
August 1914 : From Mons to Le Cateau Branch Tour : 12-15 September 2013

Graham Adams

This year it was a return to Belgium for the first time since the inaugural Branch Battlefield Tour in 2008. It was the first Branch Tour to cover actions in 1914 and therefore we appropriately based ourselves at Mons, where the BEF first saw battle.

Our tour party of sixteen was once again led by Bob Brunsdon, a full badge member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides. Chris Nation, our professional driver, was on his fifth tour with us: he too is a GBG member and has recently become a familiar face at Branch meetings.

The journey from Cheltenham to Mons, via the Eurotunnel, was uneventful and we arrived in the town in time to pay a visit to an original section of the Mons-Conde Canal (now known as the Canal du Centre), which contrasts with the much wider modern section. The canal was a prominent feature in the defence of Mons in August 1914 and it was important to relate to its actual size at the time of the battle. From the canal we travelled to the 'George Price Bridge' and the nearby memorial to Private George Price, 28 Battalion Canadian Infantry, who was shot by a sniper at 10.58am on 11 November 1918 and is reputedly the last man killed in action on the Western Front. This visit provided a neat link with last year's tour to the battlefields of late 1918.

We then headed for the Hotel Ibis Mons Centre Gare, our base for the whole tour and after everyone had settled into their rooms we assembled in the bar before sitting down to the traditional first evening group dinner. The table was decorated with some laminated place mats depicting a cavalry unit of BEF during the Retreat from Mons and the centrepiece was a model 18 pounder field gun and a group of Royal Fusilier soldiers, provided by Robert Davies. On the journey to Mons Bob Brunsdon had described the formation of BEF and its arrival in Mons and after dinner Andy Hinks gave an



Casteau at Memorials for first and last action

informative talk on the German Army structure, uniforms and equipment, using some 'props' from his personal collection.

Starting out at 8am, our first full day on the battlefield concentrated on actions in and around Mons itself. The morning was taken up with visits to Casteau, Nimy and Obourg and we heard detailed descriptions of actions involving the 4th Battalion Royal Fusiliers and 4th Battalion Middlesex Regiment. The two memorials either side of the busy Mons to Soignies road at Casteau, commemorate the BEF's first encounter with a German cavalry patrol on 22 August 1914 and the point which BEF had reached when the Armistice came into effect on 11 November 1918. We drove through the mist about a mile towards Soignies to the spot, near a former chateau, where the Royal Irish Hussars charged and opened fire on the German patrol and Bob pointed out the presence of an original wall, surrounding the former chateau, used to shelter the horses.

At Nimy we visited the railway bridge, where the machine gun section of the 4th Royal Fusiliers mounted their machine guns and fired them across the canal - not straight down the tracks, as is commonly believed but in enfilade towards what was once a swing bridge, now a modern road bridge. The railway bridge is now much larger than its Great War predecessor and spans a much wider waterway but the base of the buttresses on which the machine guns were sited is still evident. It was here, on the morning of 23 August, that the gallant action of



Rifle tactics discussed at Obourg Station

Lieutenant Dease and Private Godley resulted in the award of the first Victoria Crosses of the Great War. It is possible to climb up onto the bridge and cross it via a walkway. Having returned to the canal bank Bob spoke of the highly trained BEF infantryman being capable of firing one rifle round every four seconds and demonstrated how enfilade fire produced an effective 'cone of fire'.

The Royal Fusiliers' defence of the bridge effectively ceased when Muskettier Oskar Niemeyer swam the canal and started the mechanism to swing the bridge, allowing the Germans to cross. He was killed in the process and awarded a posthumous Iron Cross.

Refreshments were taken in Nimy in a café on the ground floor of a building which had served as the Battalion HQ of Lieutenant Colonel N R McMahon, CO of 4th Royal Fusiliers, the officer who had formulated the rapid fire of the British infantryman into Musketry Regulations of 1909.

Heavy drizzle was a feature of the mid-morning but this abated shortly after our arrival at the Memorial to the 4th Battalion Middlesex Regiment at Obourg Station. As Bob explained, the rapid fire of the Middlesex men caused carnage in the ranks of the advancing German 31st Infantry Regiment but sheer weight of numbers enabled them to cross the canal. A lone rifleman of the Middlesex barricaded himself into the roof of the railway station building and continued to fire until eventually killed. The brave action of this anonymous soldier

assisted his comrades to make their escape to defensive positions.

On the former platform, adjacent to the memorial, Andy Hinks demonstrated the workings of the British Short Magazine Lee Enfield and the German 1898 Mauser rifle (both deactivated!), part of a personal collection.

Much of the fighting in Mons was in residential areas and we visited a location, behind some modern houses, where the 4th Middlesex established

machine gun positions. It was then time for our packed lunch, partaken on the bus outside a former psychiatric hospital which had caught fire during the battle, causing its inmates to flee. Adjacent to this was Mons Communal Cemetery and some members of the party visited the CWGC plot.

Two stands were planned for the afternoon. At La Bascule crossroads Joe Devereux related the story of the support given to the 4th Middlesex by the 2nd Royal Irish and in particular the action of QMS Thomas Fitzpatrick. Discovering a collection of cooks and bandsmen cut off from the main unit, Fitzpatrick gathered together a party of forty who managed to repel successive German attacks on the crossroads from noon until sunset. Only sixteen managed to escape that night, which included Fitzpatrick, who was awarded the DCM and finished the war as a colonel.



Joe's talk at La Bascule crossroads

At the final stand of the day we heard, from Chris Nation, the story of E Battery, Royal Horse Artillery and the first shell fired by the BEF on the Western

Front. This was Chris' debut as a Branch tour presenter and it was unfortunate that the now heavy rain limited visibility and made presenting and listening uncomfortable.

Chris had discovered a photograph, dating back to 22 August 1984, of a gun crew re-enacting the scene of the firing of the first shell seventy years earlier. Surprisingly he could find no written report of the commemoration. He decided to research the original action. He had looked closely at contemporary reports and the movement of the German forces on 22 August and concluded that the direction the gun was pointing in the photograph had been determined by the desire not to include a background of industrial units! Guide books differ as to the exact location of E Battery but despite the poor visibility Chris was able to demonstrate that the spot where we stood was the only one in the locality where the advancing Germans would have been visible and within range of the gun.

Our second day on the battlefield would take us out into the country, first to Elouges and on, via Bavay and Landrecies, to Le Cateau. After an 8.15am departure we made a rendezvous with Lieutenant Colonel (ret'd) Ian Woodbridge in the town square at Elouges. Ian, a recently retired cavalry officer, who now works at SHAPE in Mons, was to relate the story of the flank action at Elouges on 24 August. Leading us to a part of the former battlefield which afforded good views (despite persistent rain) he described the brave charge of units of the 4th Dragoon Guards and 9th Lancers towards the Sugar Factory, to relieve the beleaguered infantry of the Norfolks and Cheshires. Following the description he demonstrated the techniques used by the cavalry when armed with sword and sabre. A couple of members of the tour party were encouraged to wield these weapons (provided by Bob Brunsdon) but Ian declined to slice in half the two melons which Bob had brought along!

After expressing grateful thanks to Ian we travelled south into France and arrived at Bavay, where Sir John French had his

advanced HQ. During the refreshment break Bob organised our lunch of baguettes from a local boulangerie.

The bus travelled the Roman road to the west of the Forest of Mormal, along which General Smith-Dorriens' 2nd Corps had retreated in August 1914. Lunch was taken in a picnic area inside the Forest and Paul Haigh gave an informal presentation on the myth of The Angel of Mons, expressing thanks to Helen Earle for the research. Graham Adams then used this time to detail how the British 4th (Guards) Brigade and German 27th Division came to confront one another unexpectedly at what became known as *The Affair at Landrecies*.

The 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards first saw action at Landrecies and Graham gave a detailed account of the confused nighttime action where it took place. Following this we drove through the town to the Communal Cemetery where a small CWGC plot is located. Here Graham concluded this section of the tour by describing the effect this relatively minor clash of forces had on the overall pattern of the Retreat from Mons and how Sir Douglas Haig (commanding 1 Corps) had come very close to being captured. Most of those who fell in the action are buried in the cemetery and Graham had researched seven of the names: volunteers read out biographical details at their grave. The cemetery includes some burials from the 1st Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment, dated 26 August 1914. These were the first casualties of the Regiment in the Great War. Graham took the opportunity to give a short description of the nearby Glosters action at Le Favril.



Andy presents Le Cateau from a German perspective

The remainder of the afternoon concentrated on the Battle of Le Cateau. This was in three parts. The first was a presentation from the German perspective,

which was delivered by Andy Hinks inside the German Military Cemetery, overlooking the British lines. The second took us across the Le Cateau to Cambrai road to a vantage point where Bob described how the 2nd Suffolks (5th Division) fought off the Germans for nine hours before the survivors were forced to surrender. Unfortunately time and conditions underfoot prevented a visit to their memorial.

For the third and final stand Chris drove us up a long farm track to reach a point almost due south of Inchy. Here 107, 108 and 109 Batteries, XXIII Brigade RFA (3rd Division) were positioned on 26 August. The father of a member of our party, Scott Balchin, was a gunner with one of them and fought here. Time was spent attempting to pinpoint the exact position of these batteries and Bob gave a description of the action which took place, the artillerymen being responsible for a high level of casualties in the advancing German infantry. Scott told us something of his father and Bob, using a model, demonstrated how an 18 pounder shrapnel shell worked.

Ideally we would have then made a visit to the nearby grave of Wilfred Owen but time did not permit and instead Robert Davies gave a short talk about Owen as we travelled back to Mons and Dale Hjort followed this with a description of how the action of the Munsters at Etreux enabled 1 Corps to break clear on 27 August.

The weather on our final morning was much improved for our visit to St Symphorien Military Cemetery, for which Bob had provided a very useful map pinpointing the more prominent graves. This beautiful, landscaped, atmospheric cemetery, which is shared by the fallen of the British Commonwealth and Germans, was an entirely appropriate setting for the short ceremony of

remembrance and the laying of a poppy wreath, which is a feature of each Branch Tour. Robert Davies conducted proceedings with great dignity, reading an epitaph written by Kipling.

Ironically the sun shone until we reached the Eurotunnel terminal, only for the rain to return upon arrival in Blighty and to continue until we reached Cheltenham.

Grateful thanks were expressed to Bob, for organising another exceptionally enjoyable and informative tour. To support the presentations Bob had produced a quite superb ring-bound information 'pack', full of maps, descriptions and illustrations. On this occasion no less than nine members of the party had contributed some form of presentation, one of whom was our driver, Chris, who was also warmly thanks for getting us around safely. For many these tours are a highlight of their year and we look forward to what is in store for 2014!



Atmospheric St Symphorien Military Cemetery



Wreath Laying at St Symphorien
