
Arras 1917

Branch battlefield tour: 10 - 13 September 2015

Graham Adams

Sandwiched between the 1916 Somme Offensive and that of Third Ypres in the following year, the thirty seven day long Arras Offensive of April and May 1917 is often overlooked and the battlefield less frequently visited than some. Our objective was to look closely at this battle, as much as we could inside a four day trip and follow its course from north to south. Once again we benefited from the organisational skills and knowledge of our guide, Bob Brunsdon and driver Bruce Cherry, both members of the Guild of Battlefield Guides.

The dozen participants in the tour assembled at Morrisons' supermarket ready for the designated 8.30am departure. This year there were several new faces on the bus and for some it was a first visit to the former battlefields.

We set off on time, with a substitute driver to take us to the Eurotunnel terminus at Folkestone, where he would be replaced by Bruce. Experiencing no major delays en route we discovered that our early arrival facilitated loading onto an earlier train. Along the way Bob had distributed the comprehensive tour booklet full of maps, diagrams and photographs and he explained the background to the Arras Offensive and how it was a diversionary attack in support of a major French attack to the south.

By mid-afternoon we had reached our first destination, the French Memorial and National Cemetery at Notre Dame de Lorette and time was spent exploring the area and visiting the comparatively new 'Ring of Remembrance' Memorial. From the viewpoint we were able to gain an appreciation of the importance of the high ground here and Vimy Ridge, seen in the distance.

Bruce then drove the bus into Arras, with brief stops at the ruined church at Ablain-St Nazaire and the large German cemetery at Neuville-St Vaast and a drive by the Polish and Czech roadside memorials; nationalities who fought in the Great War with the French Foreign Legion.

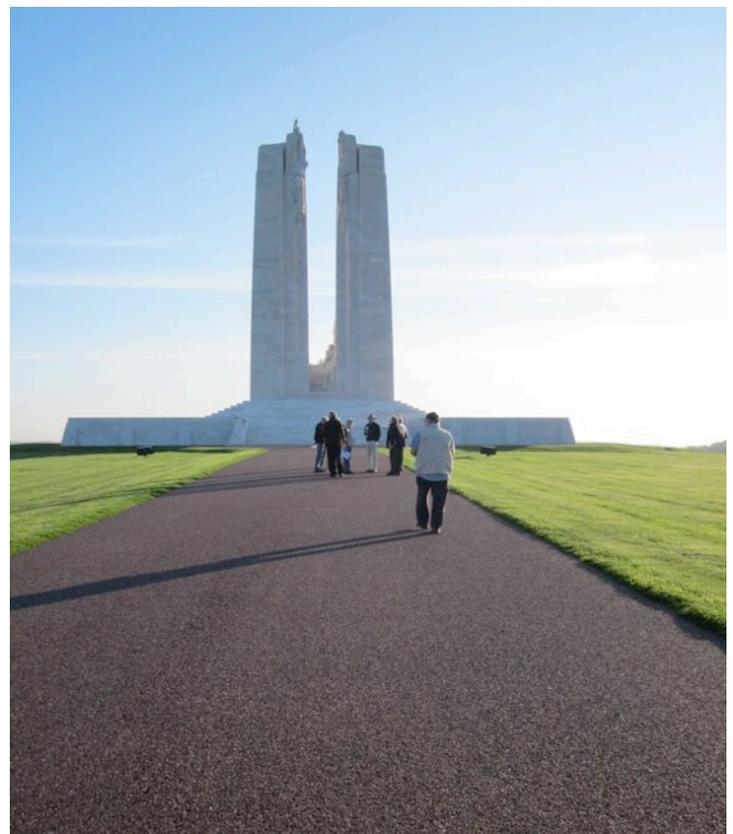
Our base for the next few days was the familiar Holiday Inn Express, near to the Arras rail station and once everyone had



John, Scott, Andy & Dave at Notre Dame de Lorette viewpoint

settled into their rooms and changed the party re-assembled and strolled round to another familiar haunt, the Bistrot du Boucher, for the traditional first night group dinner.

Following breakfast the next morning it was all aboard the bus for an 8am departure and the short drive to the Canadian Memorial Park at Vimy Ridge. On a beautiful sunny morning the Memorial was resplendent under a clear blue sky. It being so early,



Vimy Ridge Memorial on a beautiful morning

there was an absence of crowds and individuals had ample time to admire the view across the Douai Plain and photograph the Memorial. We then moved to a quiet side road and were treated to two presentations. The first by Andy Hinks on artillery tactics employed in the battle, supported by photographs of the various artillery pieces employed and a chart detailing their range and rate of fire etc. Andy demonstrated how a shell with a percussion fuse was utilised to cut barbed wire: in true 'Blue Peter' style his 'shell' had been made earlier utilising the top half of a fizzy drink bottle and insulating tape! Bob then organised the group into a formation of bayonet men, bombers, rifle grenadiers and Lewis gunners, under the command of 2nd Lieutenant ("*I think I should be a Brigadier*") Hardy and demonstrated how platoons were organised for offensive action, based on the SS 143 Manual. The various recreational joggers who passed through our ranks appeared somewhat bemused!

We then moved on to the site of the preserved trenches, where Bob described how the four Canadian Divisions, attacking in concert for the first time, were so successful in capturing Vimy Ridge and holding it.

Following a short refreshment stop at Gavrelle we visited the nearby Royal Naval Division Memorial and once away from the busy major road Bob described the attacks made by the land based sailors and marines from 23 - 29 April.

It was then time for a spot of battlefield archaeology. The bus took us to Farbus Wood and before we entered the wood Tony Gilbert told us of the part played by naturalist and writer Henry Williamson in the Great War and how in his book *The Wet Flanders Plain* he wrote about his return to the battlefields in the mid-1920s. Included in that book were photographs of former German gun emplacements in Farbus Wood and our task was to discover the existing remains and to try to match them with the photographs in the book: not an easy task, after almost a century!

A packed lunch was then partaken at Chili Trench Cemetery and we heard the story of Lance Corporal Thomas Ashmore, 7th (Pioneer) Battalion Yorks & Lancs Regiment, the uncle of a branch member, who was wounded in nearby Chili Avenue Trench on 16 May. Graham Adams took the



Battlefield archaeology in Farbus Wood

opportunity to read A P Herbert's poem, *The Lost Leader*: the author was wounded serving with Hawke Battalion at Gavrelle.

The bus then took us to Fampoux and we drove up a narrow lane to the Sunken Road Cemetery and then walked back down to the Seaforth Highlanders' Memorial which is in the form of a Celtic Cross. Here we heard how Fampoux was captured by 4th Division (one of whose Brigade Commanders was the celebrated Brigadier-General Carton de Wiart) on 9 April. On 11 April an attempt was made to renew the advance from the sunken road but the 2 Seaforths and 1 Royal Irish Fusiliers were cut down by long range machine gun fire, notably from the Chemical Works at Roeux.

It was now time for a battlefield walk, led by Graham Adams. At various stages he described 51st (Highland) Division's attack on the Chemical Works and Roeux village on 23 April. Starting at Crump Trench Cemetery we walked, in welcome shade, down 'Crump Trench', a sunken lane next to the marshy River Scarpe, which was the jumping off



On the battlefield walk, Roeux British Cemetery

line for the attack. A visit was made to the pretty Roeux British Cemetery before ascending the slope alongside it and following the line of Roeux Wood across the fields to meet the bus at Roeux Church. The bus then took us past a large German bunker, now covered in foliage, on the edge of a housing estate and to the site of the Chemical Works, now partly occupied by a supermarket. 51st Division sustained 2,000 casualties in their attack and the area was perhaps the greatest killing ground in the whole of the Battle of Arras.

A decision was taken to return to the hotel to freshen up after a very warm day, which gave time for a rest or exploration of central Arras before dinner.

On Saturday morning the bus set out once more at 8am and we were to look at the actions south of the River Scarpe. The weather forecast was less promising than the previous day. The first stop was at Saint Laurent-Blangy German Cemetery, which enabled newcomers to the former battlefields to appreciate the contrast with the CWGC cemeteries.

The rest of the morning was devoted to various actions in and around Monchy-le-Preux, strategically important due to its high location. First, we visited Orange Trench Cemetery, which lies between the British start line and the village itself and Bob described the plan of attack on 11 April and initial moves. The infantry of 63 and 111 Brigades (37 Division) got into the village but did not



The Tour Party

have it secured when units of 3rd Cavalry Division, believing it was in British hands, advanced and sustained heavy casualties. We then drove into the village, past the 37 Division's Memorial and paused for refreshments opposite the Caribou Memorial to the Newfoundland Regiment. Time was taken to walk round the centre of the village comparing the modern buildings to photos of those present at the time of the war.

We then moved to the east of the village and referring to a contemporary sketch map tried to locate the various machine gun positions put in place once the village was finally captured on 11 April. Here Bob told of the part played by Harold Mugford VC of the Essex Yeomanry. Our vantage point looked east towards the former German positions on Infantry Hill and we set out in the bus to visit the point where, on 14 April, the Newfoundland Regiment, in conjunction with 1 Essex, sought to push the British positions eastward by taking Infantry Hill. Thanks to access to Dave Gargett's 'Linesman' software we stopped right on the site of the jumping off trench, where Bob described the attack. Next to where we stood was a collection of various types of shell collected from the surrounding fields, an 'eye-opener' to those new to the battlefields! Bruce then drove the bus along the track up and over Infantry Hill before we turned round and approached Monchy from the east to hear, from Bob, how ten men from the Newfoundland HQ, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Forbes-Robertson (buried in Cheltenham Cemetery) held off German counter attacks until relieved by the 2nd Hampshires.

It was now time to visit the very southern end of the battlefield and we drove to Neuville-Vitasse Road Cemetery for a lunch stop before embarking on the next stage. Here Bob handed over to Graham Adams, who distributed annotated copies of original trench maps to assist with identifying the various features of the next two sections of the programme. Graham explained how 56 Division had broken into the Hindenburg Line at Neuville-Vitasse on 9 April and that this had enabled units of 30 Division, notably the 18th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, to enter



Caribou Memorial at Monchy-le-Preux

the line on 11 April. The bus then took us down part metalled and part grass tracks through the heart of the former Hindenburg Line. Our journey was tracked on 'Linesman' and Dave called out the names of the former trenches over which we passed. We stopped to overlook the Heninel and Cojeul Valley and Graham described how on 12 April the 18th Manchesters drove down the Hindenburg Line defences, across the river and up onto the ridge beyond; an advance of about 1,700 yards, sustaining only 33 casualties. This stop was a special moment for one of our party whose grandfather fought with the 18th Manchesters that day and in all probability earned his Military Medal in the action.

It was then on to the lonely Cuckoo Passage Cemetery, where Graham delivered the second part of his story of *The Manchesters at Heninel*. He spoke briefly about the formation of Manchester's City Battalions and how the first four (16th-19th) all took heavy casualties in this area when they resumed their attack on 23 April and by the end of that day had been rendered virtually ineffective. This was followed by a short presentation by Dave Gargett about a family member who was wounded in this area in August 1917.



The lonely Cuckoo Passage Cemetery

We then drove back into Arras and managed to find the River Crinchon in the suburb of Achicourt, where Colin Hardy related how a number of tanks, earmarked to support the Arras offensive, were bogged down in the muddy ground near the river.

Our final stop of the day was made at the Arras Memorial to the Missing and the Fauborg D'Amiens Cemetery. As this is also the site of the Flying Services Memorial Andy Hinks gave a short presentation on the role of the RFC during the Battle of Arras and told how the superior German



Hearing about the RFC at Arras Memorial to the Missing

aircraft inflicted so much damage at the time it was dubbed 'Bloody April'. Andy supported his talk with model aircraft and an informative handout. As is the custom, a wreath in remembrance of The Fallen was laid on behalf of the Branch, on this occasion by Tony Gilbert. Time was then spent exploring the cemetery and the panels commemorating those with no known grave, before we returned to the hotel.

On the following morning, before heading for the Eurotunnel we visited the tunnels of Wellington Quarry, for a guided tour and a fascinating glimpse into Arras' role in the Great War.



Tour Party equipped for the Wellington Quarry

Thankfully there was only a small delay in our departure for England and once through the Tunnel it was the long haul back to Cheltenham, arriving back right on schedule at 5.30pm. En route thanks were expressed to Bob for yet another well organised and executed tour and to Bruce, our driver, for his driving skills and imparting his great knowledge of the battlefields: he took us down tracks and by-ways which would have been completely un navigable for a larger vehicle. With many newcomers to our tour on board it is hoped that they were impressed by the experience and we shall see them again in the future.