
Mines, Medals & Muddles

Branch Battlefield Tour - 12 to 15 September

Graham Adams

This year's branch battlefield tour had the rather intriguing title of *Mines, Medals & Muddles*; a hint at the principal theme of the tour – mining and tunnelling: what better place to go for this than Ypres, the scene of so much of this activity during the middle years of the war?

We had a new tour leader, branch member Dave Gargett, a former Royal Engineer. The tour proved popular and virtually sold out very early on and we ended up with a party of 15, which included our old friend, Bruce Cherry, as our driver.

After leaving Cheltenham on schedule at 8am, Dave handed out the comprehensive tour booklet, prepared with the assistance of Bob Brunsdon. We arrived in late morning at the village of Mickleham, Surrey, to visit the grave of Sir John Norton Griffiths KCB DSO, who was responsible for the formation of the Royal Engineers Tunnelling Companies. Dave told us of the colourful life of 'Empire Jack' before, after a short refreshment stop at a pub across the road, we headed for the Eurotunnel and on to the Best Western Flanders Lodge hotel in Ypres, our base for the duration of the tour.

The customary first evening group dinner was held in the hotel and tour members were supplied with a laminated place mat featuring maps and diagrams we would use on the tour.

Our departure next morning was under cloudy skies and for the first hour or so occasional drizzle, thereafter the weather improved considerably.

The majority of the day was to be spent in the immediate area of Ypres, looking at operations in 1915/16. The first stop was at Hill 60 and as we stood inside the remains of one of the mine craters (ignoring nearby roaming sheep) Dave gave us an overall view of the activities of mining and



At the grave of Sir John Norton Griffiths

counter-mining that went on here, as the British sought to drive the Germans off relatively high ground formed by the spoil from the excavation of the nearby railway cutting. Specialist sappers, renamed 'moles' or 'tunnellers', were recruited by Norton Griffiths and the method of 'clay kicking' used in Victorian times for digging sewers was introduced. The British experimented with steadily increasing quantities of explosive and methods of tamping and placement. Tunnelling was challenging, due to wet earth and constant enemy counter-mining activity. We were introduced to the story of Captain Thomas Tuff, 1st Royal West Kent Regiment, and would hear more of him later and Bob Brunsdon related the stories of the four Victoria Crosses awarded at Hill 60.

We then travelled to 'The Bluff', a large artificial mound created from the spoil of excavation of the never completed Ypres - Comines Canal, located within a recreation area known as the Palingbeek. We walked the track on the northern side of the canal and climbed up onto 'The Bluff'. Here Dave described, in some detail, the fighting that went on above and below ground and in particular the mining and counter-mining which took place from October 1915 and throughout 1916. Unusually, the British held the higher ground here and the Germans made great efforts to remove them, and the ground changed hands on several occasions.

The bus then took us to Maple Avenue, where we left it to walk across the fields towards the rear of Hooge Crater Cemetery. Our next stand was just inside the cemetery entrance, where Dave briefed us on the story of the creation of Hooge Crater.

On 19 July 1915 the British blew their largest mine to date, under two German blockhouses, located near to Hooge Chateau, across the Menin Road from the cemetery. This time ammonal, a new, much more powerful, explosive was used (35,000 lbs). When the indent for it arrived at GHQ it caused confusion, as no one had heard of ammonal and signals flew about and somehow the Corps HQ Medical Officer became involved. He muddled ammonal up with ammonol, a drug used in America as a sensual sedative in cases of abnormal sexual excitement and reported that he had not encountered any need for it at Corps HQ! Lieutenant Geoffrey Cassells, of 175 Tunnelling Company, in charge of preparations, became increasingly frustrated with the non-delivery of the required ammonal and scoured neighbouring units for any form of explosive he could use. Eventually a wagon load of ammonal arrived on time and apart from having to repair the firing line minutes before the designated firing time, the huge explosion went ahead, although one shaft had actually missed its true objective. It is thought that between 200 and 600 Germans were buried and unfortunately so were twenty or so men of the 4th Middlesex, waiting to attack the crater. Blamed for these deaths, Lieutenant Cassells was arrested but General Allenby heard of the events and took charge of Cassells, whisking him off to lunch with the C in C of the BEF, Sir John French, for a congratulatory lunch!

Our lunch break was taken in the café at Hooge Crater with opportunity to look around the fine museum located next door. After which we walked a track up to Bellewarde Wood. This was a much contested area of the front line during 1915 - 1917 and the wood, plus the field and Railway Wood beyond, is the site of



Inside a Hill 60 crater



A view from The Bluff



Walking the path to Hooge

34 identified mine craters. These had been handily plotted for tour members onto a 'google earth' image. Dave related the story of Captain McNair, 9th Royal Sussex, who was awarded the VC for resisting a German attack, following the blowing of one of their

mines. We then progressed to the unique RE grave near to Railway Wood. One officer and eleven men of 177 Tunnelling Company are buried in tunnels below the Cross of Sacrifice. We remembered them specifically and the tour group photograph was taken.

We spent a short time exploring Bellewarde Wood, now subject to free and open access, encountering the remains of several craters, in particular one known as 'The Momber Crater'. It was named after Captain Edward Momber MC, OC 177 Tunnelling Company, responsible for the blowing of a mine, using 15,000 lbs of ammonal, the largest for that unit. It destroyed a number of existing craters and caught a number of Germans working underground.

After a refreshment stop in Kemmel village, we travelled south to the preserved German trench area known as the 'Bayernwald'. It is unique in that it contains two surviving German mine shafts. Here Andy Hinks delivered a detailed presentation on the types of German bunkers or blockhouses, many examples of which can still be found in the Ypres Salient. This part of the battlefield was finally captured in September 1918. Sergeant Louis McGuffie, 1/5th King's Own Scottish Borderers was awarded the VC for gallantry shown here. Following our tour, Dave briefed the party on what was in store on the following day and we returned to our hotel.

We were again all aboard the bus at 8am. Above us were clear blue skies and the sun shone brightly all day. Much of the day would be spent on Messines Ridge, where twenty five mines were laid in readiness for the attack on 7 June 1917, with nineteen being fired.

First, it was back to Hill 60 but this time to view Caterpillar Crater. It was formed from setting off 70,000 lbs of explosive under a curiously shaped portion of the German line. The area around it has now been cleared of vegetation and it is very impressive. As with all the surviving craters



Hearing about the mining of Bellewarde Wood



Tour group at the RE Grave, Railway Wood

from 7 June 1917 it is full of water: exceptionally all the craters on Hill 60 are dry, as water is siphoned away via the many underground tunnels below the hill. Whilst we walked the rim Dave told us about the construction of this mine and how (with Hill 60) it had not originally been part of the plan for the Messines offensive and that the tunnel dug to place the charge, called Berlin Sap, had been dug from our next destination, Larchwood.

Once inside Larchwood Wood (Railway Cutting) Cemetery, Trevor Hek hopped over the rear wall and walked out into a field, stopping to indicate the site of the entrance to the Berlin Sap, which served the mines placed under The Caterpillar and Hill 60, whilst Dave indicated places of interest.

Progressing south we arrived at the village of St Eloi, where there is a memorial to 172 Tunnelling Company. Dave had hoped to show us the site of the Messines offensive crater. This is in a protected area, accessed via a combination locked gate, with the code available from the tourist office. We had the correct code but the lock would not open - a 'modern muddle' maybe? Undaunted, we crossed the road and visited a crater, which was formed when a cluster of mines were blown under a German vantage point on 27 March 1916.

On any tour it is always nice to have a surprise or unscheduled stop and our visit to Oostaverne Wood Cemetery was exactly that. At Hill 60 on the previous day Dave had told us the story of Captain Thomas Tuff, 1st Royal West Kents. He was shot dead on 20 April 1915 leading his company in an attack at Hill 60. He was posted missing and his name inscribed on the Menin Gate but thanks to research, a hundred years later, the CWGC accepted that the grave of an 'unknown officer' in the cemetery was that of Captain Tuff. Something of a 'muddle' occurred on the day his new headstone was dedicated - 'no names, no pack drill'!

After a refreshment stop at the Palingbeek we drove, via Wulvergem, to explore the trio of crater areas associated with the 36th (Ulster) Division's attack on 7 June 1917. Graham Adams was our guide for this. Three mines, using 109,500 lbs of explosive, were exploded at the Kruisstraat cross roads and two of the craters are visible today. Bruce then drove us up to Spanbroekmolen and from inside Lone Tree Cemetery we heard the story of how 91,000 lbs of ammonal blew the top of a well fortified German position, the highest on Messines Ridge. Not quite a muddle, more of



Exploring the reconstructed trench system at Bayernwald



Caterpillar Crater

a mishap, this mine was blown fifteen seconds after the 3.10am zero hour causing debris to fall on the advancing troops, who had orders to advance at 3.10am, whether the mine blew or not. The location of the former entrance to the mine shaft is visible about 300 yards away in the fields below the cemetery.

The party then walked up to Spanbroekmolen Crater (keeping a wary eye out for racing cyclists), where Graham told the story of how the Toc H organisation acquired the crater, now named the 'Pool of Peace'. We then circled round the back of the crater and viewed the remains of a sunken German bunker, where, after capture, two German soldiers were found inside, dead from the concussion of the blast: we then continued on the footpath to Spanbroekmolen British Cemetery. This affords a good view of the ground over which the Ulstermen made their successful attack in the wake of the mine

explosion. Lance Corporal Armour of the Royal Irish Rifles was awarded the DCM for his part in it. We then walked to Peckham Farm, in front of which lies a crater caused by the explosion of 81,700 lbs of ammonal. The structure of the under-soil made tunnelling difficult in this location and one of the mines laid (20,000 lbs) was not fired and remains there to this day.

Bruce then collected us and we travelled to Ploegsteert, where we partook of our packed lunches at the Memorial to the Missing. Here we paid our respects to Sapper William Hackett VC of 254 Tunnelling Company, who, in June 1916, helped rescue men entombed in the mine and was killed four days later. At the adjoining Berks Cemetery Extension, we visited the grave of Sergeant Wintour Maurice Adams, 3rd Tunnelling Company, Canadian Engineers, who was born at Ruspidge in the Forest of Dean.

Our final field visit of the day was to the site of the most southerly of mines blown on 7 June 1917, located near to St Yves, east of Ploegsteert Wood. Trevor Hek led us up to the site of the two most southerly mines, Trench 122 (40,000 lbs of ammonal) and Factory Farm (20,000 lbs). Work in this area was begun by 171 Tunnelling Company and completed by Canadian Tunnellers. As at Spanbroekmolen there was a slight timing confusion, a matter of seconds but enough to cause fear that the Germans had set off one of their own mines. However, this was not the case and the 3rd and 4th Australian Divisions took the ground.

Trevor pointed out the location of the Birdcage cluster of mines, which were not fired on the day and one of the mines blew up in 1955, caused, it is believed, by a lightning strike on an exposed firing cable.

Refreshments were taken at the Auberge opposite Ploegsteert Memorial before we returned to Ypres and a visit to the location in The Ramparts where the iconic *Wipers Times* was first printed. It is now the site of a local brewery, with a place to sample its wares and a shop ... anything more to be said?



One of the Kruisstraat Craters with Spanbroekmolen in the distance



Remembering a Forest of Dean man in Berks Cemetery Extension

That evening the branch wreath was laid by Dale Hjort and Martin Yemm at the traditional Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate, witnessed by the usual large crowd.

Prior to arriving at the Eurotunnel terminal, visits were made to Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) at Zillebeke; Red Farm Military Cemetery, where there is an intriguing headstone to three unnamed Belgian civilians, thought to be the 'Egg & Chips Girls', who provided sustenance to the troops at a nearby camp, before an ammunition dump blew up causing many casualties; Brandhoek New Military Cemetery to pay respects at the grave of Sergeant J W Hoare, 171 Tunnelling Company, a Forest of Dean man, awarded the DCM for rescuing a man at Hill 60; Brandhoek New Military Cemetery No 3 where Bruce told us the story of a member of the Connaught Rangers, who was a founder member of

the IRA, and to Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, where respects were paid at the grave of Major E M F Momber DSO MC, of 177 Tunnelling Company, who has craters named after him in Bellewarde Wood and at Vimy Ridge.

This was another very enjoyable branch tour, which enhanced our knowledge of an important aspect of fighting on the

Western Front and gave an opportunity for members to socialise outside of the normal meeting environment. Dave Gargett's debut as a guide was very successful, leading a tour full of content, yet perfectly paced. Our thanks were expressed to him for his hard work with organisation and research, and to Bruce Cherry for his safe driving, knowledgeable input and the provision of a most comfortable bus.



Where once The Wipers Times was produced



The Branch Wreath is laid at The Menin Gate
