THE R H 7 HISTORY GROUP

LINGFIELD WAR MEMORIAL



When we gather each year at the war memorial to remember those who gave their lives in wars and other conflicts, we take it for granted that it exists. We accept its location at the centre of the village and the temporary inconvenience to traffic during the ceremony. But it wasn't always clear that there should be a stone memorial, or that its location should be by the village pond; and nor was it the only memorial established in the village.

The first reference to plans for a war memorial in Lingfield is found in a brief report in the East Grinstead Observer for 8 March 1919. Mr P de Clermont [a local dignitary] chaired a meeting at the Victoria Institute when he described the wish of all present for a lasting memorial "for the heroic deeds done by our brave men" and a committee was established. Mr de Clermont "offered the plea" that they should cut their garment according to their cloth - an early acknowledgement of the need to consider cost.

At a meeting on 22 May, it was evident that there were different views as to the nature of the memorial. Five proposals were put forward:

a monument in the middle of the village;

a Lych gate "at the usual place";

a Lych gate at the entrance to the cemetery;

endowment of a bed at Reigate Hospital;

a recreation ground.

A total of £800 had been raised from local people. This was a significant sum at the time - roughly equivalent to £40,000 in today's money.

Votes were taken from those who had subscribed to decide how it was to be used. The result was close:

monument 63;

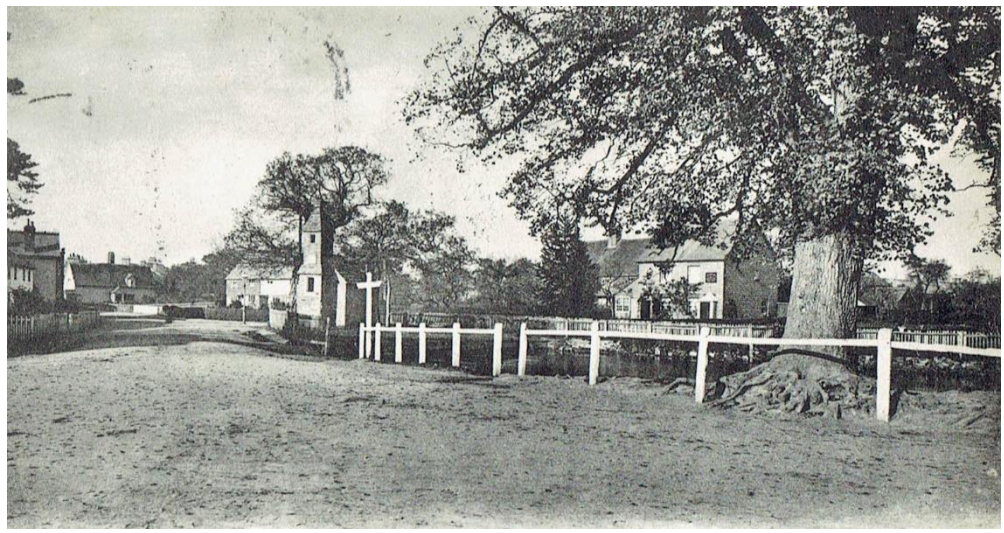
bed 60;

Lych gate 55.

On the basis of the votes, the committee obtained a design from Mr Arthur Hayward, the owner of the Guest House. The design was displayed in the Post Office window. The votes from relatives of the fallen were examined and found to divide 20 for the monument and 19 for the bed. Correspondence with the Hospital had, in the meantime, established that the sum collected would not be sufficient to endow a bed and, in the light of the votes and discussions, the decision was taken to continue with the memorial.

There was an explanation of Mr Hayward's design - it was to be 17 1/2 feet high with a lamp on top always burning "as is the custom in Provence". The custom it followed was that of the "Lanterne aux Morts" - a slender tower, found usually in France, with provision for a light intended to serve as a guide for the deceased.

The trustees of the cage and pond had given permission for a monument "on the site of the pollarded elm". The photo below shows the tree before its removal.



The cost of the memorial came to £350 with £100 to be set aside and invested. This was expected to generate £5 per year to cover the cost of lighting and care. £290 was to be used to establish a sports field, using land made available by a Mr Morter. This became the Talbot Road football ground.

Amongst the sites that were considered for the memorial were the site it occupies by the pond; a site opposite the Post Office in front of the chapel (now the Lingfield Tandoori); in front of the old oak – i.e. the cage; near the church; or opposite “the brick store”.

The Controversy about memorial

At the meeting to decide upon the nature of the memorial, a Mr Prockter (of The Gables, Lingfield) objected to the idea of a monument and proposed the money be given to the Waifs and Strays Society or "he would make it up to £1000 on condition the whole sum be given to the Reigate Hospital". The report of the meeting tells us "the feeling of the meeting was not in favour of this, and after some unpleasant discussion the resolution (for the monument) was passed unanimously".

Mr Prockter was not, however, finished on the subject of the memorial. On July 17 1919 he writes "We appear to be in the hands of the Philistines. Very recently a very old tree which has formed a landmark and meeting place for many generations ...was ruthlessly cut down by the powers that be to make room for an up to date monument to commemorate the British fallen, in case, forsooth, we might forget..."

This, of course, was a reference to the pollarded elm - see above - whose fate had been decided.

In correspondence about the memorial plans there is a suggestion that Mr Prockter’s ire might have arisen from the rejection of his proposed design (he had been an architect).

Mr Prockter also joins with some others in arguing that funds for the memorial should only be accepted from British people and not from “aliens.” There is no evidence that “foreign” funds were offered, so the argument was, perhaps, academic but symptomatic of strong views at the time.

In July 1919 a request was made for local people who had lost men in the war to supply details to the War Memorial Committee. It is interesting that this was a locally driven exercise. So far as we know, there was no central control of the process or consistent rules as to who should be included on a specific memorial. The result was that the lists inscribed on village memorials were often inconsistent, with some names appearing on more than one memorial. The East Grinstead Observer published on 16 October 1919 a list of 53 names that had been put forward for inclusion - there are today 59 names of Great War fallen.

In 1919, one correspondent wrote to The East Grinstead Observer "These memorials what [sic] are built to their memory would be, in my opinion, nearly forgotten after about 20 years."

In the event, the memorial and its location were agreed upon and it was unveiled in a ceremony on 13 November1920. The East Surrey Gas Company undertook to maintain the light and to provide gas free of charge for all time. Responsibility for the memorial rested with the Lingfield Pond Trust. This arrangement remained until 1939, when the trust funds became inadequate to maintain the memorial. It was agreed that responsibility should transfer to the parish council – not accomplished until 1944. In December 1944 the shaft of the memorial was blown down in a gale and smashed.

The memorial was restored again with funds raised locally, this time including the fallen from the Second World War, and was rededicated on 6 November 1949. Mr Hayward had submitted a design including provision for a flag pole to fly the Union Jack permanently but this was evidently not taken up.

By 1979, the memorial was once again in a bad way and public subscription once more required. The memorial was taken down and rebuilt again, in the form we now know.

Today, the monument stands prominently in the centre of the village. It has been restored and has had added to it the names of those who fell in the Second World War. It is a recognised part of our village where we meet each November. But nearly 100 years ago it was only by a narrow vote and not without controversy that the decision to build a memorial by the pond was taken.

Ian Jones

October 2026