VREDESSTAD IEPER

E



EDUCATIONAL PACKAGE

SCHOOL VISIT TO THE MENIN GATE

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

School visit to the Menin Gate Manual

Introduction

The Menin Gate is a memorial that expresses the enormous human cost of the Ypres Salient. It is a huge shrine dedicated to the almost 55,000 casualties of the British Empire who have no known graves. The design is by the British architect Sir Reginald Blomfield, one of the four principle architects of the Imperial War Graves Commission (he also designed the well-known Cross of Sacrifice). He was chosen for his classical and formal attitude; one that best fitted the city of Ypres and its gothic associations. The monument was to be inserted in Vauban's 17th century ramparts and since Blomfield was a great fan of Vauban he was open to the idea. Blomfield's plans for the final structure took their inspiration from the (now gone) Porte de la Citadelle in Nancy, France.

Description

From outside, the memorial looks like a gate. It has a lion on top facing the Ypres Salient (a statue made by William Reid Dick), which stands for the determination of the British Empire. On the city side, the sarcophagus on top gives the memorial the feeling of a mortuary. Over each of the two centre arches there is a panel with the following inscription *'To the armies of the British Empire who stood here from – 1914 to 1918 – and to these of their dead who have no known Grave'.* The indication **"British Empire"** clearly stands for the entire empire and thus not just 'England'. The 55,000 names on the memorial are those of military men of the British Empire who died but have no known grave. They were all killed before 15th August 1917. Because of lack of space for the names of later casualties who were never found, two additional monuments were built; one at Tyne Cot (35,000 names) and the other at Ploegsteert (10,000 names). Together they amount to approximately 100,000 names, which is 30 casualties per square metre. The Menin Gate was inaugurated on 24th July 1927.



A 'Living Memorial': the Menin Gate is a living memorial because even today names are deleted or even added (addenda), the latter occurs if it transpires that a missing person is wrongly mentioned on a monument, or if it is discovered that a particular soldier does not have an identified grave or is not remembered somewhere else.

Errors on the Menin Gate

The IWGC was very accurate – as many as 25 complex, well-described steps had to be taken before the decision was made as to who was to be inscribed on which panel. But, despite this, many errors were made and the 'closing date' (15th August 1917) was one of the reasons why. Another was that it transpired that some of the names from the London Regiment were actually to be remembered on Tyne Cot Cemetery and not the Menin Gate. But another common reason was simply the lack of information. The 47th Sikh Regiment only has 15 names on the memorial, while the regiment lost 348 of its 444 men in No Man's Land on 26th April 1915. The discrepancy in record keeping was the result of the poor administration by the Asian troops. In many other cases, after a name was engraved on a panel it was revealed that the person in question already had an identified grave elsewhere.

The Last Post

Today, the Menin Gate and the Last Post ceremony seem inseparable. However, during the construction of the Menin Gate there were no plans for such a daily ceremony. Almost spontaneously, and in a spirit of loyalty, the local community, to whom the impressive British memorial was handed to on a silver platter, started it off.

The Last Post's power stems from the simplicity of the ceremony. Every day, several buglers – Ypres' citizens – sound the Last Post, and a short melody rings out across the immense hall.
The Last Post was sounded for the first time during the inauguration ceremony. It left Ypres' police commissioner Pierre Vandenbraambussche with such a strong feeling that he contacted other city notables to enable a regular Last Post ceremony under the Menin Gate.

On Monday 2nd July 1928, the first the first ceremony took place and since that day, it has taken place every day, except during the Second Word War when the city was re-occupied by the Germans. During this time the ceremony took place at the Brookwood military cemetery. On 6th September 1944 the Polish 1st Armoured Division liberated Ypres and that evening the Last Post was sounded once again.



The Menin Gate… Arch of Triumph?
In general, the public opinion towards the memorial was positive. Nevertheless, there was also criticism.

Siegfried Sassoon, a former soldier and celebrated war poet described it as follows:

On Passing the New Menin Gate.

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?

Crudely renewed, the Salient holds its own.
Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;
Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,
The armies who endured that sullen swamp.

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

The IWGC understood that the memorial could be interpreted differently and a press release was written detailing the meaning of the Menin Gate. Its absolute priority was to prevent foreign journalists from describing the memorial as an 'Arch of Triumph'. After all, that would rightfully be considered an insult to the relatives of the many missing whose names are etched on the monument.

However, it was Blomfield's explicit intention to 'symbolise the permanent power and the unstoppable determination of the British Empire' (the lion, the wreath and the many oak leaf garlands are all symbols of courage and heroism, and the text is patriotic: 'Pro Rege' and 'Pro Patria': for king and for country). The latter was called 'the old lie' by war poet and victim Wilfred Owen: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:* it is sweet and right to die for your country.



In 1928, internationally rewarded German author and pacifist, Stefan Zweig, wrote in the *Berliner Tageblatt:*

"Ypres was deprived from its most famous artworks. Therefore, no one, as some did before, shall again take pilgrimage to this remote city to admire the wonderful Cloth Hall, which was there in its greatness, massive and powerful. But in return for its lost monument, Ypres got a new one, and I should predict it at once: a monument that is both psychically and artistically overwhelming: the Menin Gate, built by the English nation and dedicated to the dead, a monument so touching that there can only be one of those in Europe. The enormous gate, large and of sparkling marble (Euville limestone) was built on the road that used to lead to the enemy. It puts a shadow on that road – the road of the besieged Ypres, which the English regiments, under a burning sun or in rain, took on their way to the front. Cannons, ambulances and ammunition were transported over this road. Countless coffins were taken back to the city over this road. The large gate building, Roman in the simplicity of its mass, rises high. It rather looks like a mausoleum than an arch of triumph. On the front side, spying on the enemy, a marble stone lion lies on top, its claw firmly standing as if it holds a prey it won't let go. At the back, facing the city, a sarcophagus, stunning and severe. Because this is a monument dedicated to the dead, the fifty-six thousand British casualties whose graves are unknown, who lie somewhere, put together in a mass grave, unrecognisably mutilated by grenades, or disintegrated in water. For all those who, unlike the others, have no shiny white polished headstone in one of the many cemeteries around the city, as an individual sign of their final resting place. For all those men, all fifty-six thousand of them, this gate was built as a common headstone. The fifty-six thousand names are all engraved in it, in letters of gold – so many, so endless that the typography looks like art, just as it is on the walls of the Alhambra. The monument is thus a memorial. It is not dedicated to the victors, but to the dead – the victims – without distinction, for the fallen Australians, Englishmen, Hindus, Muslims who have all been immortalized, using the same typography, in the same stone, for the same cause of death. The Menin Gate has no image of any king, no reference to any victory, no statement on any genius general, no nonsense on any archbishop or prince; just the following laconic, noble inscriptions: Pro rege, Pro Patria.

In its honest Roman simplicity this monument dedicated to the fifty-six thousand casualties is so much more than all arches of triumph and remembrance monuments that I have ever seen, and its impressiveness is enlarged by the constant presence of the many wreaths left there by widows, children and friends, because an entire nation goes on an annual pilgrimage to this common grave of soldiers whose grave is unknown.

Worksheet
Visit to the Menin Gate

1 Above the central passage of the Menin Gate you can read the following text:

"To the armies of the British Empire who stood here from – 1914 to 1918 –
and to these of their dead who have no known Grave".

Complete this sentence: "The Menin Gate has names of ..."

2 Contrary to France, for example, England wanted to give every serviceman that died an individual grave. This idea was inspired by America, who adopted a similar approach after their Civil War (1861-1865). Previously, during the Boer Wars in South Africa (1880-1881 and 1899-1902), the British dead had received their own individual graves and from the very beginning of the First World War, Britain tried to ensure that as many of her war-dead as possible received an individual grave. However, this proved to be very difficult, as many of the dead could not be identified and accordingly, the names of these men, known as 'the missing' are inscribed on the Menin Gate so that, as Rudyard Kipling wrote, *"Their names liveth for evermore".*

However, these acts of remembrance have an important difference. Do you know what it is?

3 Next to some of the names the man's 'Service Number' has been added. Give one example and why was this extra information added?

4 Every evening, at 8pm, all traffic is blocked from passing beneath the Menin Gate because the Last Post is played. Describe this ceremony.

5 Often, floral wreaths are laid together with a message. Which message appeals most to you? Why?

6 The former soldier and war poet Siegfried Sassoon branded the Menin Gate as an 'arch of triumph' and therefore a 'criminal shrine'. The world-famous pacifist and German author Stefan Zweig described the Menin Gate as follows:
"It is a memorial […] offered not to victory but to the dead – the victims – without any distinction, to the fallen Australians, English, Hindus and Mohammedans who are immortalised to the same degree, and in the same chambers, in the same stone, by virtue of the same death."

What are your thoughts on these opinions?