

The blueprint for a foreign field

[Alice Rawsthorn]

With Fabian Ware as its Vice Chairman, the newly formed Imperial War Graves Commission created a report in 1918. The purpose was to set out a clear vision for burying the dead of the Great War.

It is a blueprint that has been followed for the last 100 years. In effect, this is a 24-page design brief for British military cemeteries.

The report begins by laying out the Commission's key vision; "what was done for one should be done for all, and that all, whatever their military rank or position in civil life, should have equal treatment in their graves."

It's hard to emphasise just what an important moment this was. Never before had the lives of the rank and file soldier been acknowledged on an equal footing.

Most radically, it recommends the use of individual headstones. In previous wars common soldiers had often been buried in mass, unmarked graves. But now, they would each receive their own plot, marked with their own name.

And for those soldiers with no known grave, they would now have their names inscribed on a larger memorial near the site of where they fell.

The final element of this new vision was that every British cemetery would contain two distinctive memorials. One would symbolise Christian sacrifice, representing the majority religion of the British forces. The other would be a memorial stone, a non-denominational altar, to "meet many forms of religious feeling."

What makes these 24-pages so fascinating is that for the first time they consider the individual as well as the whole. For the first time, all soldiers of the Empire would be honoured and acknowledged together, just as Fabian Ware had hoped.

The ideas in this report created the blueprint for the British war cemetery that have reshaped our vision of remembrance. But it would take some of the greatest architects – and one famous British writer – to build them.

IMAGES AND SELECTED FOOTAGE COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES