

# The Meaning of the

Part One

# Town War Memorial

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When I was growing up in Dover and was taken shopping by my mother we often used to walk past the War Memorial outside Maison Dieu House. I learnt very quickly that this was a place where I had to be quiet and respectful - and under no circumstances was I permitted past the iron railings into the Garden of Remembrance. This was puzzling to me, because I could not understand the significance of the Memorial - death and war were unknown concepts to a small child.

When I was bigger and allowed out on my own I returned to the Memorial. I thought that if only I could go close and read all the words upon it - and maybe even touch it - there was some magical secret, some deep meaning, that would be revealed to me. But I read the words and ran my finger over them and they meant nothing more than a list of names, just like the register called at school every morning. By then I had learnt a little of war and of loss, and had seen other memorials, gloriously sculpted with soaring columns of steadfast soldiers and triumphant angels. Those I did understand. But our Memorial was... boring.

Or so I thought. For fate has a wry humour and so decreed that, one day, on behalf of the Town Council, I would become researcher and leader of the Dover War Memorial Project. Now not only do I understand in great and sorrowing depth the meaning of all those names on our Memorial, but I have understood too the significance of the Memorial itself. It has become a passion in my life. The Memorial isn't boring at all - it's beautiful, and this is the beginning of its story.

"Over by Christmas" was the popular belief - that our troops, after a few months of

fighting and adventure, would be home in time to celebrate Yuletide 1914 with their families. But by then there were already many who would never return, and losses like that of the three cruisers (see March 2006 newsletter) had damaged British confidence. By the first week in January 1915 The Dover Express had considered a Memorial for those lost in what was to be known as the Great War, and encouraged the recording of casualties for fear that otherwise some should lack commemoration.

But such were the calamitous costs of the war it wasn't until 1922, after nearly three years of deliberation and after rejection of a number of suggestions, including a shrine in Maison Dieu Hall to hold a Book of Remembrance, that the Memorial Committee could recommend the site outside Maison Dieu House for the erection of a more substantial monument. The design and situation were not the only considerations, for the Memorial also had to be funded. There was less than three hundred pounds in the kitty (today this would equal some £10,750), and this was around a fifth of the sum needed. A number of events were held to raise money, including a band performance in Pencester Gardens and a Military Tattoo, but two years later Councillor Norman was fearful that the Memorial would be "unveiled in debt" while the Mayoress commented sadly that it was difficult to persuade "ladies to sell the flags". Three weeks before unveiling the fund was still short by £150 (around £5,500).

There were other problems too. As The Express had feared there was no definitive record of casualties, necessitating the issue of cards so that names could be suggested for

commemoration. But not everyone was seen as eligible and there was the occasional lively debate when those who lost their lives in air raids were excluded, and one suggested casualty was discovered to have died in 1921. The discussions were defused by asking a subcommittee to specify the exact conditions for inclusion, whereupon the designer and sculptor, Mr Goulden, rather plaintively requested a closing date for the names so he could order materials in time. Meanwhile the Town Clerk observed, perhaps somewhat snappily, that the list had been on display for some time.

However, the design of the Memorial ran more smoothly. Mr Goulden, fortuitously a Dovorian, and thus, according to Councillor Livings, enhancing the reputation and public acceptability of the Memorial, had created a model for display. Perhaps the Councillor was right, for at the subsequent public meeting to approve the Memorial only a handful of people attended besides the Committee. Unperturbed, the Mayor buoyantly interpreted this as denoting acquiescence. Proposing that the design be approved, Councillor Livings agreed, putting forward the rather less charitable but probably cannier view that if anyone had objected the room would have been full.

But indeed considerable thought had preceded the design, and perhaps it reflects the character of the sculptor. Himself a veteran of the Great War, Richard Goulden was said to be modest and subtle, poetically empathetic, and yet with a strong sense of duty towards others. He was thus able artistically to express the wishes of the Committee to show gratitude to those fallen and sympathy to those bereaved. "Masses of metal and masonry" were inconsiderately extravagant in the face of such loss, the Committee stated, and also "rather pagan". Furthermore such constructions were likely to glorify victory and familiarise young people with warlike images they might

unfortunately seek to emulate and even enhance. Instead the Committee felt that freedom was sufficient reward for battle, and that a "simple symbolic monument" placed "in the midst of the busy throng of everyday life" would emphasise and encourage both spirituality and self-sacrifice. Rather more pragmatically it also wouldn't obscure the "interesting old Elizabethan building" of Maison Dieu House.

Practical, simple, and symbolic are the key words for our Memorial. Rather than the normal Portland stone of many memorials the base is made from twenty blocks of Cornish granite, an unusually hard and long-lasting rock. Finished by hand with a rustic punch, the blocks are typical of Mr Goulden's work for they remain subtly rough, reverencing the character of the stone. The Roll of Honour is of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, an advance in technology discovered millennia before and again renowned for durability. The Roll is carefully formed to fit around the base, with the names in blocked relief to render them easily readable. Other bronze furnishings created by a traditional method of pressing a carved wooden template into silver sand to form a mould for the molten metal are the two laurel wreaths for glory on either side of the main die, and, on the front, the Arms of the Borough.

These are placed above the inscription "To the Glorious Memory of the Men of Dover who gave their lives for their Country in the Great War - 1914-1918". The whole is surmounted by a bronze figure. Cast in several pieces probably by the ancient "lost wax" method, it was welded together, burnished, and fastened to the granite base by a brass dowel locking into the statue. According with the desire of the Council to educate young people, the figure represents youth in self-sacrificial devotion, spiritually triumphing over bodily suffering and the thorny difficulties of life.

By the end of October 1924 the Memorial, in a green lawn kerbed by granite, was complete and ready to be unveiled. Already embedded in the construction were a number of meanings. In a space set aside for quiet and reflection the Memorial was yet central to the everyday town as the small Garden of Remembrance adjoined the busy Biggin Street. The materials of the Memorial itself evoked Eternity, the crafts of construction evoked Continuity, and the figure, both in situation and pose, evoked Transcendence. The inscription encapsulated all these concepts, and firmly wedded to them by plaques bearing their names were those we had lost - Gone Before, Remembered Evermore. Beneath its material nature and symbolism, all the deeds and discussions, all the debates and decisions that shaped and formed the Memorial lie hidden and nearly forgotten.

But not quite. I'm grown up now and it's almost as though a long finger from the bygone committee has reached out and tapped me on the shoulder, to say "See? We told you so!" For now I understand far better what those who designed our Memorial tried to say, and how and why they tried to say it. Remembering the past and honouring the present they also had a clear vision for the future. And even then, with the erection of the Memorial, their work was not finished. For our Memorial does not stand alone. It carries many more meanings yet, and in the next part of this series I'll explore another layer.

But in the meantime do have a closer look at our Memorial, for it bears upon it the marks of changing meaning over the years. One clear and sad scar is the filled pinholes within the main inscription. The dates had to be moved to the left to make room for the dates of World War II, and an "S" was added to the word "War". Inclusive this time of civilian casualties and of the role of women, the word "Men" in the inscription was



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replaced by "People", while the names, harkening back to an original suggestion by the first committee, were recorded in a Book of Remembrance to be placed in the Town Hall. Later an extra panel bearing a few of the names of those lost during World War II was added to back of the Memorial. It lies beneath a larger panel listing more men who died in the Great War, for, as had been feared, some were missed, and within a month of the unveiling more names had been put forward for commemoration.

There are more recent changes revealing differing understandings also. So well was I trained that even now, and even though I am working on the Dover War Memorial Project and so helping to perpetuate the significance of the Memorial, I still find it a little irreverent actually to approach the Memorial. But not everyone feels the same. One part of the design no longer used is the flower vases. Made of bronze there were six, sunk into the granite beneath the Roll of Honour. They were filled in after some people began using them as ashtrays. The Memorial has also suffered vandalism. The figure was repaired and it and the plaques were cleaned. No longer coated in beeswax and blackening they have been protected by lacquer, and now, phoenix-like, the bronze gleams in the sunshine.