

SECOND WORLD WAR MEMORIALISATION ON MY DAY OFF

June 29, 2012 Ian Richardson Day of Archaeology 2012, Military, Museum Archaeology 1st Baronet, Andrew Kershman, Arthur Harris, Battle of Britain, Bomber Command, Bomber Command Memorial, British Museum, British people, Department of Portable Antiquities and Treasure, Dresden, Hamburg, head, Hyde Park Corner, London, Military, Military personnel, Queen, RAF Chapel, RAF Fighter Command, Royal Air Force, Sir Arthur Harris, St Clement Danes, statue of Arthur Harris, Wellington Arch

My day job is in the Department of Portable Antiquities and Treasure at the British Museum, but today is a day off for me. Not to worry, I've found plenty of archaeology, or at least, Cultural Heritage, to keep me occupied! [Since the Institute of Archaeology runs a master's programme in Cultural Heritage Studies, I thought this would be allowed]

Yesterday, the Queen unveiled London's newest monument, a memorial to the men and women of the Royal Air Force (RAF) Bomber Command who gave their lives in service during the Second World War. The event was well attended by veterans and their families, and, coming 67 years after the conclusion of the war, could be regarded as overdue. Today I paid the monument a visit, and attempted to put it in context – amongst other monuments from the war, and also amongst the themes it addresses.



*The new Bomber
Command Memorial,
viewed from the
approach to the gyratory*

The Bomber Command Memorial is a marble open-topped temple surrounding a bronze sculpture of seven crew members posed as if returning from a mission



Statues of crewmen in the Bomber Memorial

Doric columns, like the choice of building material, evoke classical values of the virtue of defense that are echoed in a quote from Pericles on the base of the statue. The monument is sited on the Green Park side of a large gyratory at Hyde Park Corner, inside of which are several other large war memorials and the massive Wellington Arch. So, whilst it dominates its corner of the roundabout, the new memorial is not out of place, and I thought if anything it mirrored rather nicely the neo-Classical (though Ionically columned!) entryway into Hyde Park.

The monument also commemorates all of those people from any country who have suffered at the hands of aerial bombing, and in doing so makes a deliberate gesture to those who would criticize any commendation of the efforts of men who wrought such destruction on German cities like Hamburg and Dresden. This is nice to see, and shows an awareness of the delicateness of the topic, which an earlier memorial did not. I am referring to the statue of Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command during the closing stages of the Second World War, which stands in front of the church of Saint Clement Danes on the Strand. The statue obviously commemorates the man, but a little plaque on the side also explains that it is erected ‘in memory...of the brave crews of Bomber Command, more than 55,000 of whom lost their lives in the cause of freedom. The nation owes them all an immense debt.’ According to my little book *London’s Monuments* by Andrew Kershman (Metro Publications, 2007), when the statue of ‘Bomber’ Harris was unveiled in 1992, the attending crowd booed and threw eggs in disgust. However much one may make allowances for Harris’ strategy of using his air fleet to attack centres of population (rather than strictly military or industrial targets) by saying that it ultimately helped win the war or was justified in the face of German attacks on British civilians, erecting an oversized statue in his honour was bound to be controversial.

What I found fascinating is the evolution of the capital’s commemoration of the RAF’s part in the Second World War over the last half century – and that you can see this evolution on a short walk or bike tour. Starting on the Strand, the church of Saint Clement Danes serves as the official RAF church and a memorial to everyone who has given their life for the force. Gutted in the war, it

was reconstructed in the 1950s, and its interior is bedecked with plaques, flags and books recalling all of the individuals, units, and battle honours of the RAF. However from the outside the church is rather inconspicuous as a memorial and if anything is only noticeable for its ecclesiastical nature amidst the large buildings of Aldwych. For many years after the war, the more obvious monuments to the RAF would have been those to individuals.

Harris's statue outside the church stands across the forecourt of Saint Clement Danes from another one erected in 1988, of his contemporary Hugh Dowding, who led Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain in 1940.

Down on Embankment, the figures of Lord Portal and Viscount Trenchard, giant figures in the development and leadership of the RAF, have stood watch since the 1960s and 70s.

It was only in 2005 that the memorial to the Battle of Britain was constructed on the Embankment opposite Trenchard and Portal. This piece honours the rank and file of the RAF and goes to the effort of listing every person who died during that conflict in 1940. Like the new Bomber Command Memorial, it shows an

awareness of the importance of collective effort (and sacrifice) in the achievement of a nation's prosperity. This isn't a new phenomenon – witness the many memorials that sprang up after the First World War which gravely paid tribute to 'the noble dead'. However it is curious to consider that it is only 60 years after the event that London is in a position to feel that the statues of individuals do not pay due respect to the others who served and died for them.



Statue of Lord Portal

I personally thought the new monument was fitting and a poignant reminder of the service of these individuals. Because of the negative associations of carpet bombing German cities, the airmen of Bomber Command have received (to my mind) rather less acknowledgement than they deserve. Certainly they have not been immortalized like their colleagues in Fighter Command, 'the few' whom Churchill said we owed so much to.

It is interesting to ponder what some future students of material culture will make of the dates and styles of these various monuments to the RAF. I wonder if, when they question why the British felt it proper and necessary to construct a memorial to the 55,000 people from Bomber Command killed in the Second World War, they will reflect on contemporary outrage over British involvement in the Iraq War and the continual disappointment of the campaign in Afghanistan.



Poppies and a message left at the Bomber Command Memorial