

SOCIETY OUTING

1st Visit to Ypres and First World War Cemeteries

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On the longest day of the year and one of the sunniest a packed coach travelled via Eurotunnel to Ypres and the fields of Flanders to pay our respects to the many thousands who gave their lives during the carnage of the battles around the Ypres salient during the year commemorating the centenary of the outbreak of the 'war to end wars'.

A day trip could not possibly do justice to our objective and we were conscious of the pressures of time to complete our itinerary with our military historian and driver hurrying us along. The plan was to visit two British and Commonwealth Cemeteries and one German Cemetery culminating with attending the daily Menin Gate ceremony in Ypres. A lunch stop in Ypres came first where we lost our first bit of time negotiating road closures caused by a car rally in the town centre with the Cathedral close being used as pit stops! There was just time for a snack and a drink and a quick look inside the cathedral where there was a number of moving art displays on a First World War theme.

Passing several small, beautifully kept (by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) cemeteries, our first stop was at Essex Farm cemetery. Our historian pointed out the special memorial to John McCrae, a Canadian doctor who enlisted early in the War and was stationed at Essex Farm with the Canadian Field Artillery. Having witnessed the burial of a close



McCrae memorial Essex Farm

friend buried there, John McCrae noticed the poppies blowing around the graves, which inspired him to write the well-known poem 'In Flanders Fields,' now recorded on his memorial.

The German cemetery at Langemark is one of only four German cemeteries in Flanders, containing the remains of over 44,000 soldiers. It differed greatly from the British cemeteries with their white, upright headstones standing proud in the sunshine. At the entrance was a sombre, mass grave, containing the remains of 24,917 unidentified soldiers. Elsewhere, shaded amongst lines of oak trees (a German symbol of perpetuity) were slabs of dark granite laid flat, concealing up to 15 named remains per stone. In one corner was a short, stubby black cross so different from the tall, white memorial crosses in our cemeteries. A sculpture of four mourning figures stands guard over the fallen which, strangely, include two British soldiers killed in 1918. Before leaving Langemark, some of us gathered to pray and meditate upon the horrific slaughter that this cemetery and others represent to us today.

Our final visit was to Tyne Cot Cemetery and its Memorial to the Missing. This is the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world with over 11,956 graves and on its impressive white walls 35,000 names of those with no known grave who died in the Ypres Salient after 16 August, 1917. The site was originally a barn with half a dozen German pill-boxes around it in the Passchendaele battlefields. Three pill-boxes remain and the large Cross of Sacrifice sits atop another. With little time we admired the beautiful red roses everywhere that complemented row upon row of simple, white headstones – some with names, others inscribed, 'An Unknown Soldier of the Great War'.

We returned to Ypres for our booked main meal, leaving behind our historian and one of our party who had failed to return to the coach and who could not be found. Fortunately, he turned up eventually, but the delay cost us dear in time. The plan was to be at the Menin Gate an hour before the 8pm ceremony in order to obtain a good view. Instead, we managed to arrive just before the start and had to be content with looking over the heads of some 2,000 others. It was, nevertheless, a moving ceremony, carried out daily since 1928 after the Menin Gate was built in 1927 (except for a break during the Second World War German occupation when it was held at Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey). Inscribed on the Gate are the names of 54,896 Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Ypres Salient, but whose bodies have never been identified or found. The daily ceremony represents an expression of gratitude by Ypres citizens to those who gave their lives for Belgium. Buglers from the fire brigade sound the Last Post and wreaths are laid. Often visiting military bands from the UK and elsewhere take part and on our visit it was the London-Scottish Regiment.

Under strict instructions to get back to our coach as quickly as possible in order to make our booked return trip, we lost more time in the crowds, and our leaders were worried that we would not make it and would face a long delay and even extra cost, but we did, by the skin of our teeth, after loading time had officially passed. We were one of only four vehicles on the very long train.

The journey back gave us time for thought. Why do we and thousands of others make this trip to Flanders and other battlefields day after day, year after year, after 100 years? To remember and respect all those unknown to most of us who gave – no, whose lives were taken? To learn something from the slaughter?

Our thanks go to Pat and Patrick for organising the visit, especially for organising a second trip so as not to disappoint all those wishing to go.



Menin Gate