

1914-
1918

St Clement's History Department:
WWI Battlefields Tour (France & Belgium) 2018:



The importance of this topic can never be underestimated, least not this year, being the 100th anniversary since the end of the Great War when the armistice was signed at 11am on the 11th day of the 11th month 1918.



As Super Learning Day (March 2018) approached the excitement for our 70 historians from Year 8 and 10 grew, not least for the 03:50 meeting at school. A seamless boarding of our coaches, a quick goodbye to parents and carers and we were off. We picked up our guides at Maidstone service station then boarded the Eurotunnel to France, all in a breeze. There was a buzz as we entered France, particularly for those who hadn't been out the country before and this continued as we followed the footsteps of our soldiers 100 years earlier. Our first stop in Belgium at 11:30am saw us relax and refresh with a drink before a museum tour and walk through a trench system.





Following this first activity before we set off for our next part of the adventure, we had the obligatory museum stop with the standard 'bullet on a chain' purchase! So far, the weather hadn't dampened our spirits (in actual fact, it helped set the context of the fighting in this part of Belgium with the Battle of Passchendaele being famous for its swampy and flooded conditions!).



We then arrived at our first cemetery, which of course isn't the most fun part, but incredibly important to give us some scale to the war. Our students looked, listened and reflected in a very mature and sensitive way asking Dickie and Beth (our guides) some excellent questions and hearing their insights into the Great War. We were introduced to individuals from the War and hearing their stories at their grave stones made the experience all the more poignant.



We then made our way to a German cemetery and heard some stories about the other side, which were observed with exactly the same respect and manners. The German cemetery was very different than the British Commonwealth cemeteries, there was a more gothic, darker presentation of their fallen troops. The weather had really picked up by this point, allowing for a really good insight into what it would have been like for the soldiers of both alliances.



The first day in Belgium was drawing to a close as we headed off for our evening meal and accommodation. Who knew the French Fries are actually a Belgian invention that the Americans called French because they didn't know they weren't in France? They were delicious a long with the gigantic chicken thigh and pasta!





There was one really important part of our trip that probably carries the most significant message and that is the 'Last Post' ceremony at the Menin Gate. This ceremony takes place at 8pm EVERY night and has done for at least 70+ years (there was a 5 year gap during WW2 where it took place in England) and is performed by volunteers and the fire service. We selected 3 students from to represent St. Clement High School and lay a wreath following the service where they performed brilliantly in front of a few thousand people.



Our last few hours in Belgium wouldn't be complete without a visit to a genuine Belgian chocolate shop where they had deals for us all and all of us were like 'kids in a sweet shop', not just the kids!



Day two began early with a continental breakfast and a slick and easy room check! We then set off for France and a day on the Somme, the sight of Britain's most severe military damages in a day in history.

The picture to the left shows a giant crater that was made by mining and blowing up the German stronghold of the Somme's high ground. The impact and sheer size of the Battle of the Somme and WWI could be seen as far as the eye could see and having the locations of the Trenches for both sides being portrayed really made Trench Warfare very clear, particularly as we walked through what would have been 'No man's land'.



Our next stop was 'Newfoundland Memorial Park' which was where the Canadians had been located on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916. As we walked through the 'communication trenches' to the 'frontline trench' we were literally following the footsteps of the soldiers as they prepared to go 'over the top'. The scars of the Trenches were clear to see in the landscape and environment. We stood and looked at the exact location and the exact view these soldiers would have faced as they stepped up and out of their trenches to imminent death. It was even more moving and sad to learn that there are still the remains of 200-300 soldiers in this land that have not yet been discovered.



With particular focus on the injuries of the Great War, we then went on a walk along the 'Evacuation chain' from the battlefields to the medical facilities. This walk wasn't easy at the best of times with the constant barrage of shell fire, machine guns, weather and screams of pain! One could only imagine what it must have been like. As we walked along, we picked up shells and our guide found a rusty spade head which we brought home with us – the question I have for this, is why was it just dropped and left to be discovered by us 100 years later? Had the Germans shelled our trenches, destroying this particular trench that no one ever went back to it? It is very common that the farmers of the Somme find WWI weaponry daily as they plough their fields and just leave it on the side. For me, this isn't just a spade head, but it carries a story we'll never know, but evokes emotion and mystery but reminds us of the many mysteries of WWI and those stories that will never be told or discovered.



We eventually arrived at a big hall where we would have lunch, and then be taken through some of the medical routines from WWI. It was made very vivid what some of these injuries will have looked like, with entry and exit wounds and the techniques to treat them.



As the stretcher bearers arrived, all will be fine for our heavily wounded soldier!



Our final activity before we set off for home was the Thiepval Memorial at the Somme which lists all of the soldiers who were never found. This was incredibly moving and again to see the scale of death in this war was a particularly poignant way to end our tour of the Battlefields.

A very powerful message given to us here was that tonight, we get to go home!



Our journey home was only interrupted by a short delay at the Euro Tunnel, which didn't dampen the excitement for tea at McDonalds at the service station! Arriving home at 1am, our historians collected their stuff and went to bed probably not remember much about how, but I am sure they will wake up with a new perspective on WWI and full of memories of a fantastic trip.

I'd like to thank Mrs Norton, Miss Franklin, Mrs Drake, Mr Osler, Mr Brooks and Miss Ballard for their support in this trip, as well as our guides Dickie and Beth who added more depth and value than I can put into words. But also, and more importantly I'd like to thank our students who represented our school, themselves and their parents in the most incredible way, as they always do. Finally, thanks again to you, our parents and carers who support these trips helping us enhance our student's experiences and lives.

Mr Modica

More pictures can be seen at the Gallery <http://www.stchistory.com/wwibattle.html> , on our Facebook page www.facebook.com/stchistory or on our Twitter feed @stchistory

