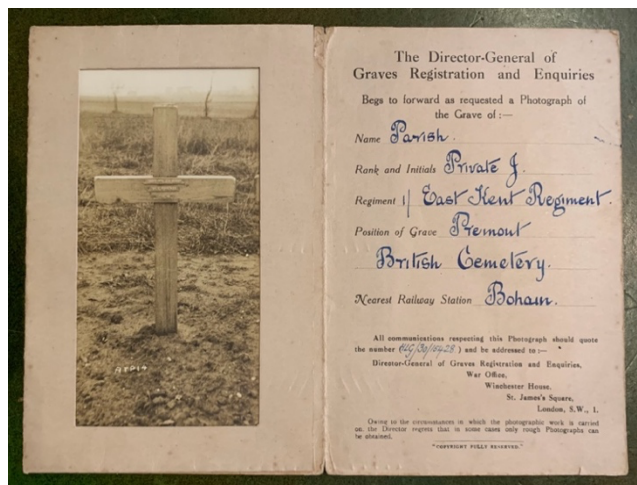


Battlefield Crosses - What Are They?

As the number of men killed whilst fighting on the Western Front during the First World War mounted, it became necessary to consider how the final resting places of the dead could be marked and registered. Initially, dedicated British Red Cross ambulance units operated alongside the British Expeditionary Force. In 1916, the work was taken on by the newly formed Directorate of Graves Registrations and Enquiries.

Meanwhile, questions began to be asked about the fate of the war graves once the conflict ended. In May 1917 this concern was addressed by the establishment of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), later renamed as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). Post conflict the dangerous job of clearing the battlefield of live munitions and recovering bodies was undertaken by the Labour Corps which included thousands of Chinese nationals. In the early 1920s the IWGC had agreed a set of design principles for the cemeteries under its' care and the process of consolidating burials into over 1,000 new or extended sites on the Western Front began. Some original battlefield cemeteries were retained with the proviso that they would be rebuilt to conform to the new design.

During this time, all temporary grave markers were to be removed and replaced by a generic headstone. The information on each headstone was prescribed and the resultant uniformity plus the fact that the repatriation of bodies had been banned from 1915 onwards, meant that all were equal in death irrespective of rank or status. At the point where wooden grave markers were replaced by formal headstones, families were given the chance to take ownership of the original wooden crosses. Many of these original markers were repatriated and they can often be found in parish churches, museums, archives and occasionally in other settings. There are two such markers in this church.



Grave marker in situ photograph

An example of a battlefield grave marker in its original location. Cards like this were sent to relatives enquiring about the last resting place of their loved ones.

This one has a particular poignancy since Joe Parish was killed in action on 11 November 1918 (a couple of hours before hostilities ended).