

WESTERN FRONT TRIP TO FLANDERS AND THE SOMME 9th -13th JUNE 2009: Roger Dix

Tuesday, 9th June, saw the commencement of North Lancs Branch visit to Flanders and N France organised by our Secretary, Andrew Brooks. Our coach, belonging to Bibby's of Ingleton and driven by our usual driver, Andrew Middleton, picked up at various points including Bradford where we were joined by our friends from Bradford Mechanics (who have been our companions on previous trips) and our experts, Harry Taylor and Jack Cavanagh. Our final pick up was at Ashford International Station for Andrew's son and his friends. A feature of our group was that, as well as Andrew and his son, there were three other fathers and sons including the writer, and our Chairman, Stan Wilkinson, whose two sons accompanied us.

The journey to Calais by Eurotunnel was uneventful with no delays. The weather, which had been dry and fair on leaving Lancaster, had been deteriorating as we moved south. It was raining in Calais and we were greeted by a heavy downpour on arrival at Ypres. After getting ensconced in the very comfortable Novotel we walked to the Menin Gate for the 8.00pm ceremony. As usual, this was very moving, both for those making their first visit and for those of us who had been before. There was the usual large crowd and it is good to see that interest remains high and is even increasing.

The following day (Wednesday) we left Ypres bound for Arras. Our first stop was at Tyne Cot Cemetery where some went to the new Visitor Centre. Others found their time taken up in the Cemetery which is the largest Commonwealth War Cemetery anywhere in the world, holding 11,953 Commonwealth graves and four German. We had arrived at Tyne Cot via Hellfire Corner, Hoge Crater and the Menin Road. On leaving Tyne Cot we passed through Broodseinde and Zonnebeke on our way "to Mount Kemmel, some of the highest ground in Belgium and scene of heavy fighting from October 1914 to 1918.



Lettenberg Bunkers.JPG

Almost at the top of Mount Kemmel, we visited the French National Ossuary containing the remains of 5,294 French soldiers. At the summit stands the French Memorial to soldiers killed in Belgium. We then descended back towards Kemmel to explore the **Lettenberg Dugouts** built into the side of a banking by 175th Tunnelling Company. These impressive structures were used as Brigade Headquarters and First Aid Posts. Stan's grandfather, "Willie" Wilkinson, mentions these Shelters in his diary.

After a substantial lunch in Kemmel, we took the N365 towards France, passing through Wyschaete (White Sheet) with views of Messines Ridge, Irish Park Memorial, Ploegsteert Wood and Hyde Park Corner before entering France and heading for the Aubers Ridge, Fromelles area.

Our first stop was at V.C. Corner, Australian Memorial Cemetery. This Cemetery is the only one devoted entirely to Australians; with no gravestones, the names of the missing being engraved on panels.

On 19th July 1916, the 5th Australian Division and 61st (South Midland) Division attacked well-defended German positions, suffering a total of 7,637 casualties. The attack was launched to divert German attention from the Somme Offensive. It is generally acknowledged that it was unsuccessful in this aim.

Next to V.C. Corner is the Australian Memorial Park with a Ross Bastiaan Plaque showing a relief map of where Australian Divisions fought. Another feature of this Memorial is the **"Cobbers" Sculpture** by Peter Corlett showing Sgt. Simon Fraser carrying a wounded comrade.

We proceeded to Fromelles village where we saw the huts housing the bodies recently discovered in a mass grave. Attempts are now being made to identify as many bodies as possible. On the opposite side of the road, work is taking place on the new Pheasant Wood Cemetery where the bodies will eventually be interred. The cost has been estimated at £20,000,000.



Cobbers Memorial, Fromelles.JPG



The party split here, some going to the Fromelles Museum and a group of us going in search of the **"Real Hitler's Bunker"**. After negotiating a ditch and barbed wire we were able to see this concrete structure in the middle of a corn field. Hitler was in this bunker from 10th March 1915 to 25th September 1916, apparently acting as a runner. Hitler revisited the area on 26th June 1940.

Our resumed journey took us into Neuve-Chapelle and past the Indian and Portuguese Memorials, Vimy Ridge Memorial and Dud Corner (Loos), arriving at the Holiday Inn in Arras (where we were to spend 3 nights) at approx. 6.00pm.



Point du Jour, Gavrelles.JPG

Thursday morning was spent in the Gavrelle area, scene of intense fighting during the Arras offensive of April 1917. Our first call was at Point du Jour Military Cemetery. Outside this Cemetery is the stone **Point du Jour Memorial** to the 9th Scottish Division and 26,27,28 and 197 Companies of the Machine Gun Corps.

The 63rd Royal Naval Division was heavily engaged in the offensive here and was brought into the line on 3rd April 1917 (St George's Day). The Battalions involved were the Nelson, Hood, Howe, Benbow, Collingwood and Anson. Point du Jour Military Cemetery

holds 738 bodies, mainly British but also 9 New Zealanders. Pte. 3 E.Cheney lies here who died on 22nd May 1940 in the Battle of the "Scarpe. There are also five members of the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry, one being unknown.

We next visited Orchard Dump Cemetery containing 3,000 graves; one in five being named.

At Oppy Wood, scene of severe fighting until September 1918, we were given a talk by Karl Parr whose great-grandfather was killed here serving with the 4th. Btn. King's Liverpool Regt. We also viewed the Kingston-upon-Hull Memorial. Lt. John Harrison, V.C., who played Rugby League for Hull died here.



Andrew at RN Div Memorial Gavrelles.JPG

We continued to Gavrelle village, scene of an attack by the 63rd. R.N.D. on 23rd April 1917 and the subsequent defence against innumerable counter-attacks. **The Royal Naval Memorial** is on the outskirts of the village and takes the form of a ruined red brick house with a ship's anchor in the centre. The badges of the Division's units are displayed on the walls.

We then returned to Gavrelle village where some of us supported the local cafe and other more hardy souls visited other sites in the village.

We arrived in La Boisselle for lunch at Le Poppy. Our excellent 3-course lunch delayed our departure and we had to cut short our route.

A short stop was made to the Pozieres Memorial before arriving at the Thiepval Memorial. Here, our party split. One group visited the Memorial and the other party were taken on a short walk by Harry Taylor. The walk took us to the scene of the attack of 1st July 1916 against the German lines and we passed the site of the notorious Leipzig Salient. Our objective was the Lonsdale Cemetery but although we could see this, time did not allow us to visit it.

On reuniting, we headed to Arras to visit the newly opened Wellington Tunnels. These tunnels have recently been refurbished with a lift and electric light. They were re-excavated by the New Zealand Tunnelling Co., to provide shelter for the attack of the 9th April 1917 as part of the Arras offensive. We were accompanied by an English speaking guide and we also had tape recorders. Our visit gave us an insight into the conditions under which the large number of troops existed prior to the attack.

Friday, as we had been promised, dawned bright and warm. Again, we were to split into two parties, one to visit Amiens and the other to take a walk over the Somme battlefields, led by Harry Taylor.

The walk commenced at Serre and took us up Sackville Street and along Great Northern to Old Touvent Farm to see the site of Matthew Copse. We continued to **Railway Hollow Cemetery** containing many of the "Accrington Pals" killed on 1st July 1916 and on to the Sheffield Memorial Park, Queen's Cemetery and Serre Road No. 3. We returned to Serre Road No. 1 where we viewed the graves of A/B W.H. Atkinson, R.N.V.R. of Howe Btn (died 13th November 1916) and Willie King of the "Leeds Pals".



Railway Hollow, The Somme.JPG

We then walked on to view the Redan Ridge area, scene of fierce fighting during the Battle of the Ancre in November 1916, which saw the end of the Somme offensive. Lunch was taken at Frankfurt Trench Cemetery where we were met by Pat and David Shackleton who were spending time in their nearby caravan. Pat read the Oratory and also a poem by a Scottish poet.

We moved on to Beaumont Hamel and visited the Sunken Road, White City and Jacob's Ladder, all areas deeply involved in the Somme battles. We visited the site of Hawthorn Ridge Crater (blown on 1st July 1916) and Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery. We then walked on towards Auchon Villiers (Ocean Villas) to meet up with the coach.

The Amiens party also enjoyed a good day. Their first visit was to Amiens Prison and St. Pierre CWGC. Two notable graves were those of Captain "Pick" Pickard and Flight Lt. John Broadly, killed during a raid to allow French prisoners to escape from Amiens Prison. A visit was made to Amiens Cathedral and a boat trip was also enjoyed.

Our return to England went without a hitch. The trip was extremely interesting, educational and (as usual) poignant.

Our thanks go to Harry Taylor and Jack Cavanagh for their usual knowledgeable talks and instructive visits, to Andrew Middleton, our helpful and forbearing driver and especially to Andrew Brooks for all the time and effort he put into organising this most successful and enjoyable trip..