



Wootton Bassett and the political spaces of remembrance and mourning

K Neil Jenkings, Nick Megoran, Rachel Woodward and Daniel Bos

School of Geography Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle NE1 7RU Email: neil.jenkings@ncl.ac.uk

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From 2007 the English village of Wootton Bassett emerged as a site to honour British military personnel killed in action. Repatriation ceremonies developed from a spontaneous act by the citizens of the town into an informal site of national respect for the armed forces. Initially cited by the media as an example to shame the country for its lack of respect for the military, it became both a space for public displays of grief and a site of political contention about British involvement in the Afghanistan war. Analysing newspaper coverage of the repatriations through Wootton Bassett, this first geographical analysis of the phenomenon describes that trajectory, its coverage by the media and the eventual return of formal control of the repatriation process to the military. Although it opened spaces for critical reflection on UK foreign policy, the Wootton Bassett phenomenon should be seen as part of a trend of the rehabilitation of the military in the aftermath of the Iraq war. The paper thus contributes to emergent debates about the militarisation of civilian space, and about the shifting nature of civil-military relations as a consequence of the two wars in which the UK has been engaged over the past decade. It concludes with a call for geographers to pay more attention to the formation and dissolution of spontaneous, immaterial and temporary sites of memory.

Key words: Wootton Bassett, repatriation, media representation, military, memorials

Introduction

Until 2007, the rural market town of Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire, England, was known historically as an infamous 'rotten borough' abolished by the Great Reform Act of 1832. Yet over the past half decade the name of the town entered into national and international consciousness because of the (initially spontaneous) public ceremonial events honouring UK military personnel killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The town sits on the A3102 road, and hearses containing the bodies of dead British military personnel necessarily passed through it on their journey from nearby RAF Lyneham, into which they were flown by military transport, to the coroner's office in Oxford prior to their release for burial. As the cortège passed through the town centre, a ritual evolved that entailed the assembling of a silent mass of people, including grieving family and friends, civilian residents of the area and beyond, and serving and former military personnel. They silently lined the town's main street, and other sections of the route the hearses took beyond the town. The hearses stopped in the town, and close relatives and friends of the departed laid

flowers or other items on them. Serving and former military personnel saluted, and regimental banners were lowered. The cortège then proceeded on its way. From the end of August 2011, repatriation flights by military transport arrived at RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire, and the repatriation ceremonies at Wootton Bassett came to an end.

These repatriation events were unique and distinct in terms of British ceremonial traditions honouring those killed on active military service. Both civilian and military in origin, organisation and execution, they combined visual spectacle and organic social movement. They were also significant political events. Commentaries and activities that have been prompted by the repatriations – from the hosting of the BBC's flagship current affairs programme *Question Time* in the town to the conferral of the title 'Royal' to Wootton Bassett by the British monarch – together with the repatriations themselves, can be seen as indicative of a wider emergent sensibility around commemoration of the war dead. This paper draws on print media commentaries about the repatriations to look at them as events suggestive of a wider politics than simply

their presentation as spontaneous civic markings of respect for dead military personnel and solidarity with the bereaved would initially suggest. Specifically, we are interested in what a new spatiality of remembrance, brought into being through the repatriations, says about contemporary militarism. Although probably unintended as a consequence by those involved in the Wootton Bassett ceremonies, the repatriations provided a space for both overt political responses to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan¹ and a more subtle inculcation of support for British armed forces. This paper, one of the first academic studies of the Wootton Bassett phenomenon, contributes to emergent debates about the militarisation of civilian space and the shifting nature of civil–military relations as a consequence of the two wars in which the UK has been engaged over the past decade.

Sites of remembrance and spaces of militarism

The repatriation to the UK of military personnel killed overseas in British armed forces combat operations is a relatively recent phenomenon. Soldiers would customarily be buried where they died, and although the recording of the location of death was a feature of nineteenthcentury armies, the repatriation of the bodies of all but the most senior commanding officers was not. This practice continued with the First World War, producing vast cemeteries established on the former battlefields of the Western Front by the Imperial (subsequently Commonwealth) War Graves Commission (CWGC) (see Mosse 1990; Winter 1995; Heffernan 1995; Morris 1997). The practice of in situ burial continued until as recently as 1982, when British soldiers killed during the Falklands/ Malvinas war were buried on the islands. In tandem were the construction of memorials to the dead in their places of origin (Moriarty 1997), and a national monument in the form of Lutyens' Cenotaph in central London. These sites of remembrance have multiple and temporally shifting meanings; what is clear to most commentators looking back now to the start of the twentieth century are the specific functions performed by the practices and materialities of remembrance in the post-First World War British context.

In a marked change in policy, the bodies of those killed in action since the 1991 Gulf War have been repatriated for burial, most commonly with military honours, by their families. This is possible because of the availability of suitable transportation from combat zones, for what are, relatively speaking, smaller numbers, and necessary because the sites of conflict are foreign sovereign territories where there is uncertainty over the long-term care of British war graves. Also of great significance to the emergence of the Wootton Bassett phenomenon is the change

in public cultural understandings of the soldier. Consequent on a range of factors, including the changing technological nature of warfare, the rise of the idea of low-casualty conflict, the mass out-sourcing or privatisation to non-state actors of military functions and changing public sensibilities about the visibility and display of grief and loss, we see the personalisation and domestication of the soldier (King 2010). King traces this personalisation and domestication and identifies what he terms a 'new lapidary convention' around the soldier in the public imagination. If we are to fully understand the Wootton Bassett phenomenon, then, we have to understand it not only as a consequence of individual motivations enabled by a range of practicalities and circumstances (the use of a specific RAF base for incoming repatriation flights, an active British Legion membership in the town, the practice of repatriation), but also for what it says about the wider civic understandings of military action and military organisations as they evolve around shifting representations and meanings of the soldier. Wootton Bassett is of interest not only as another (temporally variable) space of death, mourning and remembrance (see Maddrell and Sidaway 2010), but also as a public space where contemporary engagements with militarism and the meanings of war are negotiated (see also Walklate et al. 2011). So whilst we can read the Wootton Bassett ceremonies as a continuation of older, established forms of remembrance where mute respect for personal sacrifice is foregrounded in a context of visible, public sympathy for the families and friends of the bereaved, we must also ask what these events, taken together, say about militarisation.

In this paper, we work with an understanding of militarism and militarisation that sees this as a process through which military objectives and priorities extend into civilian life (Enloe 2000; Woodward 2004 2005; Kuus 2008; Bernazolli and Flint 2009). This process is social, in that it involves people and their understandings of and reactions to military activities and institutions, and it is inherently spatial, in that this process occurs in specific places. Militarisation is often seen as an intentional, sustained and deliberate practice on the part of state military institutions and wider actors supportive of state objectives. The spectacles and practices of Remembrance Sunday on or around the 11 November every year in the UK would be a case in point. But militarism is a process that also entails non-state actors behaving in non-orchestrated ways, and the Wootton Bassett repatriation ceremonies provide a very clear window onto this. They illuminate militarism precisely because of their temporary nature and because of their seeming spontaneity. As a spontaneous memorial space (Azaryahu 1996), they provoke questions distinct to those posed by more permanent or obviously stateorganised military memorials and memorialisation practices. Specifically, we focus in this paper on the space these

ceremonies opened up for more overt political responses to the wars, and the limits to this criticism.

In using the Wootton Bassett phenomenon to consider militarism, we draw exclusively on textual print media commentaries about the repatriations and a selection of events around the repatriations. We chose print media sources for two deliberate reasons. First, this source, accessed through the Lexis-Nexis database, was the most readily accessible source for the research team, with the widest and most reliable coverage. Second, by looking at print media, we can trace the emergence of the Wootton Bassett story over a specified period that could be matched against other sources of information, such as Ministry of Defence press releases on the levels of military fatalities over time.

Print media coverage and the emergence of the Wootton Bassett phenomenon

National media accounts have retrospectively constructed the repatriation events as somehow naturally emergent, contingent on: British Legion members meeting on a day when a hearse happened to be passing through the town and noticing the cortège; the encouragement of the practice through coordination between civic leaders and traffic management authorities; and the gradual consolidation of a set of individual actions into a shared social event that includes not just the tribute within the town itself, but also the lining of the route from RAF Lyneham to Oxford (Jardine and Savill 2009).

The phenomenon started in April 2007 with the closure of the runways at RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire for resurfacing and the relocation of repatriation flights to RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire. The first repatriation event through the town on 13 April 2007 was reported as a minor element of a broader repatriation process involving reception of the bodies of four British personnel killed in Iraq. 'People in the nearby town of Wootton Bassett stood in silence as the convoy passed by' (Russell 2007); they 'lined the streets in silence to pay their respects' (Kelly 2007). A *Swindon Advertiser* reporter noted that around 40 people had gathered at the town's war memorial to pay their respects as the hearses passed by, with the local police facilitating by stopping traffic (Anonymous 2007).

It appears that what started as a spontaneous gesture became regularised and normalised over the following year, but national coverage was absent until April 2008 when *The Mail on Sunday* published an article headlined 'Shameful'. This expressed dismay and outrage at repatriation convoys being caught up in traffic jams and being denied a police escort within the policing jurisdiction of Thames Valley police, in contrast to the escort provided by the Wiltshire police force (Almond 2008). A negative contrast was drawn with the practices that had emerged in Canada, where repatriated bodies were driven along roads cleared of traffic with police escorts and lined by police officers and respectful members of the public (Almond 2008; see also Managhan 2012). An editorial comment noted that in the UK 'The country would mourn them properly, if only it were given the chance, as the citizens of Wootton Bassett have clearly shown' (Anonymous 2008).

It is unclear from media commentaries, and is an empirical question worth investigating in its own right, how, exactly, the actions of a few individuals became a mass public spectacle. In the 3 years from 2007, the ceremonies developed from a minor act by a small group of exemplary citizens, to well organised and nationally recognised events. Television news film crews and press photographers covered subsequent repatriations, cementing the status of the events as semi-official displays facilitated by the necessary civic and policing authorities, local businesses and social groups. The event had become, by 2011, something of a spectacle, regularly reported as a news item on television and in print media. Inevitably, because this is about war and death and making sense of loss, other political agendas would become imposed upon it.

Media attention on the repatriations has, however, been uneven. Using Lexis-Nexis, Figure 1 shows the frequency of articles covering the repatriations over a 2-year period from April 2008. Table 1 shows the total of such articles for each newspaper.

Our primary focus has been on national broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. The term 'Wootton Bassett' was used to search the database for the period 1 January 2006 to 31 March 2010, disregarding any newspaper articles unrelated to the repatriations. A total of 655 items were collected, dated and coded by emergent themes.

As Figure 1 shows, the Wootton Bassett repatriations received sporadic news coverage until July 2009, following the deaths of eight soldiers in a 24-hour period in Afghanistan. Prior to this, whilst the town is mentioned as part of reports of repatriation from Afghanistan or Iraq, Wootton Bassett was not the focus. After July 2009, the town receives much greater news coverage, reflecting the increase in the fatalities from Afghanistan, and reaches a peak in January 2010.

The politicisation of space

In December 2009, BBC television decided to broadcast its flagship current affairs discussion show, *Question Time*, from Wootton Bassett itself. Before the broadcast, the town's mayor, Steve Bucknell, urged the show's makers not to focus simply on the war. As *The Guardian* elaborated, 'Residents and civic leaders have worked to keep debate about the rights and wrongs of the war away from the Wiltshire town' (Morris 2009a). However, as

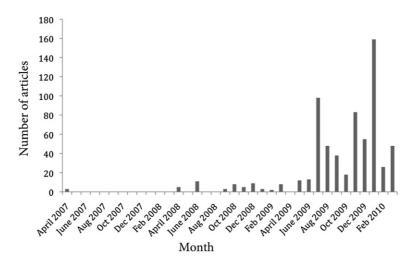


Figure 1 Graph detailing the frequency distribution of articles accessed concerning the military repatriations of Wootton Bassett between April 2007 and March 2010

Table 1 Number of articles accessed per newspaper

Newspaper	Number of articles
Tabloid	
The Daily Mirror	88
Sunday Mirror	9
The Sun	126
News of the World	15
The Daily Star	67
Sunday Star	2
Daily Mail	51
Mail on Sunday	9
The Express	69
The Sunday Express	12
Broadsheet	
The Guardian	41
The Observer	6
The Times	49
The Sunday Times	18
The Independent	32
The Independent on Sunday	2
The Daily Telegraph	52
The Sunday Telegraph	7
Total	655

events in the following weeks and months demonstrated, these efforts were in vain.

In January 2010, Anjem Choudary sparked outrage by announcing that his radical group 'Islam4UK' would parade through Wootton Bassett with 'symbolic coffins' in memory of the Muslim civilians 'murdered by merciless' coalition forces. *The Daily Mail* reported that 'the firebrand cleric' aimed to cause 'maximum offence' by comparing 'fallen British heroes to Nazi stormtroopers and the

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September 11 and July 7 terrorists' (Drury and Dolan 2010). The story was covered widely. Rather than using the controversy to demonise Islam, most papers depicted Choudray's group as a 'small bunch of extremists, bigots and opportunists' with little support amongst British Muslims (Mitchell 2010). The Times reported that the local Wiltshire Islamic Centre described Choudray's previous group, the now banned al-Muhajiroun, as 'a deviant sect', and stated that 'We unreservedly condemn this march and call on the organisers to not go ahead with it' in the interests of Muslims and the people of Wootton Bassett (O'Neil 2010). Choudray apparently claimed that his goal was to initiate 'an open and frank dialogue regarding the reality of this war' (Anonymous 2010). The march never went ahead - it was doubtful if Choudray commanded enough supporters even to undertake it. Although he was accused of ' "hijacking" the town for political purposes' (Drury and Dolan 2010), this extremely marginal figure in British Islam was given the national media spotlight precisely by threatening to site his march in a space that had already been politicised through national media coverage of the repatriations.

Choudray was the only reported political actor who expressed the desire to use Wootton Bassett as a site to demonstrate against the Afghanistan war. However, the spectacle of repatriations occasioned many prominent visits. At the end of January 2010, and hours after the people of Wootton Bassett had congregated to mourn the repatriation of two more soldiers, *The Daily Telegraph* reported the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall visiting the town 'to thank the people of Wootton Bassett for their unstinting support of the Armed Forces over the past two years' (Farmer 2010). At the other end of the social spectrum, in a fundraising event for the charity 'Afghan Heores', 15,000 bikers descended on the town on Mothers' Day. The *Daily Star* quoted one biker as saying 'It's crucial we show our support for all our soldiers in Afghanistan' (Hall 2010). The event was widely covered by the media, with Mayor Steve Bucknell telling the *Daily Star* that 'Too many times the town has had to stand still in silence but today is all about noise and movement' (Hall 2010).

If the monarchy and the bikers were welcome in Wootton Bassett but Islam4UK was not, where did politicians stand? Commenting on the presence of right-wing British National Party leader, Nick Griffin, at a repatriation, the Daily Mail lamented that 'the ceaseless presence of television cameras' has attracted 'the worst kind of opportunists' and turned a 'solemn homecoming' into 'a freak show' (Samuel 2009). There was disagreement, however, about whether the presence of mainstream parliamentarians should be regarded as 'proper respect' or 'cynical opportunism'. The Daily Telegraph lambasted Prime Minister Gordon Brown for not attending a repatriation ceremony, suggesting he wouldn't because he feared that the ceremony 'smacks of failure, of international policy gone wrong' (Moir 2008). More balanced coverage recognised the dilemma for politicians facing charges of callousness if they did not attend, or opportunism if they did. The Times claimed that Wootton Bassett itself 'has urged Gordon Brown and other politicians to stay away from its tributes' to prevent the repatriations being politicised (Brown 2009). On a similar note, and without a hint of irony, The Guardian was amongst many newspapers that sent a journalist to the repatriation ceremonies to report on concerns that they had been 'hijacked by the media and turned into something quite different' (Morris 2009b).

However, by the time of widespread coverage of the repatriations of 15 soldiers killed in Afghanistan in 10 days in July 2009, such attempts to prevent the ceremonies - and the town itself - being 'politicised' were futile. Indeed, 'Wootton Bassett' had become a metonym for the human cost of the UK government's Afghanistan policy. For critics, the deaths represented by the ceremonies were self-evidently damning indictments of the government's war conduct and strategy. 'What has Brown to say as the coffins roll through Wootton Bassett? Nothing. What is his strategy? We don't know', thundered The Sun (Shanahan 2009). For the pro-war but anti-government Daily Telegraph, Wootton Bassett was evidence of Brown's failure to support the troops morally and materially. In an opinion piece on the deaths of six soldiers over previous days, Liz Hunt (2010) wrote that

Soon, the inhabitants of Wootton Bassett will be lining the streets once more . . . Gordon Brown did not take us into this war; but what is increasingly evident is that his actions

as Chancellor and as Prime Minister mean that he cannot dodge the burden of blame.

As it launched its 'Justice for the Wounded' campaign to improve the treatment of Armed Forces personnel, the paper sent a reporter to Wootton Bassett to get endorsements from people paying their respects at a repatriation ceremony (Kirkup *et al.* 2009).

Whether the Wootton Bassett phenomenon itself helped or hindered public support of the war and the image of the Armed Forces was a moot point in print media commentary. The Times described Wootton Bassett as the town that led the way in reawakening Britain's cooled 'love affair with the Forces' (Pavia 2009). Alternatively, the very spectacle of solemn public grief could have the opposite effect, and many articles on repatriations reported bereaved families' condemnations of the government and the war. Typical here was The Times' reporting that 'Anne Smith, grandmother of one of the dead soldiers, said he died for no reason' (Low 2009). In contrast, Seumas Milne in The Guardian opined that although the public was now largely opposed to the war, the 'sanitised commemoration' of Wootton Bassett went hand-in-hand with 'gung-ho embedded dispatches from the frontline' and cross-party support for the Afghanistan operation, which closed down debate and obscured opposition to the war (Milne 2010).

As we saw above, Wootton Bassett's mayor, Steve Bucknell, requested that the BBC Question Time broadcast from the town steer clear of the politics of the war, 'It is wrong to use what happens here for political ends', he opined (Morris 2009b). Bucknell's definition of 'political' rested upon a distinction between those who simply and solemnly honoured the dead, and those who sought to exploit the repatriations for their own ends. This distinction was flawed, because when transmitted to 'the nation' through television and newspaper coverage, the Wootton Bassett phenomenon was produced as a political event. Winter (1995, 103-4) argues that the Cenotaph functioned so well as a commemoration because its essential indeterminacy (Sir Edwin Lutyens' design was devoid of any hint of celebration, patriotism, or religion) allowed mourners to ascribe to it their own feelings and thoughts, whether of private grief, patriotism or pacifism. In contrast, Bushaway stresses the essentially conservative nature of World War I remembrance as 'removing [the War] from the sphere of normal social and political debate' (1992, 160). Gregory faults Bushaway for reliance on elite language in shaping consciousness, arguing that remembrance ceremonies did allow the preservation and display of hidden memories of the war, preserved at local level, which are often at odds with the official interpretation (Gregory 1994, 6). Likewise, we suggest, the Wootton Bassett repatriations honoured the dead without

speeches, claims or slogans, allowing mourners, onlookers and commentators to imbue them with their divergent meanings: personal grief, respect for the military, anger at government underfunding of the Forces, and opposition to or support of UK foreign policy. Yet as public mourning is always political, the failure of the town's attempt to control the meanings attached to the repatriations was inevitable.

Conclusion: Wootton Bassett and the legitimisation of war

The seemingly organic development in Wootton Bassett of a ritual of repatriation of the bodies of British military personnel killed in action, can be read as indicative of a number of different issues. It highlights aspects of contemporary militarisation of civilian space, and the shifting nature of civil-military relations as a consequence of the two wars in which the UK has been engaged over the past decade. It shows how sites of memory and mourning may be temporally and spatially transient, an exemplar of the spontaneous formation of memorial spaces identified by Azaryahu (1996). It also demonstrates the indeterminacy of commemoration, as different actors used the repatriations to reflect critically on UK foreign policy and its prosecution by the Labour government.

The repatriation rituals were also deeply political acts, in that they provoked a range of responses across a spectrum from outright condemnation of the military engagements that caused the fatalities through to 'apolitical' positions that sought to deny explicit recognition that the repatriations could be understood in those terms. Through this, a space was opened up for some specific arguments and closed to others. This in turn raises questions about the extent to which the repatriation events served - however unintentionally by those participating – as a legitimisation of the armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Managhan (2012) argues of similar rituals around the repatriation of Canadian war dead along a route that came to be known as the 'Highway of Heroes', repatriations interpreted the war deaths as noble sacrifices. It also raises challenging questions for how we develop a social understanding of the soldier as a person whose value as a human being can be recognised, whilst being able also to critique the ways in which the figure of the soldier becomes used for specific, legitimising ends (Woodward and Jenkings 2012, Woodward, Winter and Jenkings 2009, see also Chesterton 2011).

Wootton Bassett could also be considered in the context of government anxieties about national recognition of the armed forces. In 2008 a government-commissioned *Report of Inquiry into National Recognition for our Armed Forces* was published. The intention of the study was 'to identify ways of encouraging greater understanding and apprecia-

tion of the armed forces by the British public' (Davies et al. 2008, 28). In compiling the report, its authors visited Canada and wrote that they were impressed at the honouring of dead soldiers in repatriation ceremonies along the 'Highway of Heroes'. The report makes no mention of the issue of repatriation in the UK, and it seems likely that the report had been completed prior to the beginning of national news coverage of the Wootton Bassett ceremonies. Nonetheless, the political honouring of Wootton Bassett accords to the spirit and tenor of the report. The emergence of the Wootton Bassett phenomenon may have been spontaneous, but it occurred at a time when the government and military were deliberately attempting to 'reconnect' the military with the public in the wake of the unpopular Iraq war. It developed alongside, and cohered with the logic of the Help For Heroes campaign. This charity was founded in 2007 with support from the Ministry of Defence and senior military figures to support service personnel wounded in recent wars. However, as this research shows, it is perilously difficult to control the meaning of commemoration ceremonies and attach a single political meaning to them.

At the same time, however, we note the essentially conservative nature of the debates around the Wootton Bassett phenomenon. Critical reflections were limited to specific opposition to the Afghanistan war and its prosecution, rather than a thoroughgoing anti-war/pacifist position. Commemoration may unwittingly enable multiple readings of a military campaign, but in this case the range was nonetheless limited. Overall, we contend that the Wootton Bassett phenomenon should still be seen as part of a trend of the rehabilitation of the military in the aftermath of the Iraq war, and the legitimisation of the Afghanistan war. This raises important questions for the anti-war movement about how such processes can be resisted: questions that geographers could do well to attend to as part of an emerging interest in 'peace' (Megoran 2011).

The repatriations also raise questions about what Walklate et al. term the 'disquieting and uncomfortable sites of morbid engagement' and of dark tourism that the events became (2011, 160). Wootton Bassett was initially used by the Daily Mail as an example to shame the police, the Government and the nation for their lack of respect for their soldiers killed in action. The resulting media coverage transformed repatriation at Wootton Bassett to the point of growing unease, including on the part of town citizens themselves, at what The Times termed 'grief tourism'. Indeed, even the military had been cautious at the increased public participation at such events. Thus Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Fry, former head of British forces in Iraq, commented that some of the public support for Remembrance commemorations is 'pretty mawkish'. Michael Clarke, Director of the Royal United Services Institute, agreed, and was quoted as saying that the

Wootton Bassett phenomenon is 'not altogether helpful to the Forces' (Coghlan 2010). The *Daily Mirror* has labelled it 'A Diana-style tear-fest' (Reade 2010) that perhaps got out of hand and spiralled beyond what was intended or useful.

The contestation over the meaning of Wootton Bassett ceremonies led to increasing discomfort about their form and meaning amongst townspeople, the military and commentators. But to change or terminate them would itself have been fraught with difficulty. This impasse was circumvented with the announcement of the government's decision in 2010 to close RAF Lyneham as part of defence budget cuts. Repatriations would now return to RAF Brize Norton, with the cortege taking a planned route where recognition events would be more formal and, in effect, more obviously directed by the military and the state. As BBC news reports noted,

The RAF is constructing a repatriation centre at Brize Norton and Norton Way will be the focus for people to pay their respects, with temporary road closures made available. (BBC 2011a)

Meanwhile, in March 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that in recognition of its role in honouring British war dead, Wootton Bassett would henceforth be officially known as 'Royal Wootton Bassett' (BBC 2011b), the first town to be honoured with the title of 'Royal' in over a century.

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Note

1 At the time of writing, British armed forces are still deployed in Afghanistan as part of the NATO ISAF mission there. British armed forces withdrew from Iraq in 2009.

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