

In this centenary year since the start of the Great War, half a dozen members of the History Group set out in early December to take part in the nightly ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ypres. They were intent on laying wreaths to commemorate the 134 railway and dock police officers who gave their lives in the conflict and to visit some of the memorials and battlefields in the surrounding Flemish Fields.

It was an enlightening and rewarding journey that left a mark on all of us. Inspired by the WIPERS TIMES newspaper printed in the trenches, this is the way it went.

Great Railway Journeys

We came from all parts of the country to meet at St Pancras International at 10am on Tuesday 2nd of December. Bill Rogerson came from Holyhead and Rob Davison from across the Irish Sea- both had set out the day before. Others began their day early to make the rendezvous on time. One, Ed Thompson, who had the shortest distance of all to travel, nearly didn't make it. With some mechanical apparatus tearing up the track bed, his train ground to a halt on the outskirts of south-east London to go no further. But with some fortitude and a willingness to fork out £25 for a taxi fare, make it he did.

Eurostar carried us safely and swiftly to Lille International in France where a short walk brought us to Lille Flanders station for the first of our two connecting trains to Ypres in Belgium. It was cancelled. We discussed the alternatives- a bus, two taxies, hiring a car... We did the sensible thing and retired to the nearest hostelry for refreshments to await the next train in 90 minutes or so. After that there were no further hitches and at the Regina Hotel in Ypres we met up with Martin Lambert a serving BTP officer (and member of the History Group) who has been guiding battlefield tours for ten years. As we would soon find out, his knowledge and expertise were invaluable. We retired to a nearby restaurant to discuss tactics.

There were no cancellations on the return journey but there were one or two little blips... Our advertised departure from Ypres, just before noon, was only going to go half way and from then on it was a bus. We retired to the station bar to await the next direct train service in an hour. It was plain sailing then all the way to Lille International. The check-in gate was not yet open and so we retired to O'Conways, the ubiquitous Irish bar, to wait.... (Do you detect a theme here?)

Three pints of Guinness and three pints of Kilkenny s'il vous plait. Oh yes and six cheeseburgers avec frites. The beer came in good time but then suddenly the air was rent by a strident alarm and an insistent recorded irritating female voice urging us to evacuate the building immediately. Lille International is a big complex and people streamed out of every available exit. We waited in the cold on a high bridge above the station; there was not an official in sight. Soon the alarm stopped but who will say if we can return? The beer was still sitting where we had left it and the cheeseburgers turned up in time. The word according to the waitress was that it was a fire alarm *test*. What!!!

Menin Gate

The first thing you notice about Ypres is what a beautiful place it is with many fine buildings and cobbled streets. Even more remarkable is when you remember that the whole place was flattened in the 1914-18 war and that it has been painstakingly rebuilt with traditional methods. The cathedral and the cloth hall look as though they have been there for centuries.

There has been a service of Remembrance at the Menin Gate every night since 1st November 1929 with the exception only of four years during WW2. The Memorial Arch that is now the Menin Gate was completed in 1927 and it is a truly magnificent building, especially when lit up at night.



The Menin Gate looking spectacular in floodlights

It was said to be a rather quiet service that evening with only a couple of hundred people gathered. It began with a reading and a profile of one of the soldiers who died on the battlefield nearby. As always, a bugler from the Ypres fire brigade sounded the last post. One of the brigade buglers is 83 years old and has played the last post for 60 years only missing it twice. Bill Rogerson, who had been selected by the Last Post Marshall to read the Exhortation, stood in the centre of the road and his voice boomed out amongst the assembled crowd -

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*

We seven men stood beneath the gate with heads bowed as the crowd hushed for the minute's silence.



Then it was time to lay the wreaths, first were a group of four young children, perhaps eleven year olds, from Peterhouse Primary School. And a good job they did of it too. Six of us formed two ranks of three; Bill Rogerson, Rob Davison and Phil White laid the wreath on behalf of the British Transport Police and Viv Head, Glyn Thomas and Martin Lambert laid the wreath on behalf the British Transport Police History Group. We marched across the central roadway and climbed the steps to lay the wreaths.



After the ceremony, we searched through the fifty-four thousand names listed on the panels to locate four railway police officers with no known grave. Martin Lambert had taken it upon himself to bring a number of small wooden crosses, one for each man and each bearing the force crest and inscribed with name of the individual. He placed these at the foot of the corresponding panel.



PC DAVID HEADLEY FAIR

Midland Railway Police. Trooper 2025 in the 1st Life Guards; killed in action on the 30th October 1914.

PC DAVID GARVEY

London and South West Railway Police. Private 917 of the 1st Battalion of the Irish Guards. Killed in action on the 1st November 1914.

PC CLIFFORD LAURENCE LEARNER

Great Northern Railway Police .Killed in action on the 5th December 1914 when he was Private 3/8926 in the 1st Battalion of the Duke of Edinburgh's Wiltshire Regiment. He is also on the Great Northern Railway War Memorial near the Booking Office at Kings Cross Station.

PC HORACE HENRY LOVEDAY

Midland Railway. Sergeant 14617 in the 8th Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment; killed in action on 31st July 1917.

Battlefields and Memorials

If it had been a bit chilly so far, it was several degrees colder the next morning. He who turned out in shirtsleeves did not take much persuading to shake out his coat. We took the bus to Langemark, an area held by the Germans for most of the war. We visited the German cemetery, one of only four First World War German cemeteries in the Flanders region. In the whole of Belgium there are just thirteen 1st and 2nd World War German cemeteries. Each of these are a concentration of scattered graveyards brought together into huge mass graves from all over Belgium. At Langemark, 44,000 German soldiers are buried in one large pit. They are represented by four stone figures.

The names of some 5000 students from the military university are engraved on a wall.



They were young student volunteers who died in the Battle of Langemark during October and November 1914 in the First Battle of Ypres. They had the rank of *Kriegsfreiwilliger*, which translates as “war volunteer” and the cemetery is known to the German people as *Der Studentenfriedhof*- the *Student Cemetery*. Their deaths became one of the legends of Ypres- it is said they were blessed by the Kaiser and told that British bullets could not harm them. They marched across the open fields of Flanders, arm in arm with bands playing. And they were mown down in their hundreds by British machine guns.



Langemark Cemetery where 44,000 German soldiers are buried in one big pit

Back in Langemark, we defrosted over coffee in a sandwich bar, then set out along the disused railway line (no HV jacket needed) past the deserted Langemark railway station once also used as the local fire station. Crossing the old Steenbeke River, we reached one of the newest memorials on the western front. Harry Patch was the last surviving veteran to see combat in the Great War. Harry's military service lasted only three months at the front before he was wounded coming out of an attack that killed three of his comrades. Harry received a shrapnel wound to the groin. A small memorial lies on the ground close to where the action took place..

When Harry was here, conditions were horrendous. What is today flat farmland was then completely waterlogged with pontoons being used to move around during one of the wettest winters on record. We felt a chill at the thought and not just from the icy cold wind that blew around us.

Marching along a cycle path to avoid the many 40 ton lorries using the road we arrived at the Cement House British Cemetery. With neat rows of white headstones on immaculate grass, it is in marked contrast to the German one size fits all cemetery. 'Cement House' was the military name given to a fortified farm house on the Langemark to Boesinghe road. There are now 3,592 Commonwealth servicemen of the First World War buried or commemorated in the cemetery, with 2,425 of the burials unidentified.

After paying our respects, we moved further along the road to the site of the Hedd Wyn memorial, the bardic name for the Welsh language poet Ellis Humphrey Evans who was mortally wounded nearby. It is no co-incidence that the newly erected memorial to all soldiers of Welsh descent to take part in the Great War was placed just another short distance along the road at Pilckem Ridge. A quite magnificent memorial displays a cast bronze statue of a Welsh Dragon surmounting four giant Welsh Blue Pennant stones quarried in South Wales. And today, with a misty and ethereal backdrop of open Flemish countryside, it stands bold indeed.

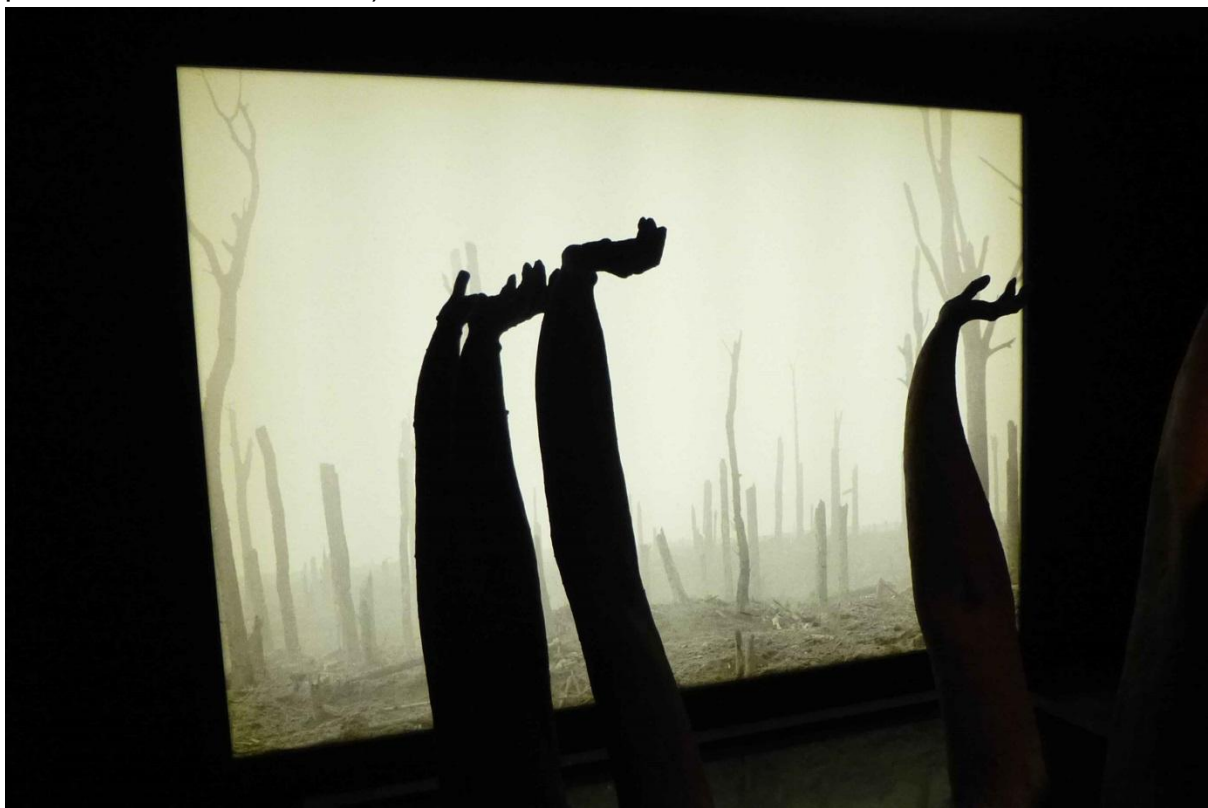


Fortunately, with a bus stop nearby, we were able to get back into Ypres and connect to a bus for Passchendaele, getting off at Zonnebeke which was the front line in the run up to the battle of Passchendaele. With a lot of walking under our belts it was time for another defrost with a special order of delicious cauliflower and leek soup, appreciated by nearly everyone, especially the Welsh contingent!

. The Passchendaele Experience Museum is housed in a beautiful chateaux set in extensive grounds. Opened only quite recently, it is a must for anyone visiting the area. Taking you through the involvement of all the nations fighting in this sector, it

includes reconstructed trenches in the grounds and shelters in the basement . With dugouts and fire steps it is an excellent way to get an idea of the depth these trenches were. Also the contrast between the well-built trenches of the German army to the British trenches designed not to be lived in too long in the desire to advance. The London Underground officers amongst us felt very much at home.

There were rooms full of munitions, weapons, uniforms, maps and artefacts of every description. One could easily spend half a day there. Particularly poignant was the *Falls The Shadow* exhibition; a sculpture of many arms reaching upwards silently screaming to be noticed. It commemorates the many hundreds of soldiers who did not die in battle but who were drowned in the waterlogged battlefields. It is an evocative and thought provoking display created by New Zealand sculptor Helen Pollock. (There are 2384 names of NZ troops with no known graves recorded on the panels of the Menin Gate.)



The evocative Falls the Shadow exhibition

Leaving the museum as the sun grew heavy in the sky we went in search in the corner pub to await the returning bus. Arriving back in Ypres we stopped off at one of the bars at the back of the cloth hall, telling tales of the cat festival during medieval times when the town fool would throw cats off of the spires of the cloth hall. These days they throw papier-mâché cats with money in for the children of Ypres to pick up. Then it was a return to the Menin Gate for the evening service and last post. This time it was the bomb disposal teams from four countries who laid their wreaths in the presence of a much larger crowd. Later, at the de Anker restaurant, we demolished a

whole species of mussels and a small potato crop of chips not to mention a few beers. Well, it had been a long day.

Too soon it was time to pack the bags ready for a mid-morning start to the return journey home. But we were not quite finished yet, there was time to walk to the Ypres Reservoir Cemetery. Entombed here are the bodies of two railway police officers:

PC GEORGE JAY M.M. Great Eastern Railway Police at Canning Town, a Londoner who served three years in the GER Police prior to enlisting into the Military Foot Police on the 26th October 1914 as a Lance Corporal. He was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field on the 14th August 1917 and was killed in action aged 35 years on the 24th March 1918 in Ypres. On his death a colleague, Corporal Blythe (who was also a GER Police Officer), wrote a remarkable epitaph:

As soon as I heard he had been wounded by shell fire I went to see him at the dressing station but he was unconscious and died three hours later. He was killed as he would have wished, in the execution of his duty and has been buried amongst other heroes who gave their lives for King and Country. He was bold and fearless under shell fire and set a fine example of courage and devotion to those who he was in charge, creating in them a feeling of confidence and safety by his coolness when in danger.

(Corporal Blythe survived the war; he is believed to be Percy Blythe from Hackney.)

PC ALFRED ARTHUR MARTIN Great Eastern Railway Police London.

He joined the Great Eastern Railway police in June 1914 at the age of 28. He was a married man living in Whitechapel, London. As Sergeant 5918 in the 10th Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry he was killed in action on the 12th November 1915 aged 31 years. He is also commemorated on the Great Eastern Railway Memorial on the upper level of Liverpool Street Station, London .



Ever prepared, Martin left two wooden BTP crosses at their headstones.

Walking back towards the centre of town we paused at St George's chapel in the English sector of Ypres. After the war many veterans joined the labour corps and the Imperial War Graves Commission (as it was then) to clean and tend to the graves. They settled and made their lives in Ypres. Under the occupation of the 2nd WW the veterans stayed and continued to tend the graves. Within the chapel are very many plaques dedicated to individuals, to regiments, to schools and to associations including one for the British Transport Police, placed there in November 2009-

In memory of the men of the Railway Police
Forces of Great Britain who fought and died in the Great War
of 1914-1918. They served their country in peace and war
and when called upon made the ultimate sacrifice.

*They died as soldiers but will be forever remembered as
colleagues by those who served after them*

It is a fine memorial plaque yet it is unfortunate in that it seems to exclude the eight officers from Dock Police Forces who also gave their lives for their country.

What a remarkable few days it has been. We may only have scraped the surface of what happened here a hundred years ago but it has given us an insight that we could never have had sitting cosily at home, no matter how much research we might have done. We have learnt too that Ypres is not just a name on a map but it is a lovely warm-hearted town full of people who are polite, warm and welcoming. We were all struck on how car drivers readily stop to let you cross the road even when not on a crossing. Wonderful.

Finally a big thank you to Martin Lambert, our guide and companion and the man with the knowledge that allowed us to get the most out of such a short time. He was unflappable and travelled light but always managed to produce the right piece of paper when needed, a map, a bus timetable or information on one of the officers who died. He knew some of the best pubs too.



By the left- Glyn Thomas, Phil White, Rob Davison, Bill Rogerson,
Martin Lambert, Viv Head, Ed Thompson

