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POPPY DAY · FAITH · THE AFTERLIFE

Remembrance

Myths vs Evidence, and the spiritual side: what the records really tell us

◆ **Quick answers and a family history finder inside**

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WELCOME

About this guide

Every November, millions of people across Scotland and the rest of the UK wear a poppy, stand in silence and gather at war memorials. It is one of the oldest shared traditions we have, and one of the most meaningful.

It also attracts myths: rules about how to wear a poppy, claims that poppies have been "banned", and stories about the war itself, from "lions led by donkeys" to the Christmas truce football match.

This guide sets each claim against the evidence, using the Imperial War Museums, the Royal British Legion, Poppyscotland, the National Army Museum, Westminster Abbey, Hansard and other original records. It is written with respect for everyone who served and everyone who lost someone. Where historians still disagree, we say so and set out both sides.

How to use this guide

1. **Chapters 1 to 4.** Why 11 o'clock, where the poppy came from, the different colours of poppy, and the silence, the Cenotaph and the Unknown Warrior.
2. **Chapters 5 and 6.** The spiritual side of Remembrance, across faiths and none, and how Scotland remembers.
3. **Chapters 7 and 8.** The "lions led by donkeys" debate, and six more common claims about the First World War.
4. **Chapters 9 and 10.** How to find a relative who served or died, and how to check Remembrance stories online, with a quick-answers table.

IN A WORLD FULL OF DISINFORMATION, GET CLARITY

Every fact and figure in this guide was checked in October 2026 against reputable sources, listed at the back. Where we could not confirm something, we say so or leave it out. If you use everyday AI tools like Grok to look into Remembrance, always check what they tell you against sources like these.

PLEASE NOTE

This guide is general information about history and commemoration. It is not linked to any charity or organisation named in it. Remembrance means different things to different people, and how you take part is your own choice.

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Famous Fife Families tells the story of Earl and Countess Haig, the Earl Haig Fund and Lady Haig's Poppy Factory in Edinburgh. **Tracing Your Scottish Family History** shows how to search Scottish records, including soldiers' and airmen's wills.

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01

CHAPTER ONE · THE DATE

Why 11 o'clock on the 11th?

The timing of Remembrance is not a symbol someone chose later. It comes from a real moment: the hour the guns stopped on the Western Front in 1918.

In the early hours of 11 November 1918, in a railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne in France, the German delegation agreed to the Allies' armistice terms at 5am. The armistice came into effect at 11am, and all along the Western Front the guns stopped firing. Officially it was only a 36-day ceasefire, but the fighting was never renewed.[1]

That is why we remember at "the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month".

Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday: not the same thing

ARMISTICE DAY

Always on **11 November**, whatever day of the week it falls on. Many people pause for two minutes' silence at 11am, at work, at school or at home.[2]

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

Always on the **second Sunday in November**. This is when most services and parades at war memorials take place, including the national service at the Cenotaph in London.[3]

Remembrance Sunday has not always followed the same rule. In June 1956, the Prime Minister told Parliament that the Queen had approved a change so that it "will always be observed on the second Sunday in November", because under the earlier arrangement it had sometimes fallen on the first Sunday and sometimes on the second.[3]

IN 2026

Remembrance Sunday is on **8 November 2026**. **Armistice Day** falls on **Wednesday 11 November 2026**.

A short timeline

DATE	WHAT HAPPENED
May 1915	Canadian army doctor John McCrae writes the poem "In Flanders Fields".

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DATE	WHAT HAPPENED
11 November 1918	The Armistice comes into effect at 11am.
July 1919	A temporary Cenotaph of wood and plaster is unveiled on Whitehall for Peace Day.
11 November 1919	The first two-minute silence is held, at the request of King George V.
11 November 1920	The permanent Cenotaph is unveiled and the Unknown Warrior is buried in Westminster Abbey.
1921	The British Legion is formed and the first Poppy Appeal is held on 11 November.
1926	Lady Haig's Poppy Factory opens in Edinburgh, making poppies for Scotland.
14 July 1927	The Scottish National War Memorial opens at Edinburgh Castle.[4]
1933	The first white poppies are made by the Co-operative Women's Guild.
1956	Remembrance Sunday is fixed as the second Sunday in November.

Sources for each line are given in the chapters that follow.

WHY "POPPY DAY"?

On 6 October 1921 Earl Haig announced that he wished 11 November 1921 to be known as Remembrance Day and that it would be a "Poppy Day".[5] Westminster Abbey notes that "The first Poppy Day in Britain was held on 11th November 1921."[6]

The name is still in use. In Scotland, Poppyscotland holds City Poppy Days, such as Edinburgh Poppy Day: street collections involving uniformed personnel, veterans and supporters, in the lead-up to Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday.[7]

WHAT THE ABBEY RECORDS

When the Unknown Warrior was buried on 11 November 1920, the King's card on his wreath read: "In proud memory of those Warriors who died unknown in the Great War. Unknown, and yet well-known; as dying, and behold they live."[6] There is more about the Unknown Warrior in chapter 4.

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CHAPTER TWO · THE POPPY

Where the poppy really came from

The red poppy is so familiar that it can feel as if it has always been there. In fact, it became a symbol of Remembrance through a poem, two determined women and a new veterans' charity, all within about six years.

The poem

Poppies flourished in the soil churned up by fighting and shelling on the Western Front. In May 1915, near Ypres in Belgium, a Canadian army doctor, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, wrote "In Flanders Fields" after the death of a friend. It was turned down by *The Spectator* and first published in *Punch* in December 1915, and it quickly became one of the best-known poems of the war.[8,9]

The two women

Moina Michael (USA)

An American academic. In 1918, moved by McCrae's poem, she wrote "And now the Torch and Poppy Red, we wear in honor of our dead..." and campaigned for the poppy to be worn in memory of those who died.[8]

Anna Guérin (France)

A French teacher and fundraiser who organised the making of artificial poppies to raise money for children in war-torn areas of France. In 1921 she visited the newly founded British Legion and asked it to adopt the poppy.[10]

The first Poppy Appeal, 1921

The British Legion was formed on 15 May 1921, bringing together four ex-servicemen's organisations. It ordered poppies from Anna Guérin, and Earl Haig announced that he wished 11 November 1921 to be a "Poppy Day". The poppies sold out almost immediately. The Legion says the first appeal raised over £100,000 to help veterans with housing and jobs[10] (£106,000, according to its centenary timeline[11]). In 1922 the Legion opened its own Poppy Factory in London, staffed by disabled ex-servicemen.[11]

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Why Scottish poppies look different

So few of the London-made poppies reached Scotland that in 1926 Lady Haig set up a factory in Edinburgh to make poppies for Scotland alone. She chose a design that Poppyscotland describes as "botanically correct": **four petals and no leaf**, instead of the two petals and green leaf used elsewhere in the UK. Lady Haig's Poppy Factory is still making Scotland's poppies today, staffed by disabled veterans.[9]

What the evidence says

- **"The poppy stands for blood and glorifies war."** The Royal British Legion says the red poppy is a symbol of Remembrance and of hope for a peaceful future, that it has no political or religious meaning, and that wearing one is a personal choice.[2] Not everyone sees it that way (see chapter 3), but the charity that sells it does not describe it as a symbol of war or victory.
- **"It's red because of the blood spilled."** The Legion's own explanation is simpler: the Remembrance poppy is red because that is the colour of the wild Flanders poppy that grew on the battlefields.[5]
- **"Poppies have been banned in some places."** The Legion says this rumour resurfaces every year and is "simply not true": poppies are offered in communities across the UK.[5]

Is there a correct way to wear one?

No. Online posts often insist that a poppy must be worn on the left, or that the leaf must point to 11 o'clock. (In Scotland that question does not arise: the Poppyscotland poppy has no leaf.[9]) The Royal British Legion says there is "no right or wrong way to wear a poppy", that whether and how you wear one is personal choice, and that it can be worn at any time of year. Poppies are most often worn from late October to mid-November because that is when the Poppy Appeal runs.[2]

CLARITY TIP

The Royal British Legion introduced plastic-free poppies in 2023, and Poppyscotland now offers a plastic-free stick-on poppy. Check the charity's own website for how to recycle yours.[5,12]

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CHAPTER THREE · CHOICES

Red, white, purple, black: poppies of different colours

Every November, social media fills with arguments about poppy colours. Here is what each one stands for, in the words of the groups behind them, so you can make up your own mind.

COLOUR	WHO IS BEHIND IT	WHAT THEY SAY IT STANDS FOR
Red	Royal British Legion, and Poppyscotland in Scotland (Poppy Appeal since 1921)	Remembrance of the British and Commonwealth Armed Forces and civilians affected by conflict, support for the Armed Forces community today, and hope for a peaceful future.[2]
White	First made by the Co-operative Women's Guild in 1933; now the Peace Pledge Union	Remembrance of all victims of war, military and civilian; a challenge to attempts to glamorise war; and a commitment to peace.[13]
Purple	Animal Aid, 2006 to 2015	Animals killed in war. Animal Aid stopped making the purple poppy in 2015 and now offers a purple paw badge instead. Other groups still sell purple poppies.[14]
Black	BlackPoppyRose, founded by Selena Carty in 2010	The contribution of African, Black, West Indian, Caribbean, Pacific Island and Indigenous communities to wars and conflicts.[15]

The white poppy: older than many people think

White poppies are sometimes described as a recent protest. In fact they were first produced in 1933 by the Co-operative Women's Guild, many of whose members had lost husbands, sons and brothers in the First World War. Its General Secretary, Eleanor Barton, called for renewed commitment "to that 'Never Again' spirit that was strong in 1918". The Peace Pledge Union has distributed them since the 1930s.[13,16]

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What the Royal British Legion says about other colours

The Legion says it recognises people's wish to wear different coloured poppies or flowers, that there is "no contradiction in wearing other emblems alongside the red poppy", and that it has no objection to wreaths of other colours being laid at memorials alongside red poppy wreaths. It asks that red poppies are not mixed into wreaths of other colours, but kept separate.[2]

What the evidence says

- **"Wearing a white poppy takes money away from veterans."** Only donations for red poppies go to the Royal British Legion's work for the Armed Forces community.[5] The Peace Pledge Union points out that nothing stops someone wearing a white poppy and also giving to a forces charity, and that many people do both.[13]
- **"Other colours are disrespectful to the fallen."** This is a matter of opinion, not fact. The groups behind each colour say they are remembering people who died. The Legion respects people's right to choose how they take part in Remembrance.[2]

IN THE MUSEUM'S WORDS

"Other charities sell poppies in different colours, each with their own meaning but all to commemorate the losses of war. White poppies, for example, symbolise peace without violence and purple poppies are worn to honour animals killed in conflict." (Imperial War Museums)[8]

A FAIR WAY TO SEE IT

People wear red, white, purple or black poppies, or more than one, or none at all, for reasons that matter deeply to them. You don't have to agree with someone's choice to treat it with respect.

CLARITY TIP

If a post says someone was "disrespectful" for wearing a different colour of poppy, or none, check who posted it, when, and what the person actually said before you share it. Chapter 10 has a one-minute check.

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CHAPTER FOUR · RITUALS

The silence, the Cenotaph and the Unknown Warrior

Most of the rituals we now think of as timeless were created in just two years, between 1919 and 1920, by a country trying to cope with grief on a scale it had never known.

The two-minute silence

The first national two-minute silence was held on 11 November 1919, at the request of King George V.[17] The idea did not start in Britain. According to the Australian War Memorial, an Australian journalist living in London, Edward George Honey, wrote to a newspaper in 1919 proposing five minutes' silence. In October 1919, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, a South African, suggested a silence on Armistice Day; during the war, a silence had been held at noon in Cape Town whenever South African troops suffered heavy losses. After a trial with the Grenadier Guards at Buckingham Palace, the silence was shortened from five minutes to two.[18]

The King asked that "a complete suspension of all our normal activities" be observed so that "in perfect stillness the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the Glorious Dead".[18] Today the Royal British Legion says taking part in the Silence is voluntary, and asks that people respect those who choose to pause. It describes the Act of Remembrance, of which the Silence is part, as "at its core … simple, brief, and non-religious".[2]

The Cenotaph: an empty tomb

"Cenotaph" means "empty tomb". The first one on Whitehall, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, was made of wood and plaster for the Peace Day celebrations in July 1919 and was meant to stand for only a week. It proved so popular that a permanent Portland stone version was built and unveiled by King George V on 11 November 1920. It carries no names, which lets every family give it their own meaning.[19]

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The Unknown Warrior

On the same day, 11 November 1920, an unidentified serviceman was buried at the west end of the nave of Westminster Abbey. The idea came from an army chaplain, the Reverend David Railton. The body was chosen from unknown British servicemen brought from four battle areas: the Aisne, the Somme, Arras and Ypres. The grave contains soil from France and is the only gravestone in the Abbey that people may not walk on.[6]

What the evidence says

- **"The Unknown Warrior was a soldier."** Not necessarily. Westminster Abbey says the person buried there may be from the Army, the Navy or the Air Force, and from any part of the British Isles, the Dominions or the Colonies. Nobody knows who he is; he represents everyone who died with no known grave.[6]
- **"Six bodies were brought to choose from."** The Abbey notes that some sources say six, but confirmed accounts say four.[6]

The words we say

The lines read at many services come from Laurence Binyon's poem "For the Fallen", first published in *The Times* on 21 September 1914, only weeks into the war. They are often misquoted. The words below are as given by the Royal British Legion, and match the poem as first printed:[20,21]

> **FROM "FOR THE FALLEN"**
>
> *They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:*
> *Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.*
> *At the going down of the sun and in the morning*
> *We will remember them.*
>
> Note the order: "They shall **grow not** old", not "They shall not grow old".

> **THE KOHIMA EPITAPH**
>
> *When you go home, tell them of us and say,*
> *For your tomorrow, we gave our today.*

This is the wording the Royal British Legion gives for the Kohima Epitaph.[20] It is carved on the memorial of the 2nd British Division at Kohima in north-east India, and the Legion says the verse is attributed to John Maxwell Edmonds.[22]

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CHAPTER FIVE · FAITH AND BELIEF

The spiritual side of Remembrance

For many people, Remembrance is a religious occasion: a time for prayer in church, gurdwara, mosque, synagogue, temple or mandir. For many others it is not religious at all. Both have been part of it from the start, and this chapter describes how, without taking sides.

The Act of Remembrance

The Royal British Legion sets out a short Act of Remembrance that anyone can use. The Exhortation from Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen" is read, and everyone replies "We will remember them". The Last Post is sounded, the Two Minute Silence is kept, and Reveille is sounded. The Kohima Epitaph may then be read. (The exact words of both are in chapter 4.)[20]

The Legion does not lay down what should go around this core. It says organisers can add their own elements to make a ceremony relevant to their community, but that ceremonies should be inclusive of all members of the community.[20] That is why the same few minutes can sit inside a church service, a civic parade, a school assembly or a moment at work.

What the evidence says

- **"The Exhortation is a prayer."** It is not. The Exhortation is a verse from a poem, "For the Fallen", published in *The Times* in September 1914.[21] It mentions no god and asks nothing of one. It is often spoken in churches, and many people hear it in a prayerful spirit. The Royal British Legion describes the Act of Remembrance itself as "brief and non-religious".[20]
- **"The Kohima Epitaph is from the Bible."** No. The Royal British Legion says the verse is attributed to John Maxwell Edmonds, and it is carved on the 2nd British Division's memorial at Kohima.[22]

Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph

The National Service of Remembrance on Whitehall is both a state ceremony and a religious service. In the official order of service for 2025, the Silence begins at the first stroke of Big Ben at 11 o'clock. The end of the Silence is marked by the Last Post, and

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wreaths are then laid. The Bishop of London offers prayers, the hymn “O God, our help in ages past” is sung, and everyone present is invited to say the Lord’s Prayer before the Blessing, the Rouse and the National Anthem.[23]

The order of service also offers “suggested subjects for thought and prayer” during the Silence. The first two are “We remember those who made the great sacrifice during the two World Wars” and “We remember those who have given their lives in the service of their country in other conflicts”. The rest are prayers: for those who suffer, for the bereaved and for peace.[23] The wording lets people of any faith, or none, use the two minutes in their own way.

Faith and belief leaders at the Cenotaph

Representatives of many faiths now stand at the Cenotaph. In 2018 the government said that 15 faiths were already represented. Alongside several Christian churches, including the Church of Scotland, the list included the Chief Rabbi, Reform Judaism and Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh representatives.[24] It announced that seven more faith and belief groups would be permanently represented from that year, namely Jains, Zoroastrians, Copts, Mormons, Bahá’ís, Spiritualists and Humanists. It said the existing list did not reflect the diversity of those who gave their lives.[24] For a short, fair guide to what the world’s faiths teach, see our Religion: Many Paths, One Source guide.

Humanists UK says it has been represented at the Cenotaph service since 2018, and at similar services in Cardiff and Belfast, while its sister charity Humanist Society Scotland is represented in Edinburgh. It also argues that the non-religious are still not equally included in what it calls “overwhelmingly Christian ceremonies”.[25] Others value the Christian form of the service as part of its history. Both views are held sincerely.

What the evidence says

- **“Remembrance Sunday is only for Christians.”** Not true. The Cenotaph service follows a Church of England order, but leaders of many faiths and none take part in it.[23,24,25] The Silence itself belongs to no single religion.[2]

Jewish remembrance: the AJEX parade

AJEX, the Jewish Military Association, says about 50,000 of the six million men who served in the First World War were Jewish, and that in 1921 a group of Jewish veterans laid their first wreath at the Cenotaph.[26] Today AJEX members march with other veterans in the national parade on Remembrance Sunday. A separate annual Jewish ceremony of Remembrance is held on the following Sunday in November, and Whitehall is closed for it.[27]

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What the evidence says

- **"Jewish veterans hold their own parade because they are not allowed in the main one."** Not true. AJEX says its members march in the Royal British Legion's national parade on Remembrance Sunday as well as holding their own ceremony.[27]

Hindu and Sikh soldiers: the Chattri

On the South Downs above Brighton stands the Chattri, a white marble memorial in a traditional Indian temple design with a domed roof. It stands on the site where Hindu and Sikh soldiers who died in Brighton's wartime hospitals were cremated, and it was unveiled by the Prince of Wales on 1 February 1921. A Commonwealth War Graves Commission wall nearby names 53 Indian soldiers cremated there. Its inscriptions are in English, Urdu and Hindi.[28]

The Patcham branch of the British Legion restarted an annual pilgrimage to the Chattri in 1950 and kept it going until 1999. In 2000, responsibility passed to a local Sikh teacher with the Undivided Indian Ex-Services Association.[28]

Faith in the war cemeteries

The Imperial War Graves Commission (now the CWGC) said early on that all who died, "of whatever race or creed, should receive equal honour". The IWM notes that every large cemetery was given two central structures: a secular Stone of Remembrance and a Christian-inspired Cross of Sacrifice. Rudyard Kipling recommended the words "Their name liveth for evermore", from the biblical Book of Ecclesiasticus, for each Stone of Remembrance.[29]

The Unknown Warrior: a religious burial

The burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey on 11 November 1920 was a Christian service. Westminster Abbey's account says that while the Cenotaph was being unveiled, the choir sang "O Valiant Hearts", the congregation sang "O God our help in ages past", and the two minutes' silence followed at 11am.[6]

A shortened form of the Burial Service followed. After the hymn "Lead kindly light", King George V dropped a handful of French earth onto the coffin from a silver shell as it was lowered into the grave. The service ended with "Abide with me", prayers and Kipling's "Recessional", and then Reveille was sounded. The Last Post had already been played at the Cenotaph.[6] The Abbey also keeps the "Padre's Flag", a Union flag that a chaplain had used at the Front as an altar cloth and as a covering for the fallen. It covered the coffin during the funeral.[6]

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Chaplains: the padres

Army chaplains, often called padres, served alongside soldiers throughout the First World War. The National Army Museum notes that two of them, Neville Talbot and "Tubby" Clayton, founded Talbot House, a social centre for soldiers in Poperinghe, Belgium, in 1915. Three chaplains were awarded the Victoria Cross, and 179 died during the war.[30]

The most famous nickname belongs to the Reverend Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, known as "Woodbine Willie" (sometimes spelt Willy), a nickname the National Army Museum says he gained by handing out cigarettes.[30] According to a story on IWM's Lives of the First World War, when a nervous soldier asked who he was, he replied "The church", and when asked what the church was doing there, he said "Its job".[31] That story was added by a member of the public, so treat it as a well-known anecdote rather than a checked record.

Today the Royal Army Chaplains' Department's chaplains have non-combatant status and are not allowed to carry weapons. Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim soldiers are served by civilian chaplains of their own faiths, and all Army chaplains are expected to care for any soldier who needs it, whatever their beliefs.[30]

What the evidence says

- **"Army chaplains carry weapons like other soldiers."** Not true. The National Army Museum says chaplains are non-combatants and are banned from carrying weapons, even on parade.[30]

Where do the fallen go? Beliefs about the afterlife

Remembrance asks us to remember the dead. It does not tell anyone what happens after death. People who keep the Silence side by side may hold very different beliefs, or none. Here are some beliefs about death and the afterlife, from Remembrance services and from older traditions, described as beliefs, without judging between them.

The Christian hope of resurrection

Many Remembrance services are Christian, and they speak of resurrection and eternal life. At the burial of the Unknown Warrior in 1920, the shortened Burial Service began with the verses "I am the resurrection and the life", sung as the coffin was carried to the grave.[6] At the Cenotaph today, the Bishop of London's prayer honours "the memory of those who have died in the service of their country and of the Crown", and the hymn calls God "our eternal home".[23] Kipling's words on the Stone of Remembrance, "Their name liveth for evermore", are biblical too (see above).

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Ancient Egypt: Amentet, “the West”

The ancient Egyptians believed that the land of the dead lay in the west. The Global Egyptian Museum describes Imentet, also written Amentet, as the goddess of the West and its regions, “particularly the underworld (thought to be in the west)”. As early as the Old Kingdom, texts express the hope that she would stretch out her arms to receive the dead person. She was later largely replaced in this role by the goddess Hathor.[32]

The best-known picture of Egyptian judgement after death is in the British Museum. In the Book of the Dead of Hunefer, a royal scribe of Egypt’s 19th Dynasty, more than 3,000 years ago, the jackal-headed god Anubis leads Hunefer to a balance. In the scene, his heart is weighed against a feather, the symbol of Maat, which the Museum explains as “what is right”. In this belief, a heart that failed the test would be eaten by a monster called the “Devourer”, pictured waiting underneath. Hunefer passes, and the god Horus leads him to Osiris, ruler of the dead.[33,34]

THE “HALLS OF AMENTI”: A MODERN BELIEF TEXT

The “Halls of Amenti” are not found in ancient Egyptian sources. They are described in later esoteric writings, notably *The Emerald Tablets of Thoth-the-Atlantean* by the American writer Maurice Doreal, who founded his Brotherhood of the White Temple in 1930. The book dates from the mid-20th century: some sources give the 1930s, while the historian Michael Barkun places its first publication in the 1940s or early 1950s.[35] Its preface claims that the writer was “Thoth, an Atlantean Priest-King”, who built the Great Pyramid “over the entrance to the Great Halls of Amenti”, and that the translation was made in 1925.[36]

Some readers find its teachings meaningful, and this guide does not judge personal belief. As history, though, it is a different matter. Its claimed ancient origin is not supported by historians or Egyptologists: no ancient text of it is known, and the scholars cited here class it as a 20th-century work.[35] The Egyptian sources speak of Amentet and the judgement of the dead, not of Doreal’s Atlantean halls.[32,33]

What the evidence says

- **“The Halls of Amenti are an ancient Egyptian teaching.”** Not as far as the evidence shows. Amentet, “the West”, really is ancient Egyptian.[32] But the “Halls of Amenti” of the Emerald Tablets come from a 20th-century book with no known ancient source.[35,36] Believing in it is a personal matter; calling it ancient history is not supported by historians or Egyptologists.

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- **"In Egyptian belief, the heart was weighed to decide who went to paradise."** Broadly true, as the Egyptians pictured it. The British Museum says the Egyptians saw the heart as the seat of emotion, intellect and character, so it stood for the good or bad in a person's life. Pictures like Hunefer's show it weighed against the feather of Maat before the dead could join Osiris.[33,34]

Valhalla: the Norse hall of the slain

Another ancient image of the fallen comes from the Viking world. The British Museum explains that we know it mainly from Old Norse poetry and prose written down in Iceland from the 13th century. In those stories, the god Odin sent the valkyries (the name means "chooser of the slain") to battle to choose warriors worthy of going to Valhalla, "the hall of the slain". There they prepared for the final battle, Ragnarok.[37] The Museum suggests the myth offered the warrior going into battle an incentive, and the dying warrior "a kind of consolation".[37]

Living on in memory

For people of any faith or none, the most widely shared idea at Remembrance is that the dead live on in memory. Binyon's poem promises "We will remember them", and the Kohima Epitaph asks the living to "tell them of us".[20] The Royal British Legion describes the Act of Remembrance, which includes the Silence, as "brief and non-religious", and says ceremonies should be inclusive of all members of the community.[20] At the Scottish National War Memorial, relatives came on anniversaries to run a hand over a name in the Roll of Honour (see chapter 6).[4]

KNOWN UNTO GOD

For the headstones of soldiers who could not be identified, Rudyard Kipling wrote: "A soldier of the Great War. Known unto God."[29]

A WARTIME RISE IN SPIRITUALISM

"In 1914, there were 145 societies affiliated to the Spiritualists National Union. By the end of the War, it had more than doubled to 309." (GOV.UK, 2018)[24]

CLARITY TIP

Taking part in Remembrance does not need any particular belief. You can pray, reflect, think of someone by name or simply stand quietly. Each of these is a valid way to keep the Silence.

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CHAPTER SIX · SCOTLAND

How Scotland remembers

Scotland marks Remembrance with the rest of the UK, but it also has traditions of its own: its own national memorial in Edinburgh Castle, its own poppy, and a factory where veterans still make it by hand.

The Scottish National War Memorial

The idea of a Scottish national memorial began in 1917, while the war was still being fought. Its driving force was the 8th Duke of Atholl, a serving soldier, who asked that Scotland should have its own memorial, at first proposed as a museum collection, housed in Edinburgh Castle. The King supported the plan.[4]

It was not an easy road. The architect, Sir Robert Lorimer, was appointed in 1919. He advised against building a chapel because it “would excite much opposition”, and proposed instead a building “of a dedicatory character without actually being church or chapel”. There were years of argument in the press about the design and its effect on the Castle skyline, and building only began after the government approved Lorimer’s designs in October 1923.[4]

Lorimer and the Duke planned how every regiment, service and corps would be remembered, including the animals that served and suffered in the war. Some of the finest Scottish craftsmen and women of the day worked on the building, and its frieze was the work of Gertrude Alice Meredith Williams.[4]

The opening, 14 July 1927

Because the King had made it a policy not to open war memorials, the Prince of Wales opened the building. Veterans and relatives came from across Scotland and the Commonwealth, and crowds on the Castle Esplanade joined in the hymns through loudspeakers. After a solemn benediction, the pipers played “The Flowers of the Forest” as the party moved into the Shrine. There the Rolls of Honour were placed in a casket given by the King and Queen. It held over 100,000 names.[4]

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In the years that followed, the memorial's own history says, many widows and relatives visited on the anniversary of a death, opened the right Roll of Honour and ran a hand over a name. A further 50,000 names were added after the Second World War. The building was left unchanged as a memorial to all who have died since 1914, and names are still being added today.[4]

What the evidence says

- **"The Scottish National War Memorial is a church."** Not quite. Lorimer deliberately designed it to be dedicatory "without actually being church or chapel", though a religious blessing was part of its opening.[4]
- **"The memorial only covers the First World War."** No. It remembers Scots who have died in conflicts since 1914, and names are still added.[4]

Lady Haig's Poppy Factory

Lady Haig's Poppy Factory was founded in Edinburgh in 1926 to make poppies for Scotland and to employ men disabled by war. Its first premises were in the grounds of Whitefoord House on the Canongate. The factory says it began with "two workers, a pair of scissors and a piece of paper".[38]

In the 1930s the workforce grew to 117, with 338 people on a waiting list to join. In 1955 the factory introduced the standard lapel poppy, which it says is almost identical to the one used today.[38] In spring 2000, the Water of Leith burst through the protecting wall, flooded the factory and destroyed over one million poppies. The workers made up the shortfall by working at weekends, in time for that year's Poppy Appeal.[38]

The factory is now on Warriston Road in Edinburgh. Poppyscotland's own pages give its team as between 28 and 34 disabled and vulnerable ex-service men and women.[38,39] They make all the items for the Scottish Poppy Appeal,[39] including three million poppies, 40,000 wreaths and thousands of other Remembrance items a year.[38] A machine from 1926 is still used to cut the silk petals for some of its wreaths.[38]

SEE ALSO

The story of Lady Haig's Poppy Factory, from its opening in 1926 to its home today at Warriston Road, is told in our Famous Fife Families guide, with how to book a visit.

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THE FIFE CONNECTION

Field Marshal Douglas Haig's family were whisky distillers in Fife. John Haig founded Cameron Bridge Distillery, near Windygates, in 1824, and in 1877–78 the firm's blending business moved to Markinch.[40,41] Lady Dorothy Haig (1879–1939), the Field Marshal's wife, founded the poppy factory that bears her name.[42]

The family's full story, from whisky to the Western Front, is told in our Famous Fife Families guide.

THE MEMORIAL IN NUMBERS

The Scottish National War Memorial commemorates nearly 135,000 Scottish casualties in the First World War, more than 50,000 in the Second World War, and the campaigns since 1945, including the Malayan Emergency, the Korean War, Northern Ireland, the Falklands War and the Gulf War. To visit the Memorial only, its visiting page asks you to request a visit by emailing ticketing@hes.scot. Visiting the rest of Edinburgh Castle as well needs a paid, timed ticket.[43]

Our Famous Fife Families guide tells how its architect, Robert Lorimer, grew up at Kellie Castle.

THE MEMORIAL'S LATER STORY

In February 1929 the Duke of Atholl's original idea, the Scottish National Naval and Military Museum, opened at the Castle. It survives today as part of the National Museums of Scotland. During the Second World War, the Rolls of Honour, the Memorial's stained glass windows and many of the museum's contents were removed to safety for fear of bombing. After the war it was decided to leave the building unchanged, so no Second World War battle honours were added to the regimental bays.[4]

CLARITY TIP

Looking for a name on the Memorial's Roll of Honour? Chapter 9 shows how to search it, and our Tracing Your Scottish Family History guide covers the wider family tree.

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CHAPTER SEVEN · THE GREAT DEBATE

"Lions led by donkeys"?

For many people, the First World War is summed up in one phrase: brave soldiers (the lions) sent to die by stupid, uncaring generals (the donkeys). Historians have argued about this for decades. Here are both sides, and what we know about the phrase itself.

Where the phrase comes from

The phrase was made famous by Alan Clark's 1961 book *The Donkeys*, which quoted a supposed conversation between two German generals, Ludendorff and Hoffmann: "The English soldiers fight like lions." "True. But don't we know that they are lions led by donkeys." Later research has discredited that attribution.[44] The historian Richard Evans wrote in 2014 that Clark "later admitted he had invented" it.[45] Even so, the idea itself was not new: a 1918 diary shows similar views were current in Germany during the war.[44]

The case against the generals

- **The losses were enormous.** On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, British forces suffered 57,470 casualties, of whom 19,240 were killed: the heaviest losses the British Army has ever suffered in a single day.[46]
- **Attacks went on too long.** Even IWM historian Alan Wakefield, who argues for a more balanced view, accepts that Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig was often over-optimistic about what his army could do, and that many attacks carried on "well past the point of diminishing returns".[47]
- **Serious critics are not all on one side.** Evans points out that strong criticism of British generals has come from writers of the right as well as the left, including the late Conservative MP Alan Clark himself and Sir Max Hastings.[45]

The case for a more balanced view

- **Everyone had to learn a new kind of war.** All the armies of 1914 were trained for a war of movement. Machine guns and modern artillery made attacking deadly for every side, not just the British.[47]

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- **The army grew from tiny to huge.** The British Army was about 220,000 men in 1914 and around 2 million by 1916 to 1917, without enough trained staff officers. Learning "on the job" in the middle of a world war cost lives.[47]
- **It did learn.** The IWM says the Somme, though terribly costly, gave the army experience that later contributed to victory, and by 1918 combined attacks with artillery, tanks, aircraft and infantry helped defeat the German army in the Hundred Days Offensive.[46,47]
- **Not "château generals".** The IWM notes that Haig regularly visited areas near the front and casualty clearing stations, and after the war helped found the British Legion.[47]

WHERE MOST HISTORIANS ARE NOW

The Imperial War Museums' summary is that the "lions led by donkeys" idea is understandable given the huge casualties, but is "not the true story": there was poor generalship on all sides, yet the British Army learned and adapted. Others still judge some commanders harshly. Both views honour the soldiers; they disagree about the leaders.

TWO VIEWS OF HAIG, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Both are quoted by the National Army Museum.[48]

David Lloyd George, 1935: "A second-rate Commander in unparalleled and unforeseen circumstances..."

Winston Churchill, 1938: "...his character and conduct as a soldier will long serve as an example to all."

THE SOMME IN BRIEF

The Imperial War Museums say the Battle of the Somme took place "between 1 July and 18 November, 1916", lasting nearly five months. "In 1915, a plan was finalised for a joint British and French offensive the following year. However, the German attack against the French at Verdun meant that the British were forced to take the lead."[46]

For Haig's life and how his reputation has changed, see our Famous Fife Families guide.

Weighing up any verdict on a general

- ☐ Who is giving the verdict, and when? Writing in 1935 is not the same as writing in 2015.
- ☐ What were they comparing him with: other generals of the time, or hindsight?
- ☐ Do they give figures and sources you can check?
- ☐ Do they separate the soldiers' courage from the leaders' decisions?

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CHAPTER EIGHT · MORE CLAIMS

Six more claims about the First World War

These come up every November in posts, school projects and family conversations. Each one is checked against official or original records.

1. "Most of the men who went to war never came back."

Verdict: Not true, though the losses were terrible.

The Royal British Legion says over 6 million men served, and of those who came back, 1.75 million had some kind of disability.[11] The IWM says around three quarters of a million British servicemen died.[29] That is roughly one in eight. Most came home, many of them wounded in body or mind.

2. "The Christmas truce was a big football match."

Verdict: Partly true.

The truce of 1914 really happened: British and German soldiers met in no-man's land, swapped gifts, buried their dead and some played impromptu football. But it was not observed everywhere, fighting and deaths continued in other places on Christmas Day, and veterans described kickabouts rather than organised matches.[49]

3. "Wealthy families brought their sons home to be buried."

Verdict: Not for those who died abroad.

In 1915 a decision was taken that remains would not be brought home. After the war, the Imperial War Graves Commission (now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) used the same headstone for every grave, from general to private, "of whatever race or creed". Some families were deeply upset by this. Families could add a short personal inscription, but there was a charge for it.[29]

4. "Soldiers executed for cowardice were never pardoned."

Verdict: Not true.

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More than 300 soldiers executed during the First World War for offences such as desertion and cowardice were pardoned when the Armed Forces Act 2006 became law in November 2006.[50] Section 359 of the Armed Forces Act 2006 pardons those executed for these offences between 4 August 1914 and 11 November 1918. The law says the pardon does not affect any conviction or sentence.[51]

5. "Scotland lost a bigger share of its men than any other part of the UK."

Verdict: Unclear: the figures are disputed.

The Scottish National War Memorial commemorates nearly 135,000 casualties from the First World War.[4] Its rolls held over 147,000 names, but a five-year review that removed duplicates of people listed under more than one regiment reached 134,712.[52] Its rules count anyone who served in a Scottish regiment, wherever they came from, and also include nurses, munitions workers and the Merchant Navy. The researcher who reviewed the rolls said he did not believe there could ever be an absolute figure.[52]

6. "It was a British war, fought by British soldiers."

Verdict: Not the whole story.

The National Army Museum says over 3 million soldiers and labourers from across the Empire and Commonwealth served alongside the British Army.[53] The IWM credits the Indian Army with about 1.5 million men; the NAM gives 1.27 million Indian volunteers as combatants and labourers. The figures differ because they count different groups.[53,54]

> **THE SCALE OF LOSS**
>
> "Around three quarters of a million British servicemen died as a result of the conflict. When combined with deaths sustained by Britain's Empire forces, the toll grew nearer to approximately one million lives." (Imperial War Museums)[29]
>
> By 1927 the Imperial War Graves Commission had created more than 500 permanent cemeteries and 400,000 headstones.[29]

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CHAPTER NINE · FAMILY HISTORY

Finding the people behind the names

Almost every town and village in Scotland has a war memorial. Behind each name is a person with a story, and official records can help you find it. Most of the search tools below can be used without charge.

1. **Start with what the family knows.** Names, rough dates, regiment, medals, photographs, letters. Write it down before you search, and note who told you what.
2. **Search the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.** If the person died in either world war while serving, the CWGC's Find War Dead search can show where they are buried or commemorated, often with their unit, age and family details.[55]
3. **Check the Scottish roll.** The Scottish National War Memorial's Roll Search lets you look up names on its Rolls of Honour by surname, service number or year of death.[56]
4. **Look for service records.** The National Archives explains which records survive for soldiers below officer rank. In September 1940, a fire caused by an incendiary bomb at the War Office Record Store in London destroyed approximately two thirds of 6.5 million soldiers' documents for the First World War, so don't worry if you can't find one.[57] Medal records are far more likely to have survived, and can confirm a soldier's service number and unit.[58]
5. **Build their life story.** IWM's Lives of the First World War brings together records for people who served, and lets families add stories and photographs.[59] In Scotland, ScotlandsPeople holds the official birth, marriage and death records that can fill in the rest.[60]

IS YOUR RELATIVE ON THE SCOTTISH ROLL?

The Scottish National War Memorial's rule for its Rolls of Honour covers a member of the Armed Forces of the Crown or of the Merchant Navy who was "either a Scotsman (i.e. born in Scotland or who had a Scottish born father or Mother) or served in a Scottish Regiment" and died as a result of service.[4] Names are still being added, so it is worth searching the Roll even if you have been told your relative's name was left off.[56]

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My research notes

QUESTION	WHAT I FOUND	WHERE I FOUND IT
Full name		
Born (date and place)		
Unit / service number		
Medals awarded		
Died or came home?		
Buried or commemorated at		
Named on which memorial(s)		
Photos or letters found		
Family story to check		

Service items to look for at home

- ☐ Photographs, especially in uniform
- ☐ Service numbers written on kit, photos or letters
- ☐ Medals and any paperwork that came with them
- ☐ Discharge papers, pay books or certificates
- ☐ Memorial plaques or scrolls sent to the family after a death
- ☐ Regimental badges, buttons or other keepsakes

CLARITY TIP

When you find a name in the Scottish National War Memorial's Roll search, you can also buy a certificate or an extract from the Roll for that person.[56]

CLARITY TIP

For interviewing relatives and tracing the rest of the family tree through ScotlandsPeople, census and parish records, see our Tracing Your Scottish Family History guide.

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CHAPTER TEN · CHECKING CLAIMS

Checking Remembrance stories online

Every November, posts about poppies, “bans” and the war spread fast because people care so much. A one-minute check before you share keeps Remembrance about the people it is meant to honour.

The STOP check

The STOP check comes from our free Real or Fake? guide, which shows how to use it on photos, videos and viral posts, with six worked examples.

1. **S – Stop.** If a post makes you angry or upset about Remembrance, that is the moment to slow down.
2. **T – Trace who’s behind it.** Is it from the Royal British Legion, Poppyscotland, a museum, a council or a news organisation? Or an account you’ve never heard of?
3. **O – Other sources.** Is anyone reliable reporting the same thing? Charities usually respond quickly to false rumours on their own websites.
4. **P – Picture the original.** Old photos and stories are often recycled every year with a new caption. Look for the date and place.

Quick answers

YOU SEE...	THE EVIDENCE SAYS...
“Poppies have been banned in [town].”	The Royal British Legion says this rumour comes back every year and is not true.[5]
“You’re wearing your poppy wrong.”	There is no right or wrong way to wear a poppy (Royal British Legion).[2]
“White poppies are a new insult.”	They were first made in 1933 by women, many of them bereaved by the war.[13]
“They shall not grow old...”	Binyon wrote “They shall grow not old”.[21]
“The silence is the law.”	The Royal British Legion describes it as voluntary, while asking people to respect those who pause.[2]

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YOU SEE...	THE EVIDENCE SAYS...
"Most soldiers died."	Roughly one in eight British servicemen who served died; most came home.[11,29]
"Lions led by donkeys, said a German general."	That attribution has been discredited; the debate about the generals continues.[44]
"Remembrance is only about the First World War."	The Cenotaph now honours those who died in all conflicts since 1914, and the Legion includes civilians and today's Armed Forces.[2,19]

Talking to children about Remembrance

- Keep it simple and honest: people died in wars, and we remember them so they are not forgotten.
- Look at your local war memorial together and pick one name to find out about (chapter 9).
- Explain that people wear different poppies, or none, and that being kind about other people's choices is part of Remembrance too.

A moment for your own reflection

Use this space to write the names of anyone you would like to remember this November, from your family, your community or history.

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Useful organisations

Poppyscotland	poppyscotland.org.uk · the Scottish Poppy Appeal and Lady Haig's Poppy Factory
Royal British Legion	britishlegion.org.uk · the Poppy Appeal in the rest of the UK
Scottish National War Memorial	snwm.org · Edinburgh Castle; Roll of Honour search
Commonwealth War Graves Commission	cwgc.org · Find War Dead search
Imperial War Museums	iwm.org.uk · Lives of the First World War: livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk
National Army Museum	nam.ac.uk
The National Archives	nationalarchives.gov.uk · service records research guides
ScotlandsPeople	scotlandspeople.gov.uk · Scottish birth, marriage and death records
Peace Pledge Union	ppu.org.uk · white poppies
AJEX (Jewish Military Association UK)	ajex.org.uk · Jewish remembrance parade
Humanists UK	humanists.uk · non-religious Remembrance
Humanist Society Scotland	humanism.scot · non-religious ceremonies in Scotland
Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)	www.oscr.org.uk · check that a Scottish charity is registered

CLARITY TIP

Contact details and opening hours change, so check each organisation's own website before you call or visit.

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Glossary

Act of Remembrance
The Royal British Legion's short core ceremony: Exhortation, Last Post, Two Minute Silence, Reveille, and optionally the Kohima Epitaph.

Armistice
An agreement to stop fighting. The 1918 Armistice came into effect at 11am on 11 November.

Armistice Day
11 November each year.

Cenotaph
A monument meaning "empty tomb", honouring people buried elsewhere.

Chattri
The marble memorial near Brighton on the site where Hindu and Sikh soldiers were cremated.

CWGC
Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which cares for war graves and memorials. It was founded as the Imperial War Graves Commission.

Imentet (Amentet)
Ancient Egyptian goddess of the West and its regions, particularly the underworld.

Kohima Epitaph
The verse "When you go home, tell them of us and say…", from the 2nd British Division memorial at Kohima.

Padre
The name used for any Army chaplain, whatever their rank.

Poppy Appeal
The yearly fundraising campaign of the Royal British Legion, and of Poppyscotland in Scotland.

Remembrance Sunday
The second Sunday in November.

Roll of Honour
A list of the names of those who died.

Unknown Warrior
The unidentified serviceman buried in Westminster Abbey in 1920, representing all with no known grave.

Valhalla
In Norse myth, "the hall of the slain".

Western Front
The line of trenches through Belgium and France where much of the fighting took place.

> **HOW CLARITY CHECKS**
> Every fact in this guide links to a source at the back. Where sources disagree, we say so in 'How sure are we?'.

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HOW SURE ARE WE?

- **The origin of the silence** is described by the Australian War Memorial as what "is said to have" happened; it is unclear whether Honey and Fitzpatrick ever met.
- **Alan Clark "inventing" the donkeys quote** rests on later accounts (including a friend's recollection) rather than a written confession; what is firmly established is that the attribution cannot be traced.
- **Scottish and Indian Army figures** vary with how people are counted, so we give ranges and say why.
- **"Roughly one in eight"** is our own calculation from two rounded figures (over 6 million served; around 750,000 died).
- **"More than 300" executions** is the figure reported when the pardons became law; the Act itself does not give a number.
- **The "Its job" story** about Woodbine Willie comes from a public contribution to IWM's Lives of the First World War, not a checked record.
- **Dates for *The Emerald Tablets*** vary; Barkun puts first publication in the 1940s or early 1950s.
- **Poppyscotland's own pages** give 28 and 34 for the factory's current staff, and 10,000, 25,000 or 40,000 for the wreaths it makes each year.

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Making the confusing clear.

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