

Teesdale U3A July Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Roger Hailwood

The National Memorial Arboretum: A World Class Centre for Remembrance

The National Memorial Arboretum (NMA) is the UK's year-round national site of remembrance situated just south of Alrewas on approximately 150 acres of old gravel adjacent to the confluence of the River Tame with the River Trent. The Arboretum was conceived by David Childs in 1988, who wished to establish a national focus or 'centre' for Remembrance. Planting started in 1996, but there were environmental constraints and funding issues that limited its development into the kind of memorial that would be truly reflective of the immense impact of war on the nation. Together with Leonard Cheshire they presented the concept to PM John Major, who launched a national appeal for funding in 2004.

The NMA now attracts around 300,000 visitors every year, and early in its development it became apparent that its visitor facilities would need to grow to accommodate these numbers. Prince William became a patron and his fundraising efforts significantly helped to fund a structure five times as large as the original. In addition, an Events Centre due to be finished in October 2018 is under construction.

Roger – a regular guide at the NMA - took us on a tour of the Arboretum, starting from the chapel and on to many of its 350 main memorials, representing all of the armed services sectors and some civilian organisations. The Arboretum is steeped in symbolism, rich in sculptures and presents a vast canvas of beautiful trees of all colours and varieties in which people can remember all those who have been affected by conflict. Most poignant for me was the *Shot at Dawn Memorial*, a sculpture of Herbert Francis Burden, stripped of all his honours, surrounded by 306 stakes to represent all the other recorded shot at dawn executions (“as examples to all the others”). Herbert Francis Burden was only 17 when shot at Ypres in 1915. Who knows the terrors he had endured before this last terrifying act?

More upliftingly, Roger told us of the annual *Ride to the Wall* event, proposed and led by the Nene Valley Harley Davidson Owners Group who organised a small ride to the National Memorial Arboretum's Remembrance Day event in 2007, at first involving only 40 bikes. Last year, on the first Saturday of October, more than 11,000 bikes turned up to a huge pageant of colourful, rumbling, remembrance.

This was a fascinating talk that would encourage members to go and experience for themselves the soulfulness and poignancy of a very special place. There can be very few of us who have not been affected by the loss of those memorialised in the NMA. The vote of thanks was given by Sylvia Watson.

Annie Clouston, 26 July 2018