

## Iraq cemetery containing graves of British servicemen is destroyed

A First and Second World War cemetery in Basra has been destroyed by vandals and looters



Only a few smashed headstones and memorials remain to mark the cemetery site. Photo: AMARICF

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A cemetery in Iraq that contains the graves of thousands of British servicemen who died in the two World Wars has been completely destroyed.

The graveyard in Basra has been left without a single one of its 4,000 headstones still standing after repeated vandalism and looting in the years since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

When British troops first took control of the city in 2003, wreaths were laid at the cemetery on Remembrance Sunday for the first time in decades.

Some soldiers even honoured the graves of relatives who had died in action during the Mesopotamian campaign of World War One.

But the growing insurgent threat soon made it impractical for British forces to protect it, and after their withdrawal from the city in 2007, it was too dangerous for the **Commonwealth War Graves Commission** to send teams to repair the damage.

The scale of destruction dwarfs vandalism of graves in Libya last two years ago and may be the

worst damage done to any Commonwealth cemetery - although finally, efforts have begun to bring it back to the immaculate standards of the Commission's estate.

Today, once again, there will be nobody there to mark Remembrance Sunday.

“It is an act of pure destruction,” said Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne, the executive chairman of the Iraq British Business Council, who visited the cemetery recently.

“We think this has been the work of militias over the years, although it's true to say that most of the people in Basra I have spoken to are rather ashamed of what has happened.”

Unlike the main British war cemetery in Baghdad, which has remained largely intact, the one in Basra appears to have suffered deliberate sabotage.

Among the items missing from it are the both the Cross of Remembrance and the bronze plaques from the Wall of Remembrance, which carries the names of the fallen. While some of the gravestones have simply crumbled in Basra fierce heat, and some removed by a local caretaker for safekeeping, others are thought to have been stolen by looters and sold for use as building materials.

In one corner of the bare earth, a set of football goals has been erected.

A neighbouring plot, containing mainly Indian colonial servicemen who fought alongside the British, has also had many of its headstones destroyed.

The Basra war cemetery is one of several around southern Iraq that date back to the British Mesopotamian campaign of 1914, when Britain launched an ill-fated assault on what was then a corner of the Ottoman empire.

After initially securing Basra, troops pressed north towards a military disaster in the city of Kut, 100 miles south east of Baghdad, where they were besieged for five months by Turkish troops, with some 20,000 members of the British killed or wounded. Britain then invaded again with an Anglo-Indian army led by Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude, which took Baghdad on March 11, 1917.

In total, 2,551 casualties from the First World War and 365 from the Second are buried at the cemetery.





Among them is Corporal Ernest Gibbons, of the Royal Field Artillery, who died of pneumonia in October 1918, aged 29. A report from the time in the *Peterborough Advertiser*, his local newspaper, said he had joined up at the outbreak of war and had been drafted to India and then Mesopotamia.

It said Cpl Gibbons was “of a very quiet disposition, and was most popular and beloved by his comrades and friends”.

Also buried in Basra is Private Alex Paterson, of the Army Ordnance Corps. Pte Paterson, from Arbroath, Scotland, had gone to India and was then a tailor in Mandalay before joining up in February 1917. He died, in May 1918, of dysentery, aged 33.

Across Iraq, Commonwealth war sites honour some 54,000 servicemen from both world wars, a figure that puts Britain’s modern-day military campaign there into perspective.

In Saddam’s time the cemeteries were still maintained by local caretakers, although around the time of the first Gulf War, the Iraqi dictator did order some war memorials to be moved out of Basra city to a new location in the desert.

A Commonwealth war grave in the city of Amarah, 100 miles north of Basra, is currently under threat from plans to build a fairground on part of it. Britain is pressing the local governor to halt the plan.

One source with knowledge of war graves said: “The war graves tend to be on prime land in the cities, and if we don’t do something about it, people will seek to develop on it.”

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has now started work to renovate the Basra cemetery, with Iraqi security forces guarding it.

Peter Hunt, director of HWH and Associates, a British engineering company based in Basra, which is involved in the work, said: “Work has started to refurbish it six months ago, and with the co-operation of the Basra governor, we hope to eventually restore it to its former glory.”

Peter Francis, a spokesman for the CWGC, said: “Work is ongoing and it is our intention to start restoring the headstones when the security situation permits.”

How we moderate

