

Gateways to the First World War presents

'HERE DEAD WE LIE': PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE WESTERN FRONT



‘HERE DEAD WE LIE’: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE WESTERN FRONT

*Here dead we lie because we did not choose
To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
But young men think it is, and we were young.*

A.E. Housman

The battlefields of the Western Front continue to haunt the imagination over a century after the First World War's end. Amateur photographer and battlefield guide, Mark Allen, has made countless tours of the battlefields. Visiting in all seasons, weathers, and times of day, he has taken thousands of photographs, creating an encyclopaedic collection. Often using his phone, rather than a more sophisticated camera, but inspired by a particular moment or vision, he has captured the spirit of the cemeteries and memorials. The effects of cloud and sun, and of morning and evening light, are recorded in the photographs and remind us that the memorials are anchored in the landscapes of North-Eastern France and West Flanders. Like Mark, many of us feel that mystical association between the precise place of commemoration, and this exhibition provides a glimpse, a snapshot even, of that relationship.

As the cemeteries inspire our imaginations to move across time considering the wartime conditions, the bereaved who visited these places seeking consolation and catharsis, and the peace and calm of the present, the accompanying soundscape interweaves fragments including poetry recorded by members of Dover Youth Theatre. It is designed to enhance your journey through the images encouraging you to consider the many influences that have shaped our understanding of the battlefields and their significance to the contemporary world.

The Photographer:

Mark Allen spends much of his (normal) year travelling around the battlefields of the First World War principally as a battlefield guide and researcher. His personal interests focus on remembering those who fought and the landscapes where many died. Examples of the memorials and cemeteries which now form part of the modern landscape are recorded in his photographs, and his thoughts are presented in the accompanying captions.

SPRING PLANTING SURROUNDS PIGEON RAVINE CEMETERY, ÉPEHY, FRANCE.

11.48, Sunday 29 April 2018.

Image taken with Motorola Moto G4 phone 13mp camera f/2.0.

A Chums pilgrimage

This visit took place at the end of a battlefield walk from Villers-Guislain to Targelle Ravine and Meath cemeteries onwards to Pigeon Ravine. The landscape here is very exposed and windswept, but interspersed with occasional sunken lanes. One imagines how vulnerable troops would feel attacking across these open areas with little cover.

The symmetry of the intimate cemetery's boundary wall and the lean of the windblown trees lend themselves to an off-centre shot – enhanced by the grassed path over which family members may have passed on a pilgrimage to visit war dead. Over the past century who out of the identified casualties has been visited and who hasn't?

I think of a chum, pipe in mouth, raincoat and cap in hand, stopping by on a Worcester's veterans' tour in the twenties, to chat with CSM George Blowers, an Old Contemptible who made it through to September 1918 before losing his life.

The image captures a moment before rain fell from the heavily laden clouds, aiding the growth of the new crop in the surrounding field. Within a few weeks the cemetery walls would be hidden, leaving only a glimpse of the Cross of Sacrifice as a hint to the cemetery's location.

This remote cemetery is to the east of Épehy and situated between Cambrai and Saint Quentin. The village was originally captured in April 1917. The shallow valley seen behind the cemetery would see a charge by Indian cavalry of the 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse) on 1 December 1917 during the 'Battle of Cambrai'. The area would be lost on 22 March 1918 in the opening phase of the Kaiserschlacht (the German spring offensives of 1918).

A small cemetery containing 137 casualties, it was begun in October 1918 by the Burial Officer of 33rd Division, after the ground was recaptured during the 'Battle of Épehy'.

Typical of many Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries in these agricultural locations, access is achieved by a perfectly mown strip of grass. Beautifully illustrated in this photograph, is the early spring planting by the farmer, which follows the outer contours of the walled cemetery boundary.



FIFTEEN SOLDIERS OF THE GREAT WAR – CONNAUGHT CEMETERY, THIEPVAL, SOMME, FRANCE.

09.08, Saturday 8 April 2017.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

Why ‘fifteen’?

Nestled amongst the rows of known and ‘unknowns’, this grave of fifteen men begs so many questions. They are probably some of the over six hundred men whose remains were concentrated here after the war. That fifteen men cannot be unentwined conjours up images of horror. Men who died on the enemy wire, their lifeless bodies then left exposed to the months of rifle, machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire until they were one rotten mass? Or men who made it into the Schwaben Redoubt’s dugouts and tunnels only to find group death in a dead-end sap? Or simply that, having originally been buried in one grave together, the passage of time has resulted in it being impossible to determine who was who.

I imagine proud Ulster families hovering in front of this, and the other unknown soldiers’ graves in Connaught Cemetery, and wondering – ‘Is he here?’ – before trudging up to what was left of Thiepval village to visit its great memorial, after its unveiling in 1932, and lingering near ‘his’ name among the 72,000.

Situated just a few feet forward of the former British frontline in Thiepval Wood and facing the formidable German strongpoint of the Schwaben Redoubt lies Connaught Cemetery. From this point men of the 36th (Ulster) Division launched their attack on the morning of 1 July 1916.

Whilst achieving early success, with many men of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers having crawled forward of the frontline trenches prior to the off, their attack could not be consolidated due to the failure of the flank divisions, notably the 32nd Division attacking Thiepval village.

The cemetery was begun in the autumn of 1916 and at the Armistice only held 228 burials. Many smaller burial plots were later concentrated into this cemetery, which now contains the graves of 1288 men.

Amongst the burials is this mass grave holding the remains of fifteen men to whom time and war have denied at individual burial. They are amongst the six-hundred within the cemetery who are unidentified. They are, however,

‘KNOWN UNTO GOD’



MAISSEMY DEUTSCHER SOLDATENFRIEDHOF, MAISSEMY, AISNE, FRANCE.

12.43, Tuesday 8 April 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

Religion and the massed ranks in the ‘Soldiers Cemetery’

In this picture the names of those German soldiers known to be amongst the fifteen thousand buried in two massed graves at Maissemy lead the eye towards the crosses behind the panels. Amongst all western allies, Christianity was the dominate faith over one hundred years ago, and the crosses are representative of this.

This leads to inevitable questions about representing those buried here of other faiths, and of those who had none...

Situated 10-km north-west of Saint Quentin, this cemetery was created by the French Military authorities in 1924 who concentrated those remains originally buried in smaller cemeteries within a 30-km radius. The vast majority of those buried here died during the three great battles of the Somme: July-November 1916, the German Spring Offensive of 1918 and the Allied offensives of that summer.

The cemetery holds the remains of 30,478 German war dead of First World War. Groupings of basalt crosses, separate from the grave markers, are a feature of many German First and Second World War cemeteries. These locations are maintained by the voluntarily funded VDK (**Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge**).

Unlike CWGC cemeteries, those maintained by the VDK all differ in the way men are remembered – some have recumbent grave stones, others have metal crosses; almost all contain multiple burials with some listing four, sometimes twenty men or more. There is a distinct lack of maintained horticulture in most cemeteries of the VDK but all have oak trees within them, the national tree of Germany.

Two mass graves are located on either side of the chapel containing the remains of 15,000 soldiers – plaques naming those men who are known to be amongst those interred.



CORBIE COMMUNAL CEMETERY EXTENSION, SOMME, FRANCE.

11.33, Thursday 10 April 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

Regimental badges that mark our place, row on row

This view of spring sunlight over the headstones in Corbie enhances the intricate detail of the carved regimental badges. At the same time, the ordered discipline of the rows of CWGC headstones is in complete contrast to the almost gothic feel of the plots in the French communal cemetery in the background.

‘One Of The Best...’ begins the epitaph from Reginald Jacksons’ mother – in truth, which mothers of all the boys and men buried here would think any differently?...

When the British armies took over the front lines from the French in the Somme region in 1915, the small town of Corbie was some 20km behind the lines. The communal cemetery, near the River Somme, was originally used for burials until May 1916, from when the land now occupied by the cemetery extension was put aside by Divisional Burial Officers in preparation for the coming Somme offensive.

Medical treatment areas comprising two Casualty Clearing Stations (No. 5 & No. 21) were based nearby, just across the Ancre River in the suburb of La Neuville. The majority of the graves in the extension are of officers and men who died of wounds during the 1916 ‘Battle of the Somme’.

Within the Cemetery and its Extension, over 1,100 British and Commonwealth men of many different regiments and corps lie buried, their neat rows of headstones in complete contrast to the civilian graves of the local population behind.

John Albert Artingstall, pre-war employed as a Hatter in Bristol, served with ‘A’ Battery, LXXX Brigade, Royal Field Artillery. Attached to 17th (Northern) Division, the Brigade would be in action throughout the campaign, from attacking Fricourt on the 1 & 2 July and by mid-July, Delville Wood.

John died on 16 July 1916 and his Casualty Form simply states that he ‘Died from “wounds received in action” whilst at No. 5 CCS at Corbie.



MEMORIAL TO SOUS-LIEUTENANT LOUIS RAYMOND JEAN ASTOUL, ATOP THE CHEMIN DES DAMES, AISNE, FRANCE.

17.04, Wednesday 9 April 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

Parents' unconditional love for their officer son

This private memorial is prominently placed on the side of the road running along the top of the ridge known as the Chemin des Dames above Paissy. Freshly ploughed fields contrasting with the sky allow the memorial to stand out, enhancing the red painted engraving upon it.

Having passed the memorial whilst researching actions fought during September 1914 and visiting the graves of Royal Sussex men at Vendresse, I felt compelled to return to capture this shot.

How must Louis' parents have felt after the war when attempting to trace and interview his fellow officers to get an idea of the exact location of his death, so as they could erect this memorial to him? A perfect example of remembrance.

Louis Astoul, a Sous-Lieutenant serving with the 70th Senegalese Regiment (*Tirailleurs Sénégalais* – comprised of French Colonial troops) was killed during the first day of the Nivelle Offensive. Known as 'The Second Battle of the Aisne', 1.4 million French troops in 52 divisions attacked against the high ground known as the Chemins des Dames between Soissons and Reims. Assaulting steep, difficult wooded terrain and against a heavily entrenched German enemy, the attacks were a failure for a number of reasons.

'To the memory of our beloved son, who at the age of 24, fell gloriously in this area during the assault of 16th April 1917 and to that of his comrades.'

Louis was killed in the village of Paissy, near to Vendresse and Troyon. The village known for its creuttes (small limestone caves used for shelter and defence), was in the area where the original British Army 'Old Contemptibles' fought during 'The First Battle of the Aisne' in September 1914.



BOY 2ND CLASS GEORGE WILLIAM SANDELL – WORTHING (BROADWATER) CEMETERY, WEST SUSSEX, UK.

11.51, Thursday 12 June 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

Evenings spent sitting at his graveside

When I first came across the grave of young George in this meadow-like cemetery in the centre of Worthing I knew nothing about his life and service. It was a summer's day with wildflower in bloom and a warm breeze from the nearby English Channel blowing the long grass surrounding the scattered headstones and memorials.

His young age struck a chord. Serving as a boy and having died of illness after the end of hostilities, one wonders how his parents dealt with his death. Were they at his bedside in Suffolk or did they receive an official Admiralty notification – something the telegram boy probably thought he would no longer have to deliver, especially when it concerned a boy of the same age and almost certainly from the same school?

In the years following his death would his mother spend time sitting quietly at his resting place, only a few streets from their home? Were other siblings or family members lost in that 'Great War', or was George, her baby who was only eleven years old at the outbreak of war, her only casualty? And that to the 'flu...

George Sandell was enlisted in the Royal Navy and was under training at the Boys' Training Establishment known as HMS Ganges II, a 'stone frigate' in Suffolk. He died of Broncho Pneumonia in the Sick Quarters at Shotley, the location of the shore base. Whilst his death, at the age of 16, occurred after the Armistice, he was entitled to an IWGC headstone – the cut-off date for First World War deaths in service being 31 August 1921.

The cemetery at Broadwater is allowed to return to meadow each spring to encourage wildflower growth. It is close to George's home address and one imagines his parents would have often visited his graveside.

They chose the following epitaph for inscription at the base of his headstone:-

**“ONLY GOOD NIGHT, DEAR LITTLE SON, NOT
FAREWELL”**



BEDFORD HOUSE CEMETERY, IEPER, BELGIUM.

06.51 and 06.52, Monday 19 September 2016.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

Men of Empire and the Dominions

Here, before sunrise, with dew on the grass and views across the top of the mist shrouded fields to the spires of Ieper as the sun introduces its rays, any visitor to Bedford House Cemetery cannot fail to be moved by its tranquility.

The 5000 who now rest here represent almost all those who came to Britain's aid - from the Punjab in undivided India to Kingston in Jamaica; from Vancouver in British Columbia to Wanganui in New Zealand. Some volunteered, others had little choice, but all are now bonded together in their sacrifice.

A frequent stop for me, this is one of those locations on the Salient that draws you in. Each time you walk its plots and rows you discover more – from the men themselves, from their epitaphs, from the ever-changing light across the headstones and flower borders... and the peaceful quietness.

Chateau Rosendal was a country house set in a wooded park with moats, and it was sometimes known by the British Army as Woodcote House, but more often as Bedford House. Situated just 2km south of Ieper within the commune of Zillebeke, the Chateau and grounds never fell to the enemy, but the house and much of the wooded areas were gradually destroyed by artillery fire. Used by different brigade headquarters units as well as field ambulances, the parkland became covered over time by small cemeteries.

After the Armistice, Wilfred Clement Von Berg became the architect tasked with designing what has to be one of the most splendid of all the Salient cemeteries.

Commissioning into the 1st/5th (City of London) Battalion (London Rifle Brigade), part of the London Regiment, at the age of 19 in 1914, Von Berg served in France and Flanders for the duration, being awarded the MC. He had started training as an architect prior to the war and at its end joined the Imperial War Graves Commission as an assistant architect, designing more than 30 cemeteries.

Incorporated into his design are the original moats and lake with views from some towards the spires of Ypres. In Enclosure 6 a circular raised area contains the remains of Second World War soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force. These men died in the defence of the Ypres-Comines canal and railway during the fighting of May 1940 and subsequent withdrawal to Dunkirk.

Buried within Enclosure No. 2 is Private Thomas Samuel Henry Peacefull of Battersea (Enc. 2. IVA.26), killed whilst serving with 4th Battalion Royal Fusiliers. Thomas' name was the inspiration for the title of Michael Morpurgo's book *Private Peaceful*.



SOLDAT W. SONNENBERG – FRANVILLERS COMMUNAL CEMETERY EXTENSION, SOMME, FRANCE.

13.33, Thursday 10 April 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

‘I hate them with the utmost hatred; They have become my enemies’

Many British and Commonwealth cemeteries across the Western Front have German soldiers interred within them. I wonder about those early pilgrims to these places, many coming before the cemeteries were fully established by the IWGC, visiting the final resting place of their son, father or brother – only to find one of ‘the enemy’ buried in the adjacent grave.

Perhaps the pain and anguish, maybe stilled after several years, resurrected itself. The quote above from Psalm 139, whilst difficult to comprehend in these days of reconciliation, may have been a reaction under a black veil...

German soldiers buried alongside British and Commonwealth personnel within CWGC cemeteries is not an uncommon sight. Once wounded, enemy soldiers were no longer combatants and as such received the same medical treatment as allied troops. Those enemy troops not surviving would be buried with the same dignity as all soldiers, regardless of their nationality or allegiance.

The extension at Franvillers Communal Cemetery was used by fighting units and by field ambulances of the Royal Army Medical Corps to bury troops who died during the defence of Amiens, which the Germans had failed to capture during the Spring Offensive of 1918 (‘Operation Michael’).

Five German soldiers, identifiable by the differing headstone shapes, are buried amongst two-hundred and forty-eight British and Commonwealth soldiers. The grave of German Soldat W. Sonnenberg, who served with 2/ I.R. 183, is pictured on a spring morning and is looked after by CWGC staff with the same care and attention as all others within this small cemetery.



SUNRISE ON THE SALIENT: BEDFORD HOUSE CEMETERY, IEPER, BELGIUM.

06.52, Monday 19 September 2016.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.



Sunrise splendour

Imperial War Graves Commission Assistant Architect Wilfred Clement Von Berg's fabulous design of Bedford House Cemetery is shown at its best here. One of the two circular classical temple shelters is pictured at my favourite time of day, sunrise. Many hours have been spent waiting to capture an image like this, the sun's early golden rays lighting up the base of the temple, whilst the contrails of flights departing from and arriving at Europe's capitals pierce the blue sky overhead.

ESCAPED RUSSIAN PRISONER OF WAR – FAUBOURG-D'AMIENS CEMETERY, ARRAS, FRANCE.

16.39, Wednesday 13 June 2018.

Image taken with Motorola Moto G4 phone 13mp camera f/2.0

A fatal mistake

Deep within Faubourg-d'Amiens cemetery, set in a walled garden behind the Arras Memorial, attention is drawn to this grave which tells the sad story of a PoW. Captured on the Eastern Front and sent west he is now surrounded by allies, his bid for freedom cut short after failing to understand a challenge.

Along with another Russian prisoner, this unidentified soldier managed to escape from behind the German lines whilst part of a working party. On approaching the British lines at dusk, they were challenged by the men of 'D' Company, 7th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment, whose War Diary relates the incident. They had been told to be extra vigilant as new assembly trenches were being constructed and, receiving no answer as the men spoke no English, a Lewis gun was opened up on them, killing one and wounding the other.

Thinking at the time that the men had been German, the survivor was sent back down the line, along along with a note for the Adjutant reading, "Herewith one Bosche slightly bent."

Once it was realised the prisoner was Russian, the reply from the Adjutant was, "For your message read 'Herewith one Ally rudely assaulted!'"

Some rows away in the same cemetery the story continues with a man, serving with the same British battalion in the line at the time, who was later executed for desertion. In the same row lie his Commanding Officer, killed by artillery fire the day after the execution, alongside Gilbert Nagle, his adjutant, killed in the same incident. Nagle had been the character witness for the executed man and was the adjutant receiving the surviving Russian prisoner. So often we find stories of men linked together like this within single cemeteries.

The CWGC marks the burials of soldiers of other nations with distinctly different headstone shapes. This with an onion-domed shaped top, a common Russian architectural style, was used for First World War burials only.



THE THIEPVAL MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING OF THE SOMME, FRANCE.

11.19, Monday 18 February 2013.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

Mighty Thiepval

From whichever angle you look at it, the Thiepval Memorial never fails to give one a feeling of respect and admiration – its purpose, to remember those missing men of the Somme, but the result is far greater.

A colossus standing proud – the straight lines and angles of its sixteen lower piers combine with the soft curves of the arches they support, leading the eye to the summit, where gold-topped poles fly the flags of France and the United Kingdom, fluttering stiffly in the constant breeze.

Here the contrast of red brick and Portland stone facings above piers No. 1 and No.8 show brilliantly against a cloudless blue sky, framing the crisply incised legend of 'The Missing'.

Missing they maybe, but each of the 72,000 men named here have their own story to tell – our job, to keep those stories alive.

The nature of the Battle of the Somme and the constituent phases from 1st July through to the 18 November 1916

would mean that thousands of men would die in situations where they either could not be recovered or where nothing of them remained. Many would die in 'No Man's Land', killed instantly or of their wounds over time, unable to return to safety. Others would simply be vaporised by the power of exploding shells.

Clearance of the battlefield would elicit little in the way of identifiable remains and the numbers of those missing or buried as unknown soldiers would grow over the following days, weeks and months.

The Thiepval Memorial is as recognisable as the 'Menin Gate'. It is the great memorial to the missing of the Somme. Sir Edwin Lutyens' monumental design sits on high ground and is visible from many places on the 1916 Somme battlefield, dwarfing everyone and everything around it.

72,317 names of men who fought during the Somme campaign who have never been recovered or identified are listed on the many Portland stone panels underneath the great red brick arches. It is still a place of pilgrimage for many and a focus for those remembering those events over 100 years ago.



GRAVES OF MEN OF THE CHINESE LABOUR CORPS – AYETTE INDIAN AND CHINESE CEMETERY, AYETTE, PAS DE CALAIS, FRANCE.

11.21, Friday 27 September 2019.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

千里之行，始於足下 – ‘A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins With a Single Step’

After three months in transit to reach France, I wondered what these men would have made of their temporary homes in France. Put to work labouring or helping to maintain machines such as ‘tanks’ – many were to die of disease or in accidents post-war, although some were killed whilst under shellfire. Would any of their immediate family ever have had the opportunity to visit ‘their’ place into the twenties and thirties? Did they even know where they rested? What of those men who remained in France – would they have visited in later years?

A dramatic sky forms the backdrop to this picture which enhances the light on the headstones and flowers.

After the huge losses suffered during the Somme campaign of 1916 and the massive drain on manpower involved in the logistics of supplying and maintaining the ever-growing British Army, moves were made to supplement the shortage of men and help with combat deficiencies.

An approach was made to the neutral Chinese government which brought about the formation of the non-combatant Chinese Labour Corps (CLC). These men would be subject to military discipline and required to undertake tasks ranging from salvage and repair to construction. Offers of higher than average wages were made and the beginning of 1917 saw the first labourers make their way to the Western Front via Canada. By the end of 1917, 54,000 men of the CLC were serving in France and Belgium – a number that would double by the time the Armistice was signed.



Men of the CLC remained after the Armistice to clear the battlefields of both weapons and munitions but also assist with the exhumation of Commonwealth soldiers. During the war phase, many were killed by long-range bombardment as well as during the Spring Offensive. After the fighting ended many would die in accidents and of illness, particularly in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. In total, 2064 men of the CLC died while serving on the Western Front.

Four Chinese military themed proverbs are used as epitaphs – “Faithful unto Death”, “A good reputation endures forever”, “A noble duty bravely done” and “Though dead he still liveth”.

'THE IRON HARVEST' – UNEXPLODED AMMUNITION, SOMME, FRANCE.

11.48, Friday 27 April 2018.

Image taken with Motorola Moto G4 phone 13mp camera f/2.0.

What untold damage we caused

At certain times of year any walk in the old frontline areas will introduce the pilgrim to the dangers of old – what you find will vary in scale and stability, but it will be a reminder of the untold misery and destruction caused by artillery shells which rained down by the thousand. Relief would only be felt when the thud of a landing shell was not accompanied by the crump of an explosion. However more would shortly be on their way.

Glance at the terrain across the fields, in many places still heavily scarred even where shell holes have been filled in. There the duds linger under the surface, preserved in pristine condition in the soil, where they will continue to pose a threat for hundreds of years whilst lying alongside what little remains of those men they were sent to maim and kill.



Today the First World War battlefields still give up dangerous reminders of the industrial scale of the conflict. This shell was in a field where German positions used to be, near Nab Valley on the Somme. The farmer, unperturbed when spoken to, simply stated that if he was worried, then he would never finish a day's work. With that, he picked up the shell and placed it in the cab of his tractor – alongside his dog and three other shells.

1.5 million shells were fired by the British at German positions in the lead up to the 1 July 1916 – over the course of the war, millions remain unexploded or unfired, many buried and all hugely dangerous. Small arms ammunition, grenades, mortars shells add to the dangers of artillery shell. It is thought that it will be several hundred years before remaining ordnance and munitions will pose no further threat and become inert.

In the meantime, hundreds will continue to be ploughed or dug up in what is referred to as the Iron Harvest.

HERBECOURT BRITISH CEMETERY, HERBÉCOURT, SOMME, FRANCE.

07.24, Thursday 10 April 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.



Pictured on a misty spring morning, Herbecourt British Cemetery is situated on the southern side of the Somme River valley on the Amiens to Péronne road. The perfectly mown lawn path gives access across agricultural land to a walled enclosure of just 59 graves.

Begun with six graves in February 1917, the plot was an extension of the civil cemetery and originally contained French and German military interments, which were later removed. The area fell back into German hands during Operation Michael in March 1918, to be re-captured by the 6th Australian Infantry Brigade in the following August.

Fifty-one of the burials are of men of the Australian Imperial Force who were killed in action or died of wounds over a period of nine days in August and September 1918 and now rest over 10,000 miles from Australia.

Buried in Row C is Private Norman Edward Wootton, a farm-hand who enlisted in Melbourne, Victoria. He had recuperated near his parents' home in Kent, England, after receiving a gunshot wound to the back in fighting during 1917 in France. Returned to service with 7th Australian Field Ambulance AAMC, he was killed in action in September 1918.

THE YPRES (MENIN GATE) MEMORIAL AT DUSK, IEPER, BELGIUM.

17.11, Friday 23 November 2018.

Image taken with Motorola Moto G4 phone 13mp camera f/2.0

The memorial simply known the world over as The Menin Gate is situated on the eastern side of Ypres. The gap in the ramparts here during the First World War was where hundreds of thousands of soldiers of Britain and her Empire passed through marching towards the battlefields.

Built to honour and remember those who have died and have no known grave, it is one of four memorials to the missing in Belgian Flanders. Designed by Sir Reginald Blomfeld, the names of over 54,000 men are recorded in stone as a permanent reminder to all who visit.

Even before its construction commenced in 1923, Ypres had become a centre for the pilgrimage of many families, veterans and visitors to the battlefields. The Menin Gate was unveiled with great ceremony in 1927, a year later would see the start of the evening act of remembrance of the Last Post Ceremony; it became a permanent daily event from 11 November 1929.

To this day, the ceremony draws many people to 'The Gate' each evening to join the local population in experiencing the simple act of remembrance of those who lost their lives in the Ypres Salient and elsewhere.



UNKNOWN, BUT PARTIALLY IDENTIFIED SOLDIERS, LONDON CEMETERY EXTENSION, HIGH WOOD, SOMME, FRANCE.

15.56, Friday 14 March 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

There were many ways to help discern who men were after recovering their remains, but as time passed the probability of a full positive identification reduced greatly. However, partial identifications could be achieved based on a combination of uniform, accoutrements and badges found with the remains.

The soldiers of the 4th Regiment, South African Infantry – known as the ‘South African Scottish’ and formed from the Transvaal Scottish and the Cape Town Highlanders – wore the Atholl Murray tartan and a standard headdress badge particular to the South African infantry, the 4th Regiment would wear collar tabs, buttons and shoulder titles identifying the regiment.

London Cemetery and Extension on the southern edge of High Wood contains 3,873 First World War burials with a staggering 3,114 of these being unidentified. It is one of five cemeteries in the area of Longueval which together contain over 15,000 burials. Originally designed by Sir Herbert Baker, the cemetery was re-modelled by Austin Blomfield to accommodate graves from the Second World War.



ADANAC MILITARY CEMETERY, MIRAUMONT, SOMME, FRANCE.

07.29, Tuesday 7 April 2015.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

The small village of Miraumont was occupied by allied troops during the German withdrawals of February 1917 towards the heavily defended Hindenburg Line. Lost to German troops again during the 1918 Spring Offensives, it was re-taken in August 1918 by men of the 42nd (East Lancashire) Division.

This large cemetery was formed after the Armistice by bringing in many graves from the battlefields in the area of Courcellette, as well as smaller cemeteries in the Miraumont area. One original grave remains in position in Plot IV.D.30 and is now surrounded by 3,186 others, of which 1,709 men are unidentified.

Designed by one of the three principal architects of the Imperial War Graves Commission, Sir Herbert Baker. The name 'Adanac' was simply arrived at by spelling 'Canada' in reverse and is indicative of the number of Canadian troops involved in fighting in the Courcellette area.

Early morning sunlight fights to break through a lingering mist over the former battlefields.



TRACK LEADING FROM THE LEIPZIG REDOUBT TOWARDS THE THIEPVAL MEMORIAL, SOMME, FRANCE.

09.40, Friday 27 April 2018.

Image taken with Motorola Moto G4 phone 13mp camera f/2.0.



The Thiepval Memorial stands sentinel over this part of the 1 July 1916 battlefield, with tracks criss-crossing field boundaries in an ever-changing landscape of colour and texture. Away to the right was the Wundtwerk trench network, guarding any approaches to the German frontline positions. The track leads from the memorial down behind the camera to the Granatloch (Leipzig Salient) strongpoint, situated around a derelict chalk quarry.

In the area in the picture, the left to right attack of the 16th Battalion Highland Light Infantry (the Glasgow Boys Brigade Battalion) would be described in their War Diary entry like many other New Army, Territorial and Regular units that day and with a similar outcome,

“...On our right were the 17th Battalion HLI (Chamber of Commerce) and on our left the 16th Northumberland Fusiliers (Tyneside Commercial). The enemy opened heavy Machine Gun and Rifle Fire as soon as our men jumped over the parapet... Our platoons advanced in waves in extended order, and were simply mown down by the Machine Gun Fire, and very heavy casualties resulted.”

Their casualties that day would be 20 Officers and 534 other ranks; they had begun the day with 25 Officers and 755 other ranks.

This would be day one – 140 more days would follow until the Battle of the Somme came to a close.

CANADA'S CORNER OF THE SOMME: REGINA TRENCH CEMETERY, GRANDCOURT, FRANCE.

08.05, Tuesday 7 April 2015.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.



Men of the 36th (Ulster) Division were to reach parts of Grandcourt on the 1 July 1916 but the village was not taken until the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in February 1917, when sailors of Howe Battalion, Royal Naval Division (RND), occupied the area.

To the south-east, Courcellette was not taken until September 1916, after which Canadian units attacked towards Regina Trench.

Regina Trench was a German earthwork, captured for a time by the 5th Canadian Brigade on 1 October 1916, attacked again by the 1st, & 3rd Canadian Divisions during October, and finally cleared by the 4th Canadian Division on 11 November 1916, just prior to the official end of the Battle of the Somme.

REGINA TRENCH CEMETERY, GRANDCOURT, SOMME, FRANCE.

08.11, Tuesday 7 April 2015.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.



Perfectly imperfect 'Portland'

Formed in the Jurassic period, the stone from Portland used for the majority of CWGC headstones weathers in many ways depending on the imperfections present in the larger quarried piece from which it was excavated. These include 'shell fragments', but of sea shells, not the sort which would have killed many of these men.

Tree cover, material blown in from adjoining fields, light levels and weather conditions all conspire against the stone looking pristine no matter how much care they receive – but for me this is the beauty of these cemeteries. No two are the same architecturally but also conditions within each cemetery allow the headstones to present differently. Perfect and imperfect at the same time, as shown in this photo of Regina Trench.

William Spriggs of 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment was exhumed from a position south of Petit Miraumont by a Graves Registration unit in March 1919. Originally buried as an unknown British soldier, the burial return shows him later identified and he now lies in a marked grave within Regina Trench Cemetery alongside an unknown Second Lieutenant of the same regiment who was exhumed from the same location.

Many of the 2,279 men buried here were discovered long after the fighting had ceased, which made identification extremely difficult. As a result, more than 1000 of the burials are unidentified with many being buried jointly under one headstone.

WINTER ON THE SOMME – COURCELETTE BRITISH CEMETERY, SOMME, FRANCE.

11.45, Wednesday 30 January 2019.

Image taken with Motorola Moto G4 phone 13mp camera f/2.0.

Walking the Somme

The opportunity to spend a day walking across the battlefields in perfect winter conditions like these presents itself once in a lifetime. Abandoning our vehicle, two colleagues and I explored this snow-covered landscape from Pozières towards Courcellette and up to Regina Trench. All we saw that day were the occasional signs of wildlife and what little sound we heard was mostly deadened by the laying snow. The cemeteries presented surreal sights, with snow perfectly balanced atop each headstone in the weak winter sunlight.

When blanketed with snow the landscape of the Somme battlefield shows every rut, furrow and contour. Walking across this area in those conditions gives you a feeling of serenity which belies the horrors which took place here those many years ago.

This track leads from the village of Courcellette, where heavy fighting in September 1916 by the 2nd Canadian Division led to its capture, towards Courcellette British Cemetery. The engagement was notable for the first use of the tank on the battlefield on this extreme left flank of the 'Battle of Flers-Courcellette'.

Coming into view is a sunken road which gave the cemetery one of its early names, before being re-named and fully established after the war by the Imperial War Graves Commission.

Sir Herbert Baker's design stands out on the horizon framed by the brightness of virgin snow and the blue winter sky.



A CEMETERY OF SNOW: COURCELETTE BRITISH CEMETERY, SOMME, FRANCE.

12.34, Wednesday 30 January 2019.

Image taken with Motorola Moto G4 phone 13mp camera f/2.0.



A winter scene in Courcellette British Cemetery, where rows of headstones stand crisply defined in the virgin snow. Clear skies and bright sunlight breathe life into the dormant trees which already show signs of spring being on the horizon. Looking across the rear boundary of the cemetery gives a view towards Mouquet Farm and the village of Pozières and across the Albert-Bapaume road to the rising fields beyond.

Established in November 1916, Courcellette British Cemetery would originally be referred to as 'Mouquet Road' or 'Sunken Road' Cemetery. After the Armistice, the original 74 burials in Plot I would be supplemented by the addition of almost 1900 sets of remains recovered in the main from the surrounding battlefields but also concentrated from two smaller cemeteries.

Fewer than half of those buried are identified. The greater proportion of those named are Canadian troops, far from home, killed during the 'Battle of Flers-Courcellette'.

THE BURIAL OF WILLIAM MCALEER – LOOS BRITISH CEMETERY, LOOS, FRANCE.

10.24, Friday 14 March 2014.

Image taken with FujiFilm Finepix HS20EXR 16mp bridge camera – 24-720mm optical zoom equiv. Auto settings.

The Burial Party

It was an honour to have been able to attend the burial of Private William McAleer, identified almost a hundred years after his death. The cold, damp morning meant Loos British Cemetery was shrouded in thick mist, so much so that the regimental piper playing to the rear of the cemetery could not be seen – only the dulled sound of his bagpipes gave a clue to his location.

The burial party would have felt a connection with the process now being undertaken – their faces caught in this moment, one of my most treasured images. Amongst the party would be men who had attended similar ceremonies in Afghanistan or Iraq during recent conflicts and whilst we can see their faces we cannot read their thoughts. A link between conflicts past and the present, but what does the next one hundred years hold?

In 2010, the remains of twenty soldiers were discovered during building work near Vendin-le-Vieil. Recovered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (who are the primary agency for recovery of First World War

remains) an exhaustive attempt to identify the men was carried out jointly with the MOD's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC).

Partial identifications showed one soldier as serving with the York and Lancaster Regiment, one with the Northumberland Fusiliers and seven with the Royal Scots Fusiliers. All had been killed during the Battle of Loos in September 1915.

Private William McAleer, of Leven, Fife, was 22 years of age and had been serving with 7th Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers. Initial clues as to his identity came from an unofficial, hand-stamped name tag found with the remains.

Amalgamated in 1959, the traditions of the Royal Scots Fusiliers are continued by 2nd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland. On a poignantly foggy morning in March 2014 serving members of the battalion formed the Burial Party and Guard of Honour for the burial of the nineteen unknown soldiers and for Private William McAleer in Loos British Cemetery.



