

WESSEX BRANCH WFA ~ BATTLEFIELD TOUR ~ “AUBERS to ALBERT & SOMME POINTS” FRIDAY 11th ~ MONDAY 14th SEPTEMBER 2015

On a lovely, but chilly morning we departed from Pimperne on a Mainline Coach at 0600 hours and drove towards Salisbury to pick up four members who joined the tour from there. During the journey we were introduced to our driver Brian and Anne from Mainline who liaises with our Secretary, Judy about our travel arrangements. Moving on from Salisbury we made a thirty minute break at Fleet Services on the M3 where the last two members were waiting to join the tour.



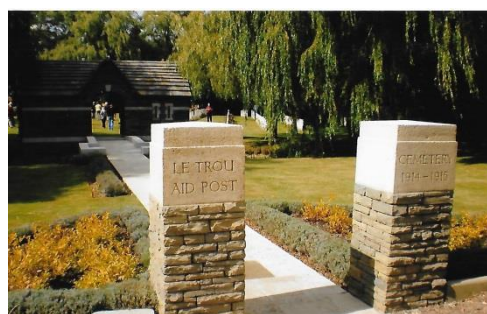
Before leaving Fleet Services Brian gave us a safety briefing and Martin, our chairman outlined the programme for the day. Motoring on along the M3 and via the M25, M26, and M20 we were able to watch a CD about the First World War on the coach entertainment system. A brief ‘comfort’ stop was made at Maidstone Services on the M20 before continuing on to the Dover Ferry Terminal, arriving there at 1115 hours. Forty-five minutes later we boarded the P&O Ferry ‘Spirit of Britain’ and our watches were advanced one hour. We arrived at Calais after a calm channel crossing, disembarking at 1440 hours, and via the A26 travelled in the direction of St Omer-Bethune-Cuinchy, over the La Basseé canal to make our first stop in France at Brown’s Road Military Cemetery, Festubert. Designed by Charles Holden, the first burials were made in October 1914 and continued at intervals until November 1917. After the Armistice the cemetery was enlarged and now contains 1,071 burials, 407 of which are unidentified. Two of our members paid a special tribute at one of the graves in remembrance of a relative who died during the war.

From Brown’s Road Military Cemetery we moved on to the Le Touret Memorial and Military Cemetery at Richebourg-L’Avoue. In the colonnaded archway Rod Arnold our Vice-Chairman gave a talk about the deployment and engagements of the BEF in French Flanders in 1914-15. This was followed by another talk by Steve Matthews about his great-uncle whose name is inscribed on the memorial and fought in the surrounding area. Unveiled in March 1930 the Le Touret Memorial commemorates the names of over 13,400 casualties who have no known grave and died between October 1914 and September 1915. Casualties of the Indian Corps and Canadian units who fought in this sector between the foregoing dates have their names inscribed on the Neuve Chapelle and Vimy Memorials. Those who died in the

northern sector during the Battle of Aubers Ridge are inscribed on the Ploegsteert Memorial. The Le Touret Military Cemetery, now containing 900 burials was initially created by the Indian Corps and 2nd Battalion, Leicestershire Regiment in November 1914, used until March 1918 and again after the German Spring Offensive. Portuguese war casualties who were buried in the cemetery were disinterred and moved to the Richebourg-L'Avoue Portuguese National Cemetery after the end of the war.

Time allowed for members to look around the memorial and cemetery before we moved on to Le Trou Aid Post Cemetery, Fleurbaix. Assembling in the beautiful architectural setting of this cemetery, Rod spoke about the assault by the 24th Brigade on Aubers Ridge on the 9th May, 1915. He outlined the general dispositions of German forces and of the Indian, British I and IV Corps. The planned assault by IV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Henry Rawlinson was described and followed by a detailed account of 24th Brigade's attack. Aided by maps of the Aubers Ridge sector he described the 'bloody' encounter which was 'an unmitigated disaster for the British Army'. For their conspicuous gallantry on the 9th May, 1915 Lance-Corporal David Finlay, 2nd Battalion, The Black Watch, Corporal John Ripley, 1st Battalion, The Black Watch, Acting-Corporal Charles Sharpe, 2nd Battalion, The Lincolnshire Regiment and Corporal James Upton, 1st Battalion, The Sherwood Foresters were awarded the Victoria Cross. Three of the recipients survived the war. Lance-Corporal Finlay was killed in Mesopotamia in January 1916.

Le Trou Aid Post Cemetery was begun in October 1914 when troops deployed in the Fleurbaix area buried their dead comrades beside a regimental aid post and dressing station. The cemetery was used until July 1915 and enlarged after the Armistice and now contains 350 burials including two French casualties. After walking around this lovely cemetery we moved on towards Fromelles and listened on the coach to Rod as we passed VC Corner Australian Cemetery and Memorial about the Australian casualties



buried in that cemetery. Martin informed us about the Battle of Fromelles fought by the British in 1915 and again a year later with the Australians. In October 1914 the 19th Infantry Brigade were ordered to attack and occupy Fromelles and Le Maisnil. Desperate fighting ensued but the Brigade subjected to intense enemy shell-fire and determined infantry attacks withdrew after sustaining heavy casualties. After the capture of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915 the Germans strengthened their defensive positions, particularly in an area around

Fromelles, known as the Sugarloaf Salient. British and Indian units attacked the enemy positions on Aubers Ridge on the 9th May, but an inadequate British bombardment made little impression on the enemy and failed to neutralise machine-gun emplacements. As the attacking troops of the BEF advanced the enemy machine guns inevitably caused severe casualties. A year later in July 1916 the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division and the 5th Australian Division fought over the same ground in which lay the remains of those who had been killed in 1915, and made no significant impact on the German entrenched frontline positions.

We arrived at Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery where Martin gave a brief talk about the cemetery which was completed in July 2010 and was the first new cemetery constructed by the CWGC in fifty years. 250 Australian and British casualties whose remains were discovered in the nearby Pheasant Wood in 2009 lie in the cemetery. The Germans had buried these casualties in mass graves after the two day battle of Fromelles in July 1916. In the pleasant evening sunshine our tour party enjoyed walking around and viewing the silent rows of headstones.



Leaving Fromelles we drove towards Albert via Loos where we observed from the coach the Double Crassier. Martin spoke about Loos and the relevance of the mining industry in that area and of a steel structure known to the troops of the First World War as Tower Bridge. Today the area is predominately an agricultural region. As we passed through the French countryside and villages, now peaceful, Martin brought to our attention notable battlefield features and monuments. We arrived at the Hôtel Ibis Albert, at 1930 hours after a long but enjoyable day full of interest. Unfortunately there was a shortage of rations available to us at the hotel to satisfy everyone. Those of our party who were able to obtain a meal at the hotel did so, but the remainder chose to be driven by taxi into Albert and had a very good meal at the Corner's Pub on the Rue de Birmingham. On return to the hotel the evening was concluded with a few drinks before retiring to our rooms.

After a good breakfast we set out on our second day in France bright and early for Orival Wood Cemetery, Flesquieres. Gathering outside the cemetery Martin gave a fascinating and detailed account of 306 Brigade, RFA at Orival Wood in 1917 and later deployments during the war. His talk was all the more engaging and personalised as his grandfather Battery

Sergeant-Major Harold Sherring MM served with Brigade. Martin skilfully blended the unit's history with his grandfather's service. Harold survived the war and was awarded the MM in 1917, the MSM in 1919 and was appointed RSM in 1924. Four of his comrades who died during the war lie in Orival Wood Cemetery. In November 1917 the first burials took place during the Battle of Cambrai and again in September – October 1918. In 1930 graves from smaller cemeteries were concentrated into Orival Wood Cemetery. These included, 20



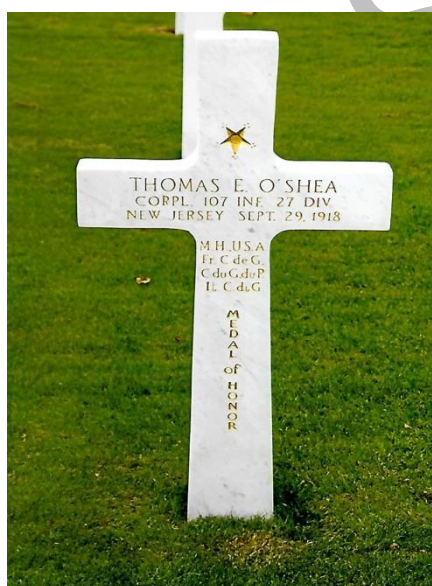
German casualties, one member of the Chinese Labour Corps, ten unidentified casualties and two specials memorials whose graves had been lost. As our members walked around the cemetery they did so thoughtfully and with remembrance upper most in their minds.

A short distance from Orival Wood Cemetery is Flesquieres Hill British Cemetery containing over 900 casualties of the First World War. Time was spent viewing the graves and personal respects were paid at individual graves. Nearly 300 of the graves are unidentified with ten special memorials of which three are to men of the Royal Naval Division. On leaving the cemetery we drove on through Flesquieres, and paused to glimpse a view from the coach of 'Deborah' a Mark IV WWI tank housed in a barn. The owner Philippe Gorczyński, a historian and hotel owner recovered the tank which had been buried in a field at the end of the war. His determination and persistence was eventually rewarded in not only finding 'Deborah' but also discarded artefacts and weapons of war. These are now housed in his private museum which along with 'Deborah' can be viewed by appointment only.

Driving on towards our next stop Rod spoke about the Le Catelet Four. During August 1914 as men of the British II Corps were retreating after the gallant stand at Le Cateau large numbers of soldiers became separated from their units as the Germans relentlessly pursued them. The hot weather did not help the soldiers as "men were falling out and even dropping down in the road in dozens" one observer recorded. Some were fortunate in evading capture others were taken prisoner by the Germans. Amongst the hundreds of soldiers, seven were given shelter in the village of Villeret, approximate four miles south-west of Le Catelet. Gradually they were accepted by the local community and became a part of village life, albeit living in German held territory. The German authorities announced in early 1915 that any British soldier given protection or succour by the French would be severely punished and any British soldiers found in civilian clothes would be shot as spies.

A relationship between Private Digby and a local girl Claire Desemme, resulted in the birth of a daughter Helene in November 1915. Attitudes by some of the villagers began to change and labelled the British soldiers as deserters. The Germans posted a deadline of the 30th April, 1916 for the soldiers to give themselves up. Six left the village hoping to reach British lines, but three returned a few days later. The Germans were notified of the presence in the village of Private William Thorpe, Private Thomas Donohoe and Private David Martin, who were all taken into custody by the Germans. Private Robert Digby escaped but on being made aware that the Germans intended to execute the villagers he gave himself up on assurance that his life would be spared. All four men were subsequently tried and sentenced to death. Privates Thorpe, Donohoe and Martin were executed on the 27th May, 1916 and Private Digby three days later. All were buried in Le Catelet Churchyard. A special memorial there commemorates another soldier, Private P. Russell of the Royal Munster Fusiliers who died on the 4th October, 1918.

Our next stop was at the Somme American Cemetery at Bony. Outside the cemetery Martin spoke about the arrival and deployment of the American forces during the First World War. The cemetery was established in 1918 as the American Expeditionary Force's Somme Cemetery No.636, and contains 1,844 casualties of which 138 are unidentified. Each grave is marked by a white marble Latin Cross and soldiers of the Jewish faith by a Star of David headstone. The memorial chapel was designed by architect George Howe 1886-1955 of Philadelphia who had served with the AEF. On entering the visitor passes through two bronze



double doors, on which are 48 stars each representing one of the 48 states of America on the 48 star flag of 1937, the year of the chapel's dedication. Above the doors is a large bronze eagle with wings outstretched. There are three windows in the chapel one of which above the altar is in the shape of a cross. On the floor is a large star, with 48 smaller ones representing the American states during the First World War. The names of over 300 soldiers who have no known grave are inscribed on the walls of the chapel. Those who were subsequently recovered are marked by a rosette.

Three recipients of the American Medal of Honor lie in the cemetery: First Lieutenant William B. Turner, Corporal Thomas O'Shea and Private Robert L. Blackwell – their crosses are inscribed in gold lettering. Also buried in the cemetery is Nurse Helen Fairchild, of the US

Army Reserve who died in January 1918, Rifleman Samuel D. Hill, a New Zealander serving with the US forces accidentally killed in June 1918 and Lieutenant J. Grantley Hall an American who served in the RAF. He died on the 8th August, 1918.

Leaving Bony we drove on to the American Memorial, a mile to the north of the village of Bellicourt. The impressive memorial is reached by ascending a flight of stone steps. It is erected above the 6-kilometre (3·8-miles) long St Quentin canal tunnel built by Napoleon. The 92·5-kilometre (57·5-mile) long St Quentin Canal was begun in the 18th Century and completed in 1810. The canal tunnel was incorporated into the Hindenburg Line by the Germans during the First World War. On the western face of the memorial is a large relief map of the surrounding area where the AEF Divisions – serving as part of the British Army – were deployed. Below the map is an orientation table with arrows pointing out the features of the battlefield. The memorial commemorates 90,000 American troops who served in battle with the British Army in France during 1917 and 1918. Martin spoke about the AEF Divisions in France and of the fighting in the area. On completion of his talk rain began to fall, lightly at first and by the time we boarded our coach the heavens open up. This disrupted our programme for the day. However, flexibility and adaptability being in the forefront of our minds we revised our plans and decided to visit The Historical Museum Of The Great War, Péronne. A short stop was made on the outskirts of St Quentin to purchase ‘rations’ for lunch. At Péronne, Brian was unable to park our coach near to the museum as access roads had been closed for a concert in the town square. Not to be outdone we turned around and drove to Albert via the D938 arriving there in mid-afternoon. A very enjoyable couple of hours were spent in The Somme 1916 Museum and afterwards some members visited The Basilica Notre Dame de Brebières. Before leaving Albert for our hotel we enjoyed suitable refreshments at a local café. Once back at the hotel some members chose to dine in Albert and were driven into town by Brian on the understanding that they made their own way back. Others enjoyed a set meal at the hotel ending a thought provoking and pleasurable day.

On coming down for breakfast on Sunday morning, news percolated that one of our members had slipped over in his room and sustained a bad cut to his right arm. After being examined by the French ambulance service our ‘casualty’ was taken to Péronne hospital for the wound to be stitched and dressed. It was intended to leave the hotel at 0900 hours but one member, subsequently nicknamed “Late Nick” over slept and had to be roused from his deep sleep. He took our jest graciously and we set off for the Lochnagar Crater.

The crater which is privately owned was bought by Richard Dunning on the 1st July, 1978 and is supported by the Friends of Lochnagar who give their time and raise funds to preserve the site. It is quite an awe-inspiring feature some 300 feet in diameter and 70 feet deep created by the explosion of 60,000lbs of ammonal, detonated at 0728 hours on the 1st July 1916. The mine was laid by the 179th Tunnelling Company, Royal Engineers under a German position called “Schwaben Höhe”. Today it is very peaceful and quiet almost as if in homage to the death and destruction the explosion caused. The friends have instituted a plaque sponsorship scheme to commemorate those of all nations who fell or survived the war. The plaques are inscribed with the veterans name, rank, number, branch of service, decorations, date of birth and death. For a relatively modest fee of £25 you sponsor a plank on the duck-board walkway around the crater to which the plaque is fixed.



It was our intention on leaving the Lochnagar Crater to stop at the Dorsetshire Regiment Memorial near the village of Authuille. Our best efforts to get to the memorial were thwarted by marathon runners, the intransigence of French officialdom and road closures around the area. We tried from all points of the compass to reach the memorial but had to abandon the attempt and drove instead to Péronne to collect our ‘casualty’ from the hospital there.

Having failed the previous day to gain access to the museum at Péronne we more fortunate and were able to park our coach quite close to The Historical Museum. Members spent two hours in the museum which displays many fascinating artefacts and material of the First World War. Leaving Péronne we drove to the village of Francilly-Selency. As we passed the village church, Martin brought to our attention a memorial erected in June 1996 to the 2nd and 16th Battalions of the Manchester Regiment who fought on Manchester Hill in 1917 and 1918 respectively. A relatively new French road complex and landscaping has changed the outline of the ‘Hill’. We stopped opposite the Manchester Quarry where Rod gave an extensive account of the deployment of the 2nd Battalion, Manchester Regiment in 1917 and the 16th Battalion in 1918. The latter battalion faced the onslaught of the German 1918 Spring Offensive. Rod quoted extracts from the War Diary and of the orders from Division to Lieutenant-Colonel Wilfred Elstob, the commanding officer of the 16th Battalion. After an heroic stand in defending Manchester Hill of the 8 officers and 160 other ranks deployed only 2 officers and 15 other ranks survived the encounter. For his conspicuous gallantry and self-

sacrifice Lieutenant-Colonel Elstob was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. His body was not recovered from the battlefield and his name is inscribed on the Pozieres Memorial ~ (Panels 64-67). During the previous year on the 3rd-4th April, 1917 Major Frederick Lumsden of the Royal Marine Artillery was awarded the Victoria Cross for his conspicuous bravery near Francilly-Selency. Leading four artillery parties and troops of the 15th Battalion, Highland Light Infantry they brought in six guns captured from the enemy which had been left in a dug-in position in advance of the British line. He was killed near Arras on the 4th June, 1918.

Rod also gave another absorbing talk about the 24th and 61st Divisions who mounted a stubborn defence on the 21st March, 1918 during the Battle of St Quentin quoting from Sir Douglas Haig's despatches and about the heavy fighting in the area around Maissemy. He also related details about the raising of the 8th Battalion, Royal West Kent Regiment, their training and subsequent arrival in France during 1915. They later participated in the Battle of St Quentin, Cambrai and in the Final Advance to Victory. On conclusion of his talk he mentioned the 'Forgotten VC' Lance-Corporal John Sayer of the 8th Battalion, Royal West Surrey Regiment (The Queens) who displayed a remarkable example of gallantry on the 21st March, 1918 at Le Verguier where he held the battalion's flank against an overwhelming enemy force. Sadly he died from his wounds a few weeks later on the 18th April and lies buried in Le Cateau Military Cemetery.

Rain once again began to fall as we arrived at Maissemy German War Cemetery – Maissemy Soldatenfriedhof. On the coach Martin spoke about the creation and upkeep of the second largest German military cemetery of the First World War. The French began in 1924 to concentrate German casualties from within a 30-kilometre radius of Maissemy into the cemetery. Most of the casualties had died in the period July-November 1916 and in the Spring Offensive of 1918. Others had died during the subsequent battles fought during the Allied advance later in the same year. There are 30,478 German casualties of the First World War buried in the cemetery. Two mass graves contain 15,000 and plaques name those who are known amongst them. Inaugurated in July 1935, a memorial hall built of golden Darchingertuff a Bavarian broken stone, houses a bronze sarcophagus and a vaulted mosaic ceiling of 340,000 pieces. In 1960 a Franco-German War Graves agreement allowed the German War Graves Commission to finalise a design for military cemeteries in France and Belgium. In the early 1970s the temporary wooden markers in the cemetery were replaced with crosses of Belgian granite and engraved with casualties name and date of death. On completion of the work the cities and towns of the Ruhr renewed their financial sponsorship. They had

originally sponsored the cemetery in 1934-35 but all work was stopped on the outbreak of the Second World War. The central aisle leading up to the Memorial Hall has on either side large carved turf stones bearing the coat of arms of the Ruhr sponsors. The cemetery is now in the care of German War Graves Authority.

From Maissemy we drove via Péronne to the Pozieres Memorial and Cemetery, outside of which Rod gave us short talk. The Memorial commemorates 14,691 casualties including 300 of the South African Forces who have no known grave. The memorial encloses Pozieres British Cemetery containing 2,760 burials of which 1,382 are unidentified. 23 special memorials commemorate those who are known or believed to be buried among them and there is one German casualty. Three Victoria Cross recipients are commemorated on the Pozieres Memorial: Lieutenant-Colonel W. Elstob, 16th Battalion, Manchester Regiment, Second Lieutenant E. De Wind, 15th Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles and Private H.G. Columbine, 9th Squadron, MGC (Cavalry). Sergeant C.C. Castleton V.C., 5th Company, Australian MGC, originally from Lowestoft lies buried in the cemetery – Plot IV, Row L, Grave No.43. The cemetery and memorial was designed by Mr. W.H. Cowlshaw with sculpture by Laurence Turner. It was unveiled by Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien in August 1930.

Despite the weather we were able to reach the Dorsetshire Regiment Memorial, the roads being clear of runners and marshals. At the memorial in heavy rain a Wessex Branch WFA wreath was laid followed by a short service of remembrance, exhortation followed by two minutes silence. The last visit of the day was to the Butte de Warlincourt purchased by the WFA in 1990. On a previous visit the whole site was a shambles and did not reflect well on the WFA nationally. After representations were made it has now been brought up to a standard expected by WFA membership. After spending time at the Butte we returned to the Ibis Hotel for a socially relaxing evening.



After all our baggage had been loaded on to the coach by Brian we left Albert travelling towards Doullens arriving there at 0950 hours. Approaching Doullens, Martin spoke about the Hôtel de Ville and the important meeting held there on the 26th March, 1918. Senior military and political leaders from France and Great Britain gathered at the hotel to prioritise the way forward for both countries as the German Spring Offensive surged through Allied lines. Those

present were President Raymond Poincaré, Georges Clemenceau, General Henri Mordarq, General Ferdinand Foch, General Maxime Weygand, General Paul-Louis Duparge, General Philippe Petain, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, General Sir Henry Wilson and Alfred Milner, Secretary of State for War. Differences had arisen between the British and French army staffs and at the meeting a compromise was reached at the suggestion of Douglas Haig who stated that he would 'follow any advice General Foch would care to give'. Clemenceau proposed and it was agreed that Foch would act as an overall Commander-in-Chief to ensure that the British and French Armies collaborated in the objective of defeating the German Army.

We entered the Hôtel de Ville, where in the entrance hall memorial tablets around the walls commemorate French casualties who died in both world wars. Ascending the grand staircase to the great hall on the first floor the visitor's eyes are drawn upwards to a magnificent stained glass window. The great hall has large dividing doors which can be closed to make smaller chambers in one of which the historic meeting

took place. On the table in the centre of the chamber are eight place names and photographs of those who sat around it. The chamber is dominated by another stained glass window depicting the meeting. Around the walls hang some paintings and small sculpted busts adorn a mantelpiece and furniture. Members spent considerable time in the chamber and a group photograph was taken to mark our visit which was full of historic interest.



Our battlefield tour was more or less concluded and we left Doullens at 1045 hours for Calais. Unable to follow the major road from the town we followed a déviation through the lovely French autumnal countryside. There was a bonus to the detour in that we passed through a number of villages many of which had buildings of notably architectural interest, some dating from the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Eventually we joined the A26 and were welcomed by heavy showers as we approached the coast. It was during one of these showers that a crack began to appear in the coach's windscreen which lengthened as we sped along. A replacement windscreen would be required at a cost of £2,500 when the coach arrived at Mainline's depot.

At 1245 hours we stopped for 'special rations and supplies' at Pidou and also for refreshments before proceeding to the ferry terminal. By 1400 hours we had passed through emigration and

passport controls which were noticeably more thorough than they had been on previous tours. Clocks were put back to UK time and we boarded the P&O ferry Spirit of Britain at 1355 hours. Our departure was delayed due to a stowaway who had managed to get onboard. The French police and port authorities removed him from the ship. There was also a delay at Dover, due to high winds earlier in the day which disrupted the departure and berthing schedules at the ferry terminal.

Leaving the ferry at 1640 hours we drove via the M20, M26, M25 and M3 stopping at Fleet Services where two of our tour party left us. As we travelled along the motorways one of our members reminded us that the following day – Tuesday – was the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain and about the commemorative events to mark the occasion. Mention was made about the importance of Salisbury and aircraft manufacture at Boscombe Down during the war. The story of the only Battle of Britain recipient of the Victoria Cross was also told. On the 16th August 1940, Flight Lieutenant E.J.B. Nicolson DFC, of 249 Squadron was seriously wounded by the enemy in aerial combat. Although his aircraft was being consumed by fire he pursued a Messerschmitt 110 and shot it down before baling out. Later promoted to Wing Commander he did not survive the war and was lost over the Bay of Bengal in May 1945.

Departing from Fleet Services at 1945 hours we continued on through heavy rain to Salisbury where four members alighted and in darkness the coach arrived at Pimperne at 2130 hours from where members dispersed to their homes after an excellent Battlefield Tour.

Thanks must be extended to Mainline Coaches and our driver Brian for his skilful driving, good humour and splendid company. Also to Anne who shared with us her enthusiasm and enjoyment during the tour. To Rod Arnold and Martin for their time, research and splendid talks delivered with professional skill. Steve must not be forgotten for his contribution at the Le Touret Memorial. Our battlefield tours are second to none and made possible by the dedication and time given by our chairman and secretary, Martin and Judy Willoughby who always ensure that they are successful, full of interest, immensely enjoyable and to whom we extend our grateful thanks.

Sources:

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Extracts From The Wessex Battlefield Tour Guide September 2015

R.G. Coleman

Wessex WFA