The Meaning of the **Town War Memorial**

Part Three

Marilyn Stephenson-Knight

ON WEDNESDAY, 5TH NOVEMBER 1924, the afternoon was fine. Outside Maison Dieu House an immense crowd had gathered, to witness the unveiling of the Town Memorial. Sixteen councillors, contingents from the services, eight clergymen (including the Archbishop of Canterbury), and a hundred-strong choir pressed about the Memorial. Relatives of casualties stood above them on a platform, and higher still, adventurously placed on the roof of the Police Station, were the ex-Servicemen and POWs. Townsfolk hung like garlands from the roofs and windows of every building. Even so many could not witness the ceremony for the throng on the ground stretched back to Ladywell.

The unveiling was the moment when the Material Memorial (the bronze, stone, and surrounding garden) and the Intangible Memorial (how the Memorial is interpreted and given meaning) were publicly joined. There to do it was the then Vice Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, former Commander of the Dover Patrol. Dovorians had lived "on the very threshold of the war", he said, reminding them that they too had heard the guns in Flanders booming, and he called upon the spirit that had won the war to win now the peace by rebuilding a country racked by unemployment, lack of housing, and unrest. He pulled the cords to unveil the Memorial, and, as though to illustrate Sir Roger's words, a bluejacket at once climbed up the Memorial to release a drape that had caught on the bronze figure.

After the ceremony people filed past the Memorial for hours, laying wreaths and flowers. It was a public expression of many private griefs, made visible by the words on their tributes: *"To our beloved son and grandson, Sydney and William"*, *"To our darling George, Mother and all"*, *"Our dear Daddy, from Ted and George"*, *"To my dear husband, from his loving wife, Clara"*, *"For my dear old pal, Arthur"* The hard stone of the Memorial was cushioned and bright with many colours, the names frozen in bronze warmed by memories from home. From that moment the Memorial became a Place, a space imbued with significance, and that significance has grown until the present day.

Six days after the unveiling was the sixth commemoration of Armistice Day. 3,000 people attended a simple service at the Memorial. The *"Last Post"*, followed by a gun firing from the Castle, began the two-minute silence. More people laid wreaths on top of those already there. Harry Barton was 20 when he died from a single shot in France; his body was never found. His family were among those who returned to the Memorial that day, laying more flowers. The wreaths were symbols of relationships wrecked by the war, washed up on the shores of Cornish granite.

As a Place, the Memorial changed the flow of people (they had to walk round it) and their thoughts (as a focus for Remembrance and marker of renewal). The Memorial could be seen as a Surtsey, a new island parting and breaking a sea of human time, thrown up by the volcanic eruptions of war. Just as an island can only be so if it has water around it, so too does the Memorial draw meaning from its surrounding time. The breadth and depth of that sea of time are key elements in the meaning of the Memorial.

For breadth close to shore, as it were, would be the Armistice Day events in Dover. It was normally a weekday, and just before 11am people would gather by the Memorial for hymn-singing, an address, and the two-minute silence presaged by the Last Post. Thousands attended to share this moment; on a number of occasions the crowd was so dense that it stretched back to Effingham Crescent. Although they joined in enthusiastically with the singing, led each year by bands from the different troops stationed at Dover, many were unable to see or hear the parts of the ceremony conducted by officials. Access and the shared experience were important, without the ceremony irritatingly lost meaning. Amplifiers corrected the sound problem; the other has proved rather more thorny.

Some years were worse than others. In 1949 the memorial was rededicated with an inscription including fallen in World War II. Craning to see past banks of uniforms, the Dover Express said, the public had been relegated to sightseers. As citizens of THE front-line town, it added acerbically,

Traynor, 1949

Dovorians more than anyone "know that medals are not the sole evidence of heroism or fortitude". The next year an enclosure was roped-off for relatives of casualties, to ensure their good view. They voted with their entry tickets, and a slightly sniffy report noted that the enclosure had been full of children. Furthermore, the paper opined, "in a garrison town such as Dover, the absence of military representatives was noticeable". (This perhaps proves the adage that you cannot please all of the people all of the time!)

There were compensations. Wreaths, and later the crosses of the Field of Remembrance, were integral to Remembrance. Each person could claim an individual moment by the Memorial. Bending or crouching to lay a wreath automatically makes an obeisance to the loved one, and they were remembered personally year after year by inscriptions. *"Dick and George, from Dad, Brothers, and Sisters"* (1925), *"George and Dick, from Dad, Brothers and Sisters"* (1926), *"George and Dick, from Dad, Brothers and Sisters, also from nieces Peg and Pat"* (1927). Grief did not fade. In 1928, one of the saddest wreaths was laid for another casualty. *"To dear Joe, from poor old dad."* It holds all the tragedy of war.

Many people experienced the individual moment of wreath-laying. Dover itself also shared a wider experience of Remembrance. The gun at the Castle alerted those unable to attend the Memorial to pause. Schools lined up in their playgrounds, troops at the garrisons paraded in silence. Employees and officials of the railway, often accompanied by passengers, stood silently by the memorial at the Marine Station. So still was the town that in 1926 the maroon from Folkestone, announcing their two-minute silence was clearly heard.

It was a reminder that at thousands of other memorials across the country and beyond, the same stillness was falling. Part

Remembrance 1928

of the meaning of the Memorial depends on the knowledge of the breadth of Remembrance, that it is widespread. Indeed, indeed, in 1924, using an influential precedent, the Council stated that Armistice ceremonies would be "very much on the same lines as those in London" attended by the King. The chimes of Big Ben, transmitted to Dovorians at the Memorial, occasionally accompanied with relayed descriptions of the ceremony at the Cenotaph too, helped this imagination of a national community. In 1939, when national cohesion and courage were again tested by war, practical considerations of safety cancelled the ceremony at the Memorial, though the Mayor did lay a wreath, and instead Dovorians listened at home to the broadcast from Westminster Abbey.

In Dover, before the second war, there was almost a Season of Remembrance. On Armistice Day the Memorial could be floodlit, and a number of churches held special evening services, sometimes then also laying wreaths, as did parading Guides and Scouts. As Armistice normally fell on a weekday, many churches held Remembrance services the Sunday before, and at Buckland a medalled parade and evensong was inaugurated for ex-Service men. St Martin's held two services for Old Boys, the afternoon one concluding at the school memorial where a wreath would be laid. The Duke of York's held weekend reunions, with a football match and an evening dance for old and current boys on the Saturday. The next morning they laid wreaths at the school memorial, after a solemn chapel service.

Very popular were events at Dover Town Hall. The Friendly Societies on Sunday afternoon and the Salvation Army in the evening both held well-attended services, while the British Legion organised a Festival of Remembrance. It began with religious dedications, but the second half was a themed concert, with tableaux, soloists, and community singing of favourites like *Pack up your Troubles* and *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* that reportedly "almost shook the Hall".

The Memorial also draws on depth of experience, or the passing of time, for its meaning. Immediate roots lie firmly in the Great War. The Rev J Osborne Martin, in an address to the Wesleyan churches on Armistice Day 1924, recalled a communion service in a "shell-riddled orchard" in France on the eve of the Battle of the Somme, 1916. The men had brought to him pocket books, photographs, and letters - memories of those at home. Most of the communicants died the next day. They had left their wills with Reverend Martin too.

Just as the soldiers had remembered loved ones at home, so were they now remembered. In a symbolic reunion, ashes from poppies and crosses placed at the Memorial would later be scattered over graves and battlefields in France and Belgium. Depth - time passing - brings the ability to look both forwards and backwards,

and Remembrance ceremonies derive meaning from their age and a sense of unbroken continuity with the past. Thus is born a tradition. Even during the Second World War, when only a plinth remained, the bronze figure being stored for safety, the Mayor continued to lay a wreath by the Memorial, and in the smaller villages nearby ceremonies and parades were still held. Occasionally, continuity is symbolised by a person, as when the last surviving Old Contemptible in Dover, Mr Archibald Stanley, laid a wreath on the 70th anniversary of the Armistice. A sad symbol of continuity was when Boer and Great War veterans stood with young serving soldiers at the 25th anniversary, in 1943.

World War II casualties are recorded in a Book of Remembrance, dedicated at St Mary's in 1951. Two years before the Memorial had been rededicated, with a new inscription in memory of the casualties of both wars. Nevertheless, the Memorial, with its annual ceremony and permanent visible presence in the town, has a different significance, revealed by a number of requests in the last twenty years for further names from both wars to be inscribed there.

The continuing importance of the Memorial is also revealed by the traditions that have developed around it. Too great a deviation from what is expected will arouse criticism and may even seem disrespectful. On several occasions the absence of hymns and the national anthem, or music, was deplored, while disturbance of the two-minute silence has often been condemned. In 1930 and for several years afterwards the plea was made for vehicles to stop and turn off their engines. Traffic noise became an unacceptable part of the tradition, seemingly irresolvable. Over four decades later a resident remarked cynically that it might prove easier to stop remembering the Fallen than to stop the traffic.

That is something that I firmly believe must never happen. We must continue to remember. The Memorial and thousands of others like it are now part of our identity. Wherever we go, in Britain and beyond, they are familiar items, reminders of our shared past and silent pointers at paths for our future. When he dedicated the Memorial in 1924, the Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke of those who had "laid down their lives ungrudgingly" and said "they taught us to appreciate the power and possibility of quite ordinary people". The memorials are symbols of great loss and suffering. Embedded within them is death, bereavement, pain, and sorrow. But they tell other stories too, of courage, fortitude, and compassion, of faith and comradeship and enduring love. They are beacons of hope for the future. Above all, they are the stories of ordinary people. As the Archbishop said in 1924, we should "thank God for those whose monument stands here, for generations yet unborn".

That for me is the Meaning of the Town Memorial.

Remembrance 1955

Post Script →

Post Script

This concludes the short series about the meaning of the Town Memorial - but it certainly is no conclusion to the meaning. The Memorial has different meanings for different people (breadth), and its meaning will continue to build and grow (depth). I hope it will do so for centuries after I am gone.

If you would like to find out more - or have more to tell us - about these ordinary people, those who did extraordinary things, who were loved and lost, and the families that mourned them, visit the Dover War Memorial Project website at www.doverwarmemorialproject.org.uk. It's updated daily with information about our casualties and much more besides, and there is a forum for discussion. Or telephone 07876 240 701. I would love to hear from you.

And finally - thank you to you, the Dover Society, for your kind hospitality. I have enjoyed very much writing this series and learnt much about our beautiful Memorial. I look forward to meeting as many as possible of you again, on my next visit to Dover.

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DOVER SEWERAGE

• • • *by Lorraine Sencicle* • • •

AS THE NUMBER OF HOMES IN DOVER is set to expand, I thought that it would be expedient to look at the story of our sewerage system, and what I found was fascinating.

Up until the Middle Ages human waste was thrown onto unpaved streets where it was left to accumulate. However, by 1582 Dover Corporation's growing concern with the town's cleanliness resulted in Mother Edwards in 1588 given the task of cleaning the town's privy. Given the title of *'town scavenger'* she was succeeded by Widow Gill in 1605 and the cleaner was paid 2s 8d (13p) for the privilege. Over the next couple of centuries the number of private and council paid scavengers increased but the cleaner of the town's privy was always a woman.

Towards the end of the 18th century the Government decided to tackle the unsanitary state of towns throughout the country, and introduced the notion of a Paving Commission. Each Commission was made up of forty *'outsiders'*, appointed by the Corporation to assess the state of the town and make recommendations.

Dover was, by this time, in a very bad way. The streets were narrow and crooked and although the number of scavengers had increased, the effluent collected was thrown directly into the harbour or the Dour. Rain water ran in open ditches down the middle of the streets, which were also used to empty household sewage by those who could not afford it or refused to pay scavengers to come and collect it.

Following their investigation, the Paving Commission in 1778 recommended that, *"on every Thursday in every weeke the Inhabitants doe sweep and make cleane the streets before theire doors, and cast the dirt into an heape on paine of vid. Forfeiture for every offence. And that Mr Maior and the two Chamberlains do yearly agree with a scavenger or scavengers for to carry the same away".* The expense was met by a tax of sixpence on every house, a shilling duty on every chaldron of coal and a toll payable at a turnpike on the London Road and an attempt was made to build a few sewers. Consequently, under the 1846 Public Health Act, Dover's sanitary conditions were again under scrutiny. Robert Rawlson led the inquiry and found that nothing had changed and expressed anger at the botched attempt at a cover up. He finished by warning that there would be *"no escape from the fatal consequences "*