



## Local History: Lest We Forget – Alton's War Memorial

Alongside the Curtis Museum, in front of the grass on Crown Close is the Cairn, a unique granite structure some 4.5 metres high which is regarded as Alton's War Memorial. In actual fact it is Crown Close and the two buildings either side of it (the Assembly Rooms and Curtis Museum) that are the memorial, rather than just the simple granite structure that is often referred to as 'a pile of stones'.

However, it is a convenient landmark to help guide people to the Museum when giving directions on the telephone, as it is rather obvious in a High Street built mainly of brick! How the town came to have such a feature is outlined below.

At the end of the Great War, Alton, like most other communities, sought to honour those who had died. Alton Urban District Council (AUDC) called a public meeting in the Foresters' Hall in Church Street on 2 December 1918. This was three weeks after the signing of the Armistice.

Their aim was to nominate a committee to formulate a scheme for a suitable war memorial for Alton and to receive suggestions for a scheme. At that meeting Mr HP Burrell proposed that there should be a war memorial and then the discussions began. Firstly, about the composition of the committee and the numbers of Councillors involved. Then a number of suggestions for schemes were voiced and it is interesting to see the range of them:

1. the purchase of premises next to the Town Hall and their enlargement by connecting them with an archway,
2. the acquisition of the Assembly Rooms as civic offices,
3. the endowment of the Cottage Hospital, a public swimming pool and a public library,
4. the building of an indoor swimming pool,
5. an archway on Crown Hill surmounted by a clock and panels on the sides with the names of those who had died,
6. the Trustees of the Mechanics Institute would be willing to hand over their premises to the AUDC as part of a war memorial free of cost to be used as a Public Library Reading Room, also to place a monument in the middle of the Square on which should be engraved the names of those who had served in the war, and if possible, get the Assembly Room buildings handed over to the town as well. It is minuted that a sufficient sum of money, probably £25,000, would have to be subscribed of which £2000 would have to be invested for the maintenance of the buildings so that there should be no burden on the rates.

The six schemes above are followed in the minutes by suggestions of: - a similar statue to that of King Alfred in Winchester, surmounted by a soldier in full fighting kit and a sailor; money to benefit discharged men and the children of those who had died; for the men it was suggested that they receive free nursing at the Cottage Hospital for life whilst for the children free education at the



## Local History: Lest We Forget – Alton's War Memorial

Grammar School was proposed. Swimming baths and the building of cottages for the dependents and children of those who had fallen or became incapacitated in the war were also minuted.

The final note for this initial meeting was that HP Burrell suggested a fund should be raised in Alton and District for the enlargement and endowment of the Cottage Hospital. This was a popular cause elsewhere, for example in Gosport where the hospital became the Memorial Hospital.

Over the next three years there were another thirty-three committee meetings to discuss the issues. There were also two more public meetings, both in May 1919. The Vicar of St. Lawrence had kept a roll of honour of all those from the town who were serving in the Forces. From 1915 the names of those who had died were also inscribed on a roll of vellum. This was later included in the design of a Memorial in the former Lady Chapel, restored as the chapel of St. Michael and St. George, which was dedicated on 28 November 1920. This list bears the names of 187 men who died in what is listed as 'The Great European War'. Interestingly, there are 169 names on the bronze panel of the Cairn.

It seems as though there was a bit of a 'mix-up' at the first meeting of the Committee on 20 December 1918. The AUDC wanted all of its members to be present and work with the Committee elected at the public meeting earlier that month. Representatives from various local groups including churches, the hospital, nursing groups as well as the Federation of Discharged Soldiers and Sailors were to be invited to participate. The following meeting looked at schemes already suggested including one proposed by The Workers Union for the erection of a urinal for both sexes in Assembly Rooms Square. After three Committee meetings, there were suggestions (in true British style) for a Sub-Committee to investigate the schemes proposed and another to decide on the names of those who should be included.

At the initial meeting of the former some costs were outlined: 7ft 6ins soldier on 8ft pedestal £1400 similar on 5ft pedestal £1100 figure in bronze alone £900 Iona Cross £500 Hospital scheme (to provide £1500 four beds and an endowment)

[NB: As an aside, in previous meetings Mrs Hall had raised the matter of the memorial in Worcester for the South African war giving costs (£1600) and providing photographs. Thinking that this might be a Cairn, and thus the source for the Alton proposal, I investigated the memorial only to discover that it was an impressive sculpture of an angel and a soldier.]

These proposals were reported at a public meeting on 10 May 1919 when 60 people attended, discussed them and resolved that: *'The memorial should take the form of an endowment of the hospital up to £3000, a building fund and that the monument should be a heap of rough granite stones with a bronze tablet let in with the Roll of Honour inscribed on it, placed in Assembly Rooms*

## Local History: Lest We Forget – Alton’s War Memorial

*Square (laid out as gardens) with a flagpole in front with a Union Jack permanently flying, that a disabled sailor or soldier should look after it and the flag be flown at half-mast on request by any relative on the anniversary of the death of any of the fallen’*

There is no indication why there was another public meeting eleven days later. Perhaps they ran out of time or possibly there was felt to be a need to digest this new proposal that had circumvented any of the discussion processes! However, the War Memorial Committee met earlier on the same evening, 21 May, when Mr Burrell ‘was called on to explain his new scheme mentioned at the public meeting’. He then proceeded to give a full description of what we see today with only minor variations. (Appendix 1).

The committee agreed that the two schemes for the monument should be submitted to the public meeting without any recommendation in favour of either. (That three possible schemes had been mentioned before and three were subsequently put before the public suggests that the minutes were a little confused!). One imagines the committee went from their meeting room to the main hall and there gave the assembled people of Alton their choices:

- the Iona Cross at £500
- the figure of Victory at £1500-2000
- the Cairn at £270

It is not surprising that the last scheme, as suggested by Major Godfrey Burrell, was adopted as the memorial for the parish of Alton.

At successive committee meetings arrangements for a letter to all households, for a public collection point at the National Provincial Bank and the appointment of Mr BD Cancellor as the architect were agreed. It was to be constructed by local builder JD Kemp. There were regular updates on the fund raising and interesting details emerged such as the names on the plaque should be in alphabetical order without distinction to rank or unit; that the existing granite fountain should not be moved to the other end of the Square and that the captured field gun given to the town should not be placed in the Square as it would be out of keeping with the surroundings of the Cairn. It is not recorded how the inscription



*The bronze plaque on The Cairn with the names of those who died in the two World Wars*



## Local History: Lest We Forget – Alton's War Memorial

*Their Name Liveth for Evermore* was chosen, although it is the last line of the famous *passage 'Let us now praise famous men'* found in Ecclesiasticus, chapter 15 in the Apocrypha.

An invitation was sent to Rt Hon The Earl of Selborne to unveil the Memorial. The Hospital Sunday Committee were approached regarding the timing of the ceremony after their service on the grass in the Square on the afternoon of Hospital Sunday, 19 September 1920.

Meetings of the committee continued for a further eighteen months. The provision of paving around the front and a fence around the rear of the structure were discussed and there were reports of names being omitted from the list. Close inspection of the bronze plaque shows that three names are out of order suggesting that they had been added later. This is not as confusing as the Second World War plate where, as well as four extra names, there is an additional plate bearing the names of nine others. The final item related to the fountain: Mr JD Kemp was paid £63-0-9 for its removal and rebuilding at the Normandy Street end of Papermill Lane where it remained for many years. Following a road accident, it was removed to AUDC storage. Later, the base of it was positioned in the Public Gardens behind Westbrook House, where it still resides, having been renovated.

Inscribed marble stones were inserted into the High Street wall of both the Assembly Rooms and the Mechanics Institute to commemorate their handing over from private to public ownership as part of the war memorial. The former is still in place and acknowledges the generosity of Gerald and Goodwyn Hall. The latter, acknowledging the gift of the Trustees of the Institute and the Curtis Museum, was removed in 1985 when building work to improve access to the museum took place. It now forms part of the Story of Alton display inside the building.

In the Museum we are often asked '*why does the memorial give the dates of the Great War as 1914-19 when the Armistice came into effect at 11am on 11 November 1918?*' The Armistice was the cease-fire or the ending of hostilities. The peace agreement between Germany and the Allies was formulated at the Paris Peace Conference and signed by both sides at the Palace of Versailles on 28 June 1919.

The Alton men who gave their lives in the service of their country in the 1939-45 War were honoured on Sunday 6 November 1949, when General Sir George Jeffreys MP unveiled another bronze plaque on the Cairn. In this conflict Alton was spared the great loss of life from 1914-19, for the names of 55 men are listed compared to the 169 who are recorded from the earlier war. Civilian casualties were not included and they are remembered only on individual gravestones in the Old Odiham Road cemetery.

## Local History: Lest We Forget – Alton’s War Memorial

Over the years there have been many changes around the Cairn including the construction of a bomb shelter during WWII. However, perhaps the biggest was brought about as a consequence of the town centre enhancement scheme in 1995. The Alton Town Council, as the successors to the AUDC, sought to improve the area around the granite structure. A working party was set up, deliberations were made and a scheme proposed which was jointly funded by the Alton Town Council and Hampshire County Council. Brick paving replaced a rather unsightly agglomeration of materials, the flower beds containing the Burma Star roses were re-structured and two seats were donated - one by the Alton Town Council, the other by C Lee and Sons, the contractor who undertook the Town Centre works.



### References

Minutes of a public meeting 2 December 1918 (Hampshire Record Office 12M75/DDC469).  
Couper, DL., The Parish Church of St. Lawrence, Alton, 1970.

### Appendix 1

*‘The Cairn will be 10ft in height from the ground and 7ft in width, tapering off to a thickness of about 5ft at the top. It will be constructed of Cornish Granite in rough stones placed at random and with left open joints and bedded to keep them in position. These blocks of granite will vary in shape and not brought in any way to an even surface, the stones are to vary considerably in size. It will require between 15 and 20 tons of granite. There will be a foundation on concrete under the whole area of the Granite and in the centre of same there will be a concrete back carried up and so as to form the fixing of the bronze tablet, but this concrete will be entirely hidden from view by the granite blocks. The bronze tablet will be 5ft in height and 2ft 6ins in width of sufficient size to take 100-120 names. The flagstaff shown on the sketch would be placed behind the Cairn or on the south side of same, but should not be placed in front of it as there would be a risk of it obscuring the inscription on the bronze tablet.*

*‘The approximate cost of the work is as follows:*

*for the bronze tablet including names and inscription £100*

*for the granite foundation, granite blocks and building same £170*

*The Cairn will be practically square, the angles will be left rough and slightly rounded off.’*

## Local History: Lest We Forget – Alton's War Memorial

(In the event, the preparation for the base was £75, the Liskeard granite was £179 and the bronze plaque from William Morris & Co. of Westminster was £126.)

### Postscript:

I am grateful to Mr. R. Martin of Binsted for information relating to the above article. His late father, Alfred Martin - a well-known local auctioneer who co-founded Martin and Stratford in 1929, had a copy (bearing his signature and dated 1913) of the second edition of volume II of Scott's Last Expedition by L. Huxley, which had been published in 1912. On page 346 there is a reference to the cairn that was built where Scott died and above a photograph of the cairn on an adjacent page is the hand-written note: *'Original idea of the Alton Cairn, but badly carried out.'*



*The Cairn was unveiled by the Rt Hon The Earl of Selborne on Hospital Sunday, 19 September 1920. Hampshire Cultural Trust.*

Whether Mr Martin had made the original suggestion at the public meeting on 10th May 1919 to build a Cairn, we shall probably never know. However the fact that he felt the need to record his thoughts in such an interesting way indicates his obvious misgivings at the eventual outcome.