

The silent Empires of the Dead

[Alice Rawsthorn]

The template for the cemeteries had been set. The task of building them could now begin.

Master architects were appointed to oversee the construction, all highly noted designers of their day.

Each had to adhere to the brief, the universal principals that would define the British military cemetery. All headstones were to be made from Portland Stone – the same material used to build Buckingham Palace and St Paul's Cathedral.

They had to take note of layout guidelines – the Stone of Remembrance had to be placed in the East, the headstones in lines and facing East too.

In the decade after the war, over 500 cemeteries were built to this template, containing over 400,000 headstones.

These foreign fields stand in six of the seven continents on Earth. Each one designed to suit its location, size and surroundings, unified under the principal of equal treatment for the common sacrifice.

The report had stated that simple language should be used so that everyone could understand the meaning, regardless of education. This was about equality not just for the dead, but for the bereaved too.

To find the right words for the cemeteries, the Imperial War Graves Commission turned to Rudyard Kipling, whose own son had died on the Western Front and whose body was never found.

Knowing that Kipling had suffered his own loss gives his choice of words an added poignancy. For the Stone of Remembrance, he selected a short phrase from the Bible "Their Name Liveth For Evermore" For the graves of soldiers whose bodies couldn't be identified, the words 'A Soldier of the Great War' would be engraved on their headstone, added underneath were the words 'Known unto God' added at the end, each soldier being acknowledged as an individual, a real person.

With the building of these 'silent cities', Fabian Ware's original vision of equal treatment for all was made real.

The Imperial War Graves Commission created an entirely new way for us to remember war, one that we continue to observe, honour and adapt for our own times.

For me, the power and simplicity of the messages contained within these spaces – their careful design, the stories they tell, means they will live on long after we're gone.

IMAGES AND SELECTED FOOTAGE COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES AND THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION