



The Story of the Unknown Warrior for teachers

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This list of frequently asked questions is designed to give teachers all the information they require to explore the story, history and significance of the Grave of the Unknown Warrior within Westminster Abbey. This background information will help with teachers' own understanding, whether they are using [Westminster Abbey's Remembrance teaching resources](#) or creating their own content.

Who is he?

We really don't know. All we know is that he died fighting for Britain in the First World War. He could be from any part of the British Isles or those parts of the world which formed the old British Empire and Dominions and whose soldiers fought for Britain.

Who had the idea for the Unknown Warrior?

In 1916 Reverend David Railton, an Anglican army chaplain looking after soldiers during the war, had seen a grave in a garden in France, with a wooden cross bearing the words 'An Unknown British Soldier'. He felt sorry for the family of this man who would never know where he was buried: if only their son could be taken home. But in this war no bodies were repatriated; all were to be buried in the same way, where they fell. In 1920 Railton wrote to the Dean of Westminster, Herbert Ryle, asking if one of these unknown comrades could be buried in the Abbey. The Dean, the king and the government agreed that this simple idea would honour all the very many who had died, without singling out any one person.

What was Britain like in 1920?

Fighting had ceased in 1918 yet returning soldiers faced delays and, sometimes, rejection and unemployment. With deaths from Spanish flu rising and over two million workers on strike, the country needed healing. The Cenotaph, or 'empty tomb', a secular monument erected as a focus for the 1919 Peace Treaty parade, was being made permanent in response to public demand. Visits to graveyards in France and Belgium were beginning for those who could afford them, but what about the parents of that 'Unknown British Soldier' whose grave Railton had seen and those many other families whose sons had no known grave?

How was he chosen?

On 7th November 1920, four unknown bodies were dug up at random from four different battle areas. Only their boots and uniform buttons identified them as having fought for Britain. At midnight General L. J. Wyatt entered the chapel in France where the four bodies lay, covered by Union Jack flags. Some say he was blind-folded. He touched one of the bodies, which was then placed in a coffin, and the others were reburied.

Why this man?

What was special about this man? The answer is 'nothing' and that is the point. He represents the more than 800,000 men who fought and died for Britain, especially the approximately 400,000 with no known grave.

What is he buried in?

The Unknown Warrior was placed in a plain coffin, and then in one made from oak grown on the king's land at Hampton Court Palace. It was wrapped in iron bands, with a 16th century sword from the Tower of London placed on top. On a shield on the coffin were the words: 'A British Warrior who fell in the Great War 1914-1918 for King and Country'. An ambulance took this coffin to the French coast at Boulogne, along with 100 bags of soil from battlefields so that he could be buried in soil where so many of his comrades had fallen.

Why is he called a 'warrior'?

Calling him a warrior shows respect and that he could be from any of the armed services: a soldier, a sailor or an airman.

Why does the Abbey have a big bell hanging on a pillar?

This bell hung on the ship HMS Verdun which brought the body of the Unknown Warrior back to Britain. The coffin was followed down to the port at Boulogne by a mile-long procession made up of important French and British people, French soldiers, including those disabled in war, and lots of children. HMS Verdun was waiting, with its flag flying at half-mast. The British National Anthem was played and guns were fired 19 times as the coffin, wreaths and 100 bags of soil came aboard. Six British ships met HMS Verdun half way across the channel and guided the ship to dock in Dover. Again the guns were fired 19 times, a military band played *Land of Hope and Glory* and thousands watched, paying their respects as the Warrior came ashore. From there, soldiers from the Empire stood guard as the coffin was taken on a special train to Victoria station where it rested overnight. The wreaths were placed with the coffin in its carriage – some were so big it took four or five men to carry them. The top of the carriage was painted white so that the crowds waiting on bridges and at stations along the line would know where the Warrior lay.

What part did the Padre's flag play?

The Padre's flag was a Union Jack belonging to Reverend David Railton, the Army chaplain who suggested the burial in the Abbey. He flew the flag outside broken-down barns to show the men that he

was inside and ready for a chat, a prayer or simply to listen. Many times he made an altar for his 'church' services by covering a box with the flag and sometimes he hung it up to decorate those barns for a boxing match or a party. On the morning of 11th November 1920, it was placed over the coffin of the Unknown Warrior for his last journey.

What happened on 11th November 1920?

Draped in the Padre's flag, the coffin was taken on a gun carriage drawn by six black horses, first to Whitehall and the Cenotaph, where King George V placed a wreath on the coffin with a hand-written card. Then, followed by the king, members of the royal family and politicians and military leaders, it was taken to the Abbey. The route of this last journey was lined ten deep with men, women and children, many of them carrying white flowers to remember their lost loved ones.

How was he buried?

Just after 11 o'clock, a short service of burial was held at the west end of the Abbey. The congregation included women who had lost their husbands and all their sons in the war. The coffin was lowered into the empty grave and the king threw in some battlefield soil and placed his wreath. The Grave was then covered with an embroidered silk cloth and the Padre's flag. Mourners filed slowly past as they left the Abbey, some laying wreaths and flowers. After the Abbey had closed for the night, some of the choirboys went back into the nave and one later wrote: "The Abbey was empty save for the guard of honour stiffly to attention, arms (rifles) reversed, heads bowed and quite still - the whole scene illuminated by just four candles".

Why is the Warrior buried in this spot?

The Grave of the Unknown Warrior lies where everyone can see it. It is near the Great West Door where royals enter the Abbey, but no one, not even kings and queens, walks over it. It is surrounded by poppies symbolising remembrance. In 1923 a royal bride, who had lost her brother in the First World War, laid her bridal bouquet on the Grave as she left the Abbey, and this mark of respect has been followed by royal brides since, including Queen Elizabeth II and the Princess of Wales.

Why is the Grave important now?

'The Reverend David Railton was an inspired man,' wrote an ex-soldier to Railton's son. The Padre's flag still hangs close to the Warrior in the Abbey and Railton's idea has given rise to similar burials in many countries whose men fought for, or alongside, Britain. The brass lettering on the black marble gravestone is made from the melted down ammunition cases which were once used to kill. The writing includes four verses from the Bible about God's love, about the sacrifice of those that died in the war and the hope of eternal life. Visiting Heads of State still lay wreaths at the Grave and prayers are said for peace. In 2014 the Grave was marked with a single candle at a special service to remember the beginning of the First World War and surrounded by fresh flowers at the service in 2018 to mark one hundred years since its end. During the centenary services, prayers were said from the faith traditions of all those involved in the conflict. David Railton emphasised the unity of all men as the true meaning of the Grave. From any of the armed services, from Britain or from the countries of the British Empire, from any religion or none, the Warrior belongs to all.