

BATTLEFIELDS TRIP REPORT

By Mr Clayton, Head of Humanities

DAY ONE

Waterloo Battlefield, Belgium

Waterloo was one of the turning points in history, ending 23 years of warfare across Europe. We followed in the footsteps of many famous people, such as William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott, who made the journey to see where the dramatic events of the battle unfolded. Starting on the low mound, Napoleon used as his observation point, we then traced the route of the 17,000 French infantry sent to break through the British lines on top of the Mont Saint Jean Ridge.

On the way, we passed the iconic walled farm of La Haye Sainte, the central position of the entire battle and defended all afternoon until it fell to the French at about 6pm. We practised forming line, column and square to understand the uses and problems of these key formations in which Napoleonic battles were fought and saw where and how the repeated French assaults on Wellington's lines were repulsed.

We visited the new, state-of-the-art underground museum and saw the hugely impressive 360 degree painting of the battle. The stiff climb to the top of the Lion Mound in the rain was worth it for the view it gave of the field, especially having just seen the panoramic painting. The rain came down in sheets as we crossed to Hougomont, but we were rewarded with the spectacular theatrical film display and being able to compare the site today to 19th Century images.

Ypres, Belgium

The tour then moved on in time as we headed for Ypres and Sanctuary Wood, where part of the front line trench system has been preserved in its "natural" state with the sides of the trenches supported with rusting corrugated iron to prevent their collapse. Our exploration of these trenches helped us to understand more fully what trench life was like and the museum showed many examples of the shocking weaponry used by both sides.

The effects of such weapons and the appalling waste of war was then amply demonstrated by our visit to the Tyne Cot, the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in which 11,908 soldiers are buried and the names of a further 34,888 missing men are recorded on stone panels. The value and attention given to each fallen soldier, from the humble private to senior commanders, was a marked contrast with Waterloo where the rank and file were turfed into vast pits and their bones later exhumed to be ground down to make fertiliser or to refine brown sugar and make it white. The fading light of the winter sunset added to the atmosphere as we ended our visit with three war poems by the Cross of Sacrifice.

We had our evening meal in the funky Depot Restaurant in Ypres before attending the Last Post Remembrance ceremony at the Menin Gate, which bears the names of 54,896 British troops who died in the Ypres Salient, but have no known grave. Members of the Ypres Fire Brigade have performed this ceremony every day since 1928, except when under German occupation from 1940-1944. The sombre mood was then lightened by a visit to the famous Leonidas chocolate shop in the beautiful main square where the owners gave us their usual warm and entertaining welcome, and in turn did very well from our visit.

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DAY 2

German Cemetery in Neuville St. Vaast, France

On day two of our tour, we travelled south to the Somme area, stopping at Neuville St Vaast, the huge German war cemetery where 44,800 soldiers' graves are marked by stark iron crosses, each marking the graves of four men.

The Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge in Givenchy-en-Gohelle, France

After a reflective visit, we continued to the Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge to view its massive stone pillars, poignant statues and trenches preserved with concrete sandbags and duckboards. The university student guides took us underground to see one of the tunnels created by the Canadians in their efforts to capture the ridge and we saw the surrounding woods and fields pock-marked by shell craters. Further evidence of Canada's contribution to the War and great sacrifice was seen at Beaumont Hamel, the Newfoundland Memorial Park where a great bronze Caribou bellows out over the memorial to the missing lost in the now grass-covered trenches and no man's land stretching along and below the ridge. We saw the skeletal Danger Tree in front of the German trenches, the furthest point reached by the Newfoundland soldiers and the site of the Hawthorne Ridge mine explosion, now one of the most iconic film images of the First World War.

The Ancre British Cemetery in Beaumont-Hamel, France

On the way to Thiepval, we stopped at the small Ancre Cemetery as it is where two of our former students are buried, Lieutenant Alec Edward Boucher and Private Robert Harry Walker. Photographs and obituaries of these men who, like us, attended assemblies and lessons in the Old Hall building, brought a more personal element to the tour, as did finding the names of several former students on the awe-inspiring Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme where 73,000 men are commemorated. Again, this was an opportunity to reflect on the vast human sacrifice lost in this attritional war.

Lochnagar Crater near the village of La Boisselle, France

Our Somme tour then ended with a visit to the Lochnagar Crater, one of the massive mines exploded under the German lines on the 1st July 1916, which is still 300' wide and 90' deep and was created by 60,000 lbs of explosive – about the size of our coach. Like the Hawthorn Ridge mine we saw earlier, it was testament to the horrendous destructive power of modern warfare.

Heading Home

The following day, we made our way home after calling at the local Hypermarché in Peronne. The return crossing was a little rougher than the first, but we still enjoyed the free meal vouchers we were given.

All in all, it was a very enjoyable trip as well as a thoughtful and, at times, poignant one. There was a lot to see and we learned a great deal about the events and their place in history. It also gave us the opportunity to consider, discuss and reflect, to connect the tangible with the intangible and empathise with the life experience of others.