

War Memorial Avenues in the UK

Allées mémorielles de la guerre au Royaume-Uni

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(Fig.1) The idea of planting an avenue of trees as a memorial to the first World War is given eloquent expression in a now famous letter from 2nd Lieutenant Alexander Gillespie, whose posthumous *Letters from Flanders* were published in 1916, and which are a poignant testimonial, running up to the eve of the Battle of Loos in which Gillespie was killed (Fig.2). Gillespie (Fig.3) writes about the garden and the orchard of the moated farmhouse where he was billeted, taking refuge in quiet moments among its cherry trees and wild flowers (81; 85). He regretted the loop-holing of the garden wall and the trenches and sand-bag parapets running through its flower-beds, but still enjoyed the apple and cherry blossom (131). He collected plants from a nearby ruined village for the garden he created at the trenches – ‘wallflowers, paeonies, pansies and many others; rather cruel to transplant them perhaps,’ he remarked, ‘but there are many left’ (134). And out of this love of nature and trees and the solace he found in them came his idea that, ‘when the peace comes they make a great road, all along the line of this western front, with a broad strip of ground on either side well planted with fruit trees and trees for shade.’ (233-34)

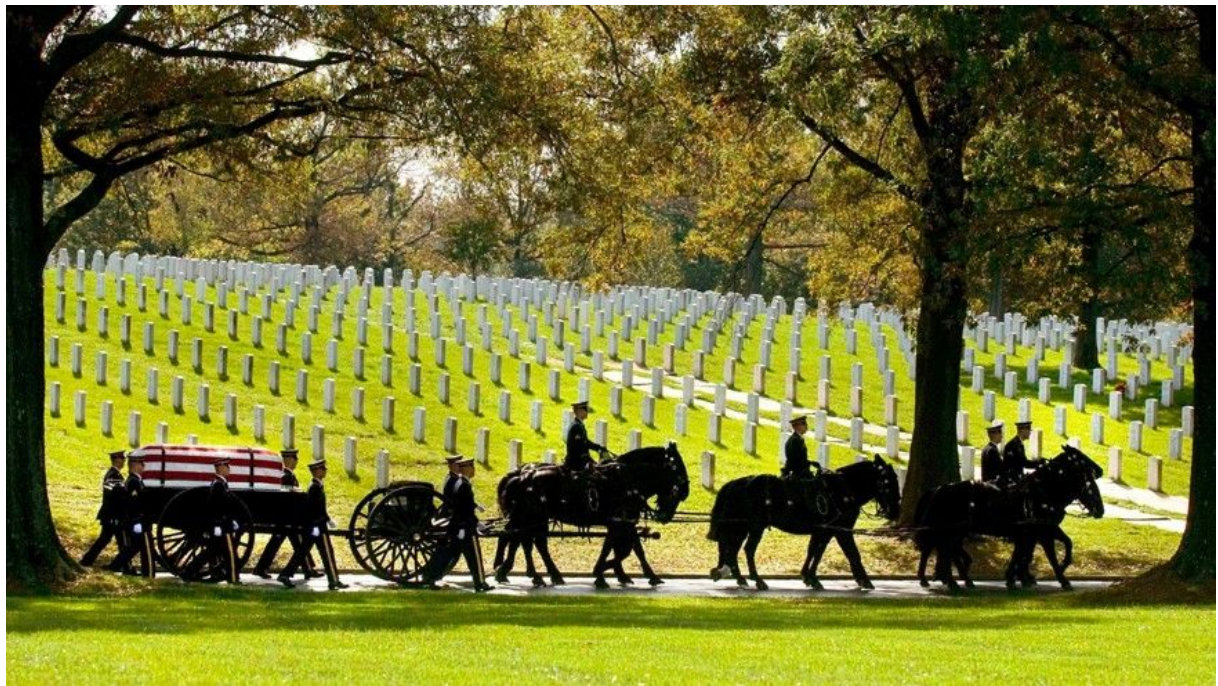


Fig.4

He drew his inspiration not only from the trees around him on the western front, but also from a memory of Arlington cemetery in Washington (Fig.4): ‘It’s not in the least a morbid place like most cemeteries, but a beautiful garden which, from its character, is more than a public park can ever be’ (234). He elaborated on this idea in a letter to the head master of his former school, Winchester College, reprinted in the 3rd edition of the *Letters*:

‘these fields are sacred in a sense, and I wish that when the peace comes, our Government might combine with the French Government to make one long avenue between the lines from the Vosges to the sea, or, if that is too much, at any rate from La Bassée to Ypres. The ground is so pitted, and scarred, and torn with shells, and tangled with wire, that it will take years to bring it back to use again: but I would make a fine broad road in the ‘No Man’s Land’ between the lines, with paths for pilgrims on foot, and plant trees for shade, and fruit trees, so that the soil should not be altogether waste. ...

Then I would send every man, woman, and child in Western Europe on pilgrimage along that Via Sacra, so that they might think and learn what war means from the silent witnesses on either side. A sentimental idea, perhaps, but we might make it the most beautiful road in all the world.¹

Gillespie's proposal for a *via sacra* was taken up by the influential magazine, *The Spectator*, in an editorial piece on 1 April 1916, followed up by correspondence in its columns, endorsed in turn by the national newspaper *The Morning Post* later that month. In February *The Spectator* had run an article by the architect Cough Williams-Ellis, who was a serving officer in France at the time, who wrote of the desirability of gardens or avenues as 'communal' memorials, whether at home or abroad, and then in June the magazine wrote a long appreciation of Gillespie's *Letters* and his 'brilliant suggestion' of a great memorial road.

The idea of an avenue along the Western Front of course did not come to fruition, overtaken by the natural desire of the local population to reclaim their landscape rather than perpetuate its brutal subdivision. What did come to fruition in the UK was the idea of roads or avenues of remembrance. In 1919, the Roads of Remembrance Association was formed, and in 1920 it published a manifesto in the form of a modest pamphlet entitled *Roads of Remembrance as War Memorials* (Fig.5). This proposed both planting up of existing roads, transforming them to show the 'dignity of roads of remembrance, adorned with trees'; and also dedicating new roads and road improvements as war memorials. It touched on the heroic and poetic, with its acknowledgement of the symbolism of trees, suggesting cherries as the soldier's bloom, which falls in full beauty, and the biblical sentiment, 'as the apple tree is among the trees of the wood, so my beloved among the sons of men'. It also suggested trees being planted by relatives or comrades, and name plaques echoing the classical practice of hanging of odes on branches or carving 'warrior' in the bark.

What was the connection between Gillespie's vision and the Roads of Remembrance Association? Firstly, *The Spectator* articles and letters, but a second source may have been the Reverend Hubert Burge (1862-1925) (Fig.6), Bishop of Southwark (1911) and later (1919) Bishop of Oxford. A preface to the *Letters from Flanders* was written by Burge, who had been head of Winchester in Gillespie's time. Burge was a well-connected member of the Establishment who numbered the Prime Minister Lord Asquith among his correspondents.

Planting trees as memorials would have been a familiar idea, and it is not clear how widely circulated the pamphlet became. But the Roads of Remembrance Association was an energetic body: its members included Samuel Hield Hamer CBE, secretary of the National Trust, who played a part in the dedication of Castle Crag in 1920 in memory of 2nd Lieutenant John Hamer (Fig.7). The Association continued its work as a sub-committee of the influential Roads Beautifying Association formed in 1928 by the then minister of transport, Lord Mount Temple, and which included influential figures such as Lionel de Rothschild, W J Bean, author of *Trees and Hardy Shrubs of Great Britain*, and later the Duke of Devonshire, and as we shall see later the RBA appears to have contributed to the cost of some memorial avenues.

In the UK, commemoration of the First World War was almost entirely devolved to individual cities, towns and villages, rather than led by the state. After the Armistice in November 1918, it was local war memorial committees which raised funds and decided on the form of memorial they wished to pursue. I have dealt in my paper on war memorial parks in *Garden History* ('A Living Monument: Memorial Parks of the First and Second World Wars,' *Garden History* 42: supplement 1, 2014), with the choice between monumental and useful memorials; many local communities rejected statuary or sculpture in favour of memorials which would benefit or beautify the place for the living. Parks and recreation grounds were a popular and widespread form of commemoration, but so too was the idea of planting individual trees or avenues.

Trees have of course been associated with commemoration since ancient times, with Ovid's tales of metamorphosis. Since pre-history, their long lives, stretching far beyond that of humans, have seen them imbued with mystical significance. In the UK, oaks especially often have commemorative functions to kings, queens or battles; there are still many Waterloo plantations, originally established to commemorate the battle of Waterloo in 1815.

There are examples of individual trees planted as war memorials, such as those in Forbury Gardens, Reading, or in the private park at Corby Castle, Cumbria (Fig.8). A number of war memorial trees were grown from acorns

¹ *Letters from Flanders written by 2nd Lieut. A D Gillespie to his Home People*, 3rd edition with an Appendix, London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1916, Appendix, p.324.

from Verdun and planted in soil specially imported.² But the significance of the avenue seems to have particularly captured the public imagination. Its associations with the poplar-lined roads of France were important to returning soldiers, while its associations with the idea of a pilgrimage or *via sacra*, a meditative exercise, while less explicit in a protestant culture, nevertheless must also have been important.³ An avenue mirrored a column of men, and the vulnerability of trees to being felled made them especially poignant.⁴



Fig.9

The exact number of WW1 memorial avenues in England is not known. There were some ambitious ideas which did not materialise, such as the circular memorial avenue around the city of Bradford, 9 miles long with 3000 trees. To date, I have found some 24 examples on the basis that they are a) linear, b) planted in the interwar period and c) specifically dedicated as war memorials. A number of avenues were planted in Memorial Parks (Fig.9. Willenhall), often but not always associated with a monumental memorial (Fig.10 Fleetwood), others

² The Woodland Trust has been seeking to trace as many of these as possible, having identified eight examples to begin with (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-35612374>). During the war, officials of the London and North Western Railway had collected seeds from the battlefields of Verdun and offered them for sale to various public bodies in England, with the proceeds going to those in need in the district of Verdun.

³ There is also a strong association in Britain between formal tree-planting and militarism; in the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century formal blocks of woodland were often referred to as battalions.

⁴ At Radcliffe-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire, a local landowner, Lisle Rockley, purchased some twenty acres to create a memorial to the men of the village and to his son. In his speech at the opening of the walk in 1927, the donor explained that he had been searching for years for a suitable memorial: 'The preservation of those cliffs and woods, ... appealed to him as a memorial which would endure, be worthy of the sacrifices made, and give joy to generations to come. Had it not been for that scheme most of the trees now standing would have been through the saw mills, and it would have been a tragedy if those beautiful woods had been cut down for commercial purposes.' *The Observer*, 16 October 1927

were planted to lead to the parish church (Fig.11Walford). Memorial avenues were planted along existing roads (Fig.12. East Keswick)and also on new roads being developed after the war, some of them residential streets (Fig.13 Sittingbourne), some arterial routes, such as the A133 at Colchester or Birmingham New Road in Coseley (Fig.14).



Fig.12



Fig.13

Unusually, the first trees planted in honour of 560 boys from Crooksmoor Road School in Sheffield were planted in March 1917 (Fig.15): more were added later and the surviving trees have recently been the subject of a fierce conservation battle, the Council only backing down on 6 November from its plans to fell them. The Promenade de Verdun (Fig. 16), part of a residential development, built in 1922, has now been registered as a historic landscape of national importance. The famous Tree Cathedral at Whipsnade uses linear tree-planting in a war memorial (1932) but is much more ambitious than a simple avenue.

The choice of tree was important: I have found no examples of coniferous planting for example. Oaks of course had strong patriotic associations, while limes too had military and chivalric symbolism; I have referred above to cherries and apples; maples were planted for the Canadian Servicemen's Memorial Avenue along the A3 at Bramshott in Hampshire (Fig.17). Lombardy Poplars, such as those planted for the Avenue de Verdun, were strongly associated with the French roads leading to the Western Front.



Fig.15

The act of planting was also an important part of the symbolism: ex-servicemen planted the trees at Tylers Green (Fig.18), at Fleetwood Memorial Park it was the children of the fallen; at Downham it was next-of-kin.

In some cases, the memorial inscription was general (Fig. 18 Western Road, Sheffield, Horsforth). In many cases, name-plaques were made of brass or cast-iron either attached to the trees or installed at the foot on plinths (Fig. 20 KO Royal Lancaster Regiment - note sponsorship by RBA; Coventry War Memorial Park), some were just on wooden stakes. The plaques at Downham were attached with telegraph cable brought back from France. A number have been reinstated as part of the centenary commemorations (Fig. 21. Keswick, Sittingbourne).



Fig.20

Trees are vulnerable which adds to their poignancy as a living memorial. A number of avenues have been partly or completely replanted as trees have failed; at Coseley in the West Midlands, 350 trees were planted along Birmingham New Road but most of those trees were subsequently lost, in part because government reorganisation did away with the Urban District Council which had been responsible and are now being replanted. The Canadian Servicemen's Memorial Avenue was felled in 1995 on highway safety grounds and replanted further away from the road. The Lombardy poplars in the Promenade de Verdun were destroyed by the 1987 hurricane and were replanted in 1989.

Since 2014, the centenary has seen new interest in these memorials and numerous local projects to replant missing trees, restore name plaques and research the fallen. And Gillespie's vision of a *via sacra* has been taken up by a charity, The Western Front Way, dedicated to forming a long distance footpath along the route, with the first section from Arras to Ypres planned for opening from early 2019 (Fig.22).



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David Lambert dirige The Parks Agency, un bureau d'études spécialisé dans la protection et la gestion de parcs historiques. Auparavant, il a occupé le poste de conservateur à la Garden History Society et a bénéficié de bourses de recherche à l'université d'York et à l'université De Montfort, à Leicester. Il a également été consultant dans le cadre de trois enquêtes parlementaires. De 2001 à 2005, il a fait partie de la Commission « jardins » du National Trust. Aujourd'hui, il siège dans plusieurs instances consultatives - Historic England, le World Monuments Fund, le Stowe Advisory Panel et Historic Royal Palaces. Il est également administrateur du Gardens Trust et membre de l'Institute of Historic Building Conservation. En 2014, pour le compte de Historic England, il a écrit une *Introduction to War Memorial Parks and Gardens* (<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/iha-war-memorial-parks-gardens/>). Il a également publié 'A Living Monument: memorial parks of the first and second world wars' dans la revue *Garden History*, 14:2.