

Local History 1

Knowledge of the row upon row of uniform Commonwealth war graves dotted around Flanders and northern France is commonplace but world wars are just that; they are fought all over the world. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, therefore, also operates worldwide, with 1.7 million graves at 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries to maintain. It is also a truly Commonwealth organisation, being funded by the governments of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

Of that 1.7 million graves, 170,000 are to be found in this country, with 87 here in Beverley. At this point you may be wondering why there are official war graves in this country; after all the fighting did not occur here. But men and women did not just die in the trenches, they died in this country too. Even in WWI there were bombing raids, when military personnel were killed, and numerous aircraft crashed during pilot training. But the majority of the graves are those of combatants who were returned for treatment after injury or sickness and did not recover.



On a warm sunny day in late June, ten members of Local History Group 1 met at the combined St Martin's/St John's cemetery on Sloe Lane to find out more about the men buried in the 27 war graves located there. But these are not the only ones commemorating the fallen of Beverley. There are also a number of 'memorial' headstones dedicated to those with no known grave, or buried elsewhere, who hailed from here and, as such, are recognised by the CWGC. However, this was not a random tour of the site, as it was organised through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and led by CWGC

Volunteer Guide, and member of our u3a, David Barton. Researching official war graves is David's passion and his knowledge is encyclopaedic.

In the initial briefing he explained how the Commission came into being. In 1917 the Imperial War Graves Commission was established to solve the problem of the 'crisis of commemoration', caused by the deaths of so many service personnel. It was decided that no body repatriation would take place and there would be equality of treatment, whatever the rank of the deceased, with generals lying next to privates. This was to be achieved by the standardisation of the headstones, with both the shape and the wording being to a common format.

This principle can be seen in St Martin's/St John's, with the highest ranked individual being a lieutenant, the next a sergeant-major and the rest lowly privates. The wording on the officer's headstone contains exactly the same elements as the rest, the only differentiation being his rank. Unlike the official war grave sites elsewhere, with their carefully laid out serried ranks of headstones, in church graveyards they are simply located on the next available slot at the time. However, there are examples of two being side by side.

As we followed David's carefully planned route around the 27 graves it became apparent from his extensive research that most had died from wounds or disease after the war. The CWGC did provide a period of grace following the cessation of hostilities to allow the wounded and sick to qualify, thereby still classing them as serving members of the armed forces. This also explains why the majority of the headstones in St Martin's/St John's have dates from after the end of the fighting. Another aspect that surprised was the age of some of these men – mid to late forties was not uncommon but the sobering ones were those in their late teens.

I think most attending found it a chastening experience but came away with a fuller understanding of what the war graves represent and appreciation of the stories of the 27 now laying in peace one hundred years after their sacrifice. [Graham Buckton]

