

Poppy Assembly

1. Armistice Day is on 11 November and is also known as Remembrance Day. It marks the day World War One ended, at 11am on the 11th day of the 11th month, in 1918. It is marked in different ways by different groups across the world, though one symbol that is recognised by many in how we remember WWI, is that of the poppy. In fact, 2021 marks 100 years since the poppy began to be used as a remembrance symbol.
2. During WW1, much of the fighting took place in Western Europe. The countryside was blasted, bombed and fought over repeatedly. Previously beautiful landscapes turned to mud, where little could grow. One hardy flower however continued to bloom - the bright red Flanders poppies. Soldiers enjoyed these poppies as a symbol of hope, and some picked them and folded them into letters they sent home.
3. In the spring of 1915, shortly after losing a friend, a Canadian doctor, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae was moved by the sight of these poppies and that inspiration led him to write the now famous poem 'In Flanders Fields'. The poem then inspired an American academic named Moina Michael to adopt the poppy in memory of those who had fallen in the war. She campaigned to get it adopted as an official symbol of Remembrance across the United States and worked with others who were trying to do the same in Canada, Australia, and the UK.
4. Also involved with those efforts was a French woman, Anna Guérin who was in the UK in 1921 where she planned to sell the poppies in London. There she met Earl Douglas Haig, who had been a leading general in WWI, and persuaded him to adopt the poppy as a remembrance symbol in the UK. The Royal British Legion, which had been formed in 1921 by Haig, ordered nine million poppies and sold them on 11 November that year.
5. The poppies sold out almost immediately. That first 'Poppy Appeal' raised over £106,000 to help veterans with housing and jobs; a considerable sum at the time. Today's Poppy Appeal has over 40,000 volunteers, distributing 40 million poppies.

6. It's not just the red poppy that is used today. White poppies were first produced in 1933 by the Co-operative Women's Guild, made up largely of women who had lost husbands, fathers, sons, brothers and friends in World War One. They were worried by the growing militarisation of Remembrance events and the detachment between the red poppy and the need to work for peace. The Guild's General Secretary, Eleanor Barton, called for renewed commitment "to that 'Never Again' spirit that was strong in 1918, but seems to grow weaker as years go on"

7. The white poppies, while symbolising those who died for Britain, also include in their remembrance those wounded in body or mind, the millions who have been made sick or homeless by war and the families and communities torn apart. Also remember those killed or imprisoned for refusing to fight and for resisting war and many civilians today, in Syria, Yemen and many other places around the world.

8. We'd like to finish the assembly with McCrae's poem:
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.

9. 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.

10. 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.