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Introduction

War Memorials Trust is regularly contacted by the public about war memorials they feel need cleaning. This helpsheet is designed to offer advice on when cleaning is appropriate. It offers ideas on simple, least abrasive cleaning methods which will cause as little harm as possible to war memorials. The helpsheet also discusses the permissions that may be required if you want to clean a war memorial and how to brief a team involved in a cleaning project.

The simple, non-invasive cleaning covered in this helpsheet is primarily focussed on very basic cleaning of stone using water. This will help remove water-soluble dirt such as pollution from vehicles. You should be aware that each stone type is different so understanding your stone is very important to ensure you do not cause any damage. The image above shows stone before and after water cleaning demonstrating the impact water cleaning can have.

All helpsheets mentioned in this guidance are available from War Memorials Trust's [website](#). At the end of this helpsheet the Other sources of information section offers further guidance.

Striking a balance

People have different opinions of how a war memorial should look. Some expect a memorial to look its age whilst others consider cleanliness to be a reflection of the care given it. The resources in the Other sources of information help to provide support for custodians so they can explain why a conservation-led approach, which respects the age of the memorial, is in the best long-term interests of maintaining it.

War Memorials Trust advises that the intention of cleaning should be to keep the memorial in a stable condition which allows it to perform its commemorative function. The purpose of cleaning should not be to create a pristine 'like new' appearance because the majority of war memorials are historic monuments and that age should be reflected in their appearance. In addition, over-cleaning can cause damage and reduce the life-time of the memorial which is contrary to the notion of preserving our shared heritage.

Conservation Principles

This helpsheet should be read in conjunction with War Memorials Trust's [Conservation Principles](#) helpsheet and the advice available from national heritage bodies on war memorial conservation. Many of the decisions regarding treatment of stone raise conservation issues and works undertaken should be in-line with current best conservation practice.

It is important to remember that we are custodians of these memorials for only a part of their life so our decisions and actions should always be based on careful consideration of the artistic and commemorative function of the memorial, its history, previous treatment as well as its current condition so it can be maintained for future generations.

Cleaning principles

Cleaning of war memorials is a complex issue because inappropriate cleaning can cause significant damage.

In the majority of cases, a specialist contractor should undertake cleaning and will be able to advise on a method appropriate to the type and condition of the memorial's material. Further advice on identifying a contractor can be found in War Memorials Trust's helpsheet [Conservation contractors and professional advisors](#). The charity can also advise on appropriate cleaning approaches when photographs of the memorial are provided.

Cleaning historic stone should be approached with care. Each time a stone war memorial is cleaned it removes a protective layer of the surface reducing the lifespan of the memorial. It can therefore be worth considering whether the whole of the memorial is cleaned or whether only key areas are addressed e.g. ensuring the inscriptions can be read but leaving the wider memorial.

Anyone considering cleaning should also note that if cleaning is performed incorrectly it can cause long-term problems. Water may penetrate the stone which could freeze in winter and expand within the stone, causing the stone to crack.

The condition of stone should also be considered when approaching cleaning. Stone which is chipped, scaling, flaking, powdering, cracking or showing other forms of surface deterioration probably has other issues which need to be addressed. In such cases it is suggested the stone is not cleaned but advice is sought to understand what is causing this damage and identify a solution to help the long-term preservation of the stone. Cleaning may be appropriate after further investigation but it may be other works are also needed.

In some cases cleaning around raised lettering or sculptural details can risk damaging these delicate elements. Therefore, War Memorials Trust advises cleaning should only be undertaken when it is needed. You should avoid cleaning for purely aesthetic reasons as you are risking the long-term stable condition of the memorial.



St Mary's Church in Leamington Spa has a plaque, above, which was cleaned by hand.

Appropriate reasons for cleaning include:

War Memorials Trust believes cleaning should only be undertaken when:

- inscriptions, features, or detail are becoming very difficult to read or see
- deposits or dirt is preventing an assessment of the condition of the memorial
- pollutants or biological growth are causing harm to the stone of the memorial or are accelerating its rate of deterioration. This can be difficult to determine and specialist input is likely to be required

How to clean

Can you clean?

Before you undertake any cleaning you should ensure that you can do so. If you do not own, or are not responsible for, the war memorial then the permission of the custodian must be obtained. Advice on confirming the custodian/owner can be found in War Memorials Trust's helpsheet [Ownership of war memorials](#).

If the war memorial is listed you should also check to ensure Listed Building Consent is not required. Listed Building Consent is a legal requirement so you do not want to undertake works which could be illegal. You should check the national register of listed buildings in your country or contact your local planning authority to confirm if the memorial is listed.

Preparation

If a group is undertaking the cleaning, all participants should be made aware of the purpose of the activity and how it will be conducted. It would be advisable to ensure all those involved know the careful approach that should be taken on site towards the war memorial. Give everyone a copy of this helpsheet or copies of the relevant national heritage body advice, found in Other sources of information below so they understand the consequences, and potential damage, of over-cleaning or using inappropriate chemicals or products.

Trial

War Memorials Trust recommends undertaking a small trial in a discreet area of the memorial before there is any attempt to clean all of the structure. It is important to identify, following your cleaning trial, exactly where you want to clean the memorial. It may not be necessary to clean all the memorial and the trial stage can be used to identify where the cleaning need exists. For example, if the lettering is delicate you may decide to leave this area rather than risk damage and potentially losing the inscription and names.

Equipment

You will need a non-metallic natural bristle brush to clean dirt from stone. Wet or dry brushing is acceptable. Steel-wire brushes should **never** be used - they can scratch and stain stone. **Do not** apply large quantities of water; you can use a spray bottle to help localise the use of water. Distilled water is preferred but not essential. What is important is that nothing is added to the water.

Detergent is **not necessary** for this type of cleaning and should be avoided as it may cause damage.



Biological growth such as lichens, mosses, fungi, and algae can be removed gently using a wooden or plastic scraper or spatula and a little water. However, you should consider if their removal is necessary - such growths are rarely harmful to stone and can enhance the appearance of a war memorial. For further information read War Memorials Trust's helpsheet on [Lichens](#) and [Biocides/Detergents](#) to ensure you understand all the issues including identifying if your lichen is legally protected. You can face prosecution if you remove protected lichen.

Cleaning

It is important to treat the stone as gently as possible.

- **Do not** drench the stone with water but apply carefully
- Work from the top downwards
- Use light circular motions to remove the surface dirt or biological growth to avoid streaking. Do not scrub at the stone to avoid erosion to the surface of the stone. Particular care needs to be taken around intricate, carved details, inscriptions and lettering as they can be easily damaged
- Check regularly how the memorial looks – if you fear you have been too vigorous at the start please consider if it is appropriate to continue the clean. You should stop immediately you are concerned that any damage may have occurred

Monitoring

Once you have undertaken the clean, War Memorials Trust advises that you monitor the condition of the memorial to better understand what factors may be causing the build-up of dirt or biological growth.

Visit regularly and take photographs to record the condition. Use the [Condition Survey on War Memorials Online](#) or in some of the documents listed below to ensure you are monitoring the same areas consistently. You should take photographs and a written record of your checks – make sure you consistently photograph the same areas to have a clear comparison.

Monitoring can help you understand how often you should be cleaning a memorial. Over-cleaning can cause damage and you may need to manage expectations of what water cleaning can or should achieve. Good monitoring can help you do this and ensure you have the evidence to show others.



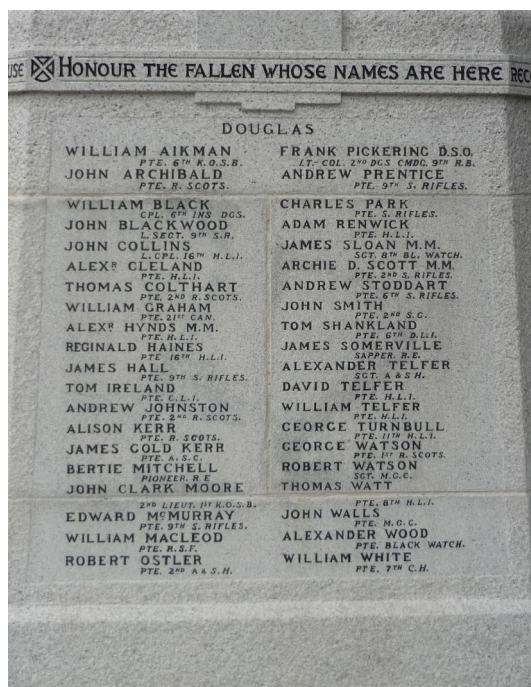
Other sources of information

Please [contact](#) War Memorials Trust's Conservation Team if you are at all unsure whether cleaning is necessary. Photographs of the memorial will need to be supplied

Historic England, [The Conservation, repair and maintenance of war memorials](#) (2015)

Historic Environment Scotland, [Short Guide: The repair and maintenance of war memorials](#) (2013)

Cadw, [War Memorials in Wales, Technical Guidance](#) (2014)



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Funding

War Memorials Trust provide grants for the repair and conservation of war memorials. For more information, visit www.warmemorials.org/grants

Douglas memorial cleaned by hand helping to remove deposits and dirt to ensure the inscription and names can be read.

Please note that this helpsheet is intended to offer informal advice and is a distillation of experience. The information contained in this helpsheet is not exhaustive and other sources of information are available. War Memorials Trust is not responsible for the content of external sources.

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