

TATLER

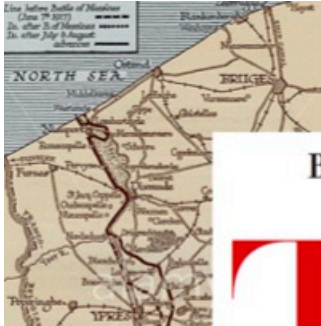
TRAVEL

Edited by FRANCISCA KELLETT



TATLER IN THE TRENCHES

*To quote soldier-poet Rupert Brooke, 'there's some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England'.
And 100 years after the outbreak of the First World War, his words feel more
poignant than ever on the eternally haunting battlefields of northern France and Belgium*



British troops during the Battle of the Somme

Braving the battlefields

By Andrew Wilson

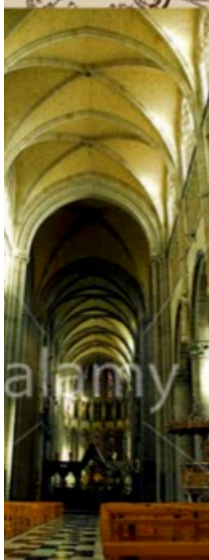
They don't talk of tourists in Ypres, the Belgian town that serves as an ideal base for exploring the battlefields of the First World War. Rather, visitors to this flat and fertile part of Flanders are described as pilgrims.

I was here to make my own pilgrimage; my great-grandfather Frank Heywood died in a long-forgotten field close to the Belgian-French border. Nobody in my family had ever paid a visit to his grave. My grandmother Anne often talked of the father she never knew – he died in March 1917, two months before she was born – and, if prompted, she would bring out an old envelope containing the well-thumbed, tissue-paper-thin letter her mother received, informing her that Frank had been killed in action.

My journey began in Ypres, less than an hour's drive from Lille (itself only an hour and a half from London by Eurostar). I had always imagined Ypres to be a depressing place, its air heavy with the ghosts of war. Although the fortified medieval town was completely destroyed by German shelling – not a single tree survived the onslaught – it was decided to rebuild it to its former glory. Today, it looks like something from a gothic fairytale, with the towers of the Cloth Hall and St Martin's Cathedral rising into the sky. At night, residents and visitors crowd into the bars and restaurants around the market square for glasses of the favoured aperitif of the region, Picon vin blanc (local orange liqueur, crème de cassis, Cointreau and white wine), and to feast on dishes such as rich Flemish casseroles and fish stews laden with cheese.

Before travelling south, we visited the two major museums in the region to discover more about the history of Flanders Fields, the area immortalised by John McCrae's poem, written in 1915 after the Second Battle of Ypres. 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow/Between the crosses, row on row,' it begins.

The Memorial Museum Passchendaele in Zonnebeke, a 10-minute drive from Ypres, is a good place to start. It was here that we met Marc,



ABOVE, THE NAVE OF ST MARTIN'S CATHEDRAL, IN YPRES. BELOW, MAJOR SIR NEVILLE RODWELL WILKINSON READING TATLER IN 1916



ABOVE, ST MARTIN'S CATHEDRAL, AND THE CLOTH HOUSE IN YPRES. BELOW LEFT, YPRES IN RUINS AND AS REBUILT BELOW, AN ADVERT FOR PICON, THE LOCAL LIQUEUR



OFFICERS & GENTLEMEN

Visiting the battlefield is an unrivalled way to bear witness to sacrifice and courage. No one can fail to be moved by the many cemeteries among the battlefields, all containing the bodies – the silent battalions – of officers and other ranks laid in the same earth and treated equally in death.

It is a common misconception that the high casualty rates on the Western Front were caused by 'incompetent toffs' dragging the working class to its doom. Nothing could be further from the truth. The higher social and political classes were hit disproportionately hard by the Great War. Their sons provided the young officers who led the way over the top and whose

life expectancy was measured in weeks. Roughly 12 per cent of the British Army's other ranks were killed in the war, compared to 17 per cent of the officers.

Captain Noel Mellish, an Army chaplain who was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1916, said of battlefield visitors: 'Yours is a pilgrimage in the memory of those who passed this way. You will tread reverently, for it is holy ground. It is the shrine of those who won the right for us all to have a country of our own.'

Take up the torch and go and see for yourself. **Rhydian Vaughan**
For information on battlefield tours of France and Belgium with Rhydian Vaughan, visit battlefieldtours.co





Above, a reconstructed frontline trench at the Memorial Museum Passchendaele. Top right, bunks in a restored dugout



No laughing matter

By John Lloyd

My great-uncle John Hardress Lloyd was a brigadier general in the First World War. He died in 1952, six months after I was born, so I never knew him – or much about him. When I produced *Blackadder Goes Forth* in the Eighties, I did wonder whether he was a General Melchett type.

In 2005, I got to know military historian Gary Sheffield. He and I did a debate in Oxford – me telling jokes from and about the programme, him telling me where we got our facts wrong. Gary is something of a revisionist in these matters. He thinks that Field Marshal Haig (and many of his staff) have been unfairly characterised, and that the average British soldier was better fed in the trenches than he would have been in rural England in peacetime.

By one of those odd coincidences, in 2008, the year I made *Blackadder Rides Again* for the programme's 25th anniversary, a Wikipedia entry for my great-uncle appeared. He was a star polo player, it turns out, winning a silver medal in the 1908 Olympics. During the war he was awarded a DSO by the British and made a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur by the French. My father always spoke very highly of him, so I hope he was one of the good guys.

While working on *Blackadder Goes Forth*, I once went down to the studio and stood in the trench set. Even though it was in the BBC Television Centre, I remember how spooky it was. It was easy to imagine a real war going on. The famous last scene, where the actors go 'over the top', was shot on a no-man's-land set so huge that we had to record it in a different studio to the one where the audience sat. In darkness (and with pyrotechnics going off all around), the experience was so horrible that the cast refused to do another take.

All of these things flitted through my mind on the trip that Ben Elton and I made to the Somme in 2008. In the flat Picardy countryside, you get glimpses of great monuments in the distance and there is a constant sense of foreboding, heightened by the fact that everything is now so peaceful. Standing on a gentle hillside dotted with crosses as far as the eye can see is hard to take in – so much pain and struggle and tragedy given an austere, strangely beautiful geometric dignity.

What really affected me, though, was where they've retained the original earthworks of the trench layout. You approach them from the car park through a leafy wood, and when you get there, it's all covered with grass, but the rugged gouges in the ground are deeply disturbing. Permanent wounds in the land, lest we forget...

Ben and I and the crew then had coffee in an unpretentious café in a French village near the cemetery. It was an unforgettable day and made me think how lucky I was to be alive.

the first of three specialist local guides, each of whom brought the reality of the war to life with tales of horror and heroism.

Situated in a former chateau, the museum is full of original artefacts: rifles, boots, uniforms, shells and photographs. It commemorates the famous Battle of Passchendaele of 1917, in which 250,000 British soldiers lost their lives in the course of 100 days to gain just a few miles of ground, and also describes the importance of the Ypres Salient, a semicircular bulge in the Allied line that extended into enemy territory. The steady stream of visitors was hushed and reverential.

Here we learned about the cocktail of deadly chemical weapons (mustard gas, chlorine gas, phosgene) that were developed by the Germans. If you lift the lid of a wooden box, you can actually smell their pungent aroma. Outside, we walked through reconstructed trenches – a glimpse of life on the frontline. I imagined what it must have been like for my great-grandfather, sleeping two to a bed on a chicken-wire bunk with a lice-infested blanket for a cover and the constant sound of shellfire and screaming in his ears.

In Ypres itself, the modern, interactive In Flanders Fields Museum tells the human stories of the tragedy – a million lives were lost on both sides in this area alone. The highlight here is a film featuring actors telling the real stories of two nurses and a doctor who worked in a field hospital. One of the nurses describes soldiers being brought in from battle – men without noses, men without faces'. Another powerful exhibit is an oak planted in nearby Elverdinge in 1760 that bears the scars of war. After coming down in a storm in 1994, the tree was split open, revealing that the wood that had grown between 1914 and 1918 was stained an unsettling shade of dark blue, the 'bleeding' being a result of shock waves from the incessant grenades that had rained down on the land nearby.

There are traces of the war everywhere. The landscape is patterned with cemeteries, from small ones next to farmyards to vast arenas >

THEY SLEPT
TWO TO
A BED ON
CHICKEN-WIRE
BUNKS
AT YPRES



EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

Edward Billington, right, reading *Tatler*, was heir to the Billington Group – a food and agriculture business – when he joined the Liverpool Scottish Territorial Regiment at the age of 19. He later volunteered for its 1/13 Battalion, which left for France in October 1914, sailing to Le Havre in the hold of a cargo vessel. They then marched and were transported in cattle trucks, and marched again to a point a mile from the frontline. There, they dug communication trenches, at times within just 10 yards of the German positions. Edward's father arranged for his return to Britain in spring 1915. But his role in the war was not over – he became a brigade transport officer and returned to the front. He survived the fighting at Ypres, was awarded the MC for rescuing horses from the firing line and stayed in France until after the Armistice. In January 1919, he was called before his brigadier: 'Billy, I did not know you were such an important businessman. Your demobilisation has come through. Off you go.' Edward 'Billy' Billington went on to head the Billington Group. He died in 1983.



LEFT, WALKING WOUNDED AT PASSCHENDAELE, 1917. RIGHT, THE MAY 1918 EDITION OF VOGUE



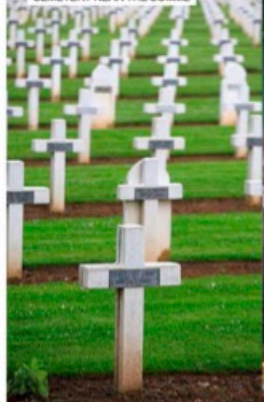
◁ of graves that stand as epic monuments to the fallen. Driving from Ypres towards Passchendaele, past fields of Brussels sprouts, red cabbages and leeks, we saw a sea of white, a ridge of gravestones that seemed to stretch on forever. This is Tyne Cot, the largest Commonwealth cemetery in the world, where almost 11,000 men are buried. A stone wall at one end is inscribed with the names of 35,000 soldiers who have no known graves. When King George V visited in 1922, he was overwhelmed. 'We can truly say that the whole circuit of the earth is gilded with the graves of our dead,' he said. 'In the course of my pilgrimage, I have many times asked myself whether there can be more potent advocates of peace upon earth through the years to come than this massed multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war.'

As we made our way from Ypres towards the French border, our next guide, Koenraad, pointed out a number of sites that seemed to speak across the century. First we stopped at the Pool of Peace, an enormous crater, now full of water, that was formed when the Allies tunneled beneath enemy lines and blew up a German command post. It is said that this explosion, together with a series of 18 others that signalled the start of the Battle of Messines on 7 June 1917, was so loud that it could be heard in London. In nearby Lone Tree Cemetery lie the bodies of 88 men, the majority of whom were killed on the first day of the battle, some of them ordered to approach the German post too soon and perishing in the blast. From there we continued to Prowse Point, one of the sites of the 1914 Christmas Day truce, when troops from opposing sides of the conflict downed their weapons and played games of football. Today, a cluster of footballs nestles by a wooden cross.



Graves at Tyne Cot

ABOVE, SHELL CRATERS AT THE BEAUFORT-HAMEL NEWFOUNDLAND MEMORIAL PARK. BELOW, A MILITARY CEMETERY NEAR THE SOMME



Remembering the war a world away

By Nicholas Shakespeare

The island of Tasmania is as far as you can travel from England and still be on the same planet. (Travel any further, an old guidebook says, and you're on your way home.) Yet in numberless small hamlets like Swansea, they pay tribute, every day, to the young men whose names decorate the war memorials and who sacrificed their lives in a conflict that took place a world away. Every evening in the Returned and Services League Club on Noyes Street, as in every other RSL Club in Australia, lights are dimmed, snooker interrupted and the same recording of the 'Ode' from Laurence Binyon's poem 'For the Fallen' is played.

My children grew up in Swansea, my eldest son winning a prize for his painting of poppies in Flanders. It was hung in the RSL Club on

Anzac Day, which honours the Australian and New Zealand troops who fell at Gallipoli in 1915. Earlier that morning in 2002, my son walked with his school to the war memorial and listened to the Last Post and the prayers said every year on 25 April. Weeks later, in Tasmania's capital, Hobart, a state funeral was accorded to the last Anzac, Alec Campbell had been a 16-year-old munitions carrier at Gallipoli and spent much of the campaign invalidated with mumps. Yet through his involvement in Gallipoli, as the Hobart *Mercury* reminded Tasmanians, he linked 'our heroic past with the minds and hearts of the present'.

Nicholas Shakespeare's Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in France (Harvill Secker, £18.99) is out now.



Nicholas Shakespeare

ABOVE, AN AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER CARRIES A WOUNDED COMRADE, GALLIPOLI, 1915. BELOW, ANZAC COVE, GALLIPOLI



Frank Heywood,
Andrew Wilson's
great-grandfather



The Pool of
Peace, near Ypres



ABOVE, THE MENIN
GATE IN YPRES. RIGHT, A
1916 EDITION OF *TATLER*.
BELOW, A CROSS AT
PROWSE POINT, WITH
FOOTBALLS
COMMEMORATING THE
1914 CHRISTMAS TRUCE



My last stop was Brown's Road Military Cemetery in Festubert, France, the final resting place of my great-grandfather and a number of his pals from the Lancashire Fusiliers. I had found the location and plot number easily enough by entering his name on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website.

The day was crisp and bright, and as I approached his grave, petals of cherry blossom danced in the wind and settled on the earth by my feet. Just days before his death, on 27 March 1917, Frank Heywood had filled out an Army-issue postcard informing his wife that all was well. His death was described in a letter from his commanding officer. Apparently a 'whizz-bang', a shell packed with explosives, went off in front of him; his death was, the officer insisted, quick and painless. 'Your husband was one of our very best soldiers. Strong and fearless with smart and soldierly carriage, he was always a most noticeable soldier. I cannot tell you how the boys miss him. He was so strong and yet so unselfish. On the march, when others less gifted with vigour were weakening, he often assisted by taking some of their loads in addition to his own. Indeed, your husband was a man who was especially beloved... his death was a personal loss to everybody.'

Later that night, in Ypres, I made my way to the Menin Gate, an enormous arch bearing the names of 55,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Salient but have no known graves. Here, every evening at eight o'clock, the Last Post is sounded in memory of the fallen. Tears came to my eyes when the leader of some visiting Royal Air Force cadets delivered the famous words of the Lancashire-born poet Laurence Binyon, words that seemed particularly appropriate for my pilgrimage: 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning/We will remember them.'

Kirker Holidays' 'Western Front' six-night escorted tour with historian Hugh Macdonald-Buchanan departs on 29 September and 15 October, and costs £1,489 a person, including Eurostar travel, half-board accommodation and all entrance fees. Kirker Holidays can also arrange independent battlefield trips from £454 a person (kirkerholidays.com; 020 7593 2283). >



Andrew Wilson,
left, and partner Marcus
Field at Brown's Road
Cemetery, in France

LEFT, FRANK
HEYWOOD'S
ARMY-ISSUE
POSTCARD TO HIS
WIFE, WRITTEN
SHORTLY BEFORE
HIS DEATH IN 1917

**WE SAW A SEA
OF WHITE –
A RIDGE OF
GRAVESTONES
THAT SEEMED
TO STRETCH
ON FOREVER**