The British Home Front during the First and Second World Wars

During the two world wars Britain became an island fortress and a base for equipping and training troops and launching land, sea and air operations. In both conflicts, the skies above the island and the seas that surround her became the scene of fierce fighting involving aircraft, submarines and warships. Britain was also the main centre for the medical care of men and women serving in the armed forces. Thousands of hospitals located across the country were used to treat service personnel who were wounded, fell victim to disease, or were injured in accidents at home or overseas.

Many of the servicemen buried in the United Kingdom were killed in action in the air while defending the home front. Others, mostly naval men, drowned in British coastal waters. However, the majority were wounded or contracted disease on active service, were transported back to Britain, and subsequently died while undergoing hospital treatment or recovering in private homes.

Today over 170,000 men and women who died in the United Kingdom, while serving in the armed forces during the first and second world wars, are buried in cemeteries and churchyards throughout the country. Some burials form small war graves plots within larger cemeteries, but the majority are scattered throughout cemetery grounds. In all, there are Commonwealth war graves in almost 12,500 different locations throughout the United Kingdom.

Cardiff (Cathays) Cemetery

Cardiff Royal Infirmary and the Welsh Metropolitan War Hospital, formerly the Cardiff City Asylum at Whitchurch, were devoted to the treatment of sick and wounded Commonwealth servicemen. Casualties took over half the beds in the former and entirely occupied the latter hospital, with a total provision of over 3,000 beds throughout the city. In addition, the Prince of Wales Hospital for Limbless Sailors and Soldiers had 66 beds for men from Wales, Herefordshire and Shropshire. Most servicemen recovered as a result of the care they received in Cardiff during the war, but of those who died many were buried in this cemetery.

The vast majority of the 466 First World War burials are British, but the cemetery is also the final resting place of six Australians and nine Canadians. Two thirds of the servicemen buried here died during the war; the remainder succumbed to post-war injuries, disease or influenza. Influenza or Spanish Flu was a global pandemic that killed up to six per cent of the entire global population between 1918 and 1920. An estimated 25 million people died in the first six months alone and it may ultimately have killed more than 50 million worldwide. The young and healthy were particularly vulnerable to the disease, which struck with such severity that a victim could be fit at breakfast and dead by tea-time.

A third of the First World War burials are located here in Section EB, where a Cross of Sacrifice, designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield, was erected after the war. The remainder are scattered throughout the cemetery.

During the Second World War, Cardiff served as one of the Royal Naval bases of the Western Approaches Command. It was also the biggest coal port in the world and consequently came under repeated enemy air attacks in 1940 and '41 and again in 1944. Damage to property was extensive and many civilians were killed. There are 224 military burials dating from the Second World War scattered throughout the cemetery in more than 30 different sections. Among the Second World War dead buried here are airmen who were stationed at the Royal Air Force bases at Cardiff and St Athan.

For more information about this location and some of those commemorated here, scan the QR code (right).