

## Battlefield Tour 2007

### THE BATTLES OF MESSINES & THIRD YPRES 1917

We left 'Branch HQ' at Pimperne around 0700 hours on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> September and after a pick-up at Salisbury made good time to Fleet Services (M3). Here the last party members joined and there was an opportunity for our travelling gannets to enjoy a full English breakfast. Once through the Channel Tunnel we soon arrived at the first stop on our itinerary, the hill-top town of Cassel.

Three major battles were fought for the town prior to 1914 - in 1071, 1328 and 1677. During the First World War, Cassel provided the HQ at different times for Sir John French, Foch and Plumer. The town was the scene of a stand by units of the BEF's 145 Brigade in 1940, commemorated by memorials to the Gloucestershire Regiment and the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in the Grand Place.

A magnificent panorama is visible from the Jardin Public - on a clear day the view takes in Mont Kemmel, Mont des Cats, Messines and Vimy Ridge. There is a fine equestrian statue of Marechal Foch, a copy of which stands near Victoria Station in London. The building that was British Second Army HQ from 1916-1918 is now boarded up. Exiting from the gardens we passed through the Porte d'Aire - the background used in Orpen's painting 'The Household Brigade Passing to the Ypres Salient'.

We crossed in to Belgium and headed for Poperinghe and our next halt at Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, the second largest British cemetery in Flanders. The cemetery was started by the French Army in 1914 and was in use through to 1920. A casualty clearing station was set up at the adjacent Remi Farm. Burials include over 9,900 British, Commonwealth and Chinese, 658 French, 223 German and the only 3 United States servicemen's graves in the Ypres Salient.

A brief halt was made at La Clytte Military Cemetery to complete some research for an absent Branch member before we pressed on to the Novotel Ieper Centrum in Ypres. The hotel is ideally situated in St. Jacobsstraat, less than 10 minutes walk from the Menin Gate and the bars and restaurants in the Grote Markt.

A fine sunny start to Saturday saw us leave town through the Menin Gate heading southeast towards Bailleul. After a brief pause at the American 27<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> Divisions Memorial - who fought in this area in August / September 1918 - we drove along what was known as York Road to Kemmel. A 500 metre ascent took us to the Café Belvedere on Mont Kemmel.

The previous building on the site was used as an observation post until it was destroyed in 1918. Here Will Townend provided a briefing about mining, artillery deployment and infantry tactics at the Battle of Messines.

Our next stop was at Ridge Wood Cemetery, which now stands adjacent to what in June 1917 was Gordon Farm. The farm was the location for the HQ 150 Brigade RFA and Will Townend described the brigade's role in supporting the assault on the Bayernwald position – our next stop.

The site known as the Bayernwald Redoubt (Bois 40 to the French and Croonaert Wood to the British) was captured from the French by Bavarian troops in 1914. The Germans turned it into an observation post and strongpoint with trenches, machine guns and bunkers. It was also the starting point for a German mine known as 'Bertha'. It was captured by 19<sup>th</sup> (Western) Division on the opening day of the Messines action. Lengths of reconstructed trenches connect surviving bunkers and the Bertha mineshaft.

Our route then took us through Wijtschate ("Whitesheet") to the site of Lone Tree Crater, the remains of one of 24 separate mine charges laid from 13 main shafts and tunnels originally planned in preparation for the Battle of Messines. This particular crater was formed by the explosion of 91,000 lbs of ammonal, largest charge of the 19 blown on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1917 and is now filled with water. The site was purchased by Lord Wakefield (Castrol Oil) for Toc H in 1930, and is now known as Spanbroekmolen Pool of Peace. The pool is 129 metres broad and 27 metres deep. The remains of one of the German bunkers targeted may still be seen. The nearby cemetery is known as Lone Tree Cemetery.

We passed the crater of another mine – Peckham Farm – before going through Mesen (Messines) en route for Ploegsteert and lunch "by own arrangements". Some of our party resorted to the hostelry opposite Ploegsteert Memorial whilst others had refreshments purchased that morning in Ypres.

There was time to explore Hyde Park Corner (Royal Berks) Cemetery and the Memorial set in Berks Cemetery Extension across the road. Amongst those buried or commemorated at these sites are miners involved in the Messines operations, a 16 and a 17 year old and a member of the Huntley and Palmer biscuit family.

We returned towards Mesen to visit the Island of Ireland Peace Park and Tower. This site commemorates all Irishmen who died in the First World War and was inaugurated in 1998 in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II, President Mary McAleese of the Irish Republic and the Belgian King Albert II. The location was selected because it was in the Messines battle that the Unionist 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division and the Nationalist 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish)

Division fought side by side. An appropriate place for Will Townend to relate the story of the Christmas Truce in 1914.

A short walk from the Peace Park took us to the New Zealand Division Memorial on Messines Ridge overlooking the Douave valley. Our party reported no casualties despite the path skirting a paintballing area with activities in progress!

We had one more stop to make before returning to Ypres. This was at Hill 60, the scene of continuous heavy fighting and mining activity from 1914 onwards. Visits were made to the memorials to the Queen Victoria's Rifles, 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Tunnelling Company and 14<sup>th</sup> (Light) Division. One of our group described how Sgt. John Carmichael, 9<sup>th</sup> North Staffords, won the VC nearby on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1917 by placing his helmet on a live grenade and standing on it to protect his comrades from the explosion.

Back in Ypres our final halt was at Ypres Reservoir Cemetery. This was originally known as Ypres Prison Cemetery because of the nearby civil jail but was renamed to avoid relatives thinking those interred had been in prison. The 2613 burials here include 16 soldiers of the 6th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, who were billeted in the cathedral vaults of the cathedral and died on 12 August 1915 when a shell from the "Ypres Express" firing from Houthulst Forest hit the cathedral. Other burials here include 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Hugh Cholmeley, 1<sup>st</sup> Grenadier Guards whose headstone also commemorates his brother Lt. Harry Cholmeley, killed at Beaumont Hamel on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916. The latter's name also appears on the Thiepval Memorial. Another Somme casualty from 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 is actually buried here. Maj. J.L. Knott was killed at Fricourt and originally buried on the Somme. At the request of his parents his body was brought to Ypres and now lies alongside his brother Capt. H.B. Knott, 9<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers, who died in the Salient on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

An absorbing day in warm sunshine followed by another relaxed evening at one of the restaurants in Grote Markt!

Sunday saw our party heading out in bright sunshine for Frenzenberg Ridge, halting first at Railway Wood. Here we heard about the attack by 8<sup>th</sup> Division on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 from Will Townend. The R.E. Grave Memorial here commemorates 12 men from, or attached to, 177 Tunnelling Company who died underground between November 1915 and August 1917 and whose bodies were not recovered. Nearby is a memorial to the Liverpool Scottish - 10<sup>th</sup> Bn Kings (Liverpool) Regiment - who suffered heavy casualties here on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1915.

We drove on through St. Julien passing the Canadian Brooding Soldier Memorial at Vancouver Corner to arrive at the Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof near Langemarck.

This is the only remaining German cemetery in the Salient and has over 44,000 burials. Almost 25,000 are buried in a mass grave – the Kameradengrab – including, it is believed, two British soldiers. The site was visited by Adolf Hitler during his tour of the old Western Front in 1940, but it is perhaps best known today for Emil Krieger’s statue of the four mourning comrades which stands at the back of the cemetery.

Will Townend described the capture of Langemarck by 29<sup>th</sup> Division on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1917 before we moved off for Polygon Wood.

Mike Adams was next in the chair when we alighted at Black Watch Corner. He related the actions of Australian troops at Nonnenboschen and Polygon Wood in 1917. We walked through Polygon Wood to Buttes New British Cemetery, which is also the site of the memorial which commemorates 378 soldiers of the New Zealand Division who died in the Polygon Wood sector between September 1917 and May 1918, and have no known grave. A memorial to the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division stands on the old shooting butt.

There are 451 identified servicemen buried here including 35 commemorated by special memorials because their grave has been lost. There are 1,677 unidentified burials.

Nearby Polygon Wood Cemetery was also visited. This is a former front-line cemetery used between August 1917 and April 1918, and again in September 1918. It now contains 107 Commonwealth burials including 60 New Zealanders. Unidentified casualties account for 19 burials and there is also one German grave.

Our coach picked us up at the cemetery to return to Ypres and lunch “by own arrangements.”

After lunch we headed for the scene of the later stages of Third Ypres. We halted in the Nieuwe Beek valley for Mike Adams to describe the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division’s attack towards Tyne Cot on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1917. Tyne Cot Cemetery, clearly visible from our standpoint, was our next objective.

Tyne Cot Cemetery is the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world in terms of burials. There are 11,962 servicemen buried or commemorated – 8,374 of the burials are unidentified, but there are over 80 special memorials to casualties known or believed to be among them. Other special memorials commemorate 20 men whose graves were destroyed by shell fire. There are 4 German burials, only 1 being identified.

The Tyne Cot Memorial forms the north-eastern boundary of the cemetery. It commemorates nearly 35,000 servicemen from the United Kingdom and New Zealand who died in the Ypres Salient after 16 August 1917 and whose graves are not known.

The memorial stands close to the farthest point in Belgium reached by Commonwealth forces in the First World War until the final advance to victory in 1918.

Mike Adams continued the story of the fighting in October / November 1917 and there was time to visit the recently opened Visitor Centre and the cemetery before we drove off to the village of Passchendaele itself. From here we took a circuitous route back to Ypres taking in Reutel (where 2<sup>nd</sup> Wiltshire Regiment were forced to surrender in October 1914) and Gheluveld, the scene of a critical counterattack by 2<sup>nd</sup> Worcestershire Regiment on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1914.

The Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate on the evening saw a poppy wreath laid on behalf of the Branch.

An early departure (0700 hours) was made on Monday under cloud with occasional rain. Our first call was Vlamertinghe Military Cemetery. This has 1,175 First World War burials including Capt. Francis Grenfell who was awarded the VC for actions at Andregnies during the retreat from Mons in 1914. The cemetery is remarkable for the care with which men of the same unit were buried side by side if they died around the same time. Nearly a quarter of the graves hold soldiers from Lancashire Territorial units dating from 1917.

Brandhoek New Military Cemetery was our next stop, situated down a path between two houses. Amongst the 530 Commonwealth and 28 German soldiers buried here is double VC winner Capt. Noel Chavasse, RAMC. Chavasse was the medical officer with 10<sup>th</sup> Kings (Liverpool) Regiment - the Liverpool Scottish.

We now proceeded to Poperinghe for some "free time". Some of the party made their way to Talbot House, whilst others visited the Town Hall with the condemned cells and execution post. No doubt a few also found an open café!

After a stop at Calais for "duty frees" we were back in the UK before 1300 hours local time. A refreshment stop was made at Clackett Lane Services (M25) and after drop-offs at Fleet Services and Salisbury we were back at Pimperne before 1800 hours.

Our thanks to Martin and Judy Willoughby for organizing a splendidly successful tour and to Will Townend (a notable tour-de-force!) and Mike Adams for their invaluable input.

**Rod Arnold**