

Remembering the Men of Kew

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Just seven weeks after the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914 the October edition of the Kew Church magazine published a list of ‘the names of the young men who have gone from Kew to take their place in fighting for their King and Country’. There were 104. Of these, 19 would be killed and a further 10 had brothers who would die in the service of their King. By the end of the war, a total of 103 men from the parish would die.

After the war a permanent memorial to the dead became a pressing concern, fulfilled in Kew with a number of memorials, each with a different purpose. Today these seem inevitable structures in our landscape and we might assume that they were built rapidly and without controversy. It was not so. This article explores the relationship between three of those memorials and the compromises their construction involved.

Throughout the country the creation of such memorials was an enterprise of communities and individuals, with the initiators of the memorials making their own choices as to who should be commemorated and how this should be done. Both of the Kew Church of England parishes, St Anne’s in the north and St Luke’s in the south, recorded the names of the dead who had some link with its parish – usually, but not exclusively, a residential link – either recently or at some time in the past. The memorials were not confined to members of their congregations, so that both of the Anglican parish memorials include Roman Catholics. Eventually the two parishes recorded 199 dead between them, 103 at St Anne’s, 106 at St Luke’s, with 10 names on both memorials. The Roman Catholic church in Kew, St Winefride’s, recorded 5 dead, of whom only one was not also recorded at St Anne’s or St Luke’s.

These lists are not comprehensive – some families may not have wanted their dead sons, husbands and brothers to be part of the communal public memory; some of the dead may simply not have been found in the trawl for names. Another source for those with a connection with Kew is the Commonwealth War Graves list, which in many cases gives an address. A further 34, listed there with some Kew connection, are not on the parish lists. There are also a few memorials to individuals who are not included in any community lists, and in the Royal Botanic Gardens there is a workplace memorial.

The three memorials discussed here are all in the parish of St Anne's. (At that time the parish was essentially the old village around Kew Green, and formed the political ward of Kew within the Borough of Richmond. St Anne's was known as 'Kew Church' and the name 'Kew' was restricted to land within the parish.) The memorials were a Memorial Screen inside the church, a Cross on Kew Green, and Memorial Gardens at Westerley Ware. The last two of these are visible to travellers on the South Circular, but perhaps not immediately recognisable: the Cross is somewhat overwhelmed by its surroundings, and the spectacular trees of the Memorial Gardens at the side of Kew Bridge are not obviously part of a war memorial, though the gardens are in constant use, and stand as a resoundingly successful memorial despite bearing little relation to the original intentions of the shocked community of Kew at the end of the war.

The first form of commemoration of the dead in Kew was the listing of individuals in the parish magazine, the *Kew Church Monthly*. When the October 1914 list of those who had joined up was published, the first man on that list, Thomas Cotton, had just been killed and his name appeared in the magazine the next month as Kew's first death of the war. Other than his rank and his widow's address no further information was given. He had been a long-term sailor who retired from the Royal Navy to run the village confectionery and tobacco shop. At the outbreak of war he was recalled to HMS *Aboukir* and died weeks later in a fiasco when a single U-boat destroyed three cruisers within ninety minutes.

From then on, month by month more names of the dead appeared in the parish magazine, and after February 1915 it stopped giving lists of those who had joined up. Perhaps volunteering had ceased to be remarkable; perhaps also there was anxiety when Thomas Cotton's quick appearance in the volunteer list and the death list was followed by Stanley Stainton – listed in December as serving and noted in January as dead.

The expression 'Roll of Honour' was first used in June 1915. The magazine did not have a consistent approach to the war dead, in some months not identifying them as killed in action, but in others being quite specific, referring to Corporal Dalliston as dying at home from the effect of gassing, and buried in Richmond Cemetery, and to the death of Captain Reid Thomas 'whose mother has four other serving sons'. (At the end of the war three Thomas brothers would be commemorated on the St Anne's memorial screen.)

Part of the disarray in St Anne's approach to the war may have reflected a confused transition from the incumbent Reverend Bliss who finally retired in 1915 after 35 years in the post. He was followed by a serving army chaplain, John Macmillan, who immediately changed the tone of the church's engagement. By June 1917 Macmillan had returned to France and would not reappear in his parish until April 1919. Writing from France, he suggested placing the Roll of Honour in a more conspicuous place in the church. Once more two men had a particular mention in the parish magazine, 'James Belshaw and William Arthur Barr... in each case they are the second sons of the family to have given up their lives for their country...' Five pairs of brothers, in addition to the three Thomas brothers, would be finally listed at St Anne's.



**John Macmillan, wartime vicar of Kew,
later Bishop of Guildford (Courtesy Guildford Cathedral)**

In September 1917 a war shrine was dedicated, put next to the vicar's stall, which certainly met Macmillan's wish for it to be in a conspicuous place, visible at all times to everyone in the congregation. The shrine consisted of a prayer stool, table cross, vases and the flags of the navy and army. 'On a panel behind the table the list of the names of the men attached to Kew, who have laid down their lives in the service of their country, is placed.' It was intended that the vases would be 'kept filled with fresh flowers offered by any friends of those who have been killed'.

Macmillan (writing from France) commented on the purpose of memorials. He saw them as a response to the need to keep the memory of the dead 'always before us'. Now and when peace comes 'we must never let it out of our hearts and minds that we are now "not our own" but "with a price" – the price of all those splendid young lives – given for English homes, for English men and women and children – given after the example of the Great Sacrifice of all sacrifices... It should become, as it were, part of our natural attitude towards every problem, personal, parochial and national... It will be the greatest of all things if a passionate resolve to be loyal to the honoured departed dominates all our thinking and action...'

The First Memorials

With the end of the war in November 1918 came the challenge – how should that loyalty be reflected in a permanent memorial? In Kew there was a wish to complete something in both a secular and a spiritual place. Ultimately both responses involved compromises and making use of

opportunities, and the two memorials became bound with one another, linked with a third and also associated with a fourth memorial which had nothing to do with the war. One thing was clear early on: Kew would go it alone in developing its views on the nature of a memorial and funding it, largely shunning the idea, promoted in the Richmond press, that 'it would show a better spirit if the desire for a big parish memorial were to be sacrificed in the interests of one fully representative of the whole town.'

For the congregation of St Anne's a memorial inside the church, in effect replacing the 1917 shrine with a permanent structure in the same place, was to be directly linked to a completely different memorial: to Mr Bliss, who had died early in 1919. They planned an enclosure of the east end of the south aisle with two purposes: the enclosure itself formed a screen – to be used as a memorial to the dead of the war, and the enclosed space formed a chapel – built as a memorial to Mr Bliss. The two different functions were delivered in a design by a well-known ecclesiastical architect William Caroe. An advantage of the dual commission was that different groups of donors could be encouraged to give.

By November 1920 separate appeals had raised £135 for the screen and £195 for the chapel. However, the combined cost of the two needed £200 more. Mr Caroe was asked to adapt his plans and a member of the congregation offered to guarantee whatever was necessary – but for the screen only. A final call for names was made and a new list published in the parish magazine. It had been decided that names only were to be recorded, without ranks or decorations, painted by a local painter Mr Williams in white on the wooden screen, and headed with the exhortation 'Remember these men of Kew'. The screen was surmounted with a plaster Imperial Crown with the flags of the three armed services, and from that were draped two large union flags (later removed).

Meanwhile a civic memorial was also under discussion. By May 1919 the consensus was that this should be a memorial institute, which would be a social and recreational centre for Kew. Perhaps this decision was influenced by the success of the Victoria Working Men's Club in Sandycombe Road, which provided a large and versatile space for a range of activities in the neighbouring parish of St Luke's.

The idea got off to a good start when an offer of land was made, leaving only the £6,000 cost of the new building to be found. To ensure the widest support, the organising committee included representatives of a broad range of religious and secular groups in Kew: the Roman Catholic, Wesleyan and Congregational Churches, Kew Ward Union, King's School Old Boys' Association, Kew Cricket Club, Priory Park Club, Kew Rifle Club, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Naval Brigade and the Workers Educational Association.

Fundraising was totally transparent with regular lists of donors published, along with current totals: by November 1919 £409, May 1920 £709, July 1920 £1,102. Although the surviving records are not complete, the funds seem to have come from the following broad sources: individuals 40%, fundraising events 40%, groups 15%, collecting boxes 5%. The groups included the children of the King's School £51; Kew Cricket Club £29, and an incredible £13 17s from the sale of a bat (sadly with no indication

of whose bat it was); Kew Association Football Club £52; and Kayhough Masonic Lodge £98.

The fundraising events included dances and rambles and particularly benefited from the skills of one couple, Mr and Mrs Ashton, who reappear throughout this story. Dorothy Ashton, a music teacher, was the daughter of the long-term organist at St Anne's, Harry Warner; her brother Vernon and sister Elsie were child musical prodigies. In April 1920 Mrs Ashton organised three days of concerts at St John's Hall, Richmond, featuring her brother and other friends, raising £129. Simultaneously, Richmond Council was raising funds for its own war memorial but it was clear that Kew's focus was elsewhere: by this time Kew had contributed only £12.

The War Memorial Institute also received the income of a summer 'Fayre', last held in July 1914 and now 'on a still more elaborate scale... this is to be a Kew function, carried out by Kew people, for a Kew cause.' The fair was a massive organisational feat, with over 300 entries to the children's fancy dress competition, a multitude of side shows, including topical attractions such as 'smashing the Kaiser', a choir of 100, a troupe of performing fleas and 'Susan, the educated fly'. Despite poor weather on the second day, the fair brought in £477. Comparisons of value over time are difficult if not meaningless, but on an RPI basis this sum would be about £21,000 today.

Despite all these efforts and the breadth of the involvement in Kew, it was clear that the original intention was not going to be realised quickly. In December 1920 a public meeting was held for all the subscribers. It was pointed out that while £1,800 had been raised, there was no prospect of reaching the £6,000 needed for a new building. After considerable discussion, it was agreed that up to £350 would be spent on a permanent war memorial in the form of a cross or cenotaph; with the remainder to be spent on an existing building for use as a War Memorial Institute.

With that decision the dynamics of fundraising dramatically changed and Kew moved on to complete the first two of its three war memorials, but even the quick solution was not free of problems. It was decided to go for a cross based on the Cross of Sacrifice design of Sir Reginald Blomfield, now very familiar from Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries (and also of course locally in Richmond Cemetery and Fulham Cemetery), but without the bronze long sword fixed to the front. While Richmond Council approved the proposed site close to Kew Bridge, the Office of Works rejected this and it was finally located at the south end of Kew Green, which is probably a better site.

As we have seen, the memorial screen was structurally associated with the memorial chapel to Mr Bliss and clearly needed to be dedicated first. This happened on Saturday 5 June 1921, with a speech by Major General Sir Frederick Maurice, when 'with a few solemn words the screen was dedicated to the glory of God and to the undying memory of the 89 men who gave their lives in England's honour'. The general commented, 'It is a long list you have here of those who were counted worthy to make the supreme sacrifice, and those that come after you will see all that it meant to you.' The general distinguished the memorials of England, 'simple record of names, names without distinction of rank or of deeds', with those in France and Germany which were 'symbolic of triumph won or a

determination to do or die'. While the memorials and words could do nothing to fill the gap for those for whom the names had a personal meaning, it was for the survivors to fill the gap and ensure that everyone coming afterwards would have a 'determination to go forward in the same spirit of devotion to others and to duty as they who fell in the war'. The general had himself made a less than supreme sacrifice during the war, when he had been obliged to resign after publishing a letter in *The Times* implying that the Prime Minister had issued misleading manpower figures. What brought this particular general to this solemn event in Kew? He was the brother of Mrs Macmillan, the vicar's wife.

Three weeks later the first civic memorial, the cross on Kew Green, was unveiled in glorious sunshine by a field marshal and with clergy from all the Kew churches present. Field Marshal Sir William Robertson had the distinction, still unique, of being the only soldier to have gone through all the ranks from private to field marshal. He had been Chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1915 to 1918, with Sir Frederick Maurice as his Director of Operations; so it seems that it was, once again, Mrs Macmillan's connections that led to a memorial in this modest suburb being unveiled by a field marshal.

In his address Sir William acknowledged what was owing 'to that larger number of men who went out to the war yet lived to come back... regretting that so many of them had returned broken in health and maimed, and that so large a proportion of those whose health was good had been unable to find employment'. The war had been won by 'all classes at home as well as at the front standing shoulder to shoulder and working zealously for the common good', and he urged that a day be earmarked annually to honour these men of Kew, both as an inspiration and in thankfulness and gratitude 'for God having given us such men'.

The Second Civic Memorial

With two war memorials complete (and the memorial to Mr Bliss dedicated three weeks later) the focus turned back to the main civic memorial. In June 1921 Mr and Mrs Ashton became the secretaries of the appeal, with the parish magazine commenting: 'The work that both Mr and Mrs Ashton did for the fair, and the energy that she has shown in many good causes give good augury of what they may be able to achieve to help the scheme along and bring it to a successful issue.' Certainly the right couple had been picked to orchestrate what was to be a complete change of direction. This was linked to a different problem which was bothering the people of Kew.

Almost all the civic responsibilities of the Kew Vestry had been transferred to Richmond Council in the 1890s but a residual function was the control and management of two pieces of riverside land, just downstream of Kew Bridge – Westerley Ware (also called Westerly Ware) and Short Lots. Under the Enclosure Act of 1824 the inhabitants of Kew had rights of common pasture over these plots under a tenancy from the Crown. These rights were exercised by the Kew Commonable Rights Committee (KCRC), which was elected by the Vestry.

While Short Lots was reasonably straightforward to manage as allotments, Westerley Ware had no clear purpose, its possible ancient function as a

place to dry fishing nets having long ceased. It was a problematic piece of land, exposed to flooding and with poor soil. The only income came from letting the allotments and from access rights granted to local householders and this was insufficient to keep the land in good condition. Just before the war the trustees had refused a local football club permission to play, because they were intending to improve the land. Meanwhile cattle grazed there and wandered onto the local roads. By the end of the war the trustees were more accommodating of the football club, seeking to ensure that unauthorised boys did not play there and calling on the police for help. However, 'roughs and football players' continued to cause problems, and a fractious Vestry meeting heard that on Good Friday 1920 hundreds of boys from the other side of the river were playing football, with the police refusing to help. The Kew boys were supposedly less foulmouthed than the foreigners from the other side. When a disgruntled resident argued that schools should teach boys to be sportsmen, the headmaster of the King's School had to remind the gathering of the 'sporting spirit' of the Kew boys who had fought in the war.

By November 1921 the trustees of KCRC were fed up and proposed various alternatives to the Kew Vestry:

1. The land could be turfed, but it would cost £400 which would be wasted as the subsoil was unsuitable: turf would not grow and would soon be worn out.
2. Public hard tennis courts could be laid out, but this would cost £2,500.
3. The land could be laid out as a playground for children, but the existing difficulties of supervision would continue.
4. The management of the land could be handed over to the Richmond Town Council.

At this point the management problems of the KCRC and the continuing difficulty in establishing an appropriate war memorial converged. The same KCRC meeting also considered a letter from Mr Ashton, the secretary of the War Memorial Fund asking if Westerley Ware could be used for the objects of the memorial fund: for the erection of a Hall or Institute and as a sports and recreation ground. However, the KCRC had already had enough and wanted to be rid of its problem land, voting 6 to 2 in favour of handing over Westerley Ware to the Council.

The next group to consider the issue was the Vestry. This had responsibility for the land but none of the day-to-day hassle, and it rejected the KCRC's recommendation outright with 17 votes against and none in favour. Yet another committee was formed to try and find some answer to the 'deplorable condition' of the land.

The proposal from the War Memorial Fund was a response to its own financial predicament: since the announcement of the cross on the Green, donations for the Institute had almost dried up: only £84 was received in the year to July 1922. The fund had just over £1,500, nowhere near enough to do anything as ambitious as the original intentions. In July the Ashtons called a meeting of all the subscribers, recommending joining with the KCRC as the scheme 'is very suitable for a War Memorial. It will conduce to the general welfare of Kew, and achieves the provision of an outdoor

trust their courage and confidence in Kew will be fully justified.’ They had already obtained a celebrity endorsement – a message from the Duke and Duchess of York (later George VI and Queen Elizabeth):

Their Royal Highnesses are very much interested to learn of the proposal to transform Westerley Ware into a recreation ground. The Duke and Duchess are confident that no better way of perpetuating the heroism of Kew residents could be found than by providing fields for children and young people, and they desire to express their sincere wishes for the success of this scheme.

The layout for the new park was prepared by an architect, Ernest Gale. A puzzling aspect of the design at Westerley Ware was that the entrance to the memorial garden was directly opposite the door to the corporation mortuary. The KCRC had asked Richmond Council to hand over the mortuary for use as the groundsman’s office and tool shed. This location opposite the park gate would have been entirely sensible; however, the council refused on the basis that the mortuary was still in use. Work on the grounds proceeded during 1924 and the appeal as well, with almost all the £500 which the Ashtons had committed to being raised by the end of the year.

In a final twist, although the park was complete, donors were puzzled that there was nothing to show that it was a war memorial. In 1926 Hill & Smith Ltd of Brierly Hill, Staffordshire, were asked to submit designs for a scroll to fix over the gates at a cost not exceeding £25. This was manufactured in wrought iron with ‘cast iron enrichments’ and, after yet another cost saving reduction to the plan, came in at £18.

The Memorial Cross was not to be problem free. Complaints were received that horses turned out on the Green ate the flowers and destroyed the wreaths placed on the cross so the low fence which surrounded it was replaced in 1927 with a 3' 6" fence with a small gate. Each Saturday the groundsman at Westerley Ware would go over to the cross to make sure all was tidy.

The cross was successful as a centre for memory on the anniversary of the Armistice. For example, in 1926 there was ‘an impressive gathering’ for a service and the two minutes silence and ‘chrysanthemums of every hue and wreaths of laurels and poppies were placed at the foot of the cross in profusion.’ In later years the cross was floodlit on the anniversary of the Armistice. The screen in the church was also a focus for commemoration: on the 10th anniversary of the Armistice, so many people came to the church that despite a seating capacity of over 750 some were turned away.



Westerley Ware today

The notion of an institute had not entirely vanished. Late in the 1920s the Kew Men's Club asked the Kew War Memorial Recreation Ground for a site on which to build a clubhouse, using the remaining funds of the War Memorial, apparently not understanding the difficult financial situation of the memorial. Other than in the first three years, the income from letting the tennis courts did not meet the running costs, and the enterprise only struggled on, subsidised by rents from the allotments at Short Lots.

By 1939 the problems with Westerley Ware were unsustainable and the KCRC asked the Council to take over the control and management of the Cross, Westerley Ware and Short Lots as an alternative to closing the recreation ground. The Council regarded the transfer as 'very desirable', despite the annual loss of £150 and the need to spend £25 on immediate repairs. When handed over to the Council, the Memorial Park consisted of six tennis courts, a netball court, a children's playground, two metal swings and three see-saws, gardens and lawns.

The story did not end when the two memorials were handed to the Council. The cross was in such a poor state in 1947, with the names defaced, that the St Anne's Parochial Church Council offered to repair it. No attempt was made to reinstate the names, instead the new bronze panel installed on the memorial in 1950 directs the reader to the names inscribed in the church nearby, declaring, 'This is the memorial of their honour and of the gratitude of the people of Kew.' At the same time 22 names of those who had died in the Second World War were added to the memorial screen. Later the screen itself needed replacement after an attack of dry rot, and was unveiled again in 1955, this time with incised gold lettering by William Sharpington.

Today, without flags, the screen is less flamboyant than originally but it is well maintained and still the focus for Remembrance Sunday commemorations; the cross still shows its purpose to those who go close

enough to read the inscription but has ceased to be part of any act of remembrance. Westerley Ware still has a clear purpose and its now less elaborate gardens are well cared for by the Westerley Ware Association, which has recently restored the commemorative arch and provided new gates. Those who struggled decades ago to devise these memorials and raise the funds for them would surely be satisfied that they have lasted so long, and content that in these ways, as Mr Macmillan wrote from the war, the memory of the dead 'is always before us'.

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