

# The Secret of the Cenotaph

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Most of the proposals to celebrate the Millennium draw on the funfair, the popular science exhibition, or the sort of gesture which has been parodied in *Private Eye* as, 'A line of trees planted in a straight line from Lands End to John o'Groats'. Many of these schemes derive in one way or another from the Festival of Britain, but who is to say that its spirit of optimism after the second world war is appropriate? A more suitable, though darker, model might be the memorial left by the first world war, Edwin Lutyens's Cenotaph. This thirty-five foot monolith is probably the most important monument in Britain. Like Stonehenge it celebrates a particular moment and is the focus of an annual ritual yet it also deals with issues of destruction, loss, and a changed world, issues which may be just as relevant to the Millennium as those of forgetful fun.



1. Sir Edwin Lutyens walking away from the unveiling of the temporary Cenotaph on 19 July 1919.

The story of its creation is well known. In July 1919 the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, gave Lutyens fourteen days to produce a temporary monument for the Peace Celebrations to act as a tribute to the nearly million dead of the Empire. Lutyens thought of the name, had his sketch proposals accepted within six hours, and then arranged for a wood and plaster structure to be erected in the time allowed.<sup>1</sup> It met with such immediate popular acclaim for its stern majesty that it was rebuilt in Portland Stone for Remembrance Day in 1920. Lutyens asked for no fee and was not even invited to the unveiling (Fig. 1). He had been a well known architect when he accepted the commission and his design made him famous. As a result of public opinion the Cenotaph survived to become Britain's official memorial (Fig. 2). Why did ordinary people respond to it so strongly?

Proposals to celebrate the victories of totalitarian powers this century, whether real or imaginary, such as Franco's colossal cross at Valle de los Caídos, or Albert Speer's plans for a 240-foot-high triumphal arch in Berlin, all involved stupendous expense, slave labour and an explicit expression of political power. Yet the Cenotaph not only has probably stirred deeper feeling but has enjoyed more genuine popular regard. Could it be that it works by invoking an unconscious reaction, by pointing to something to which we are predisposed to respond? Curiously one of Lutyens' drawings suggests that the geometry of his design may conceal an image which could affect us in this way. If this is so then his work functions in a way which is nowadays more likely to be associated with motivational research and advertising than architecture.

Seen today on a walk down Whitehall it appears, as do many great works, smaller than it does in a photograph, yet it has a strong presence and gravity. Its simple silhouette, familiar and at the same time strange, conceals subtle complications in its setbacks which lead the eye up and round. The inscription which does not celebrate victory, or even 'Our Glorious Dead' but *The Glorious Dead*, is nicely understated. It owes little to its site, its position in the middle of the road where it acts as a traffic refuge seems almost accidental, in any case the Cenotaph has the unusual distinction for a work of

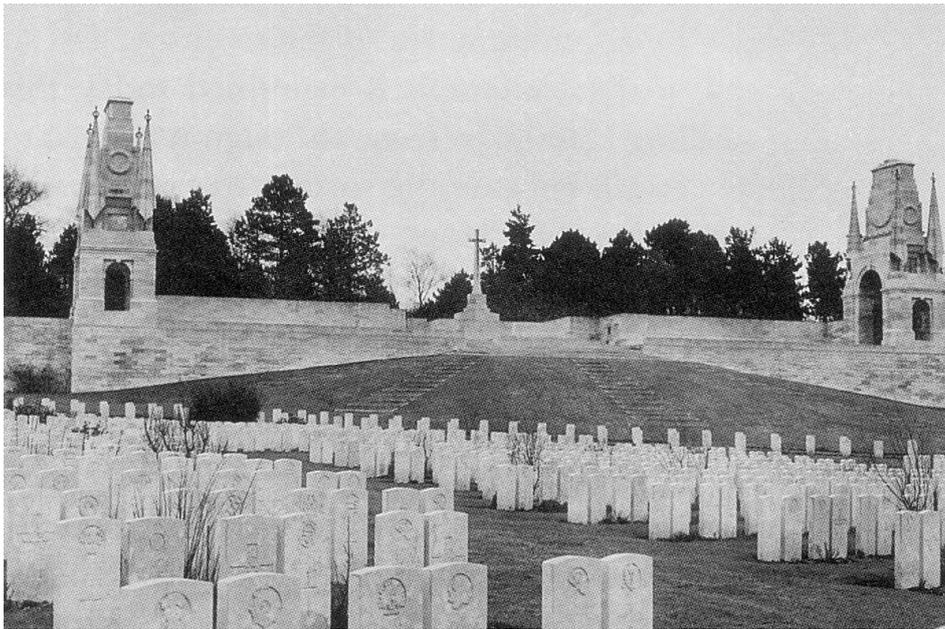
architecture of not being unique. There are at least fifty-five copies in Britain and others overseas<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, these vary in their size and embellishment: some have a soldier sleeping on top rather than the wreath, others have a sword carved point down on the side. One surreal version in France, in the military cemetery in Etaples, even has an arch driven through it and is finished with pinnacles on the corners in the form of drooping carved stone flags which look like umbrellas, yet the basic form of the Cenotaph is still plain to see (Fig 3). All take part in the synchronised ceremony when at the solemn moment of the eleventh of the eleventh of the eleventh they are served in silence and offered paper flowers. This suggests that they achieve their effect not by virtue of their size or details, but because there is something evocative about their basic form,



2. The Cenotaph on Armistice Day, 1920.

The story of its magical creation in an evening is part of its legend, but more than likely that Lutyens had his idea ready when he met Lloyd George.<sup>3</sup> For the previous year he had been working for the Imperial War Graves Commission, designing for the Allied war cemeteries in France a memorial from which the Cenotaph is clearly descended. In this work he pursued an abstract approach in spite of an influential lobby which favoured a design based on the Cross, partly because the dead had been of many different faiths, and

partly because of his own theosophical beliefs, which encouraged a pantheistic outlook. His first idea had been for a huge bronze sphere, but he eventually settled on the Great Stone, a finely proportioned horizontal block with a simple inscription (Fig 4). The form of the Stone is more sophisticated than it appeared at first sight. Its faces, which seem flat, are, actually parts of a sphere with a radius of nine-hundred feet.



3. Cenotaph in the military cemetery at Etaples.

Entasis, a refinement of Greek architecture in which surfaces are imperceptibly curved and verticals angled slightly out of plumb, best known from its application to the Parthenon, has been the subject of much study and speculation. The slight distortions it introduces are very hard to see; as with homeopathy the effect is so diluted that one may reasonably doubt that anything is actually happening. Although its original purpose is not known it is often held to be a sort of anti-optical illusion which makes buildings appear more perfectly square and upright by compensating for natural defects in our vision. It is, however, a striking fact that the entasis preserves in the Stone a magnified image of Lutyens's original sphere.



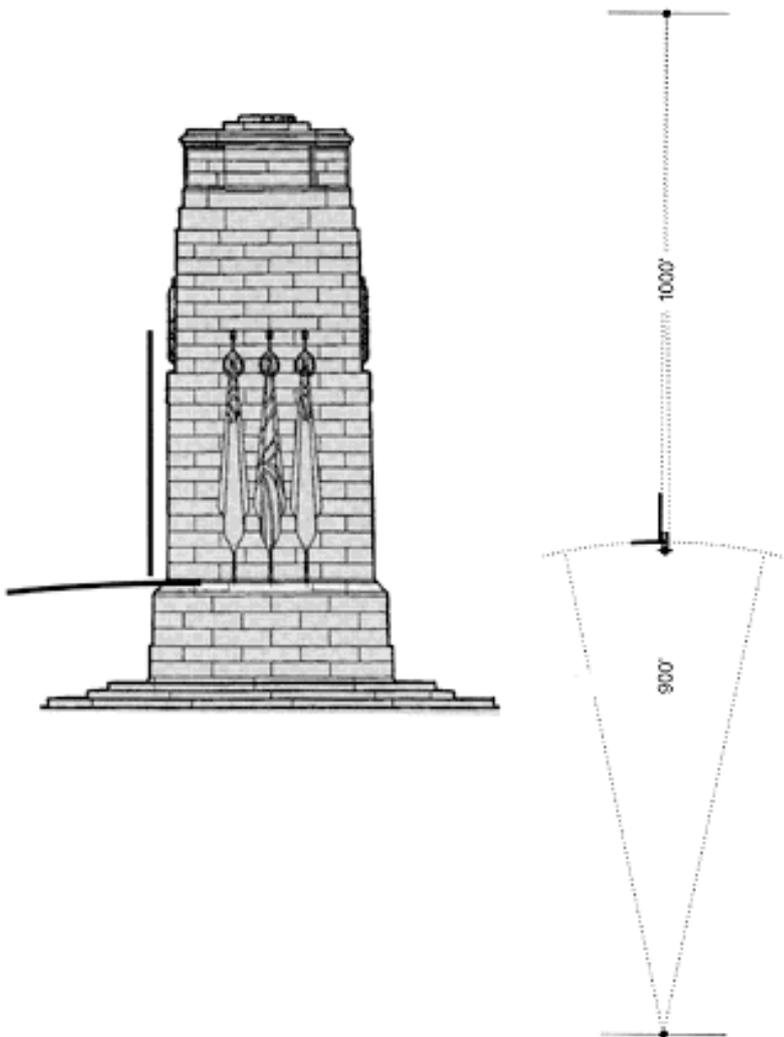
4 . Photograph showing an example of the Great Stone designed by Lutyens for the Allied war cemeteries, (date and location unknown).

The use of entasis to imply a secret form was an unusual and probably original idea. In the Cenotaph he took it even further. Drawings show that he intended the vertical sides to taper to meet at a point a thousand feet in the air, and the horizontal lines to be part of a circle with a centre nine-hundred feet below the ground (Fig. 5).<sup>4</sup> This connects a point in the air with a point in the earth on a gigantic scale, like a sort of spiritual lightening conductor. Lutyens pushed his entasis to the point of invisibility, a calculation shows that his proposals should cause the band courses to rise by 6 mm at their centre. Sad to say, if the Cenotaph is examined today this swelling cannot be seen, although it is hard to be certain because the surface has roughened with age. The sides, however, do seem to slope slightly. The entasis, if indeed it was ever incorporated properly, is so faint as to be indiscernible.

What could be the purpose of an invisible refinement? Besides concealing an image which indicates how the structure is to be read, the entasis reinforces the Greek character of the In a study of the relationship between ancient Greek art and geometry W.M. Ivins pointed out that both disciplines only used relationships which can be understood by hand rather than the eye, this for him being a distinctive trait of thought in ancient Greece.<sup>5</sup> Euclid, for example says that parallel lines do not meet, this being how they feel to the hand, whereas the modern eye sees them as converging to meet on the horizon. Ivins

traces similar traits in Greek sculpture which he said was poor at unifying separate figures or depicting figures in motion, exactly the sort of relationships which the eye can understand but the hand cannot.

Now, the hand alone cannot tell if three points lie on a straight line, this being essentially a visual relationship, and for the Greeks whether three points lined up from a particular point of view does not seem to have been important. This may be seen in the plan of the Acropolis where the buildings are arranged in an apparently haphazard manner. This suggests that slightly curving lines of entasis were used by default because exactly straight lines were not thought of as special. Understood from this point of view Greek architecture and its entasis is a natural result of a tactile and sensuous approach rather than a visual and distant one.



5. Diagram showing the battered sides and curved band courses of the Cenotaph

The Cenotaph feels as if it was designed for the hand rather than the eye. Its colourless form and details are simple such as a hand could read, it stands alone, avoids straight lines and has no internal space. Its opposite in all these respects is the Albert Memorial whose complexity, axial siting, internal space and rich finishes would baffle a blind man. Albert on his throne keeps the viewer at a distance but the Cenotaph, like most sculpture, invites touch. Whilst its abstract form avoids resembling anything too directly, it is different from the abstract purity of much modernist architecture which is so often devoid of poetic resonance. What could it be? Perhaps the right question to ask is not what does it look like, but what does it feel like?

The curved bands point to a root deep in the earth, the sloping sides project the wreath on top a thousand feet in the air, it joins heaven and the grave, but there is more to it than that. This extract from Kipling's poem of 1922<sup>6</sup> describing the cemeteries in France comes close to capturing Lutyens's secret theme;

*A carven Stone, and a stark Sword brooding on the bosom of the Cross*

*Where high and low are one.*

Notice that the shallow steps around the Cenotaph are joined to the vertical faces with a little curve and may be read as an integral part of the whole structure not just a base on which the main block happens to stand. Seen in this way the monolith becomes a grip with the steps as a hand guard, and taken together the whole thing becomes a sword sheathed by driving it into the earth. Which sword could it be? There can only be one, it comes from the oldest story in Britain, a story of a magician, a magic sword, a great king and sleeping army which will reawaken when the nation is in peril. It may be that this is the form which is unconsciously recognised and which gives the Cenotaph its power.

The sword in question appeared mysteriously in a graveyard. Though familiar and scarcely noticed by the public, once a year it is jealously attended by royalty, and

understandably so, for it will be consulted if the line of succession fails. It is frozen in stone, and waits patiently for an unknown soldier to free it. It waits for Arthur, because of course the Cenotaph is nothing less than the hilt of Excalibur itself.

*Whoso Pulleth Out This Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Rightwise King Born of all England.* <sup>7</sup>

If the Great War marked an end of a sort for Britain how very fitting that it should be remembered with something from its very beginning. And what better way of celebrating the Millennium than by discovering a way of reviving this sort of solemn power in architecture.

## NOTES

1. Christopher Hussey, *The Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens* London 1950
2. A survey by the Imperial War Museum has identified 55 cenotaphs in Britain, out of 5.600 Great War memorials so far recorded. Interesting examples may be found in Manchester, Derby, Glasgow and Hong Kong.
3. Allan Greenberg, 'Lutyens's Cenotaph', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* vol. 48 (March 1989).
4. A. S. G. Butler, *The Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens* (The Lutyens Memorial) London 1950.
5. William M. Ivins Jr, *Art and Geometry: A Study in Space Intuitions* (Harvard University Press, 1946).
6. 'The Kings Pilgrimage', 1922.
7. Sir Thomas Mallory, *Morte d'Arthur*, book 1 chapter 4.

Fig. 1: Courtesy of Jane Ridley

Fig. 2: Imperial War Museum (Q31498)

Fig. 3,4: Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Fig. 5: Drawing from A.S.G. Butler's *The Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens*, adapted by the author.