

WESSEX BRANCH WESTERN FRONT ASSOCIATION
BATTLEFIELD TOUR 4th – 7th SEPTEMBER 2009

THE 1915 BATTLES

What an incredible and full few days!

Our journey from a dark and drizzly Pimperne to a bright and sunny Folkestone was amazingly easy and quick, as was the trip through the Tunnel and the drive south to Vimy Ridge.



Here we were given a guided tour of the reconstructed trench system and some of the tunnels used by the Canadians. These tours were carried out by French Canadian students who had applied to spend four months acting as guides as part of a programme run by their Government to advance the awareness of Canadian involvement in the First World War.



After this and before heading into Arras, our base for the weekend, we drove to the top of the ridge near to the Vimy Memorial and looked down over the flatness of the Loos battlefield; this was the area that we would explore in greater depth over the coming days.



Saturday dawned bright and sunny and our first stop for the day was the Neuve Chapelle Indian Memorial at the Port Arthur Crossroads; a circular enclosure on which are inscribed the names of some 4,700 soldiers of the Indian Army. Also commemorated are Indian soldiers from other cemeteries

in Europe as well as the Second World War; the outside walls still show the scars of that conflict.



Nearby was the Portuguese Military Cemetery, the burial place of soldiers from the Portuguese Army killed in the German Lys Offensive of 1918

From here we progressed to Rue du Bacquerot No.1 Cemetery at Laventie, negotiating a farmer's yard to reach the cemetery, which had been built on either side of a paved farm track. Here we found Muslim, Hindu and Sikh graves lying close to their Christian comrades. Our Chairman, Martin Willoughby, a former tank man, stood in admirably for our branch artillery expert, Will Townend, who unfortunately had been unable to join us, and spoke about artillery actions in the surrounding area.



A drive around the outskirts of Neuve Chapelle village took us past the Moated Grange (Ferme Vanbesien), the site of the Orchard, to Layes Brook, Layes Bridge and Signpost Lane. Here our other two military 'experts' for the trip, Mike 'Iddy' Adams and Nigel Plumb, described the fighting in and around the village. On the way up to visit Aubers Ridge British Cemetery we were able to identify several of the remaining bunkers built in the area by the Germans as a defence line. Following this it was back into La Bassé for a picnic lunch eaten sitting in the warm sunshine on the canal bank.

The afternoon started by looking at the Battle of Festubert and a visit to the Post Office Rifles Cemetery on the edge of the village followed by the impressive Le Touret Cemetery and Memorial to the Missing which lists over 13,000 names of men who fell in the area before 25th September 1915 and have no known grave.



Le Trou Aid Post Cemetery was our next stop where we met up with Victoria Burbidge, a Branch member but also a respected expert on the battles in the Fromelles area.

Le Trou is a small attractive cemetery surrounded by a moat and screened from the road by weeping willows and a place very few, if any of our group had visited before. Here we held a short service of remembrance and laid a wreath.

Then it was off to Fromelles, VC Corner and the Australian Memorial where Victoria described the actions of 1915 illustrating the horrors experience with photographs showing trenches which because of the high-water table had to be built up. On leaving the memorial we took a slight detour past Pheasant Wood to see the location of the current archaeological dig which is recovering the bodies of Australian and British soldiers from the mass burial pits from 1916 only recently discovered. A short distance along the road is the site of the new Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery where these men will be laid to rest.

Our next destination was to have been Ypres and the evening ceremony at the Menin Gate, however, we arrived to find the town celebrating Liberation Day and crammed with people which meant we were unable to park our longer than normal coach in a suitable location. Taking into consideration Plans A, B, C and possible D, it was decided to abort the mission, make two swift calls at Bard Cottage and Duhallow ADS Cemeteries in order for one of our group to pay his personal respects before heading back to Arras and a very welcome cold beer.

Sunday was spent looking at the Battle of Loos. We started with Guards Cemetery at Windy Corner, Cuinchy, followed by Dud Corner Cemetery and the Loos Memorial. From the high point at the top of

the memorial we looked out at the flat, virtually featureless landscape that had been fought over at such cost in lives in September and October 1915. Contemporary trench maps and modern maps allowed us to identify the German redoubts, including the virtually impregnable Hohenzollern Redoubt, a visit to which proved fascinating.



The redoubt appears to be a rarely visited location and one that was almost lost in recent times. Thanks to the WFA a memorial now stands to commemorate the regiments of the 46th (North Midlands) Division who attacked the Redoubt on 13th October 1915 at an incredibly high cost. As we stood on the track by the redoubt and looked across the utterly flat potato planted field towards the location of the British trenches the lunacy of the attack was evident. The intensity of the

fighting was further illustrated by the amount of rusted metalwork located along the edges of the field including four hand grenades; these were left in a safe place for collection and disposal by the authorities. Even walking back to the coach two buttons were found just lying on the edge of the track; one from a German uniform and the second a British officer's. There was also plenty of evidence in the fields in the form of broken floor tiles and bricks from the miners' cottages that had once stood behind the redoubt at Cité Madagascar. These had been obliterated during the battle but were rebuilt after the war on the same foundations.

In Loos village we were met by the curator of the Musée 1914-18 Alexandre Villedeu. The small museum is named after a French soldier whose remains were found on the battlefield in 1996. He took us to the top of what now stands as the Double Crassier; an interesting journey in a 54-seater coach! This I believe for many of us

was the highlight, literally and metaphorically speaking, of the tour and a first all round.

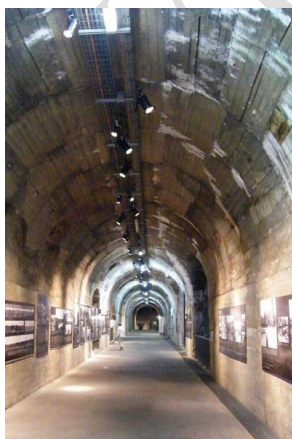


As we stood on the large flat slagheap, admittedly higher than it would have been in 1915, we looked over the whole battlefield. We were able to identify trench systems, the redoubts, the numerous cemeteries and up behind us Vimy Ridge with its Memorial and 'The

Lantern' of Notre Dame de Lorette. It was an incredible view.

Back at the tiny but fascinating museum located in the town hall, we spent time examining numerous items found by the local population over the years, from the tiniest shrapnel ball and button through to entrenching tools, machine guns and rifles. This was given a touch of realism by the sound of firecrackers going off immediately outside the building where a wedding was being celebrated.

Our final call for the day was at Loos British Cemetery, which is near the former site of "Tower Bridge" (aka "Crystal Palace") the pithead with double winding gears that dominated the 1915 battlefield.



We had completed our planned itinerary, but on the way back to Calais the following morning we diverted to La Coupole, a World War Two V1/V2 site near Wizernes; a vast undertaking dug and constructed into the side of a hill. An added bonus was a striking and captivating display of photographs of the First World War located in the long, dimly lit entrance tunnel.

And that was it! A final "replenish" stop at Calais before the long journey back to Dorset. It had been an amazing weekend with so much

crammed in; this account only scratches the surface of what we saw and experienced and I think everyone visited a location they had never been to before.



Thanks go to Martin and Judy Willoughby, our Chairman and Secretary for their hard work in producing a comprehensive and out of the ordinary itinerary; to Nigel Plumb and Mike 'Iddy' Adams, our illustrious 'military experts' for their vast wealth of information. Special thanks are due to Paul, our marvellous driver, whose professionalism and skill in manoeuvring such a large vehicle around the narrow lanes and tight locations visited was outstanding. His good humour, acerbic South Walian wit and one-liners had us in fits of laughter on many occasions.

Helen Kerridge
[With additional material from Rod Arnold]