

Old Boys Visit to the Somme – 30 September – 3 October 2016

Eight intrepid travellers set off before 5 am on 30 September on a long coach journey from Preston to Dover, where they were joined by yours truly, who lives in the Soft South, for an intensive visit to the battlefield of the Somme in northern France in the 100th anniversary year of the greatest disaster in the history of the British Army.

Although most of us were aware of the overall figures for casualties – more than 57,000 British killed or wounded in a single day, 1 July 1916, and more than a million troops killed in the entire battle – it was only by standing on the ground on which so many had suffered, and walking quietly around just a few of the 200 cemeteries dotting the rolling landscape, that the dreadful reality struck home. For the Battle of the Somme consisted of a long line of neighbouring battles that all started at 7.30am on that fateful day when the British and their allies advanced out of their trenches towards the German lines. In virtually every case, the consequences were dire. A preceding artillery barrage that had lasted seven days had failed to silence the German guns, and as soon as the British climbed out of their trenches they were cut down in their thousands by murderous machine-gun fire. Time after time we were told by our guide that thousands of men had come down a particular slope on which we were standing, and within minutes most of them were dead, dying or wounded. Although the Somme was peaceful now, ghostly figures carrying guns and barely discernible through the morning mist because of their camouflage clothing, could be glimpsed moving in small groups across the wide open fields that had once been No Man's Land, just as the British troops had done. Shots rang out, and it was slightly unsettling. But these were not, of course, soldiers who had risen from the grave, but local hunters, as it was the start of the regular shooting season.

We began at the village of Gommecourt, where a diversionary attack took place, intended to draw German forces away from the area of the main assault to the south. It followed the same grim pattern that was to become familiar to us. The heavy bombardment had failed to destroy the German defences, as the top brass had believed, with the result that the British and allied troops climbed out of their trenches and walked straight into murderous machine gun

fire, with the dire consequences that have made the Somme famous in the history of warfare.

Then, near Serre, another German fortified village, we saw where many of the Pals battalions had fought and died. The Pals battalions were part of the volunteer Army of General Kitchener – he of the “Your Country Needs You” advertisements – and were recruited in specific towns or cities, where battalions of local men enlisted together and fought together. The casualties were so enormous that whole communities were devastated. Among the many memorials to the Pals from nearby towns and cities, we found no reference to the Preston Pals. This was because, firstly, they had a lucky escape, in that they were due to join the battle in the afternoon, by which time it was clear the attack had been a catastrophic failure. Secondly, they were called the "Preston Businessmen and Clerks' Company", and were given the Pals name retrospectively. The Prestonians were attached to the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, and went into action on the Somme on 23 July at Bazentin-le-Petit, where 223 of them were lost in a single advance. We requested a detour to the cemetery at Bazentin-le-Petit to see if we could find any headstones relating to the Preston Pals or the Loyals. In the event, there were no Pals there, and just one Loyal, Lance-Cpl T Davenport, who was killed on 11 August 1916 in a later action. There was one unknown Lancashire Fusilier (date of death not stated). The burial grounds for the Pals/Loyals must be somewhere else. More research is required. A memorial to the “Preston Pals” was erected on Preston Railway Station in recent years.

Only two correspondents covered the Somme, Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell - no relation to Jim, apparently, despite the almost identical spelling. At one point we stood at the exact spot from which Malins filmed one of the most iconic images of the Somme battle, the dynamiting of the German redoubt at Hawthorn Ridge, which blasted tons of earth thousands of feet into the air – together with between 300 and 700 German defenders – forming a gigantic mushroom. The next day we stared down into the jungly depths of the vast crater caused by the explosion. Another location of Malin’s iconic photography was particular poignant and closer to home. At what has become known as Sunken Lane we stood next the grassy bank where Malins’ film shows a group of 1st Lancashire Fusiliers, bayonets at the ready, chatting and

smiling a few minutes before the whistle for the attack blew and they climbed out into the open fields to try to take Beaumont Hamel, another German fortress village located just behind the German front line. This was yet another calamity, and most of the men seen on the film met their deaths from German machine gun fire within minutes of the footage being shot. A ten-minute time gap between the detonation of the Hawthorn Ridge redoubt and the start of the attack had alerted the Germans that an attack was coming and given their machine-gunners time to get back to their posts. Then we moved on to an even larger crater, Lochnagar, the largest on the Western Front, which looks like it was made by a meteorite and is a major tourist destination. It is there today thanks to the generosity of British businessman Richard Dunning, who prevented it from being filled in, bought it and maintains the site through the charity Friends of Lochnagar.

Everywhere we looked we saw cemeteries, mostly British. Each one consisted of perfectly-formed and perfectly-maintained rows of white-painted stone graves, with the name of the soldier, if known, plus a few details, or, if not, a simple inscription: "Known Unto God". The graves were set among lawns and gardens, facing a large white Cross of Sacrifice and usually a Stone of Remembrance carved with the words: "Their Name Liveth For Evermore", as proposed by Rudyard Kipling. The only exception was the German cemetery at Fricourt, the resting place for more than 17,000 German soldiers, where the atmosphere appeared more foreboding, perhaps because the crosses were all painted black, and it was virtually deserted. Apparently, few Germans visit the Somme, though there were two German-registered cars there at the time of our visit.

By far the biggest and most the most shocking cemetery is the Thiepval Memorial, Sir Edwin Lutyens' vast and complex memorial arch, 140 feet high. Built on high ground and visible for miles around it is inscribed with the names over 73,000 British soldiers whose bodies were never found. It was some consolation to those of the group whose ancestors' were among the missing that their names are inscribed on the Thiepval memorial for all to see. Even now, names are erased from time to time when a body is recovered, as happened in 1998 after the body of a British private was found when someone noticed a skeletal finger protruding from the earth near the Lochnagar Crater.

But, it was a chastening thought that the remains of over 73,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers still lay beneath the ground on which we trod.

The town of Albert, three miles back from the front line, which was the staging post for hundreds of thousands of British troops, seemed to have turned its back on the Great War. It should be sitting on a gold mine nowadays, given the large numbers of battlefield tourists that trek around the area. But the only gold in sight was the paint on the statue of the Virgin Mary, known as the Golden Virgin, which gleamed in the sun on top of the rebuilt basilica. Down on the ground, not much moved as the town was celebrating a saint's day, that of Therese of the Infant Jesus, and all the shops were shut. In general, apart from the museum, the town appeared to be taking little advantage of its unique geographical position and association with the Great War. However, the tour organisers, Leger, happened to have hit on an excellent base for us this time. Even though it was next to a motorway intersection with a splendid view of a filling station, the Ibis Styles at Assevilliers, near Peronne, proved to be a brilliant hotel, the bar of which was sorely needed, both mentally and physically, after long days contemplating the killing fields.

At the very end, the group came face to face with modern day reality in Europe. At Calais, the coach drove past The Jungle, where thousands of refugees trying to reach the UK are holed up. It looked like a vast Third World slum, and was surrounded by miles of barbed wire fencing. The group saw French police chasing a would-be immigrant across a field in an attempted escape that caused part of the port of Calais to be closed and a lengthy and tedious wait in the coach, which those heading back north could well have done without.

The overall impression was one of sadness, futility and even anger. Yours truly certainly can understand the reaction of the British poet Siegfried Sassoon, who having won the Military Cross for carrying a wounded colleague in from No Man's Land, later threw his MC into the River Mersey in protest against the Great War and the Somme in particular.

The members of the group were Charlie Billington, Brian Hall, Jim Goring, Jim McDowall, Roger Smithson, Roland Nicholson, Trevor Sergeant, Bob Helm (ex-Hutton Grammar School) and yours truly, Ian Mather.

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