

## **The GCR War Memorial** **by Ken Grainger**

The Great Central Railway Society is proud to have been instrumental in the restoration of the Great Central Railway's memorial to its Great War dead. 10,190 Great Central Railwaymen – 30% of the workforce – answered the call to arms, of whom 1,304 made the supreme sacrifice.

The Great Central's memorial to its war dead was unveiled at the head of Sheffield Victoria Station Approach, alongside the Royal Victoria Station Hotel, by Field Marshal Earl Haig on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1922. As first erected, the memorial comprised nine columns of the names of the dead, inscribed on tablets of French Marble, within a classical portico. Regrettably, within a mere two years those French Marble plaques were crumbling alarmingly, to the extent that some names had already become illegible. Happily, the London and North Eastern Railway grasped the nettle and in 1925 replaced the decaying French Marble tablets with Kupron Bronze plaques on which the names of the fallen were embossed. So the memorial stood until 1938 and each November 11<sup>th</sup> Armistice Day was marked by a Commemoration ceremony with the memorial garlanded with poppies.

In 1938, the LNER decided to give Sheffield Victoria a long overdue facelift. Amongst other improvements, an enlarged booking hall was provided, extending out into the forecourt and incorporating the formerly free-standing memorial as its eastern wall, and there it remained until Sheffield Victoria's closure in 1970.

In the piecemeal demolition of the station which followed closure, the memorial could have been and very nearly was lost. The numbers of people who had known and loved those long-dead men was steadily decreasing, but fortunately there were still enough who cared to have the memorial plaques re-erected under the adjacent Wicker Arch, where it was rededicated in November, 1971.

At least it had been saved, but with the deteriorating status of the once-fashionable Wicker, the memorial suffered increasingly from neglect and vandalism. Various plans were put forward for alternative sites, but none were ideal until the owners of the Royal Victoria Holiday Inn, the one-time railway-owned Victoria Station Hotel, offered the memorial a permanent home, virtually on its original site. With the whole-hearted support of the Hotel, the generous backing of sponsors and a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Great Central Railway Society organised the rescue of the memorial plaques from the Wicker, and their eventual rededication on Remembrance Day, 2003, once more facing down the Victoria Station Approach, only yards from where they had first been erected eighty years before.

When Field Marshal Earl Haig first unveiled the memorial in 1922, he looked forward to the time when grieving for the fallen could be replaced by pride and gratitude for their sacrifice. Determined that the fallen should not be allowed to slip into anonymity and that the memorial should not become a mere list of names, the Great Central Railway Society has painstakingly traced each one of them. That research has resulted in a Roll of Honour which will preserve that pride and gratitude for the sacrifice of brave men - Great Central Railwaymen. This Roll of Honour can be viewed in the Royal Victoria Holiday Inn.

