

NATIONAL MEMORIAL ARBORETUM

Talk by volunteer Peter Hardy

There can be few, if any, families in this country who have not been affected in some way by wars. The great uncle who is buried, along with his future, in a foreign field, the father who served during the last war but never spoke about his experiences, and of course those affected by more recent conflicts.

In the 1980s, however, memories were fading, as veterans died and new generations were growing up with no experience of world war, so a man called David Childs decided something should be done. David was retired from the navy, and worked with Leonard Cheshire, of Cheshire Homes fame. During a visit to the United States he had visited the Arlington cemetery and the United States National Arboretum, and was inspired to create something like this for the United Kingdom. The Redland company was closing a quarry near Lichfield, in Staffordshire, and David was able to buy 150 acres from them, for the grand sum of £1.

The first trees were planted in a muddy field in 1996-7, followed by the first monument, to the Polar Bear Association (the 49th West Riding Infantry Division, who served in Norway and Iceland) and the arboretum became a Millennium project, with a chapel dedicated in 2000. As well as the two world wars there are areas dedicated to more recent conflicts: the Falklands campaign, the Gulf and Iraq wars, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland for example.

Peter's very interesting talk was illustrated with his own excellent photographs; as always, this is just a brief summary of some of the highlights. He explained the significance of the monuments to the various forces, and the planting. For example, the Royal Navy area is planted with oaks, and is surrounded by trees representing the Merchant Navy, acting as protection as did the convoys in World War two. I was particularly moved by the statue of young Herbert Burdon, shown blindfolded and stripped of all badges, one of many young men shot at dawn for "cowardice" during the first world war. This memorial is situated at the most easterly point of the arboretum, where it is struck by the first light of dawn.

We always learn things with the U3A, and I now know that "tanks" are thus called because when they were first being made, near Lincoln, the workers were under strict rules of secrecy and had to tell people they were making water tanks and the name stuck. Remember that for your next pub quiz.

Some of the audience had already visited the arboretum, and I am sure that many of us now have plans to be among the 300 thousand or so visitors each year, following a fascinating and moving talk.

Jean Austin

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