

Humanitarian Aid Memorial

The UK has a long and noble tradition of public support for people affected by humanitarian crises around the world, backed by world-renowned UK charities and aid organisations. Humanitarian aid workers are deployed in all kinds of conflicts and disasters across the globe - from Afghanistan to the Philippines, from Colombia to Mozambique. The work is often extremely dangerous and aid workers have all too often given their lives helping others in need. Surprisingly, there is no dedicated site in the UK - or elsewhere in the world - for relatives, friends and colleagues to gather and reflect on their loved ones' sacrifices, and to celebrate the work that the tens of thousands of humanitarian workers continue to undertake.

World Humanitarian Day – 17th August - has been designated by the United Nations (UN) as a day of commemoration of humanitarian aid workers. The date marks the anniversary of the assassination of Sergio Vieira de Mello, a notable humanitarian, and twenty-one of his colleagues at the UN offices in Baghdad in 2003. In commemoration of World Humanitarian Day in 2014, a group of volunteers organised the first event in the UK to celebrate and remember humanitarian workers – from the UK and around the world. This non-religious, international event took place within the grounds of Westminster Abbey at the Memorial for Innocent Victims of Conflict. It has continued to be held there each year while the search for a permanent site for a memorial goes on. The event has continued to grow in prominence and significance, with hundreds of individuals attending, underscoring the need to secure a dedicated site for the memorial.

In 2015 a Steering Committee of eminent UK-based humanitarians was established to create a permanent memorial to humanitarian aid workers. The Committee's first step was an international fund-raising campaign, directed principally at humanitarian organisations based in the UK and internationally, including non-governmental organisations and UN agencies, as well as humanitarian workers themselves, their families and friends. Within 12 months, the campaign succeeded in raising almost £400,000, thanks to many generous donations, including through a dedicated giving page.

The memorial is intended to recognise and remember not only those who have died trying to help people in need, but all those inspired by humanitarian ideals who continue to work hard and make personal sacrifices to help others around the world. This memorial is to be a celebration of lives well lived, rather than a traditional monument to the dead, encapsulating the best of humanitarian tradition and principles – humanity, independence and impartiality. The memorial is also intended to raise awareness of the history and practice of humanitarian work, offering insight into the successes achieved and the challenges faced in delivering life-saving assistance and support to people affected by conflicts and disasters.

The Contemporary Art Society (CAS) was appointed by the Committee to help commission a contemporary artist to design the memorial. After a rigorous shortlisting process, Michael Landy, RA was commissioned by the Committee. Born and raised in London, Michael's practice encompasses drawing, painting and installation, all of which are unified by an interest in bringing audiences into his works as participants.

Michael has developed the memorial design in collaboration with the Committee and its partners, as well as the CAS. His proposal is for a work of art that creates a space which people can walk around, through and become a part of. It comprises a circle of 15 human-scale figures linked in groups of five, with three spaces between that allow visitors to 'complete the circle'. Inside the circle, humanitarian stories and images are displayed on the figures, visually telling the story of humanitarian aid work for audiences young and old.

The search for a suitable site for the memorial has taken some time, given the requirement for an appropriate setting, including surrounding space to allow for quiet contemplation. The site needs to ensure both the visibility of the memorial and access to it for national and international visitors. It also needs to be able to host an annual commemoration on World Humanitarian Day. Having searched for two years, the Committee entered into discussions with English Heritage about the possibility of siting the memorial in the grounds of Kenwood House. The discussions have focused on the site in the Stable Field, which offers an ideal position for the memorial in terms of atmosphere, history and practicalities, including physical access. The Committee is extremely grateful for the sincere interest and support shown by English Heritage thus far for this worthy memorial and is hopeful that it can also attract support from the local community.