

Ypres Menin Gate

By [Dominiek Dendooven](#)

The Menin Gate in Ypres is the best known of the memorials to the missing in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's care. Designed by architect Sir Reginald Blomfield it is where the Last Post, the only daily ceremony in the world commemorating the dead of the First World War, is held.

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The Memorial in Ypres

Though the Menin Gate in Ypres is not the largest memorial to the missing in the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (previously known as the Imperial War Graves Commission) nor the one commemorating the highest number of casualties, it was the first and is arguably the best known among such monuments. This is likely also the case because it is where the famous Last Post, the only daily ceremony in the world commemorating the dead of the First World War, is held. Unveiled by Field Marshall [Herbert Charles Onslow Plumer \(1857-1932\)](#) on 24 July 1927, the Menin Gate bears the names of 55,000 officers and other men from the British Army who perished in the [Ypres Salient](#) and have no known grave.

Initially, the [British government](#) had hoped to acquire and preserve the ruins of the Cloth Hall and Cathedral in Ypres as a memorial, but when the decision to build the Menin Gate was made in 1921, it withdrew its request.

The Architecture of the Menin Gate

The Menin Gate is the brainchild of architect Sir [Reginald Blomfield \(1856-1942\)](#) who had designed a "triumphal arch" for Ypres as early as 1919. A principal architect of the Imperial War Graves Commission, Blomfield's design was adopted by the commission after the latter had decided to commemorate those with no known grave on large memorials. As a result, the Menin Gate was and still is sometimes considered ambiguous in form as well as meaning: its exterior is a triumphal arch, and the interior and sides are a funerary monument. On the east side, a watchful lion sits atop the memorial and on the side facing the centre of the town there is a cenotaph, as if to remind Ypres that all these men sacrificed their lives for the town and its residents.

Whereas a triumphal arch was the time-honoured way to commemorate military action, the concept of a monument for the missing was not only progressive but entirely new. Never before had a memorial been erected for those who were missing on the battlefields and, in the case of the First World War, the British example would not be followed by the other belligerents. The memorial to the missing not only answered a need for the families affected who wished for a place to mourn, but was also evidence of the way in which the war had been fought. The majority of the fallen had been killed by [artillery](#) fire. If they had not been literally blown to bits, it was likely that their known grave would have been lost anyway in the later battles of static trench warfare. A memorial to the missing was also the logical consequence of an earlier, distinctly progressive decision made by the

War Graves Commission to commemorate all those who had lost their lives in the service of Britain equally. It was a decision born out of the composition of the British forces in the First World War: most of the rank and file were volunteers and, from 1916 onwards, conscripts. In short, the aim was to commemorate ordinary citizens in military service. The memorial has been met with disdain by some - in his "On Passing the New Menin Gate," poet [Siegfried Sassoon \(1886-1967\)](#) describes it as a "sepulchre of crime," but it has also been praised by many, including eminent authors such as [Stefan Zweig \(1881-1942\)](#).

Dominiek Dendooven, In Flanders Fields Museum

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