

Acts of Great War Commemoration: The Warwick War Memorial

*'I take it for granted that Warwick will desire some permanent memorial...I do think it must be something that once erected cannot be forgotten, destroyed, overlooked or ignored.'*¹

-Airth Richardson, Mayor of Warwick, 1920

November this year will mark the centenary of the end of the Great War. During this conflict, the population of Warwick made significant contributions to the war effort; by 1916, over 1,300 men from a town of around 12,000 are recorded as serving in the armed forces², whilst women were increasingly engaged in a variety of labour-intensive industries³. Additionally, a recent study has suggested that, in the majority of cases, conscientious objectors from South-Warwickshire were assigned non-combatant roles, serving overseas in supply, transport and medical services⁴.

Across Europe, commemorative architecture continues to emphasise the scale of involvement on an international level. In Britain alone, there are reckoned to be over 50,000 memorials dedicated to the First World War⁵. These sentinels of history reflect how different communities have remembered and processed the events of total warfare. Ubiquitous features of the landscape, they occupy both private and public spaces, manifesting as shrines, monuments and plaques, as well as utilitarian projects such as hospitals and halls.

In Warwick, the Great War memorial on Church Street takes the form of an 'Eleanor cross', similar to those of Prestatyn, Hereford and Wigan. It is finished in a fourteenth-century gothic style intended to emulate the Beauchamp Chapel in the neighbouring Collegiate church of St Mary's⁶. It was built first and foremost to acknowledge the sacrifice of local individuals who died during the conflict. Yet it also serves as an expression of civic pride, testifying to the part the people of this small town played in the world's first global conflagration.

Warwick's strikingly egalitarian Great War Memorial is located in a public space on a wide street. The removal of the pier to the Tink-A-Tank alley and a projecting wall in front of the Old Free Library has ensured the monument is accessible from all sides⁷. The four bronze plaques listing the fallen are fixed at eye-level and a reading of the names is unhindered by railings. The honour rolls make no distinction between rank, choosing instead to list the dead alphabetically, whilst the presence of Christian iconography is limited⁸, helping to create a more inclusive and minimalist aesthetic.

¹ *Warwickshire Advertiser and Leamington Gazette*, 23rd October 1920.

² D. Boorman, *At the Going Down of the Sun: British First World War Memorials* (York, 1988) p.79.

³ *Royal Leamington Spa Courier and Warwickshire Standard*, 12th, 19th & 26th February & 19th March 1915.

⁴ K. Tiller, *Remembrance and Community: War Memorials and Local History* (Ashbourne, 2013) p.20.

⁵ IWM, War Memorials Register, Memorial Records (First World War: 1914-1918). Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/search>. [Accessed on 28th February 2018]

⁶ *Warwickshire Advertiser and Leamington Gazette*, 16th July 1921.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ It is reported in the above article that the original intention of lead architect, Mr C. E Bateman, had been to fill the niches of the third stage with figures of saints. St George, representing the English soldiery, would have faced south. St Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors, east towards the Atlantic and St Michael, the archangel, northward towards St Mary's spire. Finally, a figure of Joan of Arc would have looked east, perpetuating the importance of the role women played in the conflict.

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In many ways, the characteristics of Warwick's memorial are reflective of the broad patronage it received. Roughly £2000 was needed to complete the design⁹ and this was raised through public subscription. Over 140 individual donations are listed in the account book for the memorial, with poor and rich alike sharing the pages¹⁰. One notable contribution came from the resident magnate of Warwick Castle, Lord Brooke, who gave £25 on July 8th 1921. The account was finally settled in 1923 when the new mayor and former councillor, Dr H. Tibbits, paid off the remaining deficit of £21-12-11d.

Initially, the monument was to be unveiled on Thursday 7th July 1921, but the date was later fixed for Sunday 10th at 4pm. This may have been to coincide with the unveiling of the Kineton Wayside Cross Memorial earlier that day, or perhaps because the Sabbath was deemed more suitable for such an occasion. In the afternoon, 'hundreds of people began to flock into Church Street to pay homage to those who sacrificed all that we might live.'¹¹ At 3:15pm, Warwick members of the Comrades of the Great War organisation gathered in uniform at the Pageant House Garden in preparation for a parade led by Brigadier-General Wiggin¹².

Shortly afterwards, veterans of the Lord Leicester Hospital and members of the Warwick Corporation made their way to the memorial in time for the appearance of St Mary's choristers and clergy, who gathered alongside non-conformist ministers for the ceremony. In the summer heat, Warwick's High Sheriff, Lord Algernon Percy, addressed a crowd of some 5,000 people before pulling a cord. This caused a Union Jack flag to fall aside and reveal a monument that appeared much the same as it does today.

Though inspiration for this project was drawn from one of the darker periods of human history, an examination of the monument, nearly one hundred years after its unveiling, has revealed much about the nature of commemoration. As well as impressing the importance of remembrance, the unveiling ceremony promoted edifying notions of reconciliation and self-improvement. On the 10th July 1921, the townsfolk of Warwick were able to overcome adversity and honour their dead by realising a project that still attracts hundreds if not thousands of visitors each year.

Ross Jones, University of Oxford (12/04/18)

⁹ Boorman, *At the Going Down of the Sun* (1988) p.79.

¹⁰ *Account Book for Warwick War Memorial*, Warwickshire County Records Office. CR 1618/W4/95/BOX 2.

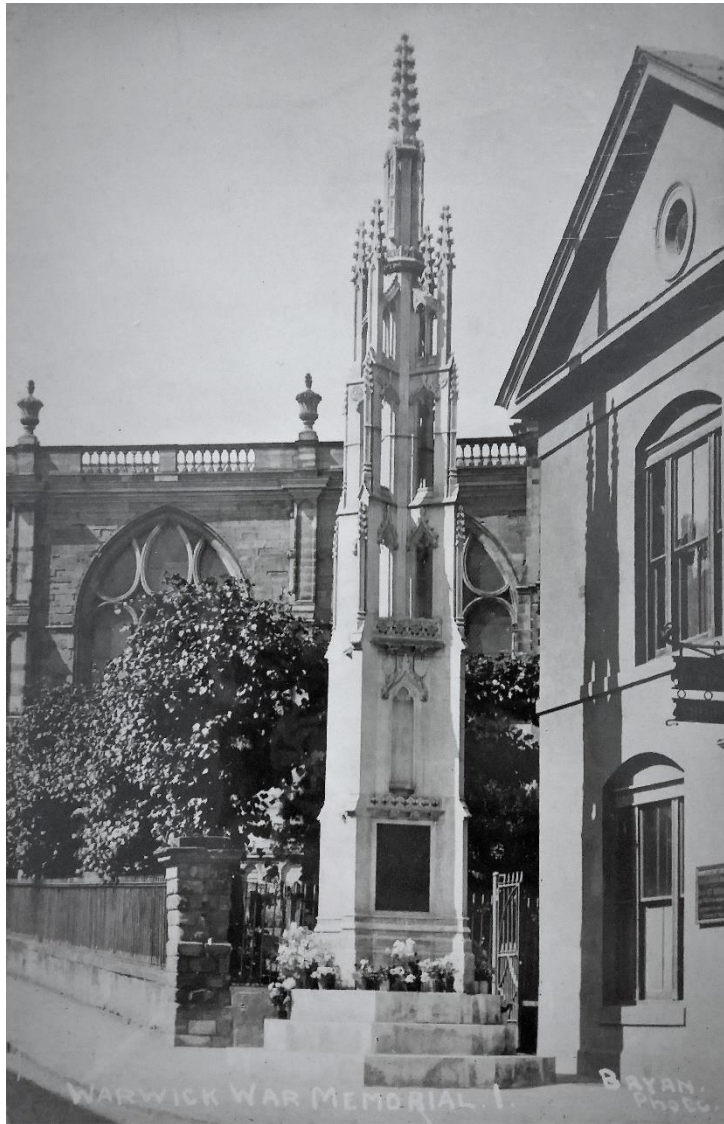
¹¹ *Warwickshire Advertiser and Leamington Gazette*, 16th July 1921.

¹² *Warwickshire Advertiser and Leamington Gazette*, 9th July 1921.

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Appendix:

Figure One

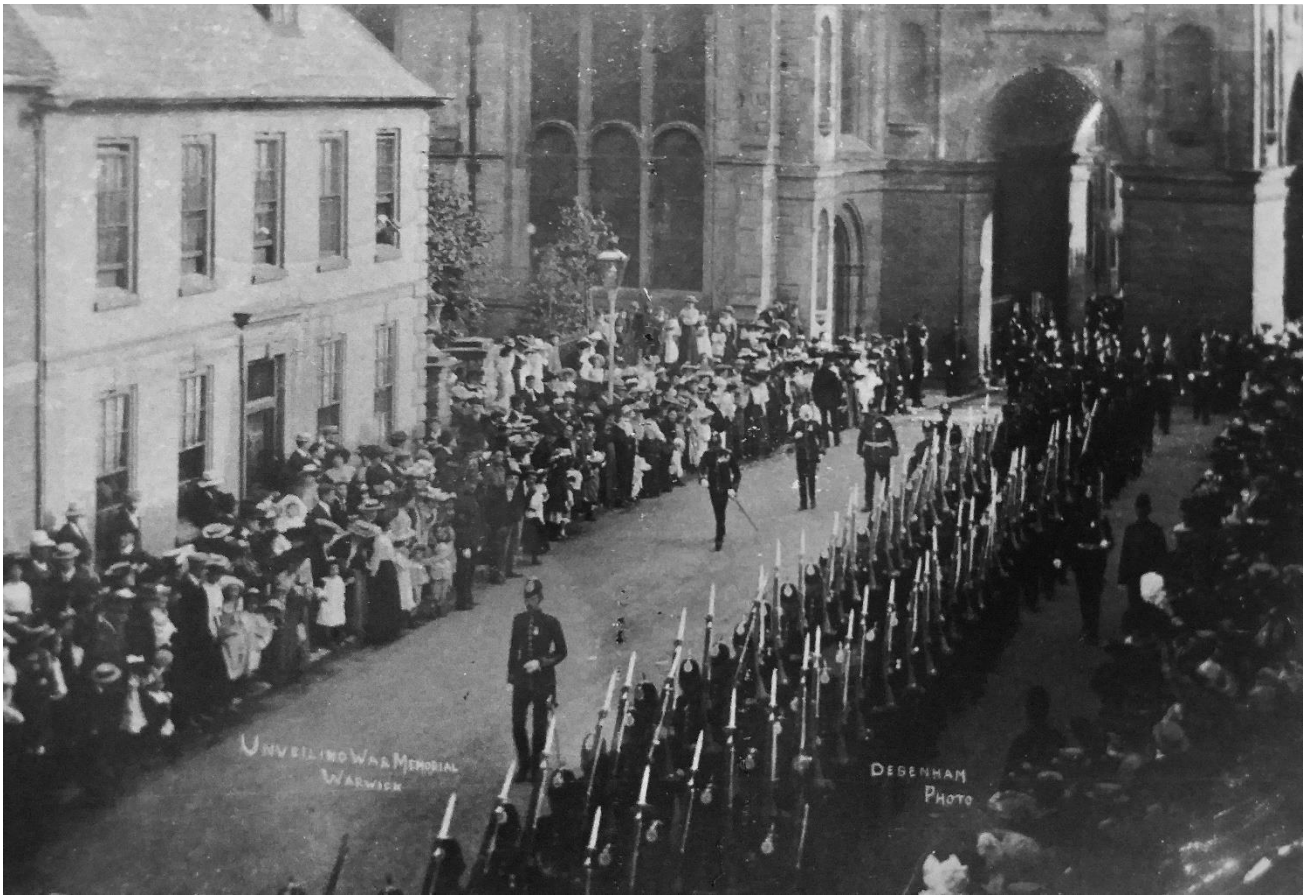


Warwick War Memorial (Looking North-East from Church Street) Attributed to 'Bryan'.
C.1921. Photo.
Warwick: Warwickshire County Record Office

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Appendix:

Figure Two



Unveiling War Memorial, Warwick (Looking South-East from Northgate Street) Attributed to 'Debenham'.

C.1921. Photo.

Warwick: Warwickshire County Record Office

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Appendix:

Figure Three



*Kineton War Memorial, The Unveiling, Anon. C. July 10th 1921. Photo.
Warwick: Warwickshire County Record Office*