



The Centenary of the Burial of the **UNKNOWN WARRIOR**

By Dr Brian Parsons

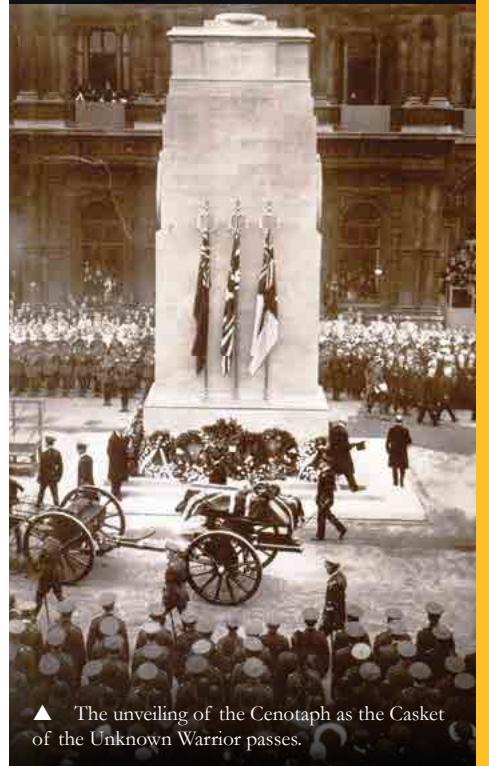


The bringing of the Unknown Warrior from his grave in Flanders to the heart of London, where his coming was awaited by King and his Princes, Generals and Admirals, Archbishops and Bishops, Ministers of State, and a multitude of men and women, was the tribute of the nation's soul, and of all great and humbler people made equal in reverence, to the virtue of the Common Man who won the war. ”

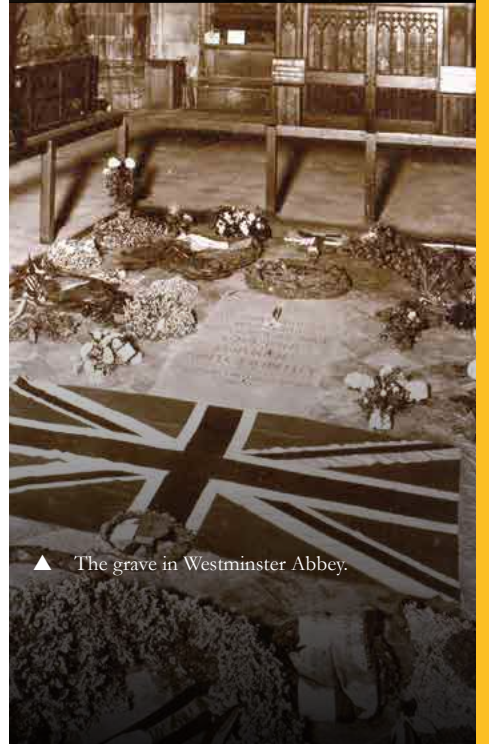
Sir Philip Gibbs (*The Illustrated London News* November 1920)



▲ Horace Kirtley Nodes
(1876-1959) photographed in 1919.



▲ The unveiling of the Cenotaph as the Casket
of the Unknown Warrior passes.



▲ The grave in Westminster Abbey.



Visitors to Westminster Abbey cannot fail to notice the black granite memorial covering the grave of the Unknown Warrior immediately inside the West door. Following a suggestion from an army chaplain, Reverend David Railton, to the Dean of Westminster, an unidentified body was brought from the battlefields of Flanders to be buried in the Abbey in November 1920. It was to be a ceremony without precedent which captured the heart of a nation scarred by war.

Literature on the subject, however, fails to refer to the contribution by funeral directors. As an occupation familiar with managing complex events within a short timeframe, the approach by the Ministry of Works to assist in this task did not overwhelm the representatives of the British Undertakers' Association's London Centre. They regarded the request as an honour. Yet the work of the secretary of the London centre of the British Undertakers' Association (BUA), John Sowerbutts, and the BUA National President, Kirtley Nodes, should not go unrecorded.

Published to mark the centenary of the funeral of the Unknown Warrior, this article reveals the involvement of the funeral profession in a unique and unforgettable task. The first provides biographical sketches of the two personalities involved while the second reprints John Sowerbutts' chronological account of the event which appeared in *The Undertakers' Journal* in November 1920; it is interspersed with a commentary in addition to quotes from Kirtley Nodes' experiences published in 1944 and those of Brigadier General Wyatt along with information about the coffin.

John Sowerbutts

John William Hadrian Sowerbutts was born in east London in August 1875, the second son of Thomas Sowerbutts, the well-known fishing tackle manufacturer. After being articled to an architect he received administrative training in the office of the Clerk to the Guardians of the Whitechapel Union and subsequently became an accountant in the Poor



▲ Preparation of the grave in Westminster Abbey (By kind permission of the Dean and Chapter).

Law branch of the Local Government Board. In 1901 he trained for Holy Orders at St Augustine's College Canterbury; four years later he was ordained in Calcutta where he served until returning to England in 1907. He then held curacies in Devon and Essex, and became an Associate of King's College London but, in 1917, he was given permission to take time out from full-time ministry.

John Sowerbutts became the assistant secretary for the London Association for the Blind where he proved himself as an able administrator. He was also active in both the Boy Scout Movement and freemasonry. On 11 February 1920 he was elected secretary of the London Centre of the British Undertakers' Association, a full-time position into which he devoted his energy and skills. He held this until 1926 when he returned to the ministry. His last living was in 1948 when he became vicar of Skillington near Grantham in Lincolnshire. He died on 5 May 1955.

Horace Kirtley Nodes

Born in London in November 1876, Horace Kirtley Nodes (hereafter referred to as Kirtley Nodes) entered the family business of John Nodes at 181 Ladbroke Grove on the death of his father in 1895. He was greatly interested in embalming having received instruction when Professor Charles A Renouard visited London in 1900. He was a member of the British Embalmers' Society from its establishment in the same year and then a founder member of the British Institute of Embalmers (BIE) in 1927 and its first Hon Secretary three years later, a position he held until 1948. In 1930 he toured America with two fellow members of the BIE and was deeply impressed by the facilities, premises and educational opportunities available there. Nine years later he visited South Africa. He was the BIE's first Fellow and then elevated to be the first Master Fellow. Kirtley Nodes was known to be a great mediator between organisations and his obituary in *Funeral Service Journal* states that "He gave himself unsparingly, to the funeral industry, and embalming in particular, and it may be said that he became one of the industry's most vital personalities, greatly endeared by many". He was twice President of the London Centre of the BUA, National President of the British Undertakers' Association 1920-1921 and a National Honorary Member of the NAFD. Away from funerals he was a member of the Royal Choral Society and a keen gardener. He died on 2 September 1959 and was cremated at West London Crematorium.

Bringing the Unknown Warrior Home

Wednesday, 27 October 1920

Ting, ting, ting! "Hello!"

"Is that Victoria 946?"

"Yes!"

"Is Mr Sowerbutts there?"

"Speaking!"

"Good afternoon, sir; we are HM Office of Works, and we have to arrange the burial of the Unknown Warrior. Can your Association undertake the making of the casket for the remains? It has to be made to special designs yet to be got out, and it has all to be done in a very short time. Can you do it?"

"Yes, sir, of course we can, nothing is impossible to my Association!"

"Very well! Will you arrange a conference with me here at the Office of Works tomorrow morning at 10.30?"

"Yes, sir, 10.30 tomorrow!"

So began the great adventure. The next morning, at King Charles Street, the design got out by the architect of the Office of Works was produced. Immediately it was seen that the task, or rather the labour of honour, was going to tax the Association's abilities to the utmost. The casket could not be got from any existing stocks; the furniture was absolutely unique; but still, your humble servant was confident that the Association could do the work. The conference was just ending when the National President (Kirtley Nodes) voiced what all were feeling, viz that the labour of honour would be marred unless the Association went a step further; accordingly he asked Sir Lionel Earle to accept the whole as a gift of appreciation to the nation for the self-sacrifice of the great body of England's warrior.

As an aside at this point, it is curious that the term 'casket' is used through the accounts, although the receptacle was indeed coffin shaped on account of the shoulders being kerfed.

In his account of the discussion, Kirtley Nodes is more precise about the meeting on 28 October: "...I well remember that some of the deputation had come armed with most elaborate designs, but we were soon informed they were not wanted. What was wanted was the cost of supplying the casket in accordance with the design got out by the architect of the Ministry of Works, acting under instructions of a special committee of the Cabinet. This was handed to us and explained and we were then asked to go over to a corner of the room and talk the matter over.

"At the time I was not only a member of the London centre, but also National President, and I felt that here was something in which the whole of the Association should take part. I proposed to my fellow-members that this should not be a question of competition, but a gift to the nation from our Association as our tribute to the Unknown Warrior. To this they readily agreed and also, to avoid any feeling, the casket should not be made by a member.

"Upon informing the representatives of our decision, he said he felt sure we should say this, although his superior had thought otherwise. As an appreciation of our offer it was decided that two of us should accompany the casket to France, do all that was necessary, and return with it to London. It was felt that by placing the matter in civilian hands no jealousy should arise between the various sections of the Forces. At the same time we were asked to be diplomatic. The choice of representatives fell upon myself and the secretary."

Payment of the casket as a 'gift of appreciation' was funded by inviting BUA members to subscribe one shilling per head and an advertisement was placed in *The Undertakers' Journal*. Kirtley Nodes commented: "In this way I felt everyone could feel they had taken some share. This suggestion was unanimously agreed to and the money needed more than subscribed." Initially, the firm making the casket - Ingall, Parsons, Clive & Co - who

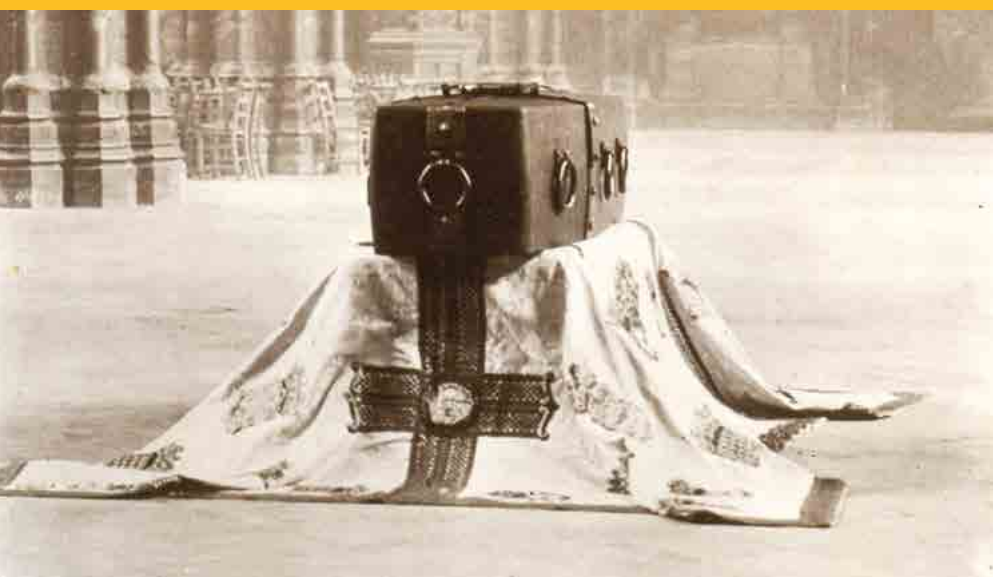
“

I well remember that some of the deputation had come armed with most elaborate designs, but we were soon informed they were not wanted.

”



The casket positioned in Westminster Abbey to be photographed. The next day it was taken in John Nodes' hearse to Charing Cross station. ▼



were not members of the BUA, had offered to donate the casket, but this was declined by Kirtley Nodes. News of the BUA's gift soon reached the public domain.

On 6 November 2020 *The Daily Telegraph* noted: "The Casket was of special design and had been constructed by the British Undertakers' Association, who undertook the task free of charge as a tribute to the dead."

Returning to John Sowerbutts' account: "The Cabinet Committee was sitting that afternoon to finally approve the design, and the Secretary was asked to remain in his office at Ebury Street until the design arrived, so that the work might be begun at once, and no time lost. It was 7.30pm when the architect brought the design to the office, and that same night work was put in hand. It would take too long to tell of the succeeding days, the many changes of plan and detail; and even when the unique furniture was finished in just twenty-four hours – the Office of Works was not satisfied with the finish. The design was right, but to get the correct Sixteenth Century style it was necessary to send to Carnarvon [sic]."

The Coffin

Both John Sowerbutts and Kirtley Nodes give details of the casket's specification. The latter states: "The casket was to the design of a Sixteenth Century treasure casket, made of two-inch English oak, with slightly rounded sides and lid, and finished with a dark wax finish. It was mounted with four pairs of hammered wrought iron handles and iron bands from head to foot and across the

shoulders. The plate was to the pattern of a Sixteenth Century shield and bore the following inscription in Old English:

*'a British warrior
who died in
the great war
1914-1918
for king and country'*

"This was bolted to the lid over a Sixteenth Century Crusaders' Sword, given by HM King. The ironwork was made in London, but, in deference to the wishes of Lloyd George, sent to Carnarvon [sic] and finished off by the man who made the ironwork of the investiture of the Prince of Wales."

The source of oak was the grounds of Hampton Court Palace, and the inner shell was made from one inch English Pine. The casket was made at Ingall, Parsons, Clive & Co's Forward Works in Mason's Avenue, Wealdstone in north west London. Walter Jackson was responsible for its construction. The ironwork was made by DJ Williams at the Brunswick Ironworks, Caernarfon.

Returning to John Sowerbutts' recollections: "A little more than seven days and the task was complete, admittedly a beautiful piece of work and admired by all who saw it. At the last minute the Office of Words asked for a shell to be sent up to the battle front. This was provided in a few hours and despatched to France.

"Sunday, November 7th, saw the casket deposited in the Abbey to be photographed amidst architectural surroundings. It reposed in the Jerusalem Chamber until Monday morning the 8th."

The casket was conveyed to Westminster Abbey in John Nodes' Rolls Royce hearse. A photograph in the Abbey library shows the motor hearse parked outside the west front and the Casket being loaded onto the bier. A nameboard with 'John Nodes' is clearly displayed in the wide window. The casket would then have been driven the short distance to Charing Cross station for loading onto the train.

John Sowerbutts continues. "It [the casket] was then taken to Charing Cross and placed in a special coach and entrusted to representatives of the BUA, was taken to Boulogne. The London Secretary and the National President were authorised to bring the remains to England, and to deliver them to the Military at Victoria, on Wednesday evening. After the casket was locked in the coach at Charing Cross, the keys were handed to the Secretary, with the following official authorisation:-

HM Office of Works

4th November, 1920

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:-

The bearer of this letter, Mr John WH Sowerbutts and his colleague, Mr HK Nodes, have been authorised to accompany the casket to contain the remains of the "Unknown Warrior" to France, and having sealed it, to accompany it back from France to this country, and hand it over to the Military upon its arrival at Victoria on Wednesday, the 10th instant.

Lionel Earle
Secretary

"Eleven o'clock am saw us off. Reaching Folkstone Junction at 1.45, a special coach was attached to the casket coach, and the two were run down to the Harbour. It was 6.30pm before we got the 'Treasure Chest' aboard the *Imvicta*.

"At 7pm, we were away – it was a delightful passage across the sea – all that could be desired. Fog was run into off the French coast, but all was well, and soon we were alongside the jetty at Boulogne. The "open sesame" of OHMS saw us through the customs and other formalities, and the casket safe under Military Guard for the night, we fetched harbour in the Hotel de Londres on the harbour front.

"Tuesday, 9th – the car has just come, and with the casket following in an ambulance, we are off to the hills at the back of the town and to the grim chateaux.



"Just picture the quadrangle of an old French fortress. We pass into it through two low archways; on the left, through a low doorway we enter a small room draped with bunting and dressed with greenery. The floor is strewn with laurels and chrysanthemum blossoms; this in the Chapel of Repose. Outside is drawn up a guard of honour poilus; here and there are groups of other officers, French and English, and so we await the coming of 'our boy'."

Of the selection of the body, Brigadier General Wyatt recalled: "Reporting to my headquarters office at St Pol, at midnight on November 7, Col Gell, one of my staff, announced that the bodies were in the chapel and the men who had brought them had gone. With Col Gell, passing the guard which had been specially mounted, I thereupon entered the chapel.

"The four bodies lay on stretchers, each covered by a Union Jack; in front of the altar was the shell of the coffin which had been sent from England to receive the remains. I selected one, and with the assistance of Col Gell, placed it in the shell, we screwed down the lid. The other bodies were removed and reburied in the military cemetery outside my headquarters at St Pol. I had no idea even of the area from which the body I had selected had come, no one else can know it."

In Sowerbutts' account, the encoffining is described differently: "Presently one or two staff cars swing into the quadrangle and then just a battle-scarred ambulance, the familiar red cross on its sides, and before we can realise it, is borne on eight shoulders the simple shell covered with



▲ The Unknown Warrior on HMS Verdun returning to England.

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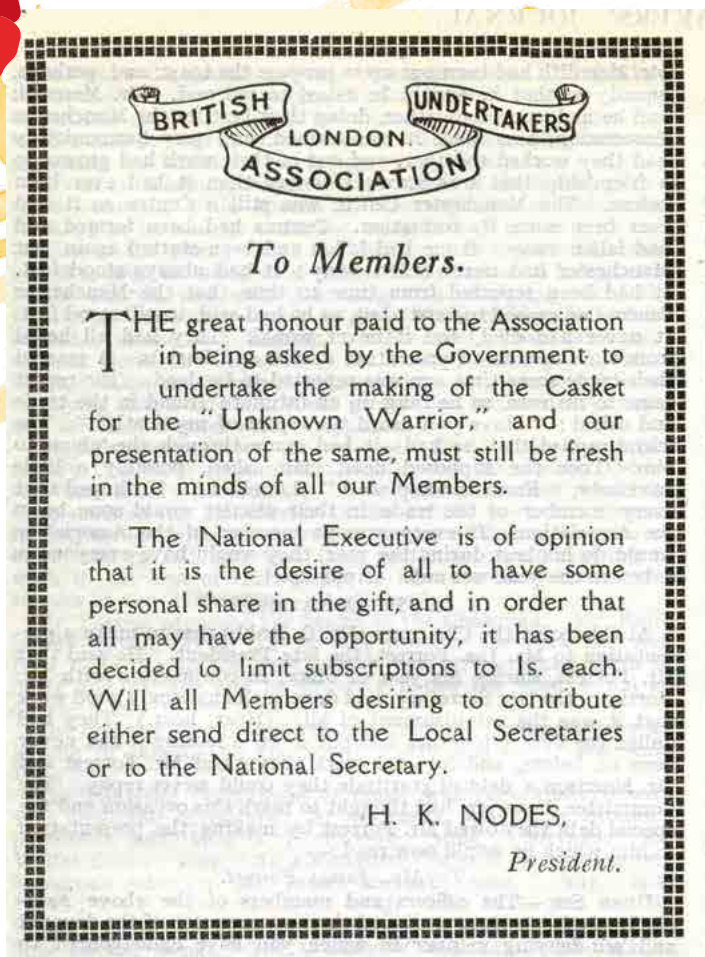


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▲ The appeal in the March 1921 *The Undertakers' Journal* to all funeral directors for one shilling.

England's flag [The Union flag], and within it the "Unknown Warrior." It is a touching scene. Gently we lay him in the "Treasure Chest" The lid is on, the bolts are driven home, and we step forward wondering "whose is this image and superscription" – and there, on a shield of hammered iron, we read: "A British Warrior who died in the Great War, 1914-1918, for King and Country." Bound round the waist and from head to foot in bands of hammered iron, with a crusader's sword thrust under the shield, we leave him in the guard of France for the night, but in the casket of England's heart, bound round with the bands of grateful love. Tomorrow we will bring him home on a destroyer, when the French have done him their *devoir*.

"Midnight, Tuesday – the hotel has become temporary Staff Headquarters. There is a field telephone on the table, the lounge is full of staff officers, England and French; soldiers and officers are coming and going, all busy preparing for tomorrow's function. All the chiefs are staying there to-night. The French mean to make a big show. We have just learned that the Destroyer is timed to arrive at 10, and to leave at noon.

"Wednesday the 10th, 10am. A dull morning, the harbour is thronged with people, the roadways and quayside are beflagged; presently, out of the mist over the sea, a grey form emerges, it is *HMS Verulam*, upon which "our boy" is to go home. It does not take long to make fast alongside. After certain preliminaries the Commander comes ashore and stepping towards the representatives of the BUA, invites them aboard. Then a period of waiting, until in the distance the sound of French trumpets, playing the stirring "Aux Champs," and the deeper, impressive music of the massed bands with "Chopin's March Funebre," Slowly down from the chateaux, where he had rested all night under the vigil of a myriad November stars, to the Place de Dernier Sou, from thence with General Sir George Macdonagh and Marshall Foch following, borne in a French Army Service wagon, through bareheaded ranks to the quayside.

"It is a scene never to be forgotten, absolutely unknown, just a skeleton and no more. It might have been a baby in the shell for the weight; yet he is a British Warrior. With

the grandeur and triumph of a great victor he comes aboard and resting on the quarter deck, abaft two grim torpedo tubes bowered in flowers and veiled in battle-stained gown of three crosses intermingled, we make him fast for the last crossing. It would take a volume to describe it all. Shortly we cast off and out into the "glory mist" we glide. Just outside the harbour six British destroyers file into position, three each side, and four French cruisers meet us with their salutes, whilst the guns of the land forts boom au revoir, and the bells of Notre Dame sing a requiem.

"About six miles out the French cross our bows firing their farewell, and so we come onwards. About 2pm we sight "Blighty," and a wireless message is received asking us to cruise in the Channel, arriving at Dover at 3.30; accordingly we go west with our escort. At 3.25 we enter Dover harbour, our escort falling away to right and left, the fortress calling to us with nineteen guns.

"Never can one forget the scene. We just glide in and, as we get close to the jetty, the bands sing softly, "Land of Hope and Glory." Soon he is borne aloft on his comrades' shoulders, and we follow him ashore to the garden of repose; for although it is a prosaic railway van, yet it has made history before; for in the same van they brought home Captain Fryatt and Nurse Cavell. Beautifully draped, garlanded and banked with laurel and chrysanthemum, it is just a paradise. We lay him down, and until the train starts the doors are left open for the public to view. At 5.30 we are away and all the way up at every station are crowds; by the crossings, on the bridges out of the darkness, white faces peer as we speed with out treasure to London. The rest the papers will tell you. Suffice it to say that at Victoria the BUA representatives handed the keys of the coach and its precious treasure to the Officer Commanding the Guard, and received the following receipt for the same:

Received from Mr Sowerbutts, two keys of Van no 132, SE & CR [South Eastern and Chatham Railway]

P S Gregson Ellis
Lieutenant
1st Battalion Grenadier Guards

November 10th, 1920

So ended a work of which the BUA must ever be proud, and one which reflects great honour upon the Association; and so far as the two representatives were concerned, a labour of love they will never forget.

Requiescat in pace – Gloria in æternum.

Afterwards

Sir Lionel Earle was prompt in writing to thank the funeral directors. His letter written from HM Office of Works in Westminster on the 12 November is still in possession of the Nodes family. It reads as follows:

Dear Sir

I desire to take the earliest opportunity to convey to you the warm thanks of His Majesty's Government for the assistance which you rendered in taking the Casket to contain the remains of the Unknown Warrior to France, and in accompanying it back to this country.

On all sides I have heard nothing but praise for the admirable way in which the duties entrusted to you were carried out.

I am, Sir

HK Nodes Esq

Your Obedient Servant

Lionel Earle

Although John Sowerbutts and Kirtley Nodes gave accounts of their role in the events, both were anxious to emphasise its importance for the funeral profession. Writing in December 1920, the editor of *The Undertakers' Journal* interviewed Kirtley Nodes where he commented: "I don't want...to make too much of the bringing home of the 'Unknown Warrior'; but the honour done to the BUA in that matter is an asset of no small value.... we did not take the credit ourselves. It was the BUA they were honouring"

At the BUA Conference in Scarborough the following year the subject was raised (it was Kirtley Nodes' Presidential conference; John Sowerbutts was also present).

The *BUA Monthly* (the predecessor of this magazine) in July 1921 reported: "The Association was called upon by the Government to take part in the burial of the 'Unknown Warrior'. It was their privilege and pride to do so. They counted it as a great honour to take part in that ceremony and to present the casket used, and it was his privilege to go to France and collect the remains. Mr Nodes alluded to the solemn and imposing character of the ceremony or bringing the body to England and its subsequent burial at Westminster Abbey. The touching appeal of his speech made a deep impression on the audience, and many wet eyes were in evidence."

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks are extended to the following for help in the preparation of this article: the Reverend Dr Peter Jupp, Ann and the late Michael Nodes, Dr Tony Trowles, Librarian at Westminster Abbey, The Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey.

All images from the author's collection except where stated.



▲ A replica of the Unknown Warrior's coffin at Bodium on the Kent and East Sussex heritage railway. It is displayed in the restored van that conveyed the coffins of Edith Cavell and also Captain Fryatt.

Conclusion

For the BUA, assisting in the bringing home of 'our boy' was the most significant event in which the Association had become involved since its founding in 1905.

The approach by the Ministry of Works was confirmation of the increasingly valuable role of funeral directors. But this was more than new-found official recognition. During the war the industry had lost a significant number of its workforce and experienced many operating difficulties, such as shortage of timber. Provision of the coffin for the Unknown Warrior and assistance in his home-coming was both an individual and collective tribute from funeral directors to those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

The Unknown Warrior: In Memoriam

By Henderson Bland (1876-1941)

*What mother's son in this that they bring here
With such high honour; that in all its ways
A nation hails, and dreams of fateful days,
The while deep thoughts now beat about the bier?
The son of every mother, far and near,
Who lost a lad in war, and gently prays.
This if the boy brought home — this hour repays!
The mothers comforted though falls the tear.*

*O bring him on with music — bring him on.
While we recapture for a little time
The glory of the hours when first we flung
Our banners high with hope the world upon.
He speaks of bloody sweat in every clime,
And strong love known the fighting men among*

Reprinted in the *BUA Monthly* (November 1923) from *The Graphic*, November 1920.

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▲ 'The British Undertakers' Association National President, Kirtley Nodes, with members of the Executive laying a wreath at the Cenotaph in May 1921.

About the Author

Dr Brian Parsons is a funeral historian with more than 30 years' experience in funeral service – firstly as a qualified funeral director and embalmer, and more recently as a provider of training, consultancy and research.

A regular speaker on the subject of the the changing face of funerals, London cemeteries

and related subjects, he has contributed numerous articles to death and funeral-related journals as well as authoring a range of books including *The Undertaker at Work 1900-1950* and *The Changing Face of the British Funeral Industry in the Twentieth Century*. The Sixth edition of his book, *London Cemeteries: An Illustrated Guide and Gazetteer* (with Hugh Meller), will be published by The History Press in 2021.

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