The meeting started with thanks to long standing u3a members Hilary Morrell and Alison Cruickshank, who were now standing down from their positions on the committee.  Members attention was drawn to a presentation which will take place on the 8th August on the work of Scottish Charity Air Ambulance. More details to follow.

We then had a very interesting talk given by David Mclaughlin on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), including the important role of local volunteers.   He had become a volunteer in Orkney, where there are 31 sites, marking 784 graves.  His duties cover not only inspecting the graves and reporting on the condition of the stones and the surrounding area but also cleaning the stones (only water and scrubbing allowed).  He photographs the stones and reports any maintenance issues to the Commission who employ specialist masons to ensure that the stones and their lettering is kept in good condition.  They also maintain records to assist families in finding records and resting places.

David explained the history of the CWGC from its inception in 1916 when the massive death toll of the 1st World War battles had resulted in unidentified bodies being buried in unmarked graves. Fabian Ware, Officer commanding a Red Cross ambulance unit, highlighted the need for a regulated system of recovering bodies from the battlefields, where possible identifying them, and burying them in suitable ground.

When the war ended the Commission brought together a team of architects, designers and even a botanist, to plan suitable sites of remembrance over Europe and Gallipoli. Individual headstones were used for the identified dead and a Cross of Remembrance placed in larger cemeteries. For the many whose bodies were never identified their names were engraved on memorial walls.   Sadly their work then had to encompass the 2nd World War and the further loss of soldiers, sailors and airmen all over the world.  This resulted in sites in Singapore and Egypt, as well as the more familiar ones at Loos and the Menin Gate, where so many thousands are remembered though their bodies have never been recovered.  Indeed the work of the Commission goes on as former battlefields are now developed and remains are found which are laid to rest with full military honours.

So from the smallest cemeteries, with one CWGC stone to the largest, such as the Menin Gate with its 54,000 names, the dead of world wars are remembered and respected.  Here in Orkney we have graves marking the final resting place of Norwegians and Germans, as well as British soldiers, sailors and airmen.  These well maintained memorials are still of great significance to families and friends of all nationalities.  Even those of us who walk through the cemetery at Lyness and St Ola cannot help but be moved by the CWGC stones marking so many young deaths.