

Cheltonians on the Somme

Branch Tour: 10-13 September

Graham Adams

The Somme was the location for the Branch's second battlefield tour. It was decided to explore the attack on 1 July 1916, from a Gloucestershire perspective, under the rather loose title of *Cheltonians on the Somme*. Several members of the party volunteered to give presentations and opportunity arose to remember various relatives of tour members, who fought and in some cases died on that fateful day.

Once again, the tour was led by branch member Bob Brunsdon, a member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides (GBG), who also organised the transport, ferry crossings and accommodation. Of the party of fifteen, some were making their first visit to the Somme battlefields. Travel was by minibus, which had the services of a professional driver, Chris, who proved to be a jovial and interested member of the party and he fully participated in all the activities.

Departure from Morrisons' car park was on schedule at 8am and the long journey to Dover proved uneventful: we were in good time for our Sea France ferry crossing to Calais. The tour was to be based at the Express by Holiday Inn at Arras and after our arrival there at about 5.30pm there was time to freshen up and change for the traditional first evening 'group dinner'. Prior to this Bob took us through the itinerary for the next few days, which we had received in a personalised folder. The latter also served as a receptacle for a series of illustrated information pamphlets, handed out during the tour in support of the presentations.

Our group dinner proved to be an entertaining affair, as the party became better acquainted and everyone was impressed with the laminated place mats, which Bob had produced, showing a map of the British Infantry Divisions involved in the 1 July 1916 attack.

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Bob's plans for an 8.15am departure were thwarted, as the breakfast area was

swamped with lycra-clad individuals, taking part in a London to Paris Cycle Ride! However, the delay was not too great and it seemed no time at all before we reached our first stop, a concrete observation bunker, overlooking Gommecourt Park, just outside Hebuterne. The bunker had been built by the Engineers of 48 (South Midland) Division, which contained many Gloucestershire men.

In the first of the Tour's presentations Bob described the preparations and plans for the diversionary attack on the village of Gommecourt on 1 July 1916. A member of our group, Cecil Ballantine, had an uncle who fought and died that day with 1/9th London Regiment (Queen Victoria's Rifles). Following some input from Cecil, we walked across the recently harvested field near to the scene of the QVR's action, before taking a quick peek into the woods of Gommecourt Park, where the outline of the former German trench system could be clearly seen.

The bus then took us to the site of Nameless Farm, which was next to the road just down from the communal cemetery at Gommecourt. This position was just behind the German front line. Bob produced a large, detailed, sketch map showing the key features of the attack by 56 (London) Division over this ground. Despite the sunny weather, there was a strong, chilly wind, which necessitated the map being pinned down by lumps of earth. Bob described 56 Division's assault and the reasons for its failure. Particular reference was made to Rifleman Arthur Williams of the Queen's Westminster Rifles



Bob delivering his presentation at Gommecourt

(1/16th London Regiment), killed in action that day: a former King's School, Gloucester scholar.

A short stop was then made at Gommecourt British Cemetery No 2, where many of the 56 Division men now lie.

Following this, the intention was for a refreshment break at the café in the former Beaucourt railway station building. However, upon arrival it did not appear to be open. The owner informed Bob that very recently he had decided to close the café due to lack of trade and to concentrate on selling vegetables. If we cared to buy some of these, then he would make the toilet facilities available. As one wag commented, *'It adds a whole new dimension to going for a pea'* (sic). We declined his offer and headed for the Ocean Villas Tea Rooms, which was to be our lunch venue later in the day.

Suitably refreshed, we travelled to Serre and after debussing at Serre No 1 Cemetery, walked the track across the former no man's land to Serre No 3 Cemetery. Here Stuart Fraser, another GBG member, described the events of the morning of 1 July 1916, with particular reference to the action involving the Accrington Pals (11th East Lancs). Perhaps surprisingly, one of the officers with the Accrington Pals was Quedgeley born and King's School, Gloucester scholar, 2nd Lieutenant Arthur Beacall.

Following Stuart's presentation, we walked to the Sheffield Memorial Park,

where time was spent exploring the Accrington Pals Memorial and Railway Hollow Cemetery and the remains of the British front line.

A short stop was then made at Euston Road Cemetery, to visit the grave of 2nd Lieutenant Arthur Beacall, who is buried along with others from his battalion.

The continuous presence of a cold wind made the prospect of lunch at Ocean Villas Tea Room, Auchonvillers, even more appealing. The proprietor, Avril Williams, originates from Nailsworth and is, of course, well known to many visitors to the Somme area.

After an excellent lunch we headed for Ulster Tower at Thiepval, where we were booked in for a guided walk of the excavated trenches in Thiepval Wood, now owned by the Northern Ireland based Somme Association. Prior to entering the wood, Teddy Colligan, the Warden of the Tower, gave us a vivid description, in an authentic Irish brogue, of the 36 (Ulster) Division's attack on the Swabian Redoubt on 1 July 1916.



Joe 'Tommy' Devereux with his admirers



Stuart points to where the Accrington Pals attacked at Serre

A feature of Teddy's presentation is the dressing up of a member of the party in a uniform of a Private soldier of the Inniskillings, complete with Lee Enfield rifle. On this occasion, the honour fell to Joe Devereux (Jnr), one of the younger members of our party. It is well known that young ladies are often attracted to a chap in uniform and it should have come as no surprise when six screaming French schoolgirls ran from a nearby coach to have their photo taken with 'Tommy'.

Teddy then led us into the wood,

where we were treated to a fascinating tour of some painstakingly excavated trenches, saps and emplacements, with a detailed description of their particular function in the line. These excavations are probably as near as anyone can get to see what the trenches actually looked like, shorn, of course, of men, equipment and general battlefield detritus.

After bidding farewell to Teddy, we travelled the short way to Thiepval Visitors Centre. Here there was opportunity to study the exhibits and the computer records, before moving on to the Memorial to the Missing, with its 70,000 names of those with no known grave, who died in the Somme battles of 1916. Somehow, this imposing monument never fails to impress first time and returning visitors alike. Time was spent wandering around the vast columns, searching for names or just in quiet reflection. Several in the party were able to locate the names of relatives or persons researched.

It was time to head back to Arras for the evening but a quick call was made at Adanac Military Cemetery, where Paul Haigh laid a poppy cross at the grave of a relative, who served with the Border Regiment: a first time visit for him.

For the evening meal, the group split into various groups and looked forward to another fine day, exploring the battlefield, south of the Albert - Bapaume road.

The absence of cyclists at breakfast next morning enabled us to make a prompt start and our first stop was Lochnagar Crater. Here Helen and David Earle told us something of the attack by 34 Division at La Boiselle on 1 July and the blowing of the mines here and at nearby Y Sap. They linked this to the story of Lieutenant Richard Jennings (10th Worcesters), the son of the Rector of Kings Stanley, who, wounded

in action at La Boiselle, was rescued by Private Thomas Turrell, whom he had released from the guardroom to participate in the attack. Sadly, Lieutenant Jennings died of his wounds but not before giving a full report of Turrell's action, which led to his being awarded the VC.

Our next stop was an unscheduled one, Ovillers Military Cemetery, which stands in what was no man's land, overlooking Mash Valley. A relative of Hilary Jennings, Sergeant Alfred Beeson, was killed in action here on 1 July 1916, serving with the 2nd Royal Berkshires. Possibly he is one of the 'unknown' soldiers buried in the cemetery.

Following refreshments at The Old Blighty Tea Room, at La Boiselle, another English-run establishment, where we pre-ordered lunch, it was off to Fricourt for the next stage of the tour. This was to be a battlefield walk of almost three miles, led by Graham Adams. Starting and finishing at the German Military Cemetery, the walk took in Fricourt New Military Cemetery, the former German front line positions facing Becourt Wood, the Willow Patch and the sunken road, which runs from Contalmaison to Fricourt. After summarising XV Corps' plan to capture the village, the actions of the individual brigades of 21 Division were described at stops along the way. Graham pointed out that by causing the Germans to evacuate the village the British Army tasted success, which had eluded them further north but at great cost. A chilly wind did not deter several of the party successfully searching for battlefield debris in the harvested fields, whilst appreciating the magnificent views across to other parts of the battlefield.



Approaching the Willow Patch on the Battlefield Walk

Lunch was then taken at The Old Blighty Tea Room, with dessert in the form of a magnificent iced fruit cake, decorated with poppies, baked by Helen Earle.



Helen with her splendid cake

The next presentation was at Mansell Copse and perfectly complemented the battlefield walk, as it covered the action of 7 Division, in the attack on Fricourt. Andy Hinks told the story of the attack of the 9th Devonshires, with whom his grandfather (born in Gloucestershire) fought and survived. Thanks to the absence of crops we were able to walk the ground of their attack and identify the extent of the German positions. After this we visited Devonshire Cemetery, where Helen Earle read the poem *Before Action* at the grave of its author, Lieutenant William Noel Hodgson, who was born in Thornbury. Also remembered was Cheltonian 2nd Lieutenant Cecil Hirst killed that same day, who now lies in Danzig Alley Cemetery. Andy's presentation was particularly praiseworthy, as he had never visited the Somme before.

Our penultimate stop was down a track, in a field in front of Montauban, near the site of the Casino Point mine. Bob Brunsdon handed out some extracts from a trench map and after some instruction on the grid referencing system of the time challenged us to pinpoint our position. We ascertained that we were at the point where the 8th East Surreys (part of 18 Division) attacked, kicking footballs into no man's land, an idea of

Captain W P 'Billie' Nevill, who was killed in action. Bob also gave a summary of the attacks by 18 and 30 Divisions, which led to the capture of Montauban.

A short visit was made to Triangle Point, just beyond Montauban. This was the furthest incursion into German-held territory by the British Army on 1 July. The information pamphlet contained a panorama, indicating the various woods and places to be seen from this point – objectives in later stages of the long Somme Offensive.

The final act of the day was to lay a wreath, on behalf of the Branch, at the site of the 12th Glosters Memorial Cross, near Longueval. Cecil Ballantine spoke a few words and recited the familiar lines of Binyon. Unfortunately, the Cross was absent, as it is in the process of being replaced.



Following the route of the 9th Devonshires near Mansell Copse

The evening in Arras followed the same pattern as previously and our final morning was spent individually exploring the city centre. This was followed by an excellent guided tour of Carriere Wellington, the recently opened cavern and tunnels complex, dug by New Zealand miners in the Great War and used to shelter troops prior to the Battle of Arras in 1917.

Prior to departure for Calais and a smooth journey back to Cheltenham, grateful thanks were expressed to Bob Brunsdon for his efforts in putting together and leading the tour. On behalf of the Tour party and Branch he was presented with the latest version of Gerald Gliddon's *Somme 1916 A Battlefield Companion*.

The aim of a battlefield tour should be to further knowledge of the battlefield, remember those who fought and to enjoy some fun and friendship. This tour met all those objectives fully. ■