

ROYAL AIR FORCE MEMORIAL

by

Philip Ward-Jackson

Location: At Whitehall Steps in an opening in the Embankment wall, opposite the Ministry of Defence building.

Sculptor: William Reid Dick

Architect: Sir Reginald Blomfield

Founder: Parlanti

Materials: The eagle and globe are in bronze, the eagle itself gilded, the globe darkly patinated. The pylon is in Portland stone.

Dimensions:

Unveiled: 16 July 1923

Inscriptions: The motto of the RAF, PER ARDUA AD ASTRA is inscribed around the frieze of the pylon

on the side of the pylon facing the Embankment - PER ARDUA AD ASTRA/ IN MEMORY OF/ ALL RANKS OF THE/ ROYAL NAVAL AIR/ SERVICE ROYAL/ FLYING CORPS/ ROYAL AIR FORCE/ AND THOSE/ AIR FORCES FROM/ EVERY PART OF THE/ BRITISH EMPIRE/ WHO GAVE THEIR / LIVES IN WINNING/ VICTORY FOR/ THEIR KING/ AND COUNTRY/ 1914-1918/I BARE YOU ON EAGLES/ WINGS AND BROUGHT/ YOU UNTO/ MYSELF

on the lower base, facing the Embankment - THIS INSCRIPTION IS ADDED/ IN REMEMBRANCE OF THOSE / MEN AND WOMEN OF THE/ AIR FORCES OF EVERY PART OF/ THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AND EMPIRE/ WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES/ 1939-1945

on the pylon on the side facing the river -1914/1918/ IN/ PERPETUAL/ MEMORY/ 1939/1945

on the base of the zodiacal globe, on the east side - F(?) PARLANTI/ LONDON

This is the official memorial of the RAF, and of its constituent services. It consists of a tapering pylon of rectangular plan, whose longest axis runs parallel to the river bank. Its side faces are framed by pilaster strips, and it stands on two step-bases, a podium and

two further levels of base. In the panels on the two broader faces of the pylon, the RAF insignia appear above the inscriptions. Above the pylon is an altar-like cap with wreaths in relief on all four sides. A further, buttressed socle takes the memorial up to its climax, an eagle, standing on a zodiacal globe, with wings raised as if about to take flight over the river.

The first RAF Memorial Committee was set up in February 1919, to respond to the suggestion of Maj. Gen. J. M. Salmond that the force should have its own chapel in London.¹ Various sites, such as Aldwych, St. James's Square and Pall Mall were suggested, and the architects Edwin Lutyens and W. D. Caroe were considered.² When the cost of acquiring a central London site was found to be prohibitive, the alternative of adopting an existing church was looked at, the chief candidate being the Grosvenor Chapel in South Audley Street.³ By April, some consideration was also being given to an "ordinary memorial", to be set up on a central London site, though the appropriate action to take on this was complicated by current proposals to erect a National Memorial. It was felt that the RAF's own memorial should form part of this.⁴ On the 30 June 1919, a new RAF Memorial Committee held its first meeting, and the Secretary was asked to find out about the plans for the National Memorial, and see whether "arrangements can be made for members of the Royal Air Force Memorial Committee to attend the meetings".⁵ The new committee initiated a consultative process, inviting officers and other ranks to express their preferences about how the bulk of the money raised should be spent. They were not asked about the War Memorial itself, since this was seen as only a minor item of expenditure. The ballot indicated that an overwhelming majority were in favour of using the money to raise a home for orphans of RAF personnel. The idea of a chapel found very few supporters.⁶ After this experiment had been tried, it was still proposed to dedicate £10,000 to the erection of an RAF War Memorial. Since the National Memorial showed no signs of materialising, it was now suggested that this should be in either St Paul's or Westminster Abbey, and that another memorial should be placed on the Rock at Edinburgh. Some recommendations were also made about the make-up of a new and more prestigious Memorial Committee, with Prince Albert (the future George VI) as patron, and influential gentlemen as vice-presidents.⁷

This was the body which finally launched the appeal in the pages of the Times, on 21 Jan. 1920, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard taking the leading role and Lord Hugh Cecil in the chair. Further details as to the objectives of the committee were given in an article in the Times of the 21 April. The sum looked for was £40,000, but not all of this was to be spent on the memorial itself. Other objectives were the creation of boarding schools for the children of airmen, the provision of bursaries for the children of officers, and treatment and assistance for the disabled. The Memorial Committee first made application to the Dean of Westminster for permission to raise a memorial cross on the lawn between Westminster Abbey and St. Margaret's Church.⁸ When this was refused, an approach was made to the LCC for the site at Whitehall Steps on the Victoria Embankment. This application was made on 23 Feb. 1921, and permission was granted by the LCC on 22 Nov., on the condition that the Department of Woods and Forests also agreed to the site.⁹

Shortly before the Council reached its decision, the executive committee for the memorial had given its general approval to Reginald Blomfield's designs.¹⁰ The pylon form which he proposed had already been used by him for war memorials for Torquay and Luton, on each occasion crowned with a different feature. The form had recently been given perfected minimal treatment by Lutyens in his Cenotaph for Whitehall, nearby. Blomfield found Whitehall Steps "a beautiful site", but one which imposed limitations. The need to leave free access space around the memorial limited the dimensions of the base, and this in turn, determined the height to which the pylon could be carried without injuring its proportions. The required height could only be achieved, he claimed, by the addition of the eagle and globe. The architect himself was responsible for the choice of William Reid Dick for the sculptural element of the memorial, and he claimed that Reid Dick "had caught exactly the idea that I was out for".¹¹ The original drawings and the models, which were shown at the Royal Academy in 1922, show that the first intention was to have the eagle facing in towards the Embankment and away from the river.¹² Blomfield seems to have decided at a late hour that the Eagle would look better taking off over the river. Reid Dick's inventive input was clearly very limited. One of Blomfield's drawings for the memorial, now in the R.I.B.A. Drawing Collection (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), is a very detailed close-up realisation of the bird, based, according to an inscription in his own handwriting, on a painting or illustration by the ornithological artist, Archibald Thorburn. A tiny bi-plane circles in the sky behind the eagle in this drawing.¹³ All that Reid Dick had to do was to work out the three dimensional rendition of this image.

There was some resistance in the committee to the gilding of the eagle. On this point, Blomfield received support from Lord Hugh Cecil, who insisted that, as the artist, he might be supposed to know what was best. In the end, Cecil was able to communicate to Blomfield the general satisfaction of the committee with his achievement. "The impression made by the memorial", he wrote, "has exactly that air of dignity and beauty which is to be desired".¹⁴

The unveiling was performed on the 16 July 1923 by the Prince of Wales. There were speeches by Sir Hugh Trenchard, Lord Hugh Cecil, and one on behalf of the civilian subscribers to the memorial from Viscount Cowdray. Perhaps the most moving and historically interesting words were those spoken by the Prince himself. He referred to the way in which those commemorated had "played their part in the war, braving with high spirit the unknown dangers of warfare in a new element and dying to give us the final victory", and to the tradition which their exploits and undoubted courage had established for "the new service", and for "our cloud armies of the future".¹⁵

Lord Trenchard unveiled the additional inscriptions for those who died in World War II on Battle of Britain Sunday, 15 Sept. 1946.¹⁶ Since then, on this same anniversary, the Chief of Air Staff places a wreath at the memorial on his way to the Thanksgiving Service in Westminster Abbey. On Remembrance Day, a very large wreath in the shape of a pilot's brevet is attached to the memorial at dawn.

¹ PRO Air 2-73, letter from Maj.Gen.Salmond to Sec of the Air Ministry, 27 Nov. 1918, and Minutes of Meeting, 1 Feb. 1919.

² PRO Air 2-73, Minutes of Meeting, 1 Feb. 1919, and letter from Gen. Brancker to L.Earie, 20 Feb. 1919.

³ PRO Air 2-73, Minutes of 3rd Meeting of the RAF Memorial Committee.

⁴ PRO Work 2-73, Minutes of Meeting, 8 April 1919, and Report of the Memorial Committee to the Air Council, 9 April 1919.

⁵ PRO Air 2-73, Minutes of Meeting, 30 June 1919.

⁶ PRO Air 2-73, Minutes of Meeting, 30 July 1919.

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Information from the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund web-site - The Royal Air Force Memorial.

⁹ LMA LCC, Minutes of Proceedings, 15 April and 22 Nov. 1921.

¹⁰ *Times*. 15 Oct. 1921.

¹¹ Blomfield, R, *Memoirs of an Architect*, London 1932, p. 184.

¹² *Architect*, 7 July 1922 - illustrations between pp.12 and 13. See also Blomfield Drawings in the R.I.B.A. Drawings Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, PA 248/12(1) and (4).

¹³ R.I.B.A. Drawings Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, PA 248/12 (3).

¹⁴ Blomfield, R., *op. and loc. cit.*.

¹⁵ *Times*, 17 July 1923, and *Flight*, 19 July 1923.

¹⁶ *Times*, 16 Sept. 1946.

WORDS ON THE SIDE OF THE MEMORIAL FACING THE EMBANKMENT

**PER ARDUA AD ASTRA
IN MEMORY OF
ALL RANKS OF THE
ROYAL NAVAL AIR
SERVICE ROYAL
FLYING CORPS
ROYAL AIR FORCE
AND THOSE
AIR FORCES FROM
EVERY PART OF THE
BRITISH EMPIRE
WHO GAVE THEIR
LIVES IN WINNING
VICTORY FOR
THEIR KING
AND COUNTRY
1914-1918
I BARE YOU ON EAGLES
WINGS AND BROUGHT
YOU UNTO
MYSELF**

On the lower base

**THIS INSCRIPTION IS ADDED
IN REMEMBRANCE OF THOSE
MEN AND WOMEN OF THE
AIR FORCES OF EVERY PART OF
THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AND EMPIRE
WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES
1939-1945**

WORDS ON THE SIDE OF THE MEMORIAL FACING THE RIVER

**1914
1918
IN
PERPETUAL
MEMORY
1939
1945**