# Theft of First World War memorial plaques devastates Luton church community



The theft of two military memorial plaques from the churchyard of Christ Church Luton in Chatham, Kent, has sparked outrage and heartbreak within the local community. The plaques, which commemorated the sacrifices of 150 local heroes from the First World War, were stolen under the cover of darkness, leaving parishioners devastated. Jonathan Pout, the church's head gardener, discovered the crime on May 24, and church leaders have described the incident as an act of disrespect towards those who fought for freedom.

This incident is part of a wider troubling trend in the region. Over the years, instances of similar thefts have been reported, particularly targeting memorials and plaques that carry significant emotional and historical value. For instance, in May 2012, around 150 brass plaques were taken from Tonbridge Cemetery, causing significant distress to families and community members alike. The local police managed to recover the stolen items in a subsequent raid, but the emotional damage had already been done.

Reverend Andrea Leonard, who has led the church since 2015, expressed her sorrow, stating, "There were definitely tears. It's part of the church, it's part of the community, and in a way it's part of people's relatives." She emphasised that had a computer been stolen, it would have been a matter of replacement. However, the loss of the plaques, which serve as a reminder of local sacrifice, feels like desecration.

In response to this heinous crime, the church has announced a £500 reward for information leading to the recovery of the memorials. Moreover, Reverend Leonard has indicated plans to replace them with replicas made from less valuable materials, with support from local veterans' associations for fundraising efforts. "We want to see justice done, but we don't want to be vindictive," she added, reflecting the community’s strong desire for healing rather than revenge.

The troubling trend of memorial thefts across Kent raises concerns about the security of commemorative structures. In 2011, for example, a brass plaque honouring 15 World War II servicemen was stolen from a memorial in River, near Dover, again highlighting the callousness of scrap metal thieves. The widespread theft not only affects the physical representation of remembrance but also disrupts the emotional fabric of communities as they grapple with the loss of symbols deeply embedded in their shared history.

As the investigation by Kent Police continues, the community hopes for quick action and the return of their cherished memorials. The very idea that these plaques may end up melted down for scrap metal is a painful thought for many, compounded by the collective memory they used to uphold. This incident serves as a sobering reminder of the ongoing challenges faced by communities dedicated to preserving their histories and honouring those who served.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14756925/callous-crooks-Iron-thieves-police-steal-two-metal-military-memorial-plaques-churchyard.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-22045573> - In April 2013, two 500-year-old brass plaques were stolen from St Michael's Church in East Peckham, Kent. The plaques, dating back to 1539 and depicting a local couple, were inlaid in the church floor. The theft was discovered by a keyholder, and Kent Police launched an investigation. The plaques were of significant local value, though their monetary worth was modest. The community expressed deep concern over the loss of these historical artefacts.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-kent-18387298> - In May 2012, approximately 150 brass plaques were stolen from Tonbridge Cemetery in Kent. Each plaque, valued between £80 and £90, was taken from the cemetery's remembrance wall. The Metropolitan Police recovered the stolen items during a raid in south London. Two men were charged in connection with the thefts. Kent Police expressed hope to reunite the recovered plaques with the affected families.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-kent-13144170> - In May 2011, a brass plaque commemorating 15 men who died during World War II was stolen from a war memorial in River, near Dover, Kent. The plaque, engraved with the names of the deceased, was believed to have been taken by scrap metal thieves. The Reverend Andy Bawtree expressed dismay over the theft, highlighting the plaque's symbolic importance to the community.
5. <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/kent/news/plaques-stolen-from-cemetery-in--a64489/> - In May 2012, 150 brass plaques were stolen from the Welland Road cemetery in Tonbridge, Kent. The plaques, each valued around £80, were taken by thieves targeting scrap metal. Kent Police described the theft as 'heartless' and urged the public to report any information. The local council expressed deep regret and sympathy to the families affected by the loss.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-surrey-14684136> - Between August 2011 and August 2012, more than 20 bronze plaques were stolen from gravestones in the churchyard of St Matthew's Church in Ashford, Kent. Several other plaques were damaged as thieves attempted to remove them. Surrey Police launched an investigation, with Sgt Rebecca Kempster stating they would do everything possible to bring the offenders to justice.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-essex-67568556> - In November 2023, dozens of memorial plaques were stolen or vandalised at Woodside Cemetery in Benfleet, Essex. Relatives of the deceased expressed heartbreak over the loss. Castle Point Borough Council stated that the stolen plaques would be replaced free of charge. The community was deeply affected by the desecration of the memorials.