

Wessex Branch Western Front Association

Commemorative Tour 10th-12th October 2014

“Arrival Of The BEF In The Salient 1914”

In the early morning darkness we departed in a Mainline coach from Pimperne on our third 2014 commemorative tour to the Western Front. Stopping at Salisbury and Fleet Services, where more members joined our tour party, we made very good progress and being ahead of schedule stopped at Maidstone Services on the M20. Leaving at 1030 hours, we encountered a delay at the Folkestone Channel Tunnel complex, having to board the 1250 hours train for Calais, and arrived there at 1430 hours (French time).

Our first stop was at Longuenesse (St Omer) Souvenir Cemetery. Although this was not our first visit members always find much to occupy their time here. Crosses are laid at chosen graves and one member has a relative buried in the cemetery who fought in the FWW. St

Omer was the HQ of the BEF from October 1914 to March 1916. Several hospital units and casualty clearing stations were established in the area during the war. In November 1917 and May 1918 the town was subjected to enemy air raids in which civilians and military personnel were killed. Amongst



the 2,874 Commonwealth burials is Lance-Corporal Cecil Noble, 2nd Battalion, Rifle Brigade who was mortally wounded at Neuve Chapelle on the 13th March, 1915 and was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. There are also buried here casualties from the Chinese Labour Corps, Nurses and members of the VAD many of whom were victims of the bombing raids. Four executed soldiers are buried in the cemetery. Second World War casualties, foreign nationals of both world wars and members of the IWGC/CWGC are also interred here.

From St Omer we drove towards Cassel and during the coach journey our chairman Martin Willoughby talked about the history of Cassel from Roman times to the present. Built on the summit of a hill Cassel overlooks the undulating plains of French Flanders below. Sir John French established a temporary HQ here for two weeks in October 1914. Marshal Ferdinand Foch had his HQ in the town from October 1914 to May 1915 and again in 1918. It was also

the HQ's of General Plumer's 2nd Army from 1916-1918. Occasionally shelled by the Germans during the FWW the town was virtually destroyed during a three-day battle in 1940 and was rebuilt after the end of the Second World War. Assembling in the Grande Place from where the lovely views of the plain below could be observed, Martin gave a fascinating talk about the activities of Wing Commander Rumney Samson and the deployment of the Royal Naval Division's Naval and Royal Marine Brigades to Belgium and France in September and October 1914.

Charles Rumney Samson was born in 1883 and entered the Royal Navy as a cadet in 1896. Appointed to various warships he served in the Persian Gulf and East Africa and by 1910 had commanded Torpedo Boat 81 and was First Lieutenant on HMS Foresight. In 1911, he was one of four RN Officers selected for pilot training and gained his Royal Aero Club certificate during April. On completion of further training at Eastchurch on the Isle of Sheppey he was appointed Commanding Officer of the Naval Air Station Eastchurch in October 1911. Promoted to Commander in January 1912 he was given command of the Naval Flying School at Eastchurch. A pioneer of naval aviation he was the first pilot to take off from a ship in January 1912 flying a Short S.27 from a ramp erected on the foredeck of the battleship HMS Africa, which was anchored in the River Medway. In May of the same year he gained another first, taking off from a moving ship, HMS Hibernia, using the same ramp and aircraft during the 1912 Royal Naval Review in Weymouth Bay.

When the RFC was formed in May 1912 Samson was appointed the commanding officer of its Naval Wing and was instrumental in further aviation developments including night flying. In 1914 the Royal Navy broke away from the RFC and formed the Royal Naval Air Service. Samson became in July the commanding officer of Eastchurch Mobile Squadron which by September became No.3 Squadron. After the outbreak of the First World War Samson went to France with his Squadron and participated in flying duties along the French and Belgian borders. With very limited numbers of aircraft available in the summer of 1914 Samson and his fellow officers used their privately owned cars, which had been lightly armoured and fitted with a machine gun to patrol the French and Belgian countryside. Samson was able with his armoured car unit to hoodwink the Germans into believing that significant numbers of British troops had been deployed in the area. More vehicles were sent over from the UK to augment Samson's force – establishing the formation of the RNAS Armoured Car Unit.

Flying was not neglected and his Squadron bombed Zeppelin hangers at Düsseldorf and Cologne. No.3 Squadron was sent to the Dardanelles and based on the island of Tenedos.

From there the squadron participated in flying operations in support of the troops during the Gallipoli campaign. Recalled to London in November, he became the commanding officer of HMS Ben-my-Chree, a former Isle of Man ferry which had been converted into a seaplane carrier, serving in the Eastern Mediterranean in operations against Turkish forces. In January 1917 HMS Ben-my-Chree was sunk by Turkish gunfire and appearing before a court martial board Samson and his crew were absolved of any blame. For the remainder of the war he commanded an aircraft group based at Great Yarmouth with responsibilities for anti-submarine and anti-Zeppelin operations in the North Sea.

The aircraft group became in October 1918 No.73 Wing, now part of the Royal Air Force based at Felixstowe which he continued to command. Released from his naval commission he was granted in August 1919 a permanent commission in the RAF as Group Captain. He commanded RAF units based at home and abroad and in 1922 was promoted to Air Commodore commanding 6 Fighter Group at Kenley. Retiring in 1929 Air Commodore C.R. Samson CMG, DSO & Bar, AFC died at his home near Salisbury in February 1931 and was buried in Putney Vale Cemetery.

Leaving the Grande Place we descended down from Cassel past the Mont des Recollects, through Bailleul and along the D23 towards the village of Kemmel. A steep ascent up through a hilly-wooded landscape led us towards Mount Kemmel – (Kemmelberg). It was unfortunate that the Belvédère was closed off so we continued on to the summit of Mount Kemmel and stopped by the French Memorial. By the memorial Phil Ventham gave an instructive talk about artillery preparations and the arrival of the 7th Division to the Western Front. The division was created in September 1914 and brought together regular army battalions drawn from around the British Empire. After assembling in the New Forest the division landed at Zeebrugge in the first week of October and was initially sent to Antwerp but by the time they arrived the city was being overwhelmed by German forces.

Tasked with holding bridges and other defensive posts they assisted the Belgian Army in their withdrawal westwards. The 7th Division then took up positions on the Ypres front – the first British unit to do so. They fought in the First Battle of Ypres – 18th October to 11th November 1914 – sustaining heavy losses in stemming



the German advance. It was not until the early months of 1915 that the Division – the “Immortal Seventh” was at full strength.

The 18-metre high French Memorial commemorates all the French soldiers who died fighting in Belgium and particularly those who died in the Kemmelberg area in 1918. A short distance from the summit of Mount Kemmel is a French Ossuary, a mass grave of over 5,000 French soldiers, of whom only 57 are known by name. Driving on down from the Kemmelberg and through the village we passed the Lettenberg British Dugouts built by the 175th Tunnelling Company in the Spring of 1917. Excavated in 2004 they were opened to the public the following year. Continuing on our journey through the peaceful Belgian countryside in late evening sunshine we arrived at our Best Western Hotel, the Hotel Belfort in Kortrijk at 1900 hours.

Kortrijk, the largest city in South-West Flanders has its origins dating back to Roman times. In 1302 the famous Battle of the Golden Spurs was fought near the city and the date July 11th is remembered by all the Flemish community as a national holiday. An important railway centre Kortrijk was bombed by the Germans in 1917 and by the RAF during the Second World War. In the Grote Markt – the main square – is The Belfry a remnant of a medieval cloth hall and now a world heritage site.

Our schedule for Saturday morning had to be changed due to the inclement weather which prevented outdoor activity. With a flexible attitude our members chatted happily together as we drove to Wyschate and parked in the town square. There in the coach we listened to an interesting talk by Martin about the deployment of the Queen’s Own Oxfordshire Hussars to the Western Front in 1914. The origins of the regiment date from 1794 when a group of yeoman volunteers assembled at the Star Inn in the Cornmarket at Oxford. Four years later the troop were known as the County Fencible Cavalry and were renamed a number of times before being titled the Queen’s Own Oxfordshire Hussars, a yeomanry regiment of the British Army between 1888 and 1922. During the Boer War they served with the 40th and 59th Companies of the Imperial Yeomanry. In 1902 Sir Winston Churchill joined the Queen’s Own Oxfordshire Hussars and later became Colonel of the Regiment. They were given a special place of honour at his funeral in 1965. When the Territorial Force was established essentially for home defence in time of war its personnel could not be compelled to serve abroad. On the outbreak of the war in August 1914 large numbers of Territorials volunteered for service outside the country. A decision was made to split the Territorial units into 1st Line (liable for service overseas) and 2nd Line units (home service for those unable or unwilling to

serve overseas). A 3rd Line unit was established to act as a trained reserve for the 1st and 2nd Line units.

The 1st/1st Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars in August 1914, after four weeks training were given orders by Winston Churchill to prepare for immediate embarkation. They were to join the RND's Brigades who were being sent to Flanders to defend the Channel ports. The Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars were the first Territorial unit to see action and amongst its members was Winston's younger brother Jack Churchill. The regiment took part in many operations on the Western Front during the war from 1914 to 1918.

Moving on from Wyshcate, we passed the 19th Division's Memorial at the Oosttaverne Crossroads. Remaining on the coach in the market square at Gheluveld, Phil gave a splendid talk about artillery developments during the war. These gradual improvements led to more accurate targeting, improved communications, a requirement for high explosives as well as shrapnel, new and more up-to-date equipment. In the early part of the war the artillery were restricted by the numbers of rounds it could fire per day. The C-in-C requested more ammunition and was told to use it more economically! To conclude his talk Phil read out a very moving and detailed letter written by his grandfather, Tom, a bombardier to his mother. Tom was wounded two days after writing the letter, later saw service in Mesopotamia and survived the war.

With the rain still falling, but with prospects of a fine afternoon we drove to the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 at Zonnebeke. The museum is housed in Zonnebeke Chateau and concentrates on the military history of the First World War with an emphasis on the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917. From 1989 until 2002 the Streekmuseum was situated on the second floor of the chateau and built up a significant military collection. Renovated and refurbished the renamed Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 was opened on the 25th April, 2004. Nine rooms of the chateau focus chronologically on the Third Battle of Ypres, with displays of photos, artefacts from the battlefields, weaponry, dioramas and film. Three new sections were opened in July 2013 including a "Remembrance Gallery" and a network of outdoor British and German trenches. From one of the galleries the visitor descends twenty-feet beneath the chateau into a series of reconstructed



dugouts with headquarters, communication rooms, first aid post, dressing station and sleeping accommodation. In the Remembrance gallery is a sculpture by the New Zealand artist Helen Pollock, called 'Falls the Shadow'. The sculpture is a forest of arms thrusting up through the ground made from clay from the Passchendaele battlefields and fused with clay from Coromandel situated on the New Zealand's North Island. It was first displayed on the 90th Anniversary of the Armistice in November 2008 at the Auckland War Memorial Museum and later at the Passchendaele Museum from Anzac Day 2009 to 2010. Before being returned to the Passchendaele Museum for permanent display the sculpture had been exhibited at the Carriere Wellington Memorial at Arras for a year. This is a museum which has much to offer those with an interest in the FWW and is worthy of another branch visit. Emerging from the museum in bright afternoon sunshine time allowed members to walk around and enjoy the chateau's beautiful gardens.

After spending three-and-a-half hours at the museum we were driven to Tyne Cot Cemetery. Before entering the cemetery Martin gave an absorbing talk about the deployment of the 7th Cavalry Brigade at Passchendaele. The Brigade's history dated back to the Napoleonic wars and was reformed on the 1st September, 1914 at Ludgershall, Wiltshire as part of the 3rd Cavalry Division. The Division comprised the 1st Life Guards, 2nd Life Guards and Royal Horse Guards. Each regiment was made up of two squadrons having had to detach one squadron to the Household Cavalry Composite Regiment in the 4th Cavalry Brigade until mid-November when they re-joined their parent regiments. The Brigade disembarked at Zeebrugge on the 7th October 1914 and was deployed to the Western Front and served there throughout the war. The Division was broken up in March 1919.

At the conclusion of the talk members walked around Tyne Cot Cemetery where 11,956 casualties of the FWW are buried, 8,369 of them unidentified, absorbing the sacrifice of so many and of the 35,000 officers and men who have no known grave and whose names are inscribed on the Tyne Cot Memorial.

The visit albeit brief was necessary as it was important for the coach to be able to park near to the Menin Gate for the evening's commemoration. Arriving at 1600 hours members were free to visit Ypres and enjoy its abundant facilities for a meal and refreshment. Asked to assemble at the Menin Gate by 1900 hours we found that a considerable number of people had already gathered for the commemoration and wreath laying ceremony. As the onlookers continued to increase the road was closed much earlier than is usual by the organisers. After the sounding of the Last Post and two minutes silence, the laying of wreaths began to the accompaniment

of music played by a band from East Grinstead. Three of our members Judy Willoughby, Viv Dickinson and Amanda Bristow laid a wreath on behalf of the Wessex Branch – the only WFA Branch present. The ceremony was a moving experience and indeed an emotional one for our wreath layers which was unique and



particularly special for them. As the crowds melted away we boarded our coach and leaving at 2045 hours we returned to our hotel after a very stimulating and interesting day.

We departed from the Belfort Hotel at 0930 hours on Sunday morning for a visit to Talbot House – Everyman’s Club – at Poperinge. Now a ‘living museum’ where during three years of the First World War from 1915 soldiers could find a haven of peace. Originally a private dwelling, the house was damaged by German shelling in 1915 and the owner, a brewer rented out the property to the British Army. Repaired, an Army chaplain the Reverend Philip “Tubby” Clayton seized the opportunity to use it as a soldiers club. Talbot House or Toc H as it was known to the soldiers is named in memory of Lieutenant Gilbert Talbot, 7th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade who was killed at Hooge in July 1915. He was the brother of the Reverend Neville Talbot who later became Assistant Chaplain General to the Fifth Army. The top floor of the house, where the hops were dried was converted into a chapel, the “Upper Room”. Simply furnished the contemplative and peaceful environs provided the battle fatigued troops quiet moments for private thoughts and prayers.

After the war the owner returned and in 1929 sold the house to Lord Wakefield of Hythe who donated it to the Talbot House Association. In 1996 the association was able to purchase the hop store in the garden which had been used for church services during the FWW. After extensive restoration the Concert Hall formally the hop store was opened in May 2003. The ground floor of the Concert Hall has an exhibition, “Life Behind The Lines” telling the story Poperinge and the surrounding area during the FWW using artefacts and easy to read information boards.

The first floor of the Concert Hall is used to show a film of a concert given by the Happy Hoppers – a troop of male entertainers. Songs, jokes and dancing are woven together to give a very good idea to the audience of the entertainment which soldiers of the First World War

experienced. The wonderful and excellent film was thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated by our members who sang along with the music and laughed at the jokes.

With the passing of years the garden became neglected and in the 1980s under the auspices of Lieutenant Colonel Graham Parker he arranged for volunteer British servicemen to help and restore the garden. The garden is now a listed Belgian monument. The Slessorium, built in the garden by Major Paul Slessor is used as a cinema showing documentary films about the history of Talbot House and for exhibitions. Modern paintings about war by the Belgian artist Jan D'Haene were on display in the main room.

On our arrival at Talbot House we were welcomed and given a guided tour by Monique a charming and entertaining lady. She related the history in detail about Talbot House and after guiding us around the museum and garden it was time for tea and cake provided by John a retired chaplain and his wife. They and their helpers are volunteers who give their time to welcome all who visit. John asked us if we could when looking around by ourselves try and absorb the quiet and peaceful atmosphere of the house and say a prayer in the "Upper Room".

Sunday morning at Talbot House seemed to pass very quickly and we left Poperinge at 1230 hours heading towards Calais. Topping-up with supplies at 'Pidou' we reached the Channel Tunnel terminus, passed through passport and border controls to board the 1505 hours train for Folkestone. Arriving there at 1450 hours (UK time) we made excellent progress via the M20, M26, M25 and M3 stopping at Fleet Services where one member alighted. Heavy rain accompanied us on our journey towards Salisbury where three members left us and then we drove on to Pimperne arriving at 1845 hours from where members dispersed to their homes.

Our October commemorative tour was an excellent one and thanks must be paid to Mainline Coaches and their driver Derek for his skilful driving. Martin and Phil must also be complemented for their splendid, knowledgeable and diverse talks about the activities of the BEF in September and October 1914.

We were privileged to be present at the Menin Gate when Judy, Viv and Amanda laid the Wessex Branch wreath with deep reverence and respect before the hundreds of people assembled beneath and around the Menin Gate. All of the foregoing would not have been possible without the determination and professionalism of our chairman and secretary, Martin and Judy to whom we all extend our gratitude.

For the first year of the First World War centennial the Wessex Branch undertook with notable success three tours to the Western Front and attended several other local commemorations.



Those who one hundred years ago left their homes and families to fight for King and Country could not have imagined that so many nations would be drawn into a World War in which millions would perish. Whether Friend or Foe they have not been forgotten and indeed our Branch over the next four years “Will Remember Them”.

Roger G. Coleman

Wessex WFA