

At that time, Field Marshal Earl Haig (who had been Commander-in-Chief in France) had become the Founder-President of the newly formed British Legion ('The Royal' prefix was not conferred until 1971). The Legion's purpose was then — as it remains today — in time of need to give practical help to all men and women who have served in the Forces, and to their widows and dependants.

Earl Haig used to say that the provision of work for disabled ex-Servicemen was as important as raising money. He always took the greatest personal interest in the Legion's Poppy Factory. This Factory started its activities in 1922 with five disabled ex-Servicemen working in a small room over a shop in Bermondsey in South London.

Today, the Royal British Legion Poppy Factory Ltd. carries on the same work in modern premises in Richmond, Surrey, where some 160 disabled ex-Servicemen are employed in the manufacture of the 45 million Poppies and 80,000 Wreaths used in the annual Poppy Appeal.

The first Poppy Appeal in 1921 raised £106,000. By 1985 the Appeal income had reached over £7¼ million annually, from which some 50,000 people benefit each year.

The attached leaflet explains, in brief, what The Royal British Legion does with these funds, and who it helps.

Further references:

"The official history of the British Legion",
by Graham Wootton. Published 1956.

"Red for Remembrance — British Legion 1921-71",
by Antony Brown. Published 1971.

Annual Report and Accounts of The Royal British Legion.
Published annually.

The Royal British Legion Poppy Appeal Reports.
Published annually.

THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION



APPEAL

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

THE POPPY EMBLEM — HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The Flanders Poppy was first described as the 'Flower of Remembrance' by Colonel John McCrae, who before the First World War was a well known Professor of Medicine at McGill University, in Montreal.

He had previously served as a gunner in the South African War, and at the outbreak of the First World War decided to join the fighting ranks. However, the powers-that-be decided that his abilities could be used to better advantage, and so he landed in France as a Medical Officer with the first Canadian Army contingent.

At the second battle of Ypres in 1915, when in charge of a small first-aid post and during a lull in the action, he wrote, in pencil, on a page torn from his despatch book, the following verses:

In Flanders' fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders' fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch: be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders' fields.

The verses were sent anonymously to "Punch" magazine, and published under the title "In Flanders' Fields".

In January, 1918 Colonel McCrae was brought as a stretcher case to one of the big hospitals on the channel coast of France. On the third evening he was wheeled to the balcony of his room to look over the sea towards the cliffs of Dover. The verses were obviously in his mind, for he told the doctor who was in charge of his case:

"Tell them this,
If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep".

The same night Colonel McCrae died. He was interred in a beautiful cemetery on rising ground above Wimereux, from where the cliffs of Dover are easily visible on sunny days.

The First World War finally came to an end in November 1918, when an Armistice was declared, so that peace-terms could be arranged. At 11 a.m. on November 11th, the last shot of the War was fired. For many years afterwards Armistice Day was observed on the 11th November, but now it is known as Remembrance Sunday, and is held always on the second Sunday in November.

An American lady, Miss Moina Michael, had read the poem and was greatly impressed, particularly by the last verse. The wearing of a poppy appeared to her to be the way to keep faith, and she wrote the reply:

"THE VICTORY EMBLEM"

Oh! You who sleep in Flanders' fields,
Sleep sweet — to rise anew;
We caught the torch you threw,
And holding high we kept
The faith with those who died.

We cherish too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led,
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders' fields.

And now the torch and Poppy red
Wear in honour of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught:
We've learned the lesson that ye taught
In Flanders' fields.

On November 9th, 1918, only two days before the Armistice was signed, Miss Michael was presented with a small gift of money by some of the overseas War Secretaries of the Y.M.C.A. for whom she worked, and whose Conference was being held at her house. She told them about the two poems, and announced that she was going to buy 25 red poppies with the money. This she did: she wore one herself, and each Secretary there bought one from her. It is claimed, probably rightly, that this was the first group selling of poppies.

The French Secretary, Madame Guerin, had a practical and useful idea. She visited various parts of the world to suggest that artificial poppies should be made and sold to help ex-Service men and their dependants in need.

As a result the first ever Poppy Day was held in Britain on November 11th, 1921. The Poppies were obtained from a French organisation, which used its profits to help children in the War devastated areas.