

## Unmarked British military graves in Opole, Poland

The first British Army of the Rhine existed from 1919 to 1929. Its primary task was to maintain a military presence in the British occupation area of the Rhineland in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>1</sup> It was deployed in and around Cologne until early 1926; it was then relocated to the Wiesbaden bridgehead until the final evacuation of British troops from the Rhineland in December 1929.

From May 1921 until July 1922 the British Army of the Rhine also included a British Upper Silesian Force. This was despatched to Upper Silesia to reinforce a much larger Franco-Italian contingent that was struggling to maintain order there. A plebiscite had been held in Upper Silesia on 20 March 1921 but this had not generated an obvious demarcation line between Poland and Germany and had triggered widespread disturbances. The League of Nations was then invited to make recommendations on a definitive international frontier and these were eventually accepted and implemented. The British, French and Italian troops withdrew in July 1922.



### Upper Silesia

The shaded area shows the territory that became part of Poland in 1922; the rest of Upper Silesia (including Oppeln) became part of Poland in 1945.

<sup>1</sup> There were also French, Belgian and (until 1923) American occupation areas in the Rhineland.

The British Upper Silesian Force included eight infantry battalions with supporting arms and services. A total of 41 British soldiers died while serving with the force. All these men were buried with full military honours in a discrete area within the municipal cemetery in Oppeln (which was in that part of Silesia that was not transferred to Poland in 1922). The graves were marked with British Army wooden crosses of a type that had been used in France and Flanders and elsewhere before the establishment of permanent war cemeteries by the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC).



**Wooden crosses marking the graves of British soldiers in the municipal cemetery in Oppeln, Germany in the 1920s<sup>2</sup>**

A decision was made in the early 1920s that the IWGC would be responsible for the graves of all those who had died while serving in the armed forces of the British Empire from the outbreak of the Great War until 31 August 1921. Such persons would be regarded as 'war dead' whereas deaths in service after 31 August 1921 were peacetime deaths and not the responsibility of the IWGC.<sup>3</sup> On this basis, the IWGC in February 1925 exhumed the remains of the eleven British soldiers in the Oppeln cemetery who had died before 31 August 1921. These were re-interred in the IWGC's Berlin South-Western (Stahnsdorf) Cemetery with proper headstones and remain there to this day.

This left in the Oppeln cemetery the remains of 30 British soldiers and 2 British civilians that were not the responsibility of the IWGC as the deaths had occurred after 31 August 1921. HQ British Army of the Rhine at Wiesbaden started making payments to the Oppeln municipal authority for the maintenance of these graves from the beginning of 1927. When British troops left the Rhineland in 1929, annual payments for maintenance were made by the War Office via the Foreign Office and the British Consulate in Berlin.

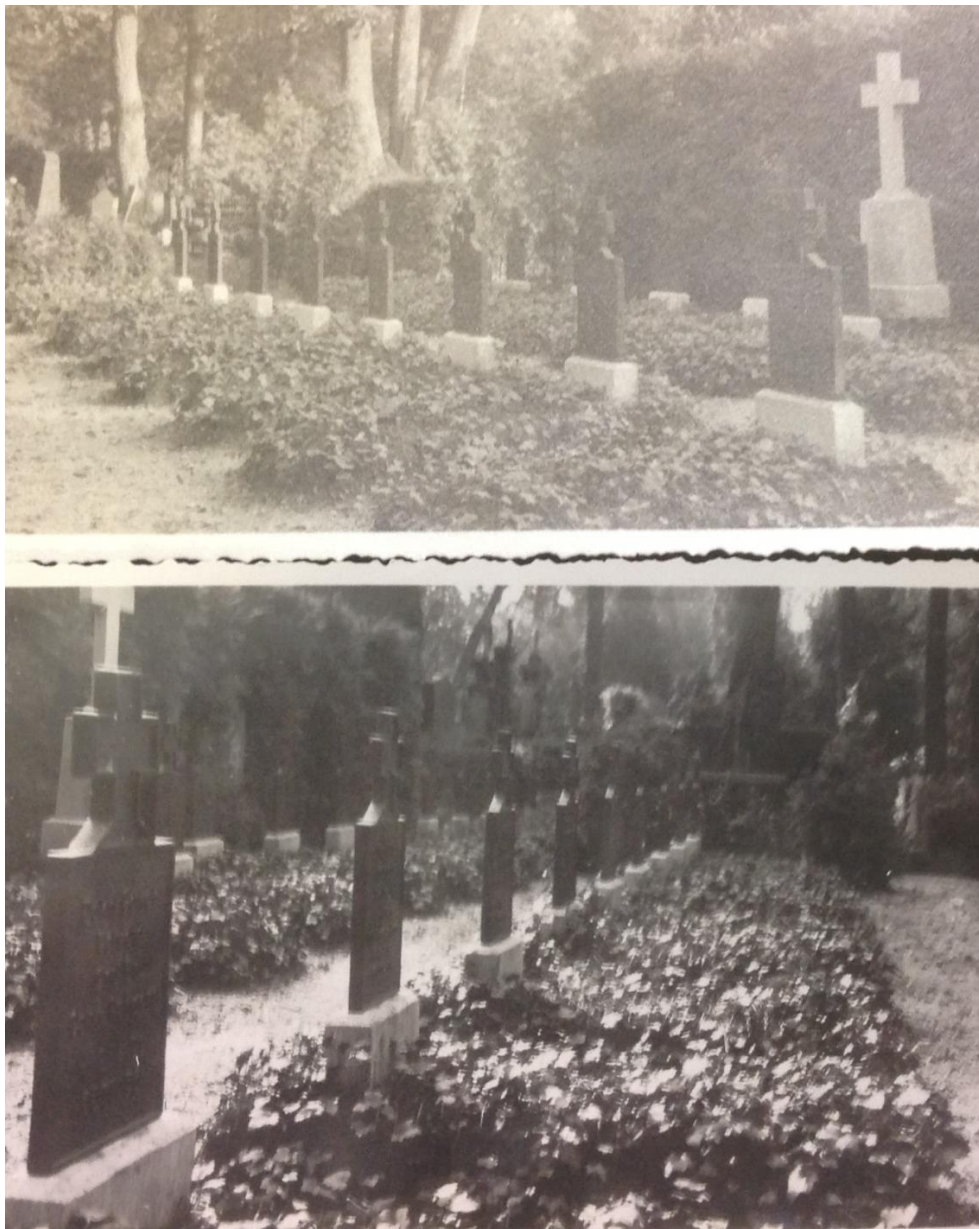
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<sup>2</sup> The large stone cross marks the grave of Private Murdagh of The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and was funded by his family.

<sup>3</sup> Although the IWGC could not allocate its funds for headstones, maintenance etc in respect of the graves of service personnel who died in peacetime, it was on occasion amenable to providing such services on a repayment basis.

By this time the condition of the wooden crosses marking the graves had deteriorated significantly and in August 1929, the Oppeln authority wrote to G.H.Q., British Army of the Rhine suggesting replacements should be erected. In 1930 having had no response to this request, the Oppeln municipal authority offered to pay for replacement cast-iron crosses; the War Office quickly accepted. Correspondence concerning the erection of the cast-iron crosses includes a list requested by the municipal authority giving the personal details of the 30 service individuals interred in the cemetery.<sup>4</sup> This list is the primary source for the list of British interments at Annex A.

The War Office also funded periodic inspections (not more frequently than once a year) by the IWGC to ensure that satisfactory standards of maintenance were being achieved.



**Cast-iron crosses marking the graves of British soldiers  
in the municipal cemetery in Oppeln, Germany in the 1930s**

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<sup>4</sup> The list was requested not only for the purpose of putting appropriate inscriptions on the cast-iron crosses but also to ensure that the entries in the cemetery register were correct.

Thus the situation in the 1930s was that the British military graves in Oppeln were properly marked and the War Office was authorizing modest expenditure on maintenance and the associated IWGC inspections. Adequate arrangements were also in place for the larger number of graves of British soldiers who had died while serving in the Rhineland during the period from 1 September 1921 until December 1929. Such graves in the IWGC's Cologne Southern Cemetery were in the direct care of the IWGC on a repayment basis. The graves in a discrete British sub-cemetery within the Südfriedhof at Wiesbaden were cared for by the German local authority but under IWGC supervision.

The pre-war arrangements at Cologne and Wiesbaden resumed in 1945 and remain in place today. Sadly, nothing was put in place for the continuing care of the British graves in the town that had been Oppeln but became Opole in 1945 when all of Upper Silesia passed under Polish administration. Most of the German population fled, records were lost, the German graves in the cemetery may have been deliberately vandalized and no one in the War Office seems to have been aware of the need to institute new arrangements for the care of the 30 British graves. The IWGC was not at fault, as it had never been responsible for the graves. The IWGC did alert the War Office to the existence of the graves in 1959 but received no response.<sup>5</sup>

There is now no visible trace of these graves in the cemetery (which was closed for new burials in 1968 and suffered serious flooding in 1997). Very few people – in the United Kingdom, in Ireland<sup>6</sup> or even in Opole itself – know that this neglected cemetery is the last resting place of 30 British soldiers and 2 British civilians who died while on active duty in the area in 1921 and 1922.



**The British area of the municipal cemetery in Opole, Poland in 2017**

One man who is aware of the existence of the British graves in Opole is Jim Powrie. Jim is a relative of one of the men buried there and has conducted extensive research<sup>7</sup> into this subject. He has visited Opole and found that there is significant local interest in this

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<sup>5</sup> It seems likely that an old IWGC file being reviewed for final disposal in 1959 included details of the pre-war periodic inspections and it was considered appropriate to alert the War Office to the existence of the graves.

<sup>6</sup> Nine of the dead were members of Irish infantry regiments of the British Army that were disbanded in July 1922.

<sup>7</sup> The archive of what is now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (the designation changed in 1960) was particularly useful.

aspect of the town's history, particularly as the centenary of the 1921 plebiscite approaches.

Jim presented the results of his research to the Defence People Secretariat within the Ministry of Defence (MOD) in 2015 with the suggestion that MOD (as the successor to the War Office) should re-assert its responsibility for the graves and erect some form of memorial. The suggestion of a memorial was made because Jim's research had not identified the precise locations of the 30 graves within the cemetery. His suggestion was rebuffed with an assertion that MOD never gets involved in the funding of memorials and advice that the relevant regimental and corps HQs might be interested in raising the necessary funds.

Jim has subsequently discovered photographs taken in September 1921 that make it possible to identify the precise location of these graves within the cemetery. This means that the reinstatement of individual markers has become a realistic option provided that funding can be found. Defence People Secretariat seems not to share Jim's enthusiasm over this development and has failed to respond to his recent e-mails. This may be because his discoveries over what actually happened in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s undermine the Secretariat's perception of what should have happened worldwide (ie that the parent regiments or corps were responsible for the graves of soldiers who died in service after 31 August 1921 and the use of public funds was inadmissible).

A soldier of the British Army of the Rhine who died while serving in Cologne in January 1922 has a proper grave (with headstone and Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintenance in perpetuity on a repayment basis) within Cologne Southern Cemetery. A soldier of the same Army who had the misfortune to die on the same date while serving in Upper Silesia lies today in an unmarked grave in Opole and there has been no official interest in his grave – and the 29 other British graves nearby – since the outbreak of the Second World War. This cannot be right.

#### **Annex:**

A. British interments in the municipal cemetery in Opole.

**British interments in the municipal cemetery in Opole  
(soldiers who died after 31 August 1921 while serving  
in the British Upper Silesian Force and two civilians)**

Private Frank PORTER (6192593) 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion The Middlesex Regiment (Duke of Cambridge's Own), died 15 September 1921

Private Frederick Arthur MARSH (6192598) 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion The Middlesex Regiment (Duke of Cambridge's Own), died 21 September 1921

Lieutenant Harold WYNN, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Durham Light Infantry, died 26 September 1921

Signalman Edward Albert IGGLESDEN (2308631) Royal Corps of Signals, died 23 October 1921

Thomas Forster USHER (civilian chauffeur attached Inter-Allied Commission of Control), died 30 October 1921

Lance-Corporal Alfred Edward EMONS (7178715) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians), died 26 November 1921

Farrier Staff Sergeant Harry SMITH (536333) 14<sup>th</sup> King's Hussars,<sup>8</sup> died 2 December 1921

Private Patrick BARRY (7178489) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians), died 12 December 1921

Lance-Corporal Alfred Edward EVANS (4437204) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Durham Light Infantry, died 14 December 1921

Private Martin Francis FRANKLIN (7110764) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment, died 15 December 1921

Private (acting Corporal) Frank Thomas DAVIES (S/8651) Royal Army Service Corps, died 18 December 1921

Bombardier Henry POWRIE MM (1026458) 62<sup>nd</sup> Battery Royal Field Artillery, died 21 December 1921

Private Nathaniel MURDAGH (6973193) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, died 27 December 1921

Private John MURRAY (2744806) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Black Watch (Royal Highlanders),<sup>9</sup> died 6 January 1922

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<sup>8</sup> It is understood that the regimental designation changed during 1921 (date not sighted) from '14<sup>th</sup> (King's) Hussars' to '14<sup>th</sup> King's Hussars'. Home HQ The King's Royal Hussars should be asked to advise on the correct regimental designation that should be shown for Smith.

<sup>9</sup> The designation 'The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment)' was not introduced until 1934.

Private William George RAFFAN (4435084) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Durham Light Infantry, died 17 January 1922

Private Michael FORAN (7111257) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment, died 11 February 1922

Private James KEATING (7110968) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment, died 11 February 1922

Private Martin Joseph MURPHY (7110952) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment, died 11 February 1922

Private Patrick SHALLY (7109064) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment, died 11 February 1922

Company Sergeant-Major Harry Fraser JEBSON (6188423) 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion The Middlesex Regiment (Duke of Cambridge's Own), died 21 February 1922

Private James LIGHT (7178629) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians), died 19 March 1922

Lance-Corporal Andrew KELLY (6973846) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, died 24 March 1922

Private John POWER (3377056) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Connaught Rangers, died 2 April 1922

Private Alfred Allen SEXTON (6190250) 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion The Middlesex Regiment (Duke of Cambridge's Own), died 7 April 1922

Private Digory SALTERN (5431013) 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, died 17 April 1922

Sapper Frederick George CREETH (1854714) Corps of Royal Engineers, died 25 April 1922

Acting Sergeant Joseph William Goulding STORER (6451065) The Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment), died 5th May 1922<sup>10</sup>

Farrier Corporal Charles THOMAS (536331) 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Hussars,<sup>11</sup> died 6th May 1922

Private Reginald GRANT (5176415) 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Gloucestershire Regiment, died 17th June 1922

Sapper James HUNTLEY (1849413) Corps of Royal Engineers, died 4th July 1922

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<sup>10</sup> It is understood that Sergeant Storer belonged to the Intelligence Corps, soldiers of which were enlisted in or transferred to The Royal Fusiliers.

<sup>11</sup> Evidence has been sighted that the amalgamation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Royal Hussars and the 20<sup>th</sup> Hussars to form the 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Hussars took place on 11 April 1922 (the designation changing to 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Royal Hussars in 1936). If this evidence is correct, Thomas would have been a member of the amalgamated regiment at the time of his death. Home HQ The King's Royal Hussars should be asked to advise on the correct regimental designation that should be shown for Thomas.

Private Arthur William FARRELL (M/19911) Royal Army Service Corps, died 6th July 1922.

Civilian George Henry Morgan date of death unknown

**GRAND TOTAL: 32 (including two British civilians)**

**Totals by regiment/corps:**

14<sup>th</sup> King's Hussars and 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Hussars – 2

Royal Field Artillery – 1

Corps of Royal Engineers – 2

Royal Corps of Signals – 1

The Royal Fusiliers (Intelligence Corps component) – 1

The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers – 2

The Gloucestershire Regiment – 1

The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry – 1

The Black Watch – 1

The Middlesex Regiment – 3

The Durham Light Infantry – 4

Irish infantry regiments that disbanded in 1922 – 9

Royal Army Service Corps – 2

Civilian – 2

**Grand Total – 32**