WORLD WAR 1 MEMORIALS IN JOHANNESBURG

On 26 September 2015, Allan Sinclair of the Ditsong National Museum of Military History lead a tour for veteran Gunners and MOTHS to five of the less well known WW1 memorials in Johannesburg.

The Brixton War Memorial

The symbol of the obelisk became a popular design for war memorials during the 19th Century and remained so in the inter-war years of the 20th Century in Britain, France, Australia and Romania. One such structure is the First World War Memorial at Kingston Frost Park in Brixton. This Memorial was erected through subscription by the residents of Brixton and commemorates the twelve residents of the suburb who died during the First World War. It was originally constructed on land owned by the local Freemason’s Lodge. In 1958, the Johannesburg City Council agreed to move the memorial to a rocky outcrop due east of its location and lay out a garden around it. The move was completed through the assistance of funds raised by the South African Legion of Military Veterans.

The design is a polished black granite obelisk on a rough granite plinth mounted on hammer-dressed koppie stone. It has carefully detailed monumental work with a collar and rough quoining on the edges to frame the polished granite sections where the inscriptions are found. The inscription states the following; “In Honour of Those who Sacrificed their Lives in the Great War, 1914 – 1918, Lest We Forget”.

The memorial and surrounds are kept in excellent condition. Seating is located around the rocky outcrop offering a comfortable view of Northcliff, Auckland Park etc.
The Ferreira Estate War Memorial

The Ferreira Estate War Memorial, the second example using the obelisk design, was erected by the management of the Ferreira Deep Mining Company in memory of 26 of its employees who died during the First World War. Ferreira Deep Mining Company was formed in October 1896. The miner’s camp, known as Ferreira’s Camp, later became the suburb of Ferreirasdorp. The Ferreira Mine stope has been preserved by Standard Bank and the main head office of the bank was developed over the mine in 1986. The memorial is situated in a traffic island at the corner of Booyens Road and Trump Street in Selby and is neatly enclosed by a low palings fence. It is approximately 2.3m high and is made of black granite with a sandstone base. The inscription reads; “In Memory of the Employees of the Ferreira Deep Ltd who made the Supreme Sacrifice in the Great War 1914 – 1918”.

Although the memorial is in a good condition, the grounds are beginning to show signs of vagrancy and neglect. The fence has been damaged in recent times and the gardens require maintaining.
The Bezuidenhout Valley War Memorial

The Bezuidenhout Valley War Memorial was erected in memory of 63 men from the area of Bezuidenhout Valley who died during the First World War. It is located on the corner of Kitchener Ave and 9th Ave on the border of Bezuidenhout Valley and Kensington and is constructed of brown marble. It is surrounded by a sandstone brick wall and has a water fountain as the central feature. Sadly, the Memorial surrounds has become the victim of neglect and deterioration. The water feature is no longer functional, pieces of the marble on the vertical memorial have been broken off, the surrounding gardens are badly maintained and there is an abundance of litter in the area. Many of these issues have been compounded by the establishment of Spaza shops in the immediate vicinity.

The names on the memorial are inscribed in white colour on the front, left and right sides of the vertical memorial. The inscription above the names reads as follows; “In honour and in memory of the men of the Bezuidenhout Valley who fell during the Great War 1914 – 1918”. The inscription below the names reads as follows; “Their Names Liveth Forever”.
The Transvaal Memorial Institute Hall

The Transvaal Memorial Institute, real hidden treasure, is an example of a utilitarian memorial. One of the major distinctions between proposed war memorials was that between utilitarian and non-utilitarian symbolic designs. Utilitarian memorials, termed “living memorials” in the United States, were intended to commemorate those who died for their country by having a practical function. Such memorials included libraries, small hospitals, cottages for nursing staff, parks, sporting facilities and clock towers.

The building was erected in memory of the people of the former Transvaal province who lost their lives during the First World War. It was initially proposed on 8 December 1919 at a meeting in Johannesburg of the National Council of Women of South Africa where it was resolved that a “children’s” hospital be erected in the town as a thanks offering for the successful termination of the war. Funds for the building were raised by the National Council of Women while the Johannesburg Town Council also provided a donation as well as eight acres of land on Braamfontein Ridge required for the development. The hospital remained the Children’s Hospital until it was incorporated into the new Johannesburg Hospital opened in 1978. Following that the building served as accommodation for special needs clinics and later the NGOs which provided fundraising and special support services to children in need. The administration or central block has as its central feature the Memorial Hall lit by a glass skylight. Two alters on either side of the Hall house the scrolls of the names of those from the Transvaal who perished during the First World War. These names, however, are not inclusive as the names of non-white soldiers from the Transvaal who died in the war are omitted. The inscriptions on the bronze plaques found on the walls state the following: “This Hospital was erected by voluntary subscriptions from the People of the Transvaal and perpetuates the Glorious Memory of those sons and daughters of South Africa who fell in actions or died of wounds, sickness or from other causes, in the service of their country during the Great War 1914 – 1918”.

“The Heroes of Delville Wood - Men and women of Brakpan, Benoni, Johannesburg and Suburbs, Klerksdorp and District, Krugersdorp, Inanda, Cyferfontein and Zandfontein, Pretoria, Pietersburg and District, Potgietersrust, Randfontein, Rustenberg and Springs”

“In Grateful acknowledgement of Gifts and Grounds and £12 500 from the Johannesburg Municipality”

“In Grateful Memory of Louisa Beck (born Gilbert) who generously bequeathed over £13 000 to this Hospital”. The Memorial, a finely proportioned and well detailed red face-brick building with a special presence, is in an excellent condition.
The Sons of England War Memorial

The S.O.E (Sons of England) War Memorial is dedicated to the men of the 3rd South African Infantry Regiment who were killed in October 1916 during the British offensive on the Somme. The Regiment was raised for Imperial service in 1915 and formed part of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade which saw service in North Africa in 1916 and on the Western Front in Europe from 1916 to 1918. It consisted of volunteers drawn from the former Transvaal Province and Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe).

The action in which the men lost their lives was the unsuccessful attack on the Butte de Warlencourt during the notorious Battle of the Somme in 1916. The memorial is symmetrical triple arched and constructed in fine hammer-dressed quartzite with the central taller arch flanked by two smaller arches. The central semi-circular arch consists of an infill panel of blue-faced brick pierced with a circular opening which provides a visual frame for a timber cross. As is seen in the above photographs, the brickwork was recently painted cream. The cross was brought back from the Butte de Warlencourt by the men of the 3rd South African Infantry who chose to have it exposed in memory of their fallen comrades in a public place rather than have it treasured in a museum. Broad hammer-dressed quartzite steps provide an elevated approach to the cross. The two flanking arches are slightly set back from the central arch and also have an infill panel which are in stone creating niches. Both of these arches have a semi-circular plinth at the base which provides for small flowerbeds. In 2012 the wooden cross was vandalised by persons who were intent on setting it on fire. The cross was, fortunately, rescued by an official of the City of Johannesburg's Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage and placed in the Sparks Gallery in Orchards for safekeeping. The inscription on the memorial states the following: “This Cross erected in 1917 at the Butte de Warlencourt was presented by the surviving officers, NCOs and men of the 3rd SAI (Transvaal and Rhodesian) Regt. The names are inscribed in All Soul’s Chapel.”

The inscription on the cross states the following: “The officers and men of the 3rd SA Infantry Regt who fell during the Battle of the Somme in October 1916”.