

# Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust



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## “A little piece of Germany in the middle of Staffordshire”

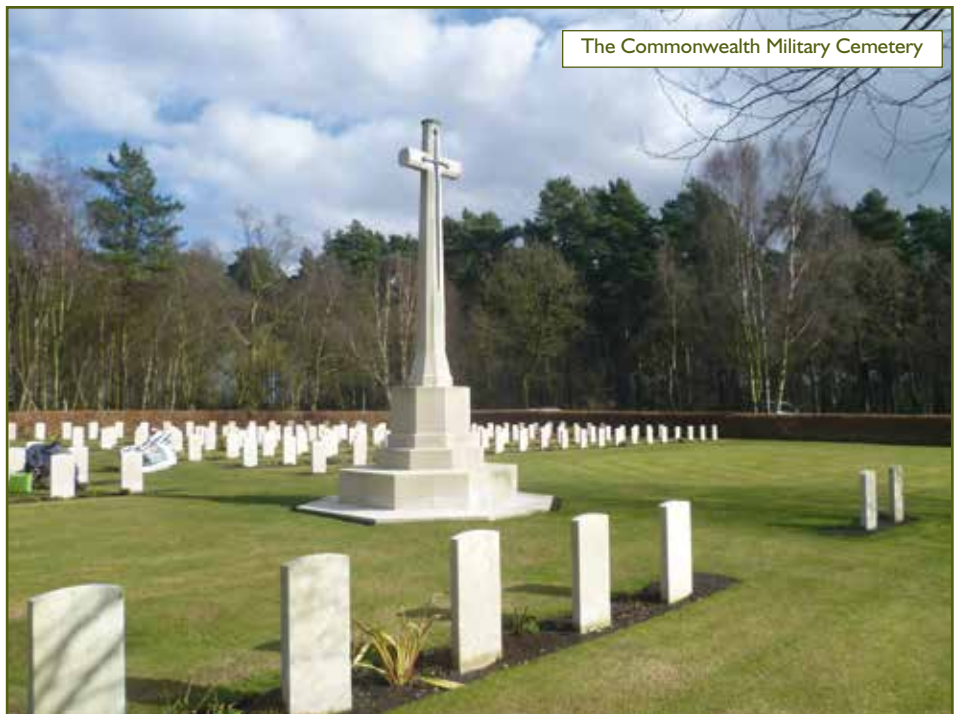
**Motorists hurrying across Cannock Chase from Stafford may, as they pass through Broadhurst Green, catch sight of a white stone cross behind clipped hedges just before they reach the Rugeley-Penkridge road. They may even catch a glimpse of white headstones, which will tell them that they have just passed a military cemetery.**

In fact, the Commonwealth Military Cemetery, consecrated in 1917, is the last resting place of 97 UK and Commonwealth soldiers, the majority New Zealanders who had been billeted at the military camp at nearby Brocton, 286 German servicemen, interred at the camp when it became a prisoner-of-war camp and one Polish serviceman. Nearly all had been victims of the world-wide Spanish ‘flu pandemic of 1918-1920.

What our passing motorist may not know is that, behind this cemetery, reached by a broad track, is a second cemetery, the German Military Cemetery, the final resting place of nearly 5000 German war dead, brought from cemeteries and burial grounds from all parts of the British Isles more than sixty years ago on the initiative of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, the German War Graves Commission, who approached the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)<sup>1</sup> with a proposal to bring all the German dead of both World Wars lying in non-military cemeteries to one central site which would remove from the families the burden of travelling to different parts of the British Isles.

In response to this proposal, an agreement had, in October 1959, been signed between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)<sup>2</sup> to establish a new German War Cemetery at Cannock Chase, the cost of which would be met by the Germans.

The following year, Staffordshire County



Council approved the transfer of six acres of land adjacent to the existing Military Cemetery, subject to certain conditions relating to its existing status as a nature reserve and to releases from any conditions imposed by the Earl of Lichfield when he gifted 2000 acres of Cannock Chase to the County Council.

There were reservations, too, from the County Planning Officer, who was concerned

about the proposed height of the cross which would be a central feature of the Cemetery and expressed some doubt as to whether a building would be legally permissible on the Chase. These concerns seemed to have been met, however, though the County Council did reject the proposal to build a caretaker's house on the site.

In an almost unprecedented gesture of friendship and reconciliation the County

Council gifted the land to the German people, the only precedent for which was the land around the memorial to John F. Kennedy, the assassinated US President, at Runnymede, at Egham, in Surrey, which was gifted to the American people.

### ***“Leave the dead, look after the living”***

One local Councillor saw the proposal as a waste of money, better spent on building a hospital instead, and a possible lever which would allow the County Council to do more on the Chase later; nor was he impressed when his Chairman pointed out that it was a reciprocal arrangement between the two Governments. Perhaps more to the point, he did not seem to recognise that the German Government had had a specific purpose in mind in proposing the scheme and would be unlikely to entertain the idea of diverting its money to another project totally unrelated to that purpose!

Before any of the remains could be removed, licences had to be obtained from the Home Secretary, and these came with strict guidelines: where possible, exhumation should take place early in the morning, and where this was not possible, screens should be erected to shield the exhumation from public gaze; exhumations should take place under the supervision of the local Medical Officer of Health.

Further instructions were given on how the remains should be treated once exhumed, and the manner in which they were to be transported to Cannock Chase. Where the remains were to be exhumed from consecrated churchyards or burial grounds, faculties had to be obtained from the relevant Diocesan authorities. For instance, the Diocese of Lichfield was petitioned for a faculty to remove the bodies of 127 German war dead from eight such consecrated sites.

While close on five thousand bodies were re-located to the new cemetery at Cannock Chase, approximately a thousand, buried in CWGC-maintained burial grounds, were left undisturbed, one such being the grave of bomber-pilot Oberleutnant Joachim Schwarz in the churchyard of St Stephen's, Fradley, a village near Lichfield, where he lies alongside more than thirty UK and Commonwealth airmen, the majority of whom died in flying accidents at the nearby wartime airfield.

The project entailed the removal of remains from 706 burial places in seventy-five counties; and while most from the Second World War were concentrated in Southern England, there were graves as far afield as Orkney and Shetland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man.

### ***“The most beautiful cemetery in the country”***

Once the necessary planning permission had been granted, work began on the cemetery in the Spring of 1961. The layout of the cemetery was designed by Professor Diez Brandi, of Gottingen University, who took advantage of the gently sloping terrain of the Chase and the existing woodland setting created by the presence of conifers and silver birch trees already growing there. Set well back from the road and thus insulated from the sound of passing traffic, the only sounds the visitor hears are birdsong and the rustle of the wind in the trees, creating an atmosphere conducive to tranquillity and reflection.

The flat-roofed, single-storey building was designed by Stafford architect Harold Doffmann and houses entrance hall, Record Room, Hall of Honour and offices. At the centre of the Hall of Honour is a bronze sculpture of a recumbent figure entitled “The Fallen Warrior”. Designed and executed by Hans Wimmer, it differs from other such recumbent figures in that, instead of assuming the traditional relaxed position, the facial expression and twisted body reflect pain rather than a figure at peace.

From one side of the Hall an open doorway leads to a small terrace where four graves hold the remains of the crews of Zeppelins shot down over the Home Counties during World War One.

The cemetery itself provides a sharp contrast with its neighbour, the Commonwealth Cemetery. Here, the headstones are of white Portland stone and are occupied by a single serviceman whose name, rank and date of death are inscribed on the face. At the centre of the cemetery stands the Cross of Sacrifice designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield, a feature to be found in almost all Commonwealth War





Graves Cemeteries, whereas the cross in the German Cemetery is in a dark wood, reducing its dominance.

In the German Cemetery, the burial plots are laid out in nineteen blocks, each row having between varying numbers of headstones of dark grey Belgian granite holding usually two, sometimes three servicemen and inscribed with name, rank, date of birth and date of death, the latter prefaced by a small cross (except in the case of First World War headstones, which bore only the date of the death). Each headstone is numbered. The practice of multiple occupations is common in German military cemeteries, their belief being that, as these men were comrades-in-arms who fell together, they should be laid to rest together.

Since there are burial plots on either side of the headstones, each side bears inscriptions. A single inscription may indicate the exhumation of one of the occupants at the request of his family for re-interment elsewhere, in one case in the United States. A gap between gravestones occurs when a tree is removed.

The exception is over sixty square stone gravestones laid flat and inscribed with the names of as many as four servicemen; here lie the remains of aircrews who could not be identified individually when their plane was destroyed.

### **“Reconciliation over the Graves”**

While the hard work of preparing the site was assigned to contractors, from the very beginning parties of young Germans were involved.

As part of the German War Graves Commission’s policy of “Reconciliation over the Graves”, parties of young German people from the district of Bremen and Bremerhaven<sup>3</sup> began coming over to assist in preparing the cemetery, carrying out tasks such as digging a perimeter ditch (one of the conditions on which the County insisted was that the Council should not be held responsible for any damage caused by deer encroaching from other parts of the Chase), clearing the area of thousands of stones and, later, planting the individual plots with heather and cleaning headstones.

Not all depredations were the result of wildlife incursions; at an earlier visit, members were told of an encounter with a woman discovered digging up clumps of heather from graves and putting them in a bag to carry away. When accosted, her response was, “What’s the problem! They’re all bl\*\*dy Nazis here!” The gardener’s response has not been recorded!

Over a period of six years more than 1000 boys and girls worked on the site, first camping out at Beaudesert, the nearby camping site donated in 1937 to the Scouts and Guides by the Earl of Lichfield, from which they were forced out by flooding caused by heavy rain. They were then housed in the Pavilion at the County Showground near Stafford until a double booking by the Secretary of the Birmingham Agricultural Society, owners of the Showground, led to



their precipitate departure and relocation to Rodbaston College, at Penkridge, near Stafford.

Through the good offices of the County Council’s Youth Service, the German party was joined in their tasks by members from Staffordshire’s youth clubs, who also entertained them during the afternoons and evenings. Reminiscing on the experience, a one-time volunteer commented that “at the beginning we were expecting it to be difficult to get to know each other due to the language barrier, but it was really easy because they knew a lot of English, and they even taught us some German phrases”, a reflection, perhaps, on the value placed on the learning of foreign languages by two different educational systems!

This co-operation has continued to the present day, though in smaller numbers, and the visiting party is now hosted by Staffordshire County Council of Voluntary Youth Services (SCVYS) and accommodated at the Army Cadet camp site on Penkridge Bank, not far from Broadhurst Green. As a further example of the enduring relationship which exists between Staffordshire and Bremen, in August 2008, a party of young people from both areas took part in a tree-planting ceremony at the National Memorial Arboretum, when two trees were planted in the Dresden Trust Memorial Garden.

In the early years, they were also joined in their labours by small groups of French youths, and, one year, by six Norwegian boys and girls, sent by the Norwegian War Graves Commission. For some years previously, parties from the Bremen Sportsjugend had been working on German war graves in France.

### **“There are no Gestapo chiefs buried here – just ordinary servicemen”**

By August 1965 work on the cemetery was nearing completion, and thoughts were turning to a date for its formal dedication, which was fixed for 10th June 1967.

It was agreed that the ceremony, which would last an hour and be organised by the German authorities, would be religious in character and would be presided over by the President of the German War Graves Commission, Walter Trepte, who, as a Deacon, would lead the ceremonies and would give the only speech; there would, however, be provision for priests of other denominations to conduct short services for their adherents.

As was to be expected, the Germans were meticulous in their planning; having chosen the music, three traditional German songs, they were anxious that the band chosen to play at the ceremony, the Band of RAF Stafford, should be able to play them and sent the Bandmaster copies of the music to assist the band in its preparations!

The Director of the German War Graves Commission also asked that the wreaths to be laid during the course of the ceremony should be written in a clear hand for the benefit of the elderly German relatives who would be present. The order in which these wreaths were to be laid was to be strictly regulated; the first would be laid by the Vice-President of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and thereafter the wreaths were to be laid alternately by German and British representatives.



The ceremony was thrown into jeopardy, however, when, four hours before it was due to take place, an early inspection revealed that, overnight, vandals had entered the Cemetery and splashed red paint over a number of the headstones and on the cross which would form the focal point of the ceremony.

Fortunately, quick thinking and prompt action saved the day; informed of the outrage, the police got in touch with the Chief Storekeeper at the English Electric Company, in Stafford, who provided petrol, acetate and cotton waste, the German party was roused and the Cemetery was made presentable in time for the dedication ceremony to commence.

The Editor of the Staffordshire Newsletter roundly condemned the perpetrators of the outrage as cowardly hate-mongers of low mentality who couldn't even spell "Belsen" correctly (they had scrawled "Belson" at the base of the cross); the German party, though naturally upset, were more restrained in their response. "Who are they hitting?" Deacon Trepte asked. "There are no Gestapo chiefs buried here - just ordinary servicemen", adding "The best thing we can do is forget this incident as soon as possible"<sup>4</sup>.

More than half a century later, the Cemetery stands as one of the earliest examples of the move towards reconciliation between the UK and Germany. "We have built a bridge between the State of Bremen and the County of Stafford," declared Alderman Harry Goodwin. The hope has also been expressed that the cemetery will be a constant reminder of the futility of war and the universality of the suffering it creates.

#### Footnotes

1. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission was established (as the Imperial War Graves Commission) by Royal Charter in 1917; it is charged with "the permanent care and maintenance of the Commonwealth War Cemeteries, Graves and Memorials, wherever situated, relating to the two World Wars. It became the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1960. The German War Graves Commission was established two years later.

2. Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the country was divided into two states, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), dominated by Russia. Germany was re-unified in 1990.

3. The German War Graves Commission is organised on a regional basis, and Staffordshire comes under the responsibility of the Bremen and Bremerhaven District, in Lower Saxony, Northwest Germany.

4. While Deacon Trepte was correct to say that there are no Gestapo chiefs buried at Broadhurst Green, his claim that they were all ordinary servicemen is open to challenge. Field Marshal Ernst Busch, described as "a Nazi to his bootstraps", was chosen by Hitler to be Reichsprotektor of Great Britain, had this country been successfully invaded in 1940; instead, he was sent to command the 6th Army in Russia, where he is said to have ordered the execution of thousands of Russian civilians.



Cleaning headstones



Gathering stones

SS General Maximilian von Herff oversaw the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in May 1943, in which 13,000 Jews lost their lives, the remaining residents being deported to death camps. Both these men may well have been brought before a war crimes tribunal had they not died within months of being taken prisoner, the one of a heart attack, the other of a stroke.

There are also the graves of five women at Broadhurst Green, thought to have been internees.

A small number of Ukrainians are also buried in the cemetery, recruited to fight against the Russians, whom they regarded as oppressors of their country.

(This article is based on information provided by Paul Bedford, our CWGC guide on the visit to both Cemeteries in May, when we were joined by

members of local U3As and Probus clubs and on which we were joined by Sarah Moody, CWGC's Regional Public Engagement Co-ordinator. Written sources consulted included the minutes and correspondence of the Staffordshire County Council, "50 Years of Friendship", a booklet published by the Staffordshire County Council, the minutes of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and local newspapers.

The writer acknowledges with grateful thanks the support of Rebecca Jackson, Archivist at the County Record Office, Mithra Tonkin, Lichfield Diocesan Archivist, Josh Armitage, Staffordshire Council of Voluntary Youth Service, who took the photographs of the 2018 working party, and Stuart Urquhart, Head Gardener, whose intervention ensured the success of the visit).



# “Loveliest of trees the cherry now Is hung with blossom along the bough, And stands about the woodland ride Wearing white at Eastertide”

(A. E. Housman, “A Shropshire Lad”)

The landscape at Keele has been developed over a period of 450 years, principally while in the ownership of the Sneyd family, who bought the estate in 1544. The Hall, first built in 1580, was re-modelled by Ralph Sneyd, who also commissioned William Emes to landscape the park.

His son, also called Ralph, inherited the estate in 1829 and brought in William Sawrey Gilpin, who planted much of the existing woodland. Gilpin, who lived from 1762 until 1843, turned to landscape design when he was nearly sixty after a career as a drawing master and was a highly accomplished water-colourist.

He worked mainly for the aristocracy, and his commissions took him all over the country, but his claim to have worked on “some hundreds of properties” is now generally accepted as an exaggeration.

The nephew of the Rev. William Gilpin, who promoted the Picturesque Movement’s theories of landscape design, he himself followed its principles, earning the approval of another giant of the Movement, Uvedale Price.

In the mid nineteenth century the Hall was replaced by the present building, designed by Anthony Salvin, who also worked at Windsor Castle and the Tower of London, though his designs for the new Houses of Parliament in his favoured Tudor style were rejected. In 1948 Keele Hall was purchased from the Sneyd family to become, first, the University College of North Staffordshire, and then, in 1962, Keele University.

At first, the University authorities took little interest in its natural environment, but this changed in 2001, when, by now aware of the rich variety of trees, both native and introduced, which were a prominent feature of the campus, it was decided to set up an arboretum which would be an educational aid open to students and public alike. To achieve this each tree had to be identified, and over three thousand trees were tagged, a task David Emley, our guide, carried out largely single-handed.

He faced two problems: the trees were not concentrated in one area but



scattered throughout the campus; and he had to find a label for which the grey squirrels which had colonised the trees did not develop a taste (when they were not stripping the bark off the trees!).

It was then decided that the arboretum needed a focus which would distinguish it from other arboreta and that that focus should be the growing collection of flowering cherries.

The first flowering cherries had been planted as early as the late 1940s, but the nucleus of the collection was provided by Chris Sanders, who was looking for a home for forty cherries when he left Bridgemere Nurseries, where he had been Production Manager. Since his retirement he has acted as consultant and advisor on the management and expansion of Keele’s collection.

This number was increased by a donation in memory of a former student which

enabled the purchase of a further eighty more trees. As the result of subsequent donations, together with purchases made by the Arboretum Committee, the collection now numbers over 240 varieties and was awarded National Collection status by Plant Heritage in 2012.

Cherries belong to the genus “Prunus”, which includes plums, peaches, nectarines, apricots and almonds. In some varieties the fruit may be edible, but in the case of *Prunus cerasoides*, or the Himalayan Cherry, it is potentially poisonous, though, in diluted form, it is used to stimulate the digestive system. It is also used as a dye.

*Prunus Tai Haku*, known as the Great White Cherry, is an ancient Japanese variety that actually became extinct in its native country, but was re-established there when a single specimen was found to have survived in a Sussex garden, a classic case of “Coals to Newcastle”!

One of the earliest-known varieties, *Prunus avium* 'Plena', originated in France in 1700. A variety of our native cherry, it produces masses of pure white double flowers but is sterile, which makes it a favourite for parks and avenues. *Prunus serrula*, or the Tibetan Cherry, is striking for its shiny red-brown bark and prominent horizontal rings. Another unusual variety is the *Prunus litigiosa*, also known as the Tassel Cherry because of its clusters of hanging white-pink flowers and its protruding anthers, that is, that part of the stamen holding the pollen.

All these varieties are to be found at Keele. Over thirty include the name of Matsumae in their title (such as *Prunus* 'Matsumae-sasa-meyuki'), Matsumae being a town on the northern-most of Japan's four islands which became the centre of the study and cultivation of the flowering cherry and whose park, the first to be designed specially to display a range of different examples, hosts a world-famous cherry festival every year between mid-April and mid-May. It is the home of over ten thousand trees, laid out in rows, which, when in bloom, provides a stunning canopy of colour under which to stroll or picnic.

To achieve this effect the trees are not allowed to reach their full height but trimmed in such a way as to encourage them to spread outwards and thus form a canopy with their neighbours. But one does not have to go to Japan to enjoy the beauty of the flowering cherry, though, unlike Matsumae Park, the trees are scattered around the campus, and the flowering season lasts just a few weeks between March and May, though some flower from November.

Happily, SGPT members were fortunate in the choice of date for the visit, and extremely fortunate in being led by David Emley, who first came up with the idea of turning the campus into an arboretum and, having spent forty years studying the rich diversity of Keele's natural environment shown a commitment which has been justly acknowledged by the awarding of an honorary doctorate by the University and nationally, in 2017, of the BEM. A true teacher and scholar, he shares his knowledge both in print, publishing studies on the moths and birds of Keele University, and by taking parties such as our own on guided tours of the campus.

This visit was the first of three visits the Trust made in 2018 to sites unique to Staffordshire.



Prunus Botan-Zakura (Jl)



Prunus Matsuma-sasa-meyuki



# “A Mawson gem – the garden at Little Onn”

The gardens at Little Onn Hall, where the Trust held this year’s Annual General Meeting, were designed by Thomas Mawson, the leading architect of the late Victorian and Edwardian era, whose work extended to landscape gardens and public parks, including, in Staffordshire, those at Burslem and Hanley.

His commissions took him all over the country, from Dyffryn, in the Vale of Glamorgan, to Rydal Hall, in Cumbria, where he made early use of pre-cast concrete in place of stone.

The present Hall was built for Col. C. J. Ashton in 1874-6, replacing an earlier house that dated from the 1790s, though there had previously been a medieval manor house on a nearby site surrounded by a moat which Mawson incorporated into the garden, though the flower garden he designed as a central feature of the island was never introduced.

In the 1890s, the Ashton sisters, Evelyn and Amy, who inherited Little Onn Hall after their father’s death, commissioned Mawson to provide a plan to landscape the gardens. His plan for the gardens are set out in his book, “The Art and Craft of Garden Making”, published in 1901.

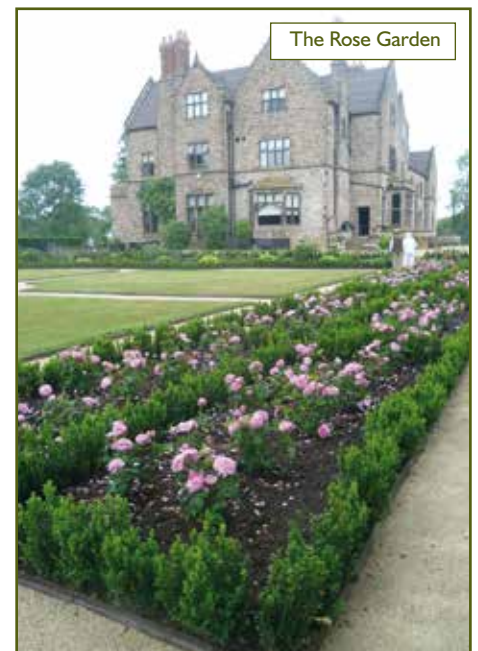
His proposals were never fully implemented due to a shortage of funds, but, nonetheless, sufficient were introduced for the gardens to be described by “Country Life” as “among the best examples of his work to be found anywhere in the country.”

They include terraces to the south and east, which give elevation to the house, parterres, a rose garden, and a rustic summerhouse. However, the unusual ‘bone’ pool – a short narrow canal with an octagonal pond at either end - was added in 1920.

Mawson’s plans also included a kitchen garden complete with vineries, peach house, palm house, fernery and gardener’s cottage, but this now lies outside the curtilage of the present property.

Little Onn Hall is now owned by David and Caroline Bradshaw and is a popular venue for weddings. The stage-by-stage restoration of the gardens is taking place under the direction of Mrs. Bradshaw, who, following the completion of the business of the meeting, took us on a tour of the gardens.

She is being guided by Mawson’s original designs and is at present assisted by just one full-time gardener, though she is hoping to engage a second gardener shortly. Her method was, she told us, to sketch out four or five possible alternative designs for each area,



which she showed to friends and fellow gardeners before making a final decision.

Members will have left Little Onn Hall not only grateful for the hospitality they had received but greatly re-assured that these historic gardens were in the hands of a committed and creative gardener.



# Peace Woodland

**One of the features of an eleven-day exhibition held at Lichfield Cathedral in August entitled “Imagine Peace” was the Peace Woodland made up of 1918 trees arranged in the form of a maze on the lawn facing the West Front of the Cathedral.**

The trees, whose number mark the year in which the First World War ended, the centenary of which is being commemorated in the final months of this year, were saved from landfill and have been grown on by the Parks Department of District Council.

In November they will be planted in nearby Beacon Park to form a permanent woodland.



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