

Foot-slogging over Belgian ways

Branch Tour to Ypres: 2–5 October 2008

Graham Adams

Foot-slogging over Belgian ways was a phrase from a poem by Will Harvey, a former pupil of King's School, Gloucester, who fought in the Ypres Salient, with the 1/5 Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment. It was the title chosen for the Branch's first ever battlefield tour, to the place where he fought.

Ten tour members duly assembled in the car park of Morrisons' supermarket, at 8 am, only to receive news, shortly after, that there was a problem with our minibus – it was stuck in Cheltenham, as a key had snapped in the lock! The news was greeted with remarkable *sang-froid* by our tour leader, Bob Brunsdon, who announced that departure would be delayed by at least a couple of hours, whilst the problem was rectified. Telephone calls had then to be made to various people, who were being picked up en-route, not least of these, Peter Gill, who was travelling across to Belgium in his own vehicle, which was to be used as back-up for the tour. A bright sunny morning helped maintain morale and the ensuing time was spent in Morrisons' café. At last, the bus and our driver, Ambrose, arrived and we set off for Dover at 10.45 am.

Dover was reached without further incident and having gathered in the other members of the party, we were able to board a later Sea France ferry for Calais. The plan for the evening was to arrive at our accommodation, Varlet Farm at Poelcapelle before heading into Ypres to lay a wreath at the Menin Gate, as part of the Last Post Ceremony; to be followed by a group dinner in the Old Tom restaurant in the Grote Markt. Obviously, the earlier delay caused a change of plan and it was decided to head direct for Ypres, in the hope that we could make it to the Menin Gate, have dinner and travel to Varlet Farm thereafter. In the event, diversions, due to road works, caused us to miss the Menin Gate but we were right on time for the dinner, where everyone admired the laminated place mats, detailing the Battalions of the

Gloucestershire Regiment, which fought in the Great War, that Bob had produced.

Upon arrival at Varlet Farm we were warmly greeted by the owner, Charlotte Cardoe-Descamps, who served up home-made apple pie, tea and coffee, whilst Bob and Peter delivered the tour briefing and rooms were allocated. So ended an eventful day!

The next morning we mustered at 8 am, to be confronted by the marvellous spread of food, which is a feature of the Varlet Farm breakfast. Any left-overs may be utilised for a packed lunch, with Charlotte thoughtfully providing the cling film.

The heavy overnight rain had thankfully abated in time for our first stop, at a crossroads near to Poelcapelle village. Bob delivered an excellent presentation on an attack made on 9 October 1917, by the 1/4 and 1/6 Glosters, along with 7 Worcesters. It was a limited action, part of the Battles of Third Ypres, which does not merit mention in the Official History of the War. Notwithstanding its small scale, Bob described the elaborate organisation that was put in place to support the attack. He made use of a large, clear, detailed sketch map, mounted on the back of the bus, to describe the attack. From our vantage point, we had a clear view of most of the actual battlefield.



One of Bob's detailed maps showing part of the action of the Battle of Poelcapelle



Poelcapelle British Cemetery

At our next stop, Poelcapelle British Cemetery, we were able to visit the graves of some of the 167 officers and men from the Glosters, who were killed in the above attack. This was thanks to an informative, coloured handout, which contained details of the cemetery, including a plan of the burial plots and grave references of the casualties in question. These handouts were a welcome feature of the tour, designed to be kept in a personalised tour folder, which each member received.

For those visiting the Ypres Salient for the first time, a visit to Tyne Cot Cemetery, with its 11,954 burials (making it the largest CWGC cemetery in the world) is a must. In recent times, efforts have been made to provide facilities for the over 180,000 annual visitors to the cemetery and to provide them with information on the history of the cemetery and the Battles of Third Ypres, often known as Passchendaele. The new facilities are sited discretely and do not in anyway interfere with the atmosphere of the place. You stand in the cemetery, look down the gentle slope towards the spires of Ypres in the distance and wonder how men attacked over ground that was a sea of mud and so devoid of cover.

From the Cemetery we walked down a lane until we reached Canadalaan or Canada Way. Peter Gill then led us on a walk, designed to retrace the steps of the Canadian

Corps, as it battled its way towards the village of Passchendaele, which it captured on 6 November 1917. We were glad that the weather remained dry, although there was a keen, chill wind. After describing incidents along the way, we came to the large Crest Farm Canadian Memorial, from which the centre of Passchendaele village can be clearly seen. Given its infamous name, in the context of the Great War, the village itself now seems rather innocuous.

Back on the bus we headed for a welcome lunch stop in the grounds of the former Zonnebeke Chateau. Unfortunately, it started to rain and refuge was sought in the Passchendaele Memorial Museum, which is housed in the former chateau. The Museum was rather crowded, with two large parties of French schoolchildren; however, they proved to be well behaved, listening intently as Museum guides conducted them round. A particular feature of the museum is the authentic reconstruction of a British front line dugout system.

The rain now looked to be in for the day, so only a brief photo stop was made at Clapham Junction, on the Menin Road, where the Memorial to 1 and 2 Glosters and 18 (Eastern) Division, stand opposite each other.

A short way down the Menin Road is Hooze Crater Museum and café. After a welcome cup of tea or coffee, we were free to look around this private, delightfully old-fashioned style museum, housed in a former chapel and which is packed with artefacts relating to the Great War. Adjacent is the site of Hooze Chateau, HQ to the BEF in 1914. The grounds



Part of the Iron Harvest at Varlet Farm

now feature a large, water-filled mine crater and this was where the Germans used flame throwers (*flammenwerfer*) for the first time. Unfortunately, the heavy rain deterred exploration of this and the Hooze Crater Cemetery, across the busy Menin Road.

We now returned to Varlet Farm, where Charlotte treated us to an excellent talk on the various relics of the Great War, which are unearthed at the farm on a regular basis. This includes various types of ordnance, live and otherwise. The Belgian bomb disposal units are certainly kept busy, with, on average, three shells or grenades a week being found. Charlotte's command of English and her knowledge and enthusiasm for her subject impressed us all.

The Last Post Association, which organises the nightly ceremony at the Menin Gate, had kindly accommodated our request to switch the laying of a wreath, on behalf of the Branch, to the following evening. Brian Ward, Alan Groves and Joe Devereux (Junior) acted as our wreath layers. The haunting notes of the bugles during Last Post and Reveille echoed around the mighty columns, with their 54,900 inscribed names, in time-honoured and moving fashion.

Our party then dispersed amongst Ypres' numerous cafes and restaurants, before returning to Varlet Farm.

Saturday dawned bright and sunny and after breakfast and a short talk by Charlotte, about the 'iron harvest' in the farmyard, we headed for the southern end of the former Ypres Salient and Ploegsteert Wood. Our objective was Ploegsteert Wood British Cemetery, which is in the heart of the wood and Bob had obtained prior permission from the CWGC to take the bus down the track into the wood, which saved a long walk. We congregated in the small, atmospheric cemetery, which was used by the 1/5 Glosters, during April to June 1915, their first experience of trench warfare, at nearby St Yves. The handout for this

section provided a grave location, biographical information and in most cases a photograph of all the 1/5 Glosters buried there. In this peaceful spot, with the rays of the autumn sun sneaking through the leaves of the trees, Peter read poems by Will Harvey and Ivor Gurney.



Poetry reading at Ploegsteert Wood British Cemetery

We returned to the road by bus and then walked to the Khaki Chums' Memorial to one of the Christmas Truce sites of 1914. We then continued a little further to the cottage under which the cartoonist Bruce Bairnsfather spent the winter of 1914/15 in a dugout.

The rest of the morning and early afternoon was spent touring the Messines/Wytschaete area, this time with Graham Adams acting as guide. Still largely a farming area, much evidence of the Great War remains, particularly in relation to the Battle of Messines, fought between 7-14 June 1917, when nineteen mines were blown under Messines Ridge. We visited the sites of many of the craters left by these, which are now large ponds. The most notable is Spanbroekmolen (the Toc H-owned Pool of Peace), Peckham and the pair near to Kruisstraat Cross Roads. Time was spent in Lone Tree and Spanbroekmolen Cemeteries, where many of the Irishmen from 36 (Ulster) Division, killed on 7 June 1917, lie. The Irish link with the area was emphasised by a stop at the Island of Ireland Peace Park and that of the Anzacs, by a visit to the New Zealand Memorial at Messines, which still features a pair of German bunkers. We would look at the area from the German perspective later in the day but in anticipation, we also visited the crypt of St Nicholas' Church in Messines, used as a dressing station and where a certain Gefreiter Adolf Hitler received treatment. A short battlefield walk from Spanbroekmolen Crater to the Cemetery gave

opportunity for members to look out for shrapnel balls, when not dodging the competitors of a cross country cycle race!

After this it was on to Hill 60, for a welcome lunch stop, in the newly appointed café across the road from the site. We explored the Hill, which was, unfortunately, being used as an adventure playground by a party of primary school children. A number of our party took the opportunity to cross the railway bridge to visit the site of Caterpillar Crater, a result of one of the mines fired on 7 June 1917. It has only recently been opened to the public and is a fine example of its type.

by an information area, which details the history of the site. Bob had supplied everyone with two trench maps of the area, one produced by the Germans and the other by the British. An interesting time was spent locating the various features shown on these maps and exploring the trenches, dug outs and mine entrances present.



New Zealand Memorial Park, Messines



Exploring the trench system at Bayernwald

The day's touring over it was a return to Varlet Farm, before going into Ypres for dinner. Some members attended the Last Post Ceremony, where an Irish Pipe, Drum and Bugle band, plus a choir contributed to proceedings.

Steady rain was a feature of our final morning. This was spent in Ypres, visiting such places as the Cloth Hall Museum, bookshops

and the Menin Gate, whilst a few people went with Peter to visit particular graves at cemeteries within the Salient area. It was then off to Calais and a rougher than usual Channel crossing, before the long motorway haul back to Cheltenham, arriving at 9 pm.

At breakfast, on the final morning, Bob Brunson was presented with an illustrated book of the Ypres Salient, endorsed by all the tour members, by way of thanks for his efforts. He had done a superb job in organising the tour, putting together a programme, which appealed to old hands and newcomers alike, which featured several imaginative touches, such as the souvenir folder for hand-outs and other related documentation. It was just as a branch battlefield tour should be, replete with fun, friendship and remembrance. Hopefully such a tour will feature annually in the Branch programme of activities. ■

With time pressing, it was decided to forgo the visit to Zillebeke Church and Churchyard, with its associations with the Old Contemptibles and British aristocracy and finish the day at the Bayernwald.

Bayernwald (known to the British as Croonaert Wood) is an area of woodland, which was occupied for much of the Great War by Bavarian Regiments of the German Army. Adolf Hitler served here. Until ten years ago it was private land and after being acquired by the local authority a team of battlefield archaeologists excavated part of the original German trench system, which was then opened to the public, supported

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