

Today's Wars and The Folly of World War I

The Folly of War Commemorations

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Any student of history knows that many of the problems the Middle East and Africa are now experiencing stem from the Great Powers having parcelled up the land, drawn borders where none had existed and put into power various friendly leaders in the aftermath of World War I. That includes the failures of Western actions in Iraq and Libya, and the ongoing failure of Syria, the West's refusal to accept a popular President in Bashar al Assad and its [efforts](#) to undermine him, resulting in a horrific humanitarian mess.

But next year sees the centenary of the outbreak of WWI and the UK government plans four whole years of commemoration of this most disastrous and senseless war. It is, despite our financial situation, spending millions to help fund local and national 'commemorative events'. However, when approached by a national peace organisation wishing to be involved, the reaction of the Ministry of Culture was clear. They understood the organisation's aim – that the WWI Centenary provides an ideal opportunity to highlight the essence of the message 'Never Again' – but they felt that this "did not fit within the Government's own centenary programme." The Government wishes to "encourage a greater understanding of all aspects of the war", except perhaps the one aspect that matters, if all those who died did not do so in vain – that WWI was 'the war to end all wars'.

The government [website](#) says: "The centrepiece of the commemorations will be the reopening of the Imperial War Museum (IWM) London following the £35 million refurbishment of the First World War galleries. The IWM London was founded in 1917 to record the then still-continuing conflict."

Not strictly true. The Cabinet decided in 1917 to set up a national museum to collect and display material relating to 'the Great War'. Not until 1920 was it formally established by Act of Parliament. Its original home, Crystal Palace, opened to the public in June that year. It was planned that it should demonstrate "the futility of war and that heroism is bought at too great a price". The Museum's current home in Lambeth was opened in 1936 by the Duke of York (the future George VI) and his wife the Duchess of York. Having lost a brother and two close cousins in WWI, the Duchess said, "It is a very good thing that people should know and realise how horrible war is." In the words of the Museum's historian Terry Charman, it is a 'Museum of Man's Greatest Lunatic Folly'(1)

There is much about funding an "enduring educational legacy" allowing school student 'ambassadors', plus a teacher, to visit WWI battlefields and undertake research on people local to their school who fought in the war. The fact is that, given the huge numbers of

casualties, for most communities there was scarcely a family that went untouched by the death or disablement of someone. There was a whole generation of men lost, of widows and fatherless children, of women who never married. How will discovering that your great-great-greatuncle Harry died at Ypres help you to comprehend that? There will be endless exhibitions of art, posters, photographs, films – the ‘culture’ of WWI. There will doubtless be football matches in memory of the 1914 Christmas Day truce when British and German soldiers played together. Would they had decided that was the only way to conduct a war!

Culture Secretary Maria Miller says “On 4 August 1914 we entered the war – a war like no other the world had seen. It is right we remember and mark the centenary of this momentous day in the world’s history, bringing its importance alive for younger generations and remembering the price that was paid by all involved.” But that price was paid by the common man. The politicians, generals, armaments manufacturers – none of these ‘paid a price’. Nor have they in more recent conflicts, which shows how little we’ve learnt in the last hundred years. And nowhere in all of these plans does the folly of this war get much of a mention. So I suppose that it is only right that some of the projects planned are in themselves follies:

For instance: the [LMS-Patriot Project](#) , with its plans to build, from scratch, a Patriot class steam engine, to be named The Unknown Warrior. Great fun for steam locomotive fans perhaps, but will it teach us to honour the dead, recognise the futility and failure of war, and, above all, work to end the waging of it? And then there’s Folkestone’s [Step Short project](#) , so named because of the order to ‘step short’ as troops marched down a steep hill on their way to the boats waiting in Folkestone harbour to take them to the Western Front. There were, according to the Step Short website, ‘millions’ of these men – such is the hype being used to promote this project.

Step Short is headed by the local Member of Parliament, Damian Collins. The plan is to build a commemorative arch, likened by some people to McDonalds’ well known ‘Golden Arches’, except it is a single arch in silver. Folkestone resident Nick Spurrier does *not* support this plan, and in correspondence with Mr Collins he explained that:

“I actually opposed the arch from the start but such were the responses from some members of the Step Short committee that I felt somewhat cowed and said I would not oppose it in public. I now deeply regret that I did not continue my opposition, having found out that there are many others as opposed as I am, and even more since it has become apparent that you have had to rely so heavily on public finance in these very straightened times. I have also become even more determined to speak out against it because some supporters of Step Short have expressed astonishment at our opposition, implying there is something faintly disgusting about those of us who voice our opposition to the arch.”

He then gives Mr Collins very good reasons why he and others oppose this scheme.

No public consultation. I do not believe there was “extensive consultation” as is written in The Step Short Memorial Arch and Visitor Centre brochure. On a page entitled “The Need”, above a picture of someone asking an elderly couple questions and filling in a form on a clipboard, it is stated “99% said that WW1 should be remembered”. It is a merely an assumption that these 99% would therefore want a £500,000 arch. There is no indication that you asked people if they wanted another war memorial and that is what your arch is by

any other name.

(Nick asked Damian Collins for (and failed to obtain) a copy of the consultation form with its questions and for the number completed forms.)

No Need for another War Memorial. In the immediate area of the proposed arch there are:

- The 1922 Blundstone memorial to all Folkestonians who died in the war but which is also dedicated to “the many thousands from all parts of the empire who passed this spot on their way to fight in the Great War” (not millions as stated by Step Short). This memorial was the subject of prolonged public debate and discussion – in the press, at two public meetings and by a committee which represented all sections of society.
- A brick pillar at the top of the Road of Remembrance which states “During the war tens of thousands of British soldiers passed along this road on their way to and from the front in France”.
- The Road of Remembrance itself was named in commemoration of those troops who passed down it.

Step Short is now building a fourth memorial to those troops. Julian Glover [wrote](#) in *The Guardian* that there was no need for more war memorials, that London was “suffering a fresh bout of monumentitis”. Clearly this disease has spread to Folkestone.

Finance. With £350,000 coming from Kent County Council and Shepway District Council, less than half has come from the public, businesses or non-government bodies. This in itself indicates lack of public support. The 1922 war memorial was financed entirely by public subscription, the committee aiming to raise £20,000 but in the end making do with about £3,000. Dr Peter Donaldson wrote “The failure of the community to subscribe to a memorial fund was one of the starkest methods of expressing dissatisfaction and one of the most effective”(2). You should have realised that the lack of contributions indicated a lack of support and abandoned plans for the Memorial Arch rather than resorting to the use of public money, something the Memorial Committee in 1922 resolutely refused to do.

A Tourist Attraction. From the start the arch has been promoted as a tourist attraction. The brochure says “it is envisaged that the arch will become the iconic image of Folkestone, re-defining the town and serving as an economic driver by way of attracting tourism... this will contribute to the regeneration of Folkestone through attracting investment, creating jobs and increasing national and international tourism to the area”. At the Shepway District Council meeting to decide on funding of £200,000 many councillors urged that funding be given because of the arch’s *commercial potential*. One resident’s response to this: “I can’t help feeling some disgust This anniversary should be an occasion to honour the dead, but also to reflect soberly on their sacrifice and the leaders who sent them to their pointless deaths – but turning the anniversary into a tawdry competition for tourist revenue dishonours them on just about every level.”

Built on myth. I do not want to dwell too long on numbers but 8 to 10 million are said by members of the Step Short committee to have passed up or down the Road of Remembrance or simply down it. In December 1918 the Mayor of Folkestone stated that 8,612,323 passengers passed through Folkestone, either *embarking or landing* during the war years. Troops did not start leaving from Folkestone until late March 1915, so many of those leaving before that would have been civilian passengers (3). In addition, the majority

of troops were leave men arriving from France to get straight on the train at the Harbour Station for London while those returning from leave got off the train and straight on the waiting boat for France; at one point up to 24 leave trains a day arrived at or left Folkestone Harbour station. The number of troops actually marching up or down the Road of Remembrance was probably the tens of thousands as recorded on the pillar. Of course Folkestone (along with Dover, Newhaven and Southampton) played a major part in troop transportation. But it is wrong to exaggerate it for the sake of promoting this plan. History is about facts not myth.

Nick's final comment is this: "I believe the suggestion that the Arch will be of educational value as justification is impractical. It would seem unlikely for a class to be brought to the Arch to sit on a row of seats (weather permitting), some of which may be occupied by other members of the public, to look at a design on the ground indicating from where all the troops who passed through Folkestone came, a resin model of soldier and a contemporary stainless steel arch. Far more can be effectively taught in a class room at less cost."

I would add that for £500,000 one could build a new classroom! And 'The Need' part of Step Short's brochure says that Folkestone has several 'deprived' wards - building an arch won't help. Getting the Council to spend that money there would. All in all, Folkestone's planned Memorial Arch appears to be another folly, costing too much and based on hopes of commercial gain. A vanity exercise with little real thought given to those who suffered and died. While peace organisations are [planning](#) events more in keeping with the gravity of WWI, I fear there will be other events like this that have an air of celebration about them.

The four years of commemoration planned by the government should have at its heart a programme of education around the utter failure of the politicians and leaders that led to the outbreak of war, the desire of some to go to war for monetary reasons, and the appalling incompetence of the military leadership that led to such a waste of lives. Talking about the 'sacrifice' of that waste only sanitises the slaughter. But to focus on the folly of WWI and the folly of the government's plans for commemorating the war rather than looking at the lessons we haven't learned, would only point a finger at the current failure over Syria. And we couldn't have that, could we?

1) *A Museum of Man's Greatest Lunatic Folly: The Imperial War Museum and its Commemoration of the Great War* by Terry Charman, IWM, 2008

2) *Ritual and Remembrance: the Memorialisation of the Great War in East Kent*, Peter Donaldson

3) *Folkestone during the War*, John Carlile

Lesley Docksey (with grateful thanks to Nick Spurrier)

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