



Whitehall

Matt Leonard discovers a rich conflict landscape in the heart of the British capital.

Battlefields and conflict landscapes take many forms and are often multi-layered and multi-vocal entities. Traditional and older battlefields, such as Agincourt or Waterloo, appear fairly straightforward to interpret. They usually involve a tremendous clash of armies, over the space of a few hours, or perhaps a day. They are almost always static in nature and have well-defined borders, but they are still always contested spaces.

More recent battlefields are less simple to define. Many of the battles on the Western Front during the Great War occurred across the same vast spaces as earlier ones. Or consider the aerial arena of the Battle of Britain or the seascape of the Battle of the Atlantic. These struggles took place in multi-dimensional theatres that have less easily defined parameters.

There are yet other conflict landscapes that further blur the common perception of a battlefield, such as Tiananmen Square in Beijing, or the Tahrir Square in Cairo. In these places, people battle for their voice to be heard. It is easy to forget that in Britain we have similar places, also bitterly contested. The road to freedom and democracy is a bloody



Above Lion of England. One of the four bronze lions at the base of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, symbolising nation, empire, and victory.

Inset Anti-war

poster at the 'peace village' in Parliament Square. A long history of democracy and dissent has made Whitehall a contested landscape.



one, and Britain's place in the world and our oft-heralded democracy came at a price. London's Whitehall has been at the centre of this struggle. It is therefore a fascinating example of a conflict landscape.

Trafalgar Square: symbol of victory and empire

At its southern end is Parliament Square, with Trafalgar Square to the north. The space between them contains a vast amount of British history and is a vigorously contested space. Monuments and statues line the grand squares on either side of the street, and even run down the middle. Each space battles with its neighbour. Some are understated and some impossible to miss. Whitehall is also home to the government's offices, the magnificent Horse Guards, and the site where Parliament executed a King of England. This single street is a conflict landscape without equal: richly layered, containing many voices, and with ill-defined parameters.

Left Whitehall contains a series of monuments to the giant figures of British imperial history. Nelson at the top of his column dominates Trafalgar Square, while Haig riding down the middle of the street – erect, confident, going forwards – seems to embody the continuity of the tradition. Except that, ahead of him, is the Cenotaph: supreme symbol of the bloody conflict over which he presided.



Left and above Inigo Jones's Banqueting House has a bust of Charles I in a niche over the main entrance. It is an indirect reference to one of the most important events in British history: the execution of the King as a traitor to the English people. This climactic event of the English Revolution has been almost completely erased from the modern townscape. It has become hidden history.

Trafalgar Square is perhaps best known for its statue of Admiral Lord Nelson. This imposing figure of British military history towers over the square and his column is a landmark, recognised the world over. It is a symbol of the might of the British Empire in its heyday: all-powerful, unconquerable, the envy of the world. Four large, bronze lions flank Nelson's Column, and the base of the monument contains four reliefs of Nelson's greatest victories, cast from captured French guns. They are victories that reinforced Britain's dominance on the world's stage. The reliefs depict the Battle of Cape St Vincent, the Battle of the Nile, the Battle of Copenhagen, and the death of Nelson at Trafalgar. They represent a heroic country that vanquished its enemies and imposed its will on the world.

Trafalgar Square is home to other representations of great Britons. The four corners of the square each contain a plinth, three of which are occupied by statues and one that it is used for other purposes. The front two plinths contain a statue of Major-General Sir Henry Havelock, noted for his capture of Cawnpore from the rebels during the Indian Mutiny of 1857-1859, and another of General Sir Charles Napier, who was famous for his actions in the Peninsular War and for his service in India. They represent Britain's colonial power, and stand for a time when Britain controlled an empire upon which 'the sun never set'. The third statue is of George IV, a flamboyant King of England.

A hidden execution

At the top of Whitehall is a statue of Charles I on horseback, but a little further down the street can be found the Banqueting House, which was the site of his execution in January 1649. For the execution, a special scaffold was constructed extending from the building into the street, so that the King could walk out of a first-floor window to meet his fate. Today, a small bust of King Charles is all that is left to show the site of his death. There is no plaque to explain the spot's significance: this is the hidden history of revolution.

Charles walked onto the scaffold, that cold winter's morning, wearing two shirts, so he would not shiver and appear afraid to die. Ironically, the Banqueting House is opposite the spectacular Horse Guards, the official entrance to St James's and Buckingham Palaces. Royalty and the death of royalty

stand opposite each other, a symbol of the political conflict that tormented the country during the early 17th century. It is a battlefield upon which modern Britain was forged.

Further towards Parliament Square, the 20th-century military history of Britain is represented. In the middle of the street is a statue of Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the central, and much maligned, symbol of Britain's involvement in the first great conflict of the last century. He faces south along Whitehall, forever staring at the Cenotaph, the cost of industrial warfare seemingly borne on his shoulders alone.

Haig and the dead

The Cenotaph is striking in its simplicity. Designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, who also designed the imposing Thiepval Memorial to the Missing on the Somme, it memorialises the dead of the First World War. Flanked with British ensigns, it is engraved with simple but powerful words selected by Rudyard Kipling: 'The Glorious Dead'.

Haig, the supposedly incompetent general who is said to have sent hundreds of thousands needlessly to their deaths, was taken for the last time past the Cenotaph on the day of his own funeral in 1928. The same gun carriage used to carry the Unknown Soldier to his final resting place at Westminster Abbey was used to transport Haig's coffin past the memorial to the dead of 'his' war. That day, tens of thousands lined Whitehall to pay their respects. A general who had carried



Lutyens' Cenotaph

BATTLEFIELD

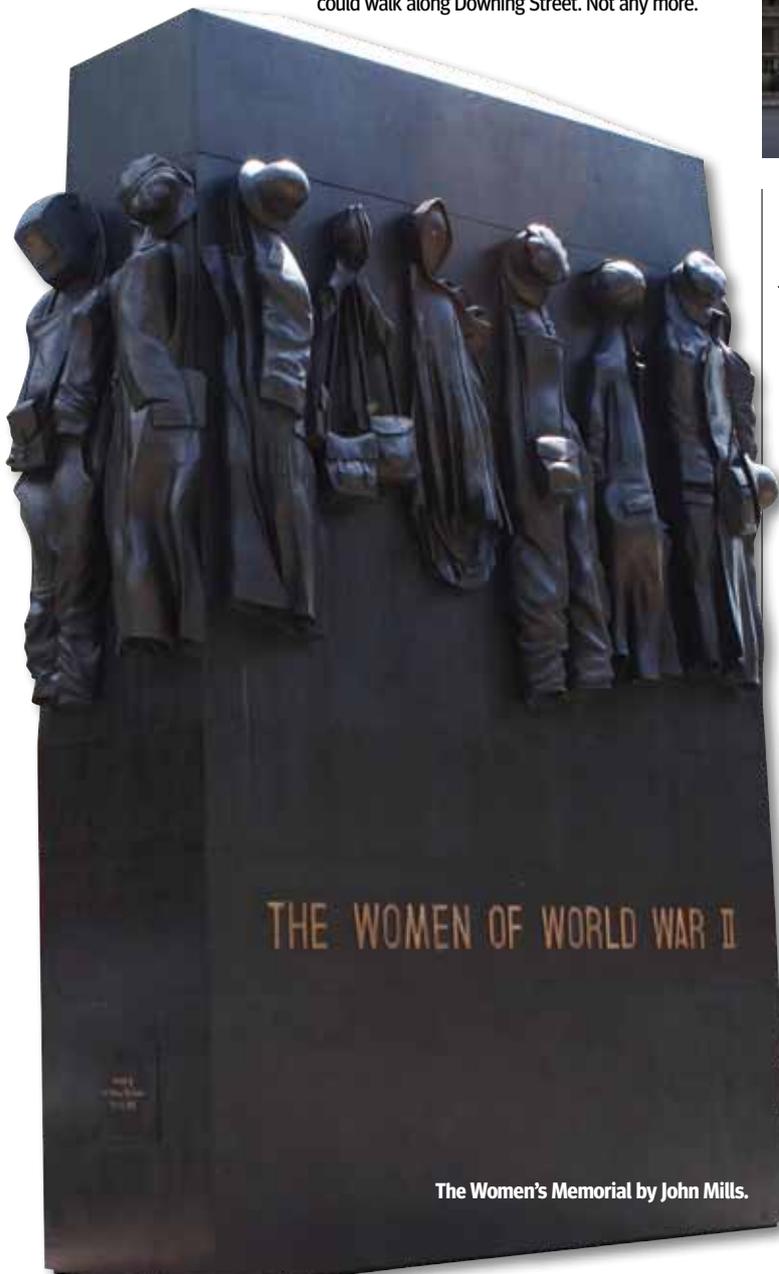
the burden of a nation was contesting the same space as those who had died to achieve the nation's aims. What did the spectators think, most of them mourning lost relatives or friends?

Haig's funeral occurred at a time of great social upheaval, and Whitehall was often its battleground. The fought-over legacy of the war was part of that conflict. Those who stood and watched Haig's coffin pass that day were surely among those who still believed it had all been worth it. These were genuine mourners for Haig, many of them his former soldiers, not those who hated him as a butcher.

Rulers and ruled

Between Haig's statue and the Cenotaph is the more recent National Memorial to the Women of World War II. The memorial was dedicated by Queen Elizabeth II in 2005. It stands 22ft high and 16ft long. There are 17 sets of clothing and uniforms sculpted onto the sides, symbolising the many tasks and hardships endured by the women of Britain during the titanic struggle against Nazism. Much is made of the heavy toll paid by soldiers, sailors, and airmen during the Second

Right Downing Street today. Roadblocks, iron gates, and armed police separate the rulers and the ruled in modern Whitehall. As recently as the 1970s, anyone could walk along Downing Street. Not any more.



The Women's Memorial by John Mills.

World War, and this rather understated memorial highlights how modern industrialised warfare affects many more than just those on the front-lines.

Whitehall is not only a site of conflict for generals, soldiers, and kings. It is also the heart of the British government. The Old War Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Admiralty, and other offices line the wide street and form yet another layer of the complex conflict landscape of Whitehall. In these offices, momentous decisions have been made that have changed both the country and the world.

Downing Street is situated just along from the Cenotaph, on the western side of the road. But this small street, the site of 'Number 10', the home of the British Prime Minister, is no longer accessible to the public. Large iron gates and roadblocks prevent people getting up the road. Policemen armed with automatic weapons flank the gates. Political leadership is thus separated from potentially rebellious people. The entrance to Downing Street is a very visible line of division between the rulers and ruled. As one journeys further along Whitehall towards Westminster, this divide becomes more and more apparent. Contested lines are drawn through the heart of London.

King Charles Street, location of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is barred to road traffic by heavy barriers. The public is permitted to walk down it, but again, there is a visible line demarcating the inaccessible realm of public authority. At the western end of King Charles Street are the Churchill War Rooms, which housed the government's command centre during the Second World War. A building that was so central to the fight for freedom and democracy is now at the end of a street that cannot be driven down by the public. As one approaches Westminster and Parliament Square, these restrictions become even more obvious.

The seat of democracy?

At the southern end of Whitehall is Parliament Square, the centre of British democratic power. The Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey, two of the greatest and most prominent buildings in the country, flank the grand square. Together, they stand for centuries of conflict – between Church and state, between ‘the divine right of kings’ and the will of the people to govern themselves. Many key figures of democracy surround Parliament Square, from Abraham Lincoln to Nelson Mandela, from Benjamin Disraeli to Winston Churchill.

Yet, as of November 2010, public access to the square is not permitted. It is simply fenced off. Demonstrations are not allowed within a half mile area of Parliament, and certainly not in the square. The people’s right to question their elected government, outside the home of their own democracy, is denied them.

In 2001, Brian Haw started a one-man protest on Parliament Square to highlight what he considered to be injustices in Britain’s foreign policy. A tented peace-camp soon sprang up, occupied by people exercising their democratic right to protest. But politicians elected to champion the rights of the people introduced legislation to ban the protests and close the square to the public.

In December 2010, protestors – demonstrating against government cuts to education and student fee increases – massed in Parliament Square and forced down the fences. The square was invaded and became a battlefield. The rights and wrongs of that demonstration will be debated for some time to come, but it graphically highlights the contested nature of Whitehall’s conflict landscape.

Two Whitehalls

The two ends of Whitehall present a sharp contrast. Trafalgar Square highlights military might, empire, and the justness of the British cause. Military leaders are remembered in stone and bronze for the sacrifices they made to ensure the greatness of Britain. Parliament Square stands for peace, democracy, the

right to vote, and freedom of expression. Yet free speech and the right to demonstrate are severely limited there. Democracy was fostered in Britain and exported abroad. Perhaps it is time to bring it home again.

The battle lines are drawn all the way along Whitehall. A walk along it is a journey that teaches about the costs of empire and freedom. An admiral shot down at the scene of his greatest victory. A king executed by his parliament. A grossly maligned general, charged with an almost impossible task. The memory of hundreds of thousands of men who died for their country, and hundreds of thousands of women who served it. All are represented.

From his lofty perch, half a mile to the north, Nelson can just make out Parliament Square. He has viewed this battlefield for many years, and one wonders what he and other pillars of history, remembered along the front-lines, make of Parliament Square today. The complex layers of this battlefield are, like so many others, multi-vocal and difficult to interpret. One thing is certain: this contested space, in the centre of the nation’s capital, will remain a conflict landscape for many years to come. For it represents the eternal struggle for freedom and democracy. **M**



Below A statue of Nelson Mandela, symbol of freedom, looks out over a fenced-off Parliament Square from which the people are banned. The peace village (top right) has been pushed onto the pavement. What would Churchill (right) have thought? Or Abraham Lincoln, another resident democrat?

