VREDESSTAD IEPER

E



EDUCATIONAL PACKAGE

SCHOOL VISIT TO A BRITISH CEMETERY

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

School Visit to a British Cemetery: Manual

Introduction
In the area surrounding Ypres there are approximately 160 British First World War military cemeteries. Although they are similar, all of them are different in their own way, as they were not constructed at the same time. This means that each cemetery's architecture is different and so are several other things, such as the way that plants or trees are laid out. All the cemeteries also differ in size. Yet, despite these differences, some features are the same in every cemetery.

The purpose of this manual is to inform the teacher of the layout of a British cemetery so they and their students can learn how to 'read' a cemetery. When the teacher visits the cemetery with the class this text can be used to inform the students and give them individual or group tasks.

About English Graveyards and British Cemeteries
Westhoek residents mostly speak about the "English graveyards". This is actually a double error. A graveyard is a burial place around a church and most military cemeteries are not built around churches. Also, the word 'English' is not correct. 'English' means 'from England'. Most cemeteries contain graves of several nationalities: Scotsmen, Irishmen, Welshmen, but also Canadians, South Africans, Asians, Australians, New Zealanders, Jamaicans, Chinese and many more.
At the time of the First World War, all these nationalities were part of the British Empire and therefore we talk about British cemeteries.

Cemetery Location
All the British cemeteries near Ypres were built during of shortly after the war. Some of them were constructed near the beginning of the war (e.g. Zillebeke Churchyard) and others in the last year of war (e.g. Hagle Dump Cemetery, Elverdinge or Red Farm Cemetery, Vlamertinge). Some cemeteries were also built after the Armistice and remote graves found in the region were relocated. Some of the cemeteries were on or close to the front line during the war (e.g. the small cemeteries in the north of the Ypres northern ring), others were far behind the front (cemeteries in the north-west of Ypres). Most cemeteries behind the front were built around field hospitals or bandaging stations. Some cemeteries are close to the road, but others are located in fields and you have to follow a small path to find them.





Some of the cemeteries are very large and have the graves of many thousands of soldiers (e.g. Tyne Cot Cemetery in Passchendaele or the Bedford House Cemetery along the Rijselseweg in Ypres). Other cemeteries are very small. One of the smallest is Red Farm Cemetery along the Poperingseweg between Vlamertinge and 'Brandhoek'.

Denomination

All British cemeteries were given an English name that often refers to the name the soldiers gave that place during the war. Other names are more official: Vlamertinghe New Cemetery simply is the 'new' cemetery in Vlamertinge, just outside the village centre, and was built because the old one (in the village itself) was almost full. Sometimes, Flemish names can be found in the English denomination, for instance, Godezonne Farm Cemetery is the cemetery close to the farm of the Goudezeune family.

Layout of the British cemeteries

During the war it was often very difficult to maintain the cemeteries because of the constant fighting and therefore only a simple wooden cross represented most graves. The graves and the cemeteries were given their present look beginning in the 1920s, some years after the war. The Imperial War Graves Commission instructed guidelines and assigned architects for the cemeteries, which can today be recognised by their uniform headstones made of (mostly Portland) limestone, their well-maintained lawns, as well as the combination of herbaceous, perennial plants and roses near the graves. They are also identified by the excellent selection of shrubs and trees, the surrounding low wall with a gate or gate building, one or more shelters and so on. All British cemeteries have a Cross of Sacrifice, designed by the architect Sir Reginald Blomfield, who also designed the Menin Gate in Ypres. The Cross of Sacrifice contains a metal sword and the larger cemeteries also have an impressive Stone of Remembrance, designed by architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. If required, the Stone of Remembrance can be used as an altar, but it wasn't designed for that purpose. The Stone of Remembrance is adorned with the words "Their name liveth for evermore", chosen by Rudyard Kipling, author of The Jungle Book and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who lost a son in during the war.

The Cemetery Register and the Visitor's Book are kept in a case near the gate, or in a small shelter that is not found in smaller cemeteries. The register contains the names of all the people buried in the cemetery, added with military information, date of death, age, family details and a letter code indicating the grave's location in the cemetery. Visitors can use the plan in the register to find the location of a particular grave. The register also describes the cemetery's history and visitors can find out how many people and how many nationalities are buried there. Visitors are invited to write a personal note in the Visitor's Book and some of these entries are very emotional.

A British military cemetery is mostly divided into plots, indicated with a number and always organised in rows, indicated with a letter. Each grave has an identification number. The side of the first as well as the last headstone of each row indicates the plot number and the row number. Many graves in the cemeteries are adorned with souvenirs from family or group visits, such as floral wreaths, flower bouquets, small wooden crosses decorated with a poppy, or a personal note, poem or picture.



The Headstones

The headstones are approximately 2 feet and 6 inches (approx. 75 cm) high and 1 foot and 3 inches (approx. 38 cm) wide, and have a curved top edge. In general, the graves of identified victims have four lines with information such as service number (in corps or regiment), rank (e.g. captain, sergeant, corporal) or type of soldier (private, guardsman, rifleman, gunner, sapper, etc.), first name or initial(s), last name, abbreviation(s) of campaign medals (e.g. MM = Military Medal, MC = Military Cross), military unit (corps, regiment, battalion), date of death and age. Some of the death dates mentioned on the headstones are not accurate. The reason for this is that battles lasted for several days and afterwards it was often hard to determine when exactly someone had died. People's ages might also be incorrect.

Each headstone incorporates an engraved badge and in most cases also a cross. Sometimes, the badge is on top with a Latin cross below, other headstones have a wide cross on the lower side with the badge on top. The reason for the two different types of crosses is unknown. The badge refers to a corps (e.g. Machine Gun Corps, Royal Army Medical Corps, etc.), a regiment (e.g. East Surrey Regiment, Durham Light Infantry, etc.) or a dominion (a partly autonomous colony of the then British Empire). The badge indicates the nationality: Canada (maple leaf), South Africa (roebuck), Australia (rising sun), New Zealand (fern leaf), etc. Headstones of Asian and Chinese people have no badge, but the foreign typography makes them recognisable. Around the badge on South African headstones there is bilingual saying, 'Union is Strength – Eendracht maakt macht'. At the time of the war, Dutch (and not Afrikaans) was the second official language of South Africa. These are the only headstones with a Dutch inscription.
Some headstones have Star of David as a symbol of the Jewish faith. The star includes five Hebrew characters forming an acronym for a wish, 'May his soul rest in peace'. Some of the headstones have neither a cross nor a Star of David, implying that it is the grave of someone with no particular religious faith.

Many headstones have a short text on the lower part, chosen or written by their relatives. These inscriptions are religious and/or patriotic, full of praise, grief or memory, sometimes with a much deeper meaning. Anonymous graves (those of unidentified people) have a Latin cross and the following inscriptions, 'A soldier of the Great War' and 'Known unto God'. Sometimes their unit is known, in which case a badge is engraved. Occasionally, there are German graves found in British military cemeteries. These mostly represent German soldiers who were taken as prisoners of war and subsequently succumbed to their wounds. Their headstones are of roughly the same dimensions as the British ones, but they were made from a different type of stone and have a straight top edge. Of course, the inscriptions are in German and in a different typography.

The date of death indicates the period of the war, whether a quieter period or during a large battle. Some dates of the larger battles are as follows: 19th October – 22nd November 1914 (First Battle of Ypres), 22nd April – 25th May 1915 (Second Battle of Ypres, with the first gas attacks), 7th – 14th June 1917 (Battle of Messines), 31st July – 10th November 1917 (Third Battle of Ypres or Battle of Passchendaele), 9th – 29th April 1918 (Fourth Battle of Ypres, Battle of the Lys and the Battle of Kemmel), 28th September – 11th November 1918 (Final Offensive during which the first phase is known as the Fifth Battle of Ypres).



Further Information
Since every cemetery differs from the next in local history, size, number of graves, etc., every one of them tells a different story. In most cemeteries one can research the graves in order to find out exactly who is the person buried there, what was his life like, and so on. It is also possible to create worksheets for particular cemeteries. For further information, teachers are invited to contact the educational department of the In Flanders Fields Museum (phone: +32(0)57 - 239 450 or e-mail: kenniscentrum@ieper.be).

Headstones with more than one name on them are very rare in British cemeteries. These victims were buried in one large grave, a mass grave. Some rows have headstones very close to one another. These are often the graves of soldiers who died during the same military action and thus mention the same date of death.

The Atmosphere in a British Cemetery

A British military cemetery has a double charisma, contrary for instance to a German military cemetery, which has a sombre atmosphere incorporating large oak trees that ensure the cemeteries are always covered in shadow, groups of statues are simple, as are the cemetery's gate buildings and/or chapels. A completely different story unfolds in the British cemeteries. During the war, many soldiers took great care of their companions' graves. They planted flowers and plants on those graves and made sure the burial places had a polished look. Visitors to a British cemetery feel like they are walking in an English garden with excellent landscaping and perfect vegetation with colourful shrubs and many types of trees. The predominant white colour of the buildings and headstones comes alive in the sun and helps to expel sombre thoughts. In this way and in many others the cemetery architects tried to meet the expectations of grieving relatives, all within the frame of the social and cultural values of the period. Visitors were not to forget that the British Empire was one of the victors of the war and that the victory was only accomplished due to the sacrifice of so many men. Some of the headstones on anonymous graves have the following inscription: 'Their glory shall not be blotted out'.

A British cemetery is not really a sombre place, despite the many graves. Of course, every visitor becomes quiet when confronted with the many rows of headstones and certainly when they discover the very young age of some of the casualties written on the headstones. Therefore these cemeteries stand to many as the main argument against war and serve as the loudest cry for peace.

Worksheet
Visit to a British military cemetery

1 Men of several nationalities have their final resting places in many of the British cemeteries. Which nationalities are present in this cemetery?

_____

_____

How can you explain this?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2 The headstones of those who could be identified have engraved on them a badge or a symbol, which refers to a unit or country of origin. Which country does each of the following emblems represent?





_____ _____

3 Choose a headstone (of a named soldier) and complete the following information, which can be found on the headstone (Please note - not all information may be found).

Service Number: _____

Military Rank: _____

Name: _____

Unit: _____

Date of Death: _____

Age at Death: _____

Message from relatives: _____

4 How many people are buried in this cemetery?

How many of them have not been identified?

(Hint: check the cemetery register)

In your opinion, why are there so many anonymous graves near Ypres?

5 How would you describe the atmosphere in a British cemetery?
Choose adjectives from the list below. Add words if you want to.

Pleasant – colourful – proud – cheerful – attractive – serene – oppressive – sad – depressing – touching – inspiring – threatening – cheerless – dark – scary

6 In the area surrounding Ypres there are approximately 160 British cemeteries. Although they are similar, all of them are different in their own way, as they were not constructed at the same time. This means that each cemetery's architecture is different and so are other things, such as the way that plants are laid out. All the cemeteries also differ in size. Yet, despite these differences, some features are the same in every cemetery.

Can you tell what these are and do you know why are there so many British cemeteries around Ypres?

7 Walk along one or two rows of headstones and note the age of 20 servicemen in the list below:

19-24

25-29

30-34

35-39

40+

Based on this small experiment, what seems to be the average age of the military casualties near Ypres?

8 Often, headstones have small inscriptions chosen by the relatives of the dead. Find an inscription that interests you and write it down:

Why did you choose this inscription?