

A new way of seeing

[Alice Rawsthorn]

A former school teacher and newspaper editor, Fabian Ware, tried to enlist in the early weeks of war but was rejected by the British Army. At 45, he was too old. Undeterred, and determined to contribute to the war effort, he joined a Red Cross mobile ambulance unit, becoming its commander.

By mid-September, Ware was on the Western Front. The scale of the task at hand quickly became apparent. 16,200 British officers and men were killed by the end of 1914. More than that number again were missing or captured and three times as many had been wounded.

Historically, rank and file soldiers had been buried without marked graves. Those few families who could afford and organise it could pay to have their relatives exhumed and transported to Britain for re-burial.

Both Ware and French commander General Foch strongly opposed the practice – why should men who had fallen in common purpose be treated differently in death?

Ware's work was changing that, and in 1915 the French government offered "to adopt as her child and to honour...every soldier who has fallen on her soil for justice and for the freedom of nations."

Legislation followed in the French parliament a year later. Ware had successfully negotiated the permanent interment of Britain's dead on French soil, and the administration of those cemeteries by an appropriate, as yet unestablished, British administrative body.

The Imperial War Graves Commission was established in 1917 by Royal Charter. Fabian Ware now had the authority to turn his vision into reality.

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