

## **WALTER JENKINS OF TORQUAY AND THE CANADIAN NATIONAL VIMY MEMORIAL**

**by Mike Thompson**

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Today's visitors to the old Western Front battlefields of the 1914-18 War have many sights to see. They can enjoy the modern Belgian and French towns and cities such as Ieper (formerly Ypres) in Flanders and Arras in Artois, which have so magnificently risen from the ruins to which they were reduced as the opposing armies demonstrated man's inhumanity to man over four wearying years. They can also appreciate the various terrains of open country, hill, wood and valley which were the unsuspecting hosts to the appalling casualties that still resonate from 'the Great War'. Also, they can witness the thought-provoking commemoration of the enormous loss of life caused by the steadfastness and valour, and the often calamitous courage, that was so often demonstrated on both sides of the blooded no-man's land that snaked its way from the Channel coast through Belgium and France almost to the Swiss border.

The visitors' books thoughtfully provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission at a host of military cemeteries that are the last resting places of hundreds of thousands of fathers, brothers, uncles and sons are a lasting reminder that 'we will remember them' as today's descendants of those soldiers continue to enact the pilgrimages to the Western Front that so often include signing the cemetery register and adding a few extra words of heartfelt and moving tribute to the sacrifice that is now at least 90 years distant in a disappearing past.

For the fallen who have no known grave (the vicious horror of the fighting meant that additional hundreds of thousands of soldiers were simply blasted into eternity) there are the memorials that mark a particular battle, a regiment's sorrow, a division's contribution or perhaps a nation's keenly felt loss. These memorials come in all shapes and sizes and among the very finest of them is the Canadian National Memorial on the Vimy Ridge, just a few kilometres north of Arras, in a corner of France that will be forever sacred to those who bear the image of the maple leaf. This is one of the most visited of the Western Front memorials - and it was largely built by the renowned Torquay stone firm of H.T. Jenkins & Son Ltd. 'Decorative Marble Contractors, London and Torquay'. By the time the monument was unveiled the company was designated Walter W. Jenkins & Co. Ltd. of 132 Union Street, Torquay and 41 Whitehall, London SW1.

Canada was still a young country (the Dominion was created in 1867) when the Great War was fought but its army had quickly rallied to the Allied cause and by the end of hostilities had contributed no fewer than 619,636 troops whose tremendous fighting qualities were made manifest in many significant campaigns. Their sacrifice was equally significant; a total of 66,655 Canadians were killed or

missing presumed killed (over 10% of their number) of whom 20,474 (almost a third) have no known graves.

In Canada's capital city of Ottawa, the newly-formed Canadian Battlefield Memorials Commission met for the time in 1921 and ultimately decided that the nation's sacrifice would need to be commemorated by one or more memorials. There was little discussion as to where the principal memorial should be, for in April 1917, as part of the infamous Battles of Arras, the four Divisions of the Canadian Corps had fought side by side for the first time and performed one of the greatest feats of arms of the entire war by capturing the heavily fortified and strategically important Vimy Ridge, which had been in enemy hands since 1914. Canadian losses were considerable - 3,598 killed in over 10,000 casualties - but their victory was a major boost to morale and of immense value to the Allied armies as they went on to further advances that year at Messines and Passchendaele to the north, and at Cambrai to the south.

In Canada a competition was launched to find the best design for the Vimy memorial and in October 1921 the winner was announced as Walter Allward (1875-1955), the leading Canadian monumental sculptor of the day, who had many public commissions to his name. The Vimy memorial was to become his life from that moment on, until its ceremonial unveiling by King Edward VIII in July 1936.

Stone masons all over Europe competed for the work of building the monument and a final decision was not taken until 24th November 1924 when the Canadian Battlefield Memorials Commission met and heard that the two principal tenders were from Messrs Duyvewaardt of Roulers, in Belgium and Messrs Jenkins of Torquay. Duyvewaardt had the advantage of having already done work in the area for the then Imperial (Commonwealth from 1960) War Graves Commission but the Commission knew that Jenkins had an association with M. Fevre, the largest quarry owner in France and owner of quarries near Dijon from where it was initially thought the Pouillenay stone for the Vimy memorial might come. The minutes of the Commission also stated that 'Messrs Jenkins have a very high reputation and have carried out important works in England, including for example the Queen Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace, London. Mr Allward... has expressed great confidence in Messrs Jenkins and it is apparent that he would work with this firm in a harmonious manner'. The Torquay firm won the day and contracts were signed the following April 1st even though at the time Allward, a perfectionist with a vision from which he rarely wavered, had not visited the Pouillenay quarries to inspect their stone.

The Commission was correct in stating that the Jenkins firm had a high reputation for it dated back to the 1860s when Henry Tozer Jenkins (died 1913), had acquired the business from George Widger. Walter, one of Henry's five sons, inherited the business after his father's death and expanded it considerably, he died in 1954. The firm provided the marble decoration to buildings as far afield

as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in Shanghai, the Imperial Bank of India in Colombo, a Processional Archway in Calcutta, the Lal Bagh Palace in India for the Maharajah of Indore, Australia House in The Strand, London, the head office of the Midland Bank in Poultry, London, and built the famous Cenotaph in Whitehall, London. Walter sourced marble worldwide for this kind of contract and also used the distinctive grey and pink marble from his own Ashburton quarry for a host of small items such as table lamps. The works in Lymington Road, Torquay were famous for the sound of their water-lubricated giant cutting machines and in the 1920s housed a staff of around 400, which had shrunk to 52 in 1983.

The Jenkins family ceased to have any connection after the 1960s when the business became part of the Buildings Specialists Group, which had headquarters in London. The firm went into receivership in October 1996 by which time there were only about two dozen staff remaining; in January 1997 a projected sale of the business fell through and the staff were finally laid off, the machinery sold and the 1.2 acre site put on the market for £300,000. Later that year plans were announced to install a large-scale car wash on the site, which was its ultimate fate. In July 1998 a fire severely damaged the premises and caused the loss of the Building Services Group records which were stored there. However, the Jenkins name allied to stone working still survives, as in the Spring of 1997 five former Jenkins staff established a new company on Milber Trading Estate, Newton Abbot, to be known as Jenkins Stone.

Allward's design for the memorial featured two massive pylons, or towers, of stone almost 100 feet (30 metres) high and representing the two nations of Canada and France, on which were surmounted eight groups of allegorical statuary (depicting Justice, Honour, Charity, Peace, Honour, Charity, Knowledge and Truth) with a further two statues entitled 'The Torch Bearer and Sacrifice', at the foot of the pylons, the whole resting on a spacious, buttressed platform which encompassed two further groups of statuary, two single statues and the extremely significant female figure with head bowed, depicting the young nation mourning her fallen sons. The figure is variously known as 'Spirit of Canada' or 'Mother of Canada'. All this statuary was to be carved by the Italian sculptor, Luigi Rigamonti, in double life size following plaster models made by Allward himself in London, to where he moved in 1922. Within panels on the walls enclosing the memorial, the names of over 11,000 Canadian soldiers killed in France but who had no known graves, were to be inscribed. Approximately 15,000 tons of concrete were used for the foundations (designed by Dr Oscar Faber, of London) and it would be Walter Jenkins' job to fetch in some 6,000 tons of durable stone with which he would build the pylons and face all the walls, platforms and steps.

It was quickly found that the Pouillenay stone did not meet Allward's strict quality criteria and over a dozen other possible varieties of stone from Europe and North America, and even Norway, were also rejected because of aesthetic, political

or quality reasons. The Canadians did not want to use American stone, and some stone was of the wrong colour or had too many imperfections, or was not available in large enough blocks; Allward wanted the statuary in particular to be carved from single blocks weighing up to 30 tons. Decisions had still not been made by February 1926 when the Commission received information from the Geological Survey and Museum in London confirming that stone from Trau, on the Adriatic coast of the then Yugoslavia (now Croatia), could be suitable even though it would add £38,000 to the £75,588 contract price. Walter Jenkins and Walter Allward immediately visited the quarries and on March 1st approval was given for the stone and the contract price was amended.

Three days later Jenkins travelled to Belgrade to obtain the necessary permits and approval for quarrying operations. He then set up workshops in Italy where the stone would be processed before it would be transported by sea to Trieste before going overland by rail to Arras and thence to Vimy. Jenkins leased a second quarry and took an option on a third to secure his supply and it was on June 18th 1927 that the first stone arrived on site at Vimy. However, on June 30th Allward was writing to Jenkins in Yugoslavia explaining why some defective stones would not be usable and Jenkins responded by saying that he could not possibly meet Allward's standards and that he would rather quit and absorb his losses than run himself bankrupt. 'The world can judge me if I am wrong in taking this step as to me it is only a sane one to try and save complete disaster to my firm,' he wrote. Allward then conceded that a certain number of small defects will be acceptable, saying that for the front and second walls of the monument he will allow one stone in 20 to contain a vent (imperfection), and on the side walls one stone in eight or ten.

The difficulties continued and when 70 tons of stone arrived on site in July 1927 some 20% was rejected. In October Jenkins was claiming that the cost of quarrying the stone was three times more expensive than anticipated and that the Yugoslavian authorities were refusing to allow any Italians to work at the quarries. In March 1928 Jenkins managed to have the contract prices amended in his favour and 12 months later signed a further contract to do the sandblasting of the names on the memorial; there were to be 11,285 names, at 5s. 9d. (about 29p) per dozen letters. Jenkins purchased the sandblasting apparatus that same month and had it shipped to Vimy. The pylons were not built with whatever sized stone came along - every stone was drawn by Allward to the exact size he wanted; hence he knew precisely where the mortar joints should be. His perfectionist approach was seen in May 1930 when he allowed Jenkins to re-position the mortar joints on the pylons by a maximum of one and a half inches but only then after written approval. Furthermore, on the whole monument Allward wanted the stones to be joined by mortared gaps of only three thirty-seconds of an inch, to give the monolithic effect he so desired. This effect was heightened by the mortar being exactly the same



colour as the stones; it is significant that the Vimy Monument Historic Structures Report of 2004 devotes no fewer than eight A4 pages in dealing with mortar issues.

The stone continued to arrive on site and there were the usual successes and failures. In April 1931 only two or three stones were rejected out of a batch of 60, yet in a newspaper interview two months later it was stated that on one occasion Jenkins had quarried 4,500 tons to obtain 360 tons acceptable to Allward. Defects in the stone were always a problem, not least because they could split even while in the stoneyard if there was a hard frost. The last shipment of stone was on its way by May 1932 (by which time the monument, still four years from being unveiled, was receiving 10,000 visitors a year) and by January 1933 Jenkins was taking down his derrick; Rigamonti continued to finish his work on the groups of statuary and it wasn't until April 1936 that the pylons were clear of the scaffolding and tented 'studios' that had supported and sheltered the stone carvers working on the highest groups. A final cleaning of the stonework was carried out before Edward VIII inaugurated the monument on 26th July 1936 before an estimated 100,000 crowd that included a pilgrimage of some 6,200 Canadian veterans, families and friends, who were joined by around 1,500 Canadian veterans living in Great Britain. The monument had cost 1,290,000 Canadian dollars.

Walter Jenkins was not slow to make the most of his firm's association with the project and produced advertising flyers which included a photograph of the monument. It was perhaps no coincidence that on the day before the unveiling ceremony he advertised his marble bathroom accessories in the *Herald Express* and he also had some reprints done of an advertisement that appeared in *The Builder* magazine, which said that the ancient quarry which he had re-opened in Yugoslavia had provided the same kind of stone which had been used to build the palace at Spoleto (now Split) of the Roman emperor Diocletian around 300AD. This stone is usually described as being from Trau, which is about 20km from Split. In fact, the stone is more accurately described as Seget, from the quarry of that name which is close to Trau (now Trogir). This was confirmed to the writer in an email of November 2005 from Mira Bezmalinovic, of the Jadrankamen company which now operates these quarries.

Mr Bezmalinovic also confirmed that the quarries were able to supply the stone required for a major restoration of the monument which took place in 2005 onwards, when the Canadian Government put in place a project costing over 30 million Canadian dollars to refurbish all 13 of Canada's Great War memorial sites in Northern France and Belgium. Over half of this money was spent on the Vimy memorial, which was closed to the public for a long period from 2005 until it was re-opened on the 90th anniversary of the battle on Easter Monday 2007. The memorial had a long history of repair and maintenance partly because of problems associated with environmental effects, inadequate drainage, and the limestone

cladding being bonded to the concrete foundations; limestone and concrete expand and contract in different ways and pressures had led to cracks and other damage appearing. Calcite had leached from the stones and the mortar joints, often making the inscribed names indecipherable, and along with normal weather discolouration Allward's version of a near-white soaring structure, representing a sermon in stone against the futility of war, was being severely corrupted. Instead of yet more temporary repairs, the Canadian Government decided to close the monument and enclose the whole of it in a vast temporary workshop so that it could be taken apart and rebuilt where necessary without any delays for weather.

It remains only to mention further the sandblasting of the 11,285 names on the monument. Originally, Allward's design denied the presence of any names at all, as he felt they would in some way demean the memorial and he had a hatred of lists of soldiers which he claimed reduced the celebrated Menin Gate at Ypres to a mere noticeboard. Governmental pressure, and the Imperial War Graves Commission's policy that the fallen who had no known grave would individually be commemorated by name on a memorial somewhere, led to Allward having to accept names, which he at first thought should be on the platform upon which visitors would walk. This, too, was unacceptable to the authorities so the names were accommodated in panels on the enclosing walls. It was typical of his desire to avoid lists that the names were inscribed like text on a page, with names simply running across, and sandblasted into, mortar joints wherever it was necessary. The name panels were drawn by Percy Smith in his London studio, and from his drawings a series of rubber stencils were made which were fixed to the wall in the correct position and then the names sandblasted through the stencil; all the connecting bars were taken out by hand chiselling. Jenkins' operator for all of this work was Mr W.H. Kernick of 43 Chatto Road, Torquay and pictures exist of him at work on the Vimy memorial. He demonstrated great skill in sandblasting all the name panels to the same depth in order to give Allward the sweep of consistent texture that he required.

The restored monument as seen in 2007 revealed afresh Walter Jenkins' enormous contribution in helping Allward succeed in creating - with his majestic pylons, impressive statuary and strikingly original names treatment - a stunning memorial that will excite the reverence and imagination of visitors for centuries to come. It was a contribution of which today's Torquinians can be justly proud.

*The principal source of information for this article was the Canadian Government's detailed and comprehensive Vimy Memorial Historic Structures Report of 2004 which was kindly made available to the writer, on site at Vimy, during the restoration by Mr Al Puxley, the then Director of Operations Europe for Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Government. Mr Peter Craven, who at the time was seconded from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to be Senior Technical Advisor to the Canadian Battlefield Memorials Restoration*

*project, was also helpful and facilitated a visit to the memorial when it was completely enclosed in its temporary workshop and closed to public view. The writer has been visiting Vimy and the Western Front battlefields since 1977.*

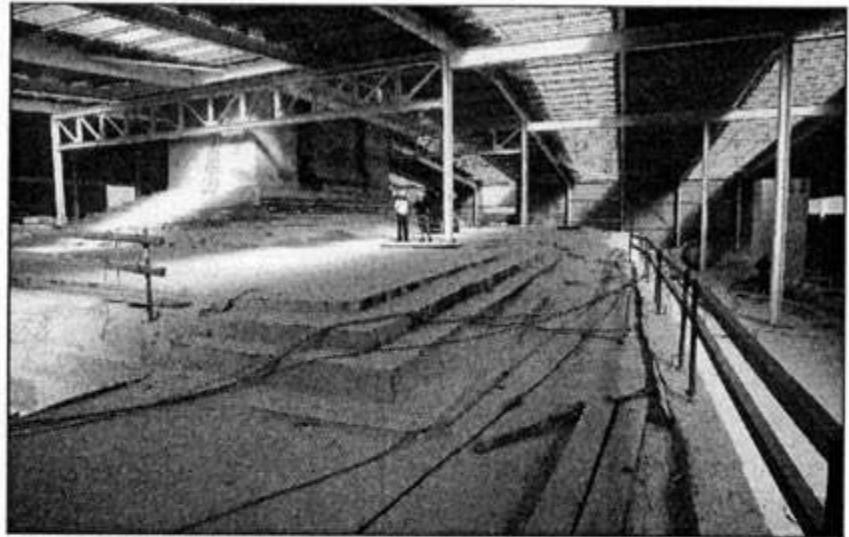
**Fig.1**

The Vimy Memorial as seen from the front, with the pylons rising majestically from the stone-clad platform. In the centre of the front wall can be seen the statue representing Canada mourning her fallen sons.



**Fig 2**

The Vimy Memorial pictured in the Spring of 2006 when it was encased in a huge temporary workshop. The stone has been taken away to reveal the concrete foundations. The pylons rise just to the left of where the two men are standing; on the right of the picture can be seen a tall wooden box, with a workman present, protecting the statue of Canada mourning her war dead.



**Fig 3**

Proof of Torquay's contribution - hidden away on one of the limestone panels is the Jenkins name.

