

# The National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Near Lichfield



## **The unknown soldier**

The National Memorial Arboretum is situated on a large expanse of land reclaimed after past quarrying activities. It's devoted to the remembrance of those who have died in service of this country. While its main focus is on conflicts post-1945, most military and uniformed organisations have memorials there too, regardless of the era in which they were active.

The Arboretum has been officially open to the public since May 2001, but it's a venue you don't often hear about. Access and parking are both excellent. From Dudley it takes about an hour by car. It's best to skirt by the northern side of Birmingham: first to Walsall then on the A461 and A5

towards Lichfield, then north east onto the A38 until you see signs for the Arboretum. There's a large car park (£2.00 all day) and a superb visitor centre that includes a restaurant. '2 for the price of 1' offer vouchers are available on their website. Entry is free but you are invited to make a contribution to the site's upkeep on leaving if you wish.





The largest memorial, built on a huge earthwork reminiscent of a pre-historic burial mound, is to Britain's fallen since 1945. All recent conflicts are remembered including Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan and the names of those who died in each year are engraved in the stone of two giant concentric circular walls. Those who died in 2010 in the Afghan conflict will be commemorated there this spring.

Of particular interest to me was the Polish memorial, which has a striking statue of Poland's service people who fought in the 1939-45 conflict including the Polish RAF, in which my father-in-law served as a Spitfire pilot.

The most moving memorial was built in the style of a prisoner-of-war hut. The inside contained an exhibition with heart-rending accounts of the inhumanity of the Japanese to Allied POWs in Singapore, Burma and Sumatra. Two stretches of railway track outside serve as a reminder of Allied forced labour on the Burma-Thailand (River Kwai) railway and the Sumatra railway.



Possibly the most striking was the RAF Association's memorial, a superb silver eagle soaring high, with the RAF emblem emblazoned in red, white and blue on the ground beneath.

But in terms of individual artworks, the most memorable was the giant effigy, seemingly suspended in the air, representing those who have died nameless and uncommemorated.



There is a Millennium Chapel on the site, containing some wonderful wooden carved figures on the upright beams and a delightful scene of 'Jesus the Storyteller' surrounded by little children.



## **The Army Commando memorial**

For further details see the Arboretum website:

<http://www.thenma.org.uk/index.aspx>

**Martin Jones**