

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY WAR HERITAGE GROUP

MONDAY 8 JULY 2013
6.00 pm COMMITTEE ROOM 4
(MAIN COMMITTEE CORRIDOR)
HOUSE OF LORDS

Minutes of the Meeting

Apologies for absence: Lord Boswell, Lord Eden, Julian Lewis MP, Ann McGuire MP, Madeleine Moon MP, Baroness Royall

Present: Lord Faulkner of Worcester (Chairman), Lord Cope, Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Baroness Golding, Lord Roper, Lord Clark of Windermere, Graham Evans MP, Rob Ffello MP, Lord Watson, Peter Doyle (Secretary)

In attendance: Frank Baldwin (Battlefields Trust), Nathan Bennett (representing Ann Clwyd MP), Peter Burley (Battlefields Trust), Tony Cowan (BCMh), Lt Col. Kingsley Donaldson (NI 100 Committee), Hugh Hamilton (University Military Education Committee), Colin Kerr (CWGC), Maj-Gen. (retd) Mungo Melvin (BCMh), Brig. (retd) T.N. O'Brien, Tony Smith (GBG), David Tattersfield (WFA), Colin Wagstaff (WFA), Harvey Watson (Battlefields Trust), Liz Woodfield (CWGC),

Lord Faulkner opened the meeting by welcoming Mr Colin Kerr, the Finance Director at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), and Ms Liz Woodfield, Head of Information Systems at the CWGC, and to invite them to talk about the activities of the CWGC in the coming centenary years of the Great War (2014–2018).

The CWGC and the Commemoration of the Great War Centenary: Mr Colin Kerr and Ms Liz Woodfield (Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Mr Kerr opened the presentation. He explained that his talk would fall into four sections, first discussing the large events that the CWGC would be involved with, and the approaches taken by the Commission; secondly how to promote the work of the CWGC during this period; thirdly, to talk about how success will be measured; and, finally, to talk about UK, and what MPs could do to connect with local war graves in their constituencies.

The CWGC role is to look after Commonwealth war dead from both world wars. The majority of the graves are from the First World War, some 60% of the total, with 40% coming from the Second World War. The Commission also looks after other graves, such as those from the Boer War in South Africa.

Turning to the major events of Commemoration in 2014–2018, Mr Kerr explained that this was the ambit of the Government, with a programme of events that will focus on Mons (1914), Gallipoli (1915), Somme (1916), Jutland (1916), Passchendaele (1917) and 100 Days (1918). These will be matched with others from the Commonwealth countries, with Gallipoli (1915) a focus for Australia, Messines (1917) for New Zealand, with the sinking of the SS *Mendi* in 1917 being a focus for South Africa. The CWGC is involved with all of these, and is a participant in a

number of subgroups that are examining the activities associated with these events, which are under the direction of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

Though the CWGC is not the originator of the events, the majority have a focus on sites that are managed by the Commission; and in view of this the CWGC have had an opportunity to influence debate over the commemorations. Important examples of this were the suggestion by the Commission of the suitability of St Symphorien Cemetery at Mons, a joint British and German site, and of sites in Denmark where men from the Battle of Jutland are buried. At present, the CWGC is working to suggest a suitable site for consideration of the 1918 Battle of 100 Days.

Mr Kerr went on to explain that there is another level of commemoration, an informal one. Events are being planned by the various regimental associations, and though it is difficult to judge how many people might attend, many of these will be at CWGC sites. For the Commission, working with the associations is important in order to help facilitate such events and make them memorable and appropriate. Events associated with the Battle of the Somme in particular are likely to be large and complex – and though the Thiepval Memorial is truly monumental in scale, there are at least 100 other monuments across the Somme battlefield that could receive visitors.

Moving to the promotion of the commemorations, Mr Kerr explained that the CWGC would be working to ensure that the iconic sites – such as Thiepval, the Menin Gate, The Helles Memorial (Gallipoli) and the Doiran Memorial (Salonika) are in perfect condition. In all thirty such sites have been identified as being ‘iconic’. In addition, a total of 500 sites worldwide have been selected for special attention. At these sites, there will be a focus on the history of what happened there – this is important as the men who served are now all gone, with no one to explain them. There will be information panels at sites as far afield as Tsingtao (now Qingdao, China) to the Falkland Islands. The panels will include pictures of the actual events that took place at the site, and explanations will be in local languages as well as English. Each panel will also include a QR (Quick Response) code that will connect smart phones with files that will have the words of men who served and who are commemorated at each site, using letters held by the Imperial War Museum (IWM). The CWGC is also responding to public demand to hear about ‘famous people’ buried at each site, though this is not necessarily in tune with the principles of the Commission.

The CWGC will also be developing six ‘Remembrance Trails’, which will connect sites and events. The first will be ‘Mons to the Marne’, focusing on 1914; there will be the ‘forgotten fronts of 1915’ as well as a consideration of the British efforts at Gallipoli, and a trail to mark the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916. There will be links to hospitals and the British base at Etaples, and there will be sites in the United Kingdom – important as there are some 13,000 separate sites in the UK. The CWGC will use Google technology to link the sites and provide geographical coordinates.

Mr Kerr went on to discuss how success will be measured by the CWGC during the commemoration period. For him, success will be about people visiting sites. He acknowledged that CWGC sites look beautiful but reflected that this cannot be enough of a measure if people do not come. For example, at one site in Suez the last visitor was four years ago. He asked what is success – more numbers going through each site, re-engaging, and perhaps even shifting perceptions. Mr Kerr’s focus is not the main sites that already receive many visitors, but the smaller and less well visited sites, and those in more remote places, such as Macedonia.

Turning to the United Kingdom, Mr Kerr explained that it was important to re-evaluate decisions that had been made in the past in order to abandon some sites. There are some 300,000 men buried in the UK; unfortunately some now lie under

developments and car parks, a result of decisions made in the 1960s. Today, the CWGC is committed to reopening access to all of its sites across the UK, even if these are components of large, derelict or overgrown municipal cemeteries. Mr Kerr assured the Group that these sites would be regularly ‘strimmed’ for weeds, and that the CWGC component would become an oasis in an otherwise abandoned site, with an access pathway maintained. It is the view of the CWGC that wherever possible these sites should be maintained for visitors, with 80% of derelict sites opened to visitors. He also explained that the CWGC had gained permission to use its characteristic green CWGC signs to indicate the presence of war graves in local cemeteries in the UK.

Ms Woodfield went on to explain the intention of the CWGC to map each headstone within the United Kingdom, so that each would be more easily found. Many are scattered and difficult to locate. In view of this, each site will be digitally mapped, and it is envisaged that the project will be able to place visitors to within 40 cm of a headstone. The CWGC has just commenced a three-month trial of the technology, and it is hoped that within the next few years the coordinates will be available for each site. She explained that it should be possible to map war graves to parliamentary constituencies, though it is not an easy task as there is no suitable software available. Notwithstanding this, the CWGC would be able to supply MPs with digital maps based on the Ordnance Survey that will map out the constituency and add the location of war graves. It is probable also that spreadsheets will be provided with the cemetery name and address, together with GPS coordinates and locations. In addition to these data it will be possible to supply the number of CWGC headstones in a given cemetery. Ms Woodfield explained that though the constituency mapping will be easy, developing the spreadsheets would be more difficult. Fortunately, there are dedicated volunteers, and it is hoped to have this material available by October.

Mr Kerr went on to explain that within the United Kingdom, there are only two large CWGC sites, at Brookwood and Lyness (Orkney). In big cities there are often large blocks of CWGC graves within municipal cemeteries, but there are scattered graves too. He then went on to suggest a number of activities that local MPs could get involved with.

Mr Kerr suggested that a good place to start with be with the local war memorials. These are already used by primary schools, and there is the opportunity to work with the names on the memorial and link them to sites across the world, or even at home, sites where these men and women are buried or commemorated. This would provide great opportunities for a fuller understanding of the impact of the war, with each headstone representing a microcosm of the war. In Mr Kerr’s view, remembrance does not have to start and stop with ‘Poppy Day’; we should try and reclaim the local CWGC sites.

Lord Faulkner thanked Mr Kerr and Ms Woodfield for their illuminating contributions, and opened up the meeting for discussion.

Lord Clark thanked Mr Kerr and Ms Woodfield for their encouraging presentation. Making reference to the Government’s decision to send two pupils from each school to the Western Front, Lord Clark considered the effect on the majority who would not go. In his view, they should be included in local initiatives, but the loss of some of the soldiers’ records during the Second World War might be inhibiting to students wishing to follow up local stories. In his view, the County Records might be a valuable source of documents, and it might therefore be worthwhile to contact them. Lord Clark also commented that it would be a big task to alert people to the existence of isolated graves in village cemeteries. **Mr Kerr** thanked Lord Clark for his comments. He agreed that the schools’ visits had some problems, and expressed

surprise that the Government had not suggested exploiting twinning mechanisms between communities and schools in Europe.

Lord Cope explained that he is a Trustee of the War Memorials Trust (WMT). In his view, it would be important to include the location of local war memorials on the proposed constituency maps for MPs. However, he recognised that there would be some difficulties. There are some 100,000 war memorials, with c. 60,000 are on a list of UK inventory run by IWM. Unfortunately, due to the age of this inventory, it is not interactive. A separate list is starting to be compiled by English Heritage and the WMT, but at present this only records a tiny fraction of the total, just 3000 memorials. Despite this Lord Cope explained that he was sure the WMT would be happy to help the CWGC in supplying information to MPs.

Lord Faulkner considered the issue of constituency maps, and expressed the view that he would be happy, on behalf of the All Party Group, to ensure that the information compiled by the CWGC was distributed to MPs. **Ms Woodfield** was grateful for the offer of assistance. **Jeffery Donaldson MP** agreed that distribution of constituency-based information would be a valuable contribution.

Baroness Golding explained that she had sat as a representative of Government on the CWGC. She remembered that UK graves are often very difficult to locate, and this represented a significant problem. **Mr Kerr** agreed that cemetery access was an important issue, and reiterated that CWGC was committed to 'blazing a path' through overgrown sites to the site of the CWGC graves. He also noted that abandoned sites will receive a green CWGC directional sign, and that the proposed GPS coding will guide the people there. **Baroness Golding** asked also about the status of German war graves in UK. **Mr Kerr** and **Ms Woodfield** explained that there is a huge German national war cemetery in Cannock, and that other graves could be scattered. Whereas the CWGC did not formerly record data relating to foreign nationals in their cemeteries, this is now changing, and their details would be available online. **Ms Woodfield** added that in addition to this new information, from next year, each individual will have additional information from the original Graves Registration Service records added to that already available online. This will be done with some sensitivity and it is hoped that the project will be available by June 2014.

Lord Watson expressed his interest in obscure sites, and asked whether some of these will be the ones to be highlighted. **Mr Kerr** confirmed that of the 500 sites selected, some indeed would be the less commonly visited. Details will be on the CWGC website. **Lord Watson** asked if there were any German sites within Germany. **Mr Kerr** indicated that there were many WW2 sites in Germany under the care of the CWGC, and some cemeteries with WW1 prisoner of war deaths.

Graham Evans MP was familiar with the work of the CWGC, and makes a point of visiting cemeteries when he can. His concerns lie with the awareness of communities and schools. In his view, MPs have an important role here, and he recommends that information should be provided that makes it easy for MPs to promote such awareness. In his experience, there are local authority officers who are responsible for memorials, and it is often valuable for MPs to connect with these authorities to share information, especially as authorities could raise the awareness. Mr Evans was happy to help promote sites to the 650 MPs. Lord Faulkner expressed his gratitude for the offer of help.

Jeffrey Donaldson MP took the chair, as there was a division in the Lords. He invited the attendees to join the discussion.

Frank Baldwin (Battlefields Trust) was concerned with getting people over to the battlefield. He explained that the Heritage Lottery Fund has set up a fund to get people over to the sites, but that this is not well known. **Jeffrey Donaldson MP** thanked him for the information, which he would seek to include in the information to be distributed to MPs.

Major-General Mungo Melvin (BCMh) noted that some sites on the Western front were still largely unvisited. In his view, there is a danger of being too narrowly focussed in the commemoration of some events, and was happy to note that Scotland and Ireland would have a focus on Loos (1915) and Messines (1917) respectively. He was grateful, however, that the pivotal 100 Days battles of 1918 were included. **Mr Kerr** agreed that some battles had a narrowly focussed public perception, with interest in the Somme (1916) seemingly centred on its first day.

Hugh Hamilton (Military Education Committee) suggested that smartphones store geographical coordinates, and that volunteers' gravesites would include site orientation photo data using smartphones for example. **Ms Woodfield** was grateful for the suggestion.

David Tattersfield (WFA) pledged the support of the 6,000 strong membership of the Western Front Association in helping to propagate the CWGC's work and initiatives. **Mr Kerr** thanked Mr Tattersfield for his support.

Lt-Colonel Kingsley Donaldson (NI 100 Committee) explained that he had encountered a significant number of people who would be interested in volunteering to assist with the commemorative events, but that they were unsure where to go. **Mr Kerr** was aware that the concept of public volunteers, so successful during the Olympics, was an important one. He noted that nearer the date, volunteers would be needed, and that a database should be developed.

Lord Faulkner, returning from the division, took the Chair and thanked Mr Kerr and Ms Downfield for their interesting and thought-provoking contributions. With no further business he closed the meeting.

THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY WAR HERITAGE GROUP EXISTS TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT THE PROTECTION, CONSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION OF WAR GRAVES, WAR MEMORIALS AND BATTLEFIELD SITES.

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