
Severn & Somme

Branch Battlefield Tour: 14 to 17 September

Graham Adams

The branch had not run a tour specific to the 1916 Somme battlefield since 2009, so one was overdue. The title *Severn & Somme* was chosen, being the name of a collection of poems by Ivor Gurney and a reflection that, by and large, the places visited and actions considered would all have some link with the county, Gloucestershire Regiment, a branch member or one of those travelling. Once again, the tour would be led by Bob Brunsdon, and Bruce Cherry would undertake the driving: both are members of the Guild of Battlefield Guides. The tour proved popular and the only spare seat on the 16 seater bus was occupied by Bob's 'box of books'.

As with previous tours, the party met up in the car park at Morrisons in Cheltenham and the journey started on schedule. Bob distributed the usual comprehensive tour guide, full of maps, photographs and information which he had put together. Our progress to the Channel Tunnel terminal was uneventful and by mid afternoon we were well on the way to our first stop, Vis-en-Artois Cemetery.

Here, tour party member Graham Sacker wished to place a poppy cross on the grave of Private T Devenny, of 1st Battalion, Machine Gun Corps (MGC), believed to have been killed by a shell on 6 September 1918. Graham maintains a research database of individuals who served with the MGC and had corresponded with a relative of Private Devenny, living in the USA.

We then headed to the Holiday Inn Express in Arras, a familiar base, used on a number of previous branch tours. Once everyone had settled into their rooms we met up for the traditional group dinner in the nearby Bistro du Boucher.

Following breakfast, we were on the road by 8am and heading for the Somme battlefield, blue skies hinting at a nice sunny day. The first call was at the site of the *Heidenkopf* adjacent to Serre No 2 Cemetery, where Bob related the story of King's School, Gloucester former pupil, Lieutenant Kenneth Wallace Brown, who received a bullet wound to the elbow, attacking the stronghold on 1 July 1916, whilst serving with the 1/6 Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment. His wound caused

him to be repatriated and he tragically died as the result of a swimming accident in 1917.

The bus then took us over Redan Ridge and we parked up and walked to Redan Ridge No 2 Cemetery. Here branch member Paul Gaze told us of his grandfather who took part here in the attack by the 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment, on 1 July. We looked across to the site of the Hawthorn Mine: the decision taken by General Hunter-Weston to fire the mine ten minutes before the opening of the attack, had caused the artillery barrage to be out of kilter and the 1st East Lancs came under German fire before leaving their trenches.



Paul Gaze describes the action of 1st East Lancs at Redan Ridge

We then walked down the iconic 'Sunken Road', which features in the Geoffrey Malins' film *The Battle of the Somme*, to meet the bus parked next to the spruced up 8th Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders' Memorial. Here we discussed the likely positioning of Malins' camera, when making his film.



Walking down the Sunken Road at Beaumont Hamel

Our next stop was at Ovillers. We walked a track up onto a ridge which, on a wonderfully clear morning, afforded us superb views of Sausage and Mash Valleys, the statue of the Madonna on top of the basilica at Albert, Nab Valley and the Thiepval Memorial. The purpose of the visit was to progress from the German front line to that of the British, where the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment (25 Brigade, 8 Division) attacked on 1 July. Serjeant Alfred James Beeson, great uncle of Hilary Jennings, our Branch Treasurer/Secretary, was a member of that battalion and was killed in action. Hilary had put together a small booklet with details of his life and service and that of his brothers. He has no known grave and we placed a poppy cross on the battlefield in his memory and Andy Tiley read Gurney's haunting poem *Ballad of the Three Spectres*.



On the ridge above Ovillers, where the 8th Division attacked on 1 July

A welcome refreshment stop was taken at The Old Blighty Tea Room in La Boisselle, before, for the benefit of some Somme 'first timers' in the party, we paid a short visit to the nearby Lochnagar Crater; Bob explaining how and why the crater came about.

Upon returning to La Boisselle village, Dave Earle related the story of how on 1 July, when attacking the village with the 10th Worcesters, Lieutenant Richard Jennings, son of the Rector of King's Stanley, was wounded and rescued by Private Thomas Turrell, who had been released from the guardroom to take part in the attack. Jennings died of his wounds but not before giving a report of Turrell's brave action, which resulted in the award of a VC.

This was followed by a 'then and now' exercise. Walking up the main street of La Boisselle, referring to a contemporary map, we tried to identify which of today's



Dave Earle explains something in La Boisselle

buildings had been present, or at least a building had been on site, at the time of the Great War. As we walked, Bob described the actions of the 8th Glosters on 3 July. They were led by the charismatic, one eyed, one armed, Lieutenant Colonel Carton de Wiart (a personal hero of Bob's), who, when the other COs in 57 Brigade were wounded, took overall command and held off German counter attacks. We finished at the 34th Division Memorial, tucked away off the main road, before returning to The Old Blighty Tea Room, to partake of a packed lunch which they had provided.

After lunch we travelled to Mametz Wood, where tour member Cathy Morris' great grandfather had seen action with the 10th Welsh Regiment in July 1916, for which he had received a commendation. We viewed the impressive 38th Division 'Red Dragon' Memorial and Bruce described the Division's attack on 7 July. It gave Dave Earle an excuse to bring out a Welsh flag!



Dave Earle and Bruce Cherry at the 38th (Welsh) Division Memorial, Mametz

A visit was then paid to the Somme 1916 Museum, in the vaults of the church at Albert, and we emerged into heavy drizzle.

For the final item on the day's programme there was a choice – to go in the bus to Corbie Communal Cemetery Extension to enable one of the party to place a cross on the grave of a relative, or to travel back by train from Albert to Arras: the line passes along the valley of the Ancre and through the former battlefield.

Those who opted for the train discovered that delays and cancellations are not confined to the British rail network. Their anticipated train was cancelled and when one arrived it was crowded with commuters and very little was seen of the former battlefield!

The weather for our second day on the battlefields looked promising, as once again we left Arras at 8am. We stopped briefly at Bullecourt, to view the tank memorials, before arriving at the 18th Divisional Memorial at Trones Wood. A heavy mist blanketed the whole area, which added to the atmosphere as we took the rare opportunity to walk through one of the iconic Somme battlefield woods. As we progressed, Graham Adams outlined the various pitched battles which took place in the wood between 8-14 July 1916, drawing upon eyewitness accounts. It took an innovative tactic, not dissimilar to driving pheasants or grouse, for 18th Division to finally achieve capture.



Walking through Trones Wood

Emerging from the wood, onto the track coming south from Longueval, the persistent mist obscured the village of Guillemont and it was not until we reached Guillemont Road Cemetery that the sun finally broke through. This was fortuitous as the cemetery affords a superb vantage point to view the 'killing ground' between Trones Wood and the German defensive positions in front of Guillemont. Graham outlined the successive attempts to attack the village in August 1916 and went on to describe, in detail, how the village was

taken by 20th (Light) Division, augmented by 47th Brigade from 16th (Irish) Division, on 3 September. Interestingly, aerial to ground attack was employed. The 12th Glosters formed part of the successful attack to the south east of the village.



Joe Devereux, Graham Sacker & Brian Ward explore Guillemont Road Cemetery

A short time was spent looking at the graves of the three prominent individuals in the cemetery, notably that of Raymond Asquith, son of the Prime Minister, before we visited the remains of a couple of entrances to bunkers which were the mainstay of the Guillemont defences and the Memorial to 16th (Irish) Division. Here Graham related the story of two Irishmen awarded the VC in the attack and their contrasting post war treatment. A visit was then paid to the Marsden-Smedley Memorial in a field, just north of the village.

It was time for a refreshment break and this was taken at a café in nearby Longueval, where a street 'table top' market was in full swing, with an eclectic array of goods for sale.

From Longueval we drove to Pozieres Cemetery, to pay our respects at the grave of Corporal Thomas Wood Gough, 1/5 Glosters, another King's School, Gloucester former pupil. He was the main focus of the next part of the itinerary, which first involved overlooking the ground where the battalion (part of 145 Brigade) took part in an attack on Skyline Trench



Bob describes the attack by 15th Glosters on Skyline Trench

on 23 July 1916 and secondly walking from the start line (just north east of Ovillers) up a lane which ran parallel with the direction of the attack. It was an attack made before first light and supported by 'flaming mortars'; oil filled projectiles, fired by Special Brigade, RE. The attack was over very open ground and the unsuppressed German machine guns created havoc and Corporal Gough was one of the many casualties. We walked to the approximate area where his body was eventually found.

We returned to the garden of The Old Blighty Tea Room for our packed lunch, before heading to Thiepval Memorial, taking in a brief stop at Gibraltar Bunker and the 1st Australian Division Memorial at Pozieres.

At Thiepval members had time to look at particular names on the various panels and we specifically remembered several of them.

After the Memorial we stopped briefly at Thiepval Church, where there is a memorial plaque to Lieutenant Colonel Carton de Wiart and Bob was persuaded to be photographed mimicking the great man pulling a pin from a grenade with his teeth, using an apple as a prop.



Bob plays Lt Col Carton de Wiart at Thiepval

The final main stand of the day took place inside London Cemetery, in front of High Wood. Supported by references to the War Diary and barrage fire charts, cleverly overlaid onto a modern 'google earth' image, Bob gave a detailed account of the 1st Glosters attack on High Wood on 8 September 1916, with emphasis on the support given by machine gun and trench mortar fire. The attack failed and unfortunately casualties were incurred from 'friendly fire'. Graham Sacker then explained the role of the machine gun in attacks and how, in the main, it was used by the British for indirect fire, whereas the Germans saw it as a direct fire weapon. He also fielded a number of questions on how the guns were worked.



Group photo at London Cemetery, High Wood

The sunny weather had now given way to some prolonged showers and we took the opportunity during a break to pose for the 'group photograph' and following this John Wilson laid a wreath on behalf of the branch.

Besides the main stands, poppy crosses were also laid at graves in various cemeteries along the way. The locations, not already mentioned, were Bernafay Wood, Caterpillar Valley, Waggon Road and Bulls Road, Flers. Thanks are due to Dave Gargett for reciting the Exhortation *They shall grow not old...* on each occasion.

On each tour, prior to journeying to the Channel Tunnel on the final day, we try to slot in a visit to a place of interest. On this occasion we stepped forward to 1940 and the BEF's retreat to Dunkirk, by visiting the Ledringhem area. Here the 1/5 Glosters mounted an heroic rearguard action, holding off a German division for sixty hours and although surrounded 130 men managed to escape, thanks to a charge using grenades, bayonets and firing from the hip. We visited the grave of a 19 year old from Cheltenham in Ledringhem Churchyard, one of the unlucky ones who failed to escape.

The journey to the Channel Tunnel was made pleasant by sharing a very tasty cake, baked by Helen Earle. Once back in 'Blighty' the motorway journey was smooth and we arrived back in Cheltenham on schedule.

Our tour used a bus in which Bruce drives parties around London on Rock Tours. It has a large guitar motif either side, bearing the names of familiar rock bands. This prompted the odd quizzical look at our various stops! Whilst awaiting boarding at the Channel Tunnel terminal Bruce put on a CD of familiar Beatles songs, prompting an impromptu sing-a-long. Bob Brunsdon again put in a tremendous amount of work to get the tour underway and ensured that it ran smoothly. He was the mainstay of the presentations but, I am sure he would agree, that the line *I get by with a little help from my friends* certainly applies to leading a battlefield tour: so, a big thank you to him, Bruce our excellent and knowledgeable driver and the various tour members who contributed in some way, large and small, to making this tour a great success.
