



Herbert Ryle and the Unknown Warrior

This November will mark the centenary of the unveiling of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey. As we approach Remembrance season, Bill Hines considers the man who inspired this national memorial and his connection to West Wales

The original idea for this came from Revd David Railton, who was serving as a military chaplain on the Western Front in 1916 and saw a single grave in Armentières, to “An unknown British soldier”. Although his original suggestion for a national memorial to the fallen was rejected, he wrote again in 1920 to Herbert Ryle, the then Dean of Westminster. Ryle pursued the idea with PM Lloyd George and this time it found favour, on condition that the body be titled the Unknown Warrior, to include all those who had also served by air and sea. A body was selected in a ceremony in St Pol in Northern France on 7 November 1920 by Brigadier General Wyatt, and then transported by sea and rail to London Victoria, and, on 11 November, it was taken by gun carriage to the Cenotaph in Whitehall, where the newly erected memorial by Lutyens was unveiled. After the two-minute silence the cortège proceeded to Westminster Abbey where King George V and 100 recipients of the Victoria Cross were waiting to receive the body and watch the final interment.

Herbert Ryle (pictured right) composed the famous epitaph engraved on the memorial, beginning “Beneath this stone rests the body of a British warrior unknown by name or rank brought from France to lie among the most illustrious of the land”, and ending with the lines “They buried him among kings because he had done good towards God and toward his house”. These last lines are an adaptation of those in 2 Chronicles 24:16.



Although these events are well known, it is perhaps not widely remembered today that Ryle had an earlier connection with West Wales, serving as Principal of St David’s College, Lampeter, between 1886 and 1888, before moving back firstly to academic life in Cambridge, and then bishoprics in Exeter and Winchester, before becoming Dean of Westminster in 1911. He died in 1925 and was buried close to the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. A couple of Ryle related oddments have recently come to light in Aberystwyth University Library, a letter of thanks he wrote to former Principal Thomas Charles Edwards in 1896 when he became President of Queen’s College Cambridge, and a 1696 copy of Richard Baxter’s memoirs *Reliquiae Baxterianae*.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Edward_Ryle