

The blueprint for commemoration

[Sophie Raworth]

If the first Remembrance Day had been a makeshift memorial, the 1920s saw the rituals of remembrance increasingly set in stone. The war to end all wars had left a nation united in grief, determined to mark the sacrifice of those who had died. Edwin Lutyens' temporary cenotaph of wood and plaster proved so popular that it was re-cast in permanent form in 1920.

Proposed by Australian journalist Edward Honey in a letter to the London Evening News, two minutes' silence had been observed in 1919 at the behest of King George V. "All locomotion should cease," he said. "So that, in perfect stillness, the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the glorious dead." The ritual stuck, and still others followed.

The 'Unknown Warrior' was buried in Westminster Abbey in November 1920 following a procession to the Cenotaph. More than a million people visited the tomb in just a week – the unknown serviceman's body chosen at random to represent all soldiers.

Memorialisation continued throughout the 1920s as monuments to the dead appeared in all parts of the country and still further afield. Military cemeteries or monuments could be found not just in Britain and on the Western Front, but in Turkey, Iraq and Egypt – everywhere men had fallen in the course of the conflict.

In 1921, the Royal British Legion was created and poppies began to be sold to support ex-servicemen. Presided over by Douglas Haig, former commander in chief of the British forces, the poppy grew in popularity. In a post-war Britain of high unemployment and economic strife, proceeds from the sale of the poppies were used to fund the great many former soldiers in need.

Just a few years after armistice, the main facets of remembrance had been established. But a poppy of another colour would soon shake up the way people saw commemoration.

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