

A Day in the Salient with Bernard Comyn **by Ian Chambers, August 2007**

Bernard is a friend of Harry Canvin, and knowing that I was spending a few days in the Salient, Harry arranged for Gary and me to spend a day with him.



Bernard, (pictured here with my son Gary) is, I would guess, in his early seventies and was born in Zillebeke, where he still lives. He is a walking encyclopaedia on the war in the Salient and once you have spent a little time with him it soon becomes clear that he gets great enjoyment from passing that knowledge on.

Our first stop was Hill 60, which is on the outskirts of Zillebeke. This mound, 60 metres high, was of great importance bearing in mind the general low lying nature of most of the area. It was held by the Germans until 7 June 1917 when a series of mines was detonated over the Messines Ridge area to signal the start of what became known as the Battle of Messines. The tunnel to Hill 60 was 1,380 feet long and was officially known as The Berlin Sap, just before it reached Hill 60 the tunnel branched off to run under another German position known as The Caterpillar which was a second "hill" formed from the spoil from the railway cutting. In total 123,500 pounds of ammonal and guncotton was placed under the two hills and when both mines exploded as planned, this allowed British troops to storm and capture them and they remained in British hands until the German advance of 1918.



This Australian built bunker, (built on top of a German one, which can just be seen, bottom right), was built after the Germans had been pushed back in 1918 and did not see any action in the Great War. (1)



This is the crater created by the mine at The Caterpillar; unlike the crater on Hill 60 this is always full of water.



Tributes left on a tree stump at Hill 60



This picture represents the distance between the front lines at Hill 60. The picture was taken at the position of the German front line while the Allies front line was where the house now stands.

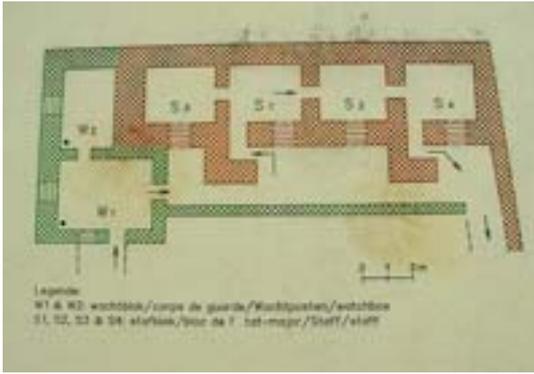


The view from Hill 60 to Ypres

From Zillebeke we then moved onto Zandvoorde to look at a German Command Post. This was built in 1916 of reinforced concrete by an Armierungsbataillon, (who presumably left this plaque as a memorial to their efforts), for use as a command post for a Regiment in reserve. The building has six rooms and measures 19 metres in length with a roof one metre thick. It has been a listed building since April 1999.







Bernard told me that when the locals started to return to the area at the end of the Great War, because the entire village had been devastated, the command post was used by them as living accommodation until their homes had been rebuilt.

From here we moved a short distance into the village to the memorial to the 1st & 2nd Life Guards and the Royal Horse Guards. Bernard explained that this had originally stood in open land but that over the years it has become surrounded by houses and now found itself standing on a very small plot with access from the road via a very narrow walk way. He also told us how the memorial came to be built here; Lord Worsley of the Household Cavalry was killed when an order to withdraw did not reach his machine gun section. His body was buried by the Germans, who made a map of the location which enabled his grave to be located in December 1918 and his widow then purchased the plot of land he was buried in. However, within a few years, his body was moved to a cemetery in Ypres, (2), and the Memorial was built on the spot where the grave had been.



Because of its location and the very size of the memorial, it is impossible to take a picture that does it any justice.

The legend at the bottom of the memorial reads:

**To Those
Of The 1st & 2nd Life Guards & Royal Horse Guards
Who Died Fighting In France and Flanders 1914
Many Of Them Fell In Defence Of The Ridge Upon
Which This Cross Stands**



We then went to the village Church, just to the right of which are buried four men of the 10th Hussars, (3), who were killed defending the village on 26 October 1914.

They are:

Captain Sir Frank Stanley Day Rose
Lieutenant Christopher Randolph Turnor
Lance Corporal J. Waugh; Private R. MacKenzie.



After the war Lt. Turnor's parents, Algernon Turnor, C.B. and Lady Henrietta Turnor paid for a stained glass window in his memory in the Church. Unfortunately, a large item of Church furniture has been placed in front of the window and it is not possible to read the legend at the bottom.

From here we moved onto Shrewsbury Forest as I wanted to see the area where Edgar Mobbs was killed (4). Bernard told me that Mobbs' men had been attacking and seeing that they were being held up by the bunker, he had simply charged at it. His body was not recovered. Bernard showed me a map of the forest on which the position of the bunker, Lower Star, as it was known was marked; he had no trouble in finding the area but because of the amount of foliage, picking out the remains of the bunker proved a bit more difficult. After a few minutes though I was able to pick out a shape deep in the trees and there it was.



Although now badly damaged the ruin of the bunker is still a very impressive sight. Part of the roof is now only held up by an unexploded shell

Our next stop was Clapham Junction on the Menin Road. Here there are two very similar memorials, one on either side of the road.



The first (left above) is to the Gloucestershire Regiment and is in memory of all of those of the regiment that fell during the Great War and also lists the regiments Battle Honours.

The second memorial (right above) is to the 18th Division, this lists the units that made up the division and also lists, year by year, the Battle Honours won by the division.

Then we went into the village of Gheluvelt where there are memorials to the men of the South Wales Borderers, who fell in the Great War and the 2nd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment.



The village was attacked on 29/10/14 by the German 54th Reserve Division. The 1st South Wales Borderers (on the left above) held up the attack and the 2nd Worcestershires were brought in to bolster the line. Although the village fell two days later, the momentum of the German advance had been broken.

Our next objective was to visit some preserved German trenches, this involved going back down the Menin Road towards Menin and taking a left hand turn near Clapham Junction. As we drove out into the country Bernard noticed a digger in a field, pulling up quickly he turned to me and said “just tell them that your grandfather was lost around this area and that his body has never been found”.



In the field were three men, the digger driver, one with a metal detector and a younger man whom Bernard approached, he asked the man why they were digging and could we have a look as my grandfather etc etc. The man told us that he was from the local archaeology unit and as the landowner wanted to build on this piece of land, (a piggery), it had to be examined for unexploded shells etc. He also told us that the man with the detector was one of the top men with the well known amateur archaeological group The Diggers and that it was his job to go in front of the digger to avoid the digger driver getting a nasty surprise. Finally, he told us that we were welcome to look as much as we wanted to but that for reasons that would soon become clear to us we must not go into the trenches.



It did not take us long to see exactly what he meant. Once we started to walk down the side of the trench we started to see the shells. There were shells almost every few yards and Bernard was able to tell us which were German and which were Allied.

There was also other assorted debris, such as this shovel.



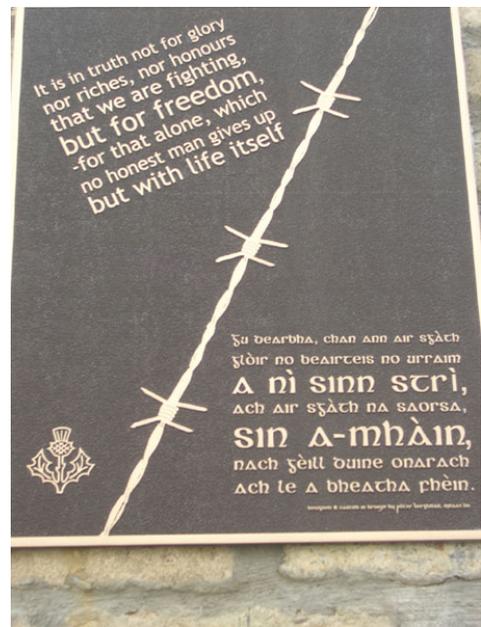
This shell was lying within inches of a British hand grenade.



It does not take much imagination to think of the damage that this piece of shell could do to a man!



Our next stop was the new Scottish Memorial that had been unveiled the Saturday before.



The monument, made of Scottish granite in traditional High or Celtic Cross design, stands in the area of Zonnebeke village and is dedicated to all Scots that fought in the Great war.

Many years ago while travelling through France very early one morning, I saw in the distance a small Commonwealth War Grave Cemetery. This stuck in my mind and ever since my interest in the war

really began I have been fascinated by the smaller cemeteries. Clearly, most of the smaller cemeteries were concentrated many years ago, for reasons that I can understand, if not necessarily agree with. Tyne Cot is an amazing place and really brings home the scale of the tragedy that was the Great War, but for me nothing beats the feeling I get from visiting a small intimate cemetery. I told Bernard this and he took us to two fine examples.

The first one that he took us to was Croonaert Chapel cemetery.



This lies about 3 miles from Ypres, and was a shrine in a hamlet between Voormezele and Wijtschate, and was in No Man's Land before the Battle of Messines in June 1917. The cemetery was begun by the 19th Division Burial Officer that same month, and was used until the following November. Two further burials were made in April 1918 and January 1919. It contains 75 Commonwealth burials of the First World War, seven of which are unidentified.

The second was Spanbroekmolen British Cemetery.



This is located about 4 miles south of Ypres and stands on the road that goes from there to Wijtschate and onto Armentieres.

The cemetery is named after a windmill which stood nearby and has in it the graves of 58 men. Of these, 55 were killed in action on 7 June 1917, the first day of the Battle of Messines, with the remaining three falling on the following day. The cemetery was destroyed in subsequent operations but found again after the Armistice.

Next we moved onto the Pool of Peace.



This is another crater resulting from a 7 June 1917 mine which has filled with water, much the same as the Caterpillar at Hill 60. In fact, the mine actually went off 15 seconds late, by which time the attacking 36 Division (Ulster), thinking it had failed had left their trenches and there were many fatalities caused by the explosion or falling debris.



As we stood at the entrance Bernard pointed out that in the distance we could see France, and in particular Bethune, (about 25 miles away, in the area known as the coal-mining basin), also the site of fierce fighting during the great war, just to the left of centre on the skyline you can make out two slag heaps.



Near to the Pool is the Lone Tree cemetery (above). Of the 79 identified burials in the cemetery, 55 are from the Royal Irish Rifles who fell on 7 June, some of whom were the victims of the mine.

From the Pool of Peace we moved onto the Canadian Memorial at Hill 62.



You can just see in the picture that the first line reads: “Here at Mount Sorrel” Bernard told us that this is an error and that the memorial does not stand on Mount Sorrel which is some 800 yards to the south.



The view of Ypres, 3 miles in the distance, from Hill 62.

Next we returned to Zillebeke to look at the churchyard.



This contains 32 burials from the Great War of which 26 are identified. Locally it is known as the aristocrat's cemetery, as amongst those buried here are:

Henry Parnell 5th Baron Congleton
Baron Alexis de Gunzburg
Lord Bernard Gordon Lennox
The Honourable William Wyndham
(3rd son of the 2nd Baron of Leconfield)

The Churchyard also has in it the village memorial on which Bernard pointed out the names of two of his father's brothers and also the name of one of his wife's uncles.

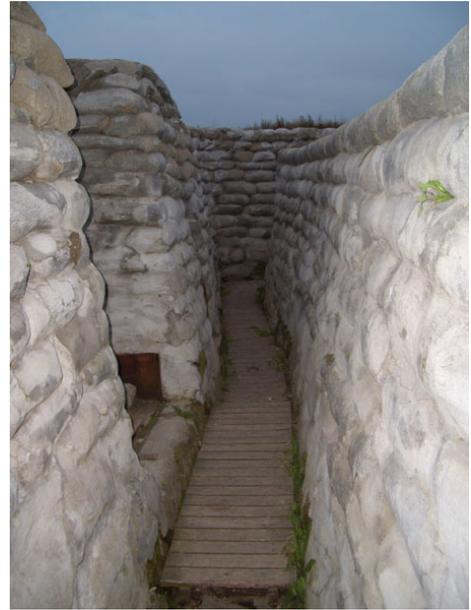
Then it was back to Ypres for the Last Post ceremony.



The British Lion gazes out along The Menin Road.



Next we made our way to the Yorkshire Trench Dugout, although this is stated as being in Boesinghe, to me it seemed more like the outskirts of Ypres.



The Yorkshire Trench appeared on maps from the spring of 1916 when it was still a shallow trench which seldom offered sufficient protection.

The dugout was started at the end of 1916 – beginning of 1917 and was completed by the 173rd Tunnelling Company, The heavy clay soil and the soil water made digging these trenches and lodging in them a difficult and dangerous business.



The dugout was discovered by accident and was surveyed by the Diggers in February 1992. There are two flights of steps that lead to two corridors ten metres below ground level off of which there are 11

small and large rooms.



This picture (above) is the entrance to the dugout. It has to be kept barred, as it is impossible to keep the water level down without round the clock pumping. Although very difficult to see, the water comes right up to the top of the stairs and the entire complex is completely flooded below ground.

At the Battle of Pilckem Ridge (start of the Third Battle of Ypres), it was used as the headquarters of the 13th and 16th Royal Welsh Fusiliers Battalions, (38th Welsh Division).

The layout of the corridors and rooms is marked on the site above the ground by means of paths.





In the gathering gloom we made our way out to the north east of Ypres to see the 50th (Northumbrian) Division Memorial, which stands near Oxford Road Cemetery. It was designed by Capt. Mauchlen MM (who had served with the Division in the 9th Durham Light Infantry) and was unveiled by Field-Marshal Lord Plumer on Sunday the

1st of September 1929,



The main inscription reads "To the enduring memory of all ranks of the 50th Northumbrian Division who fell in the Great War 1914-1918, (to which was later added, and in memory of their comrades of the same Division who gave their lives in the War of 1939-1945 for the Liberation of France, Belgium and Holland").

On the two sides are listed the units which made up this Division, which were the 149th (Northumberland), 150th (York and Durham) and 151st (Durham Light Infantry) Infantry Brigades, plus

associated cavalry, artillery and other Divisional units.

The last place Bernard took us to was the Pilkem Ridge where in the darkness we could see where the end of the A19 sits brooding looking towards the coast in the distance. The argument as to whether or not the road should be extended over the battlefield has now been going on for a number of years, from the comments he made it seemed to me that Bernard was against the extension, while he told me that Harry believed that it should go ahead. I guess that one argument would be that the Great War was fought to preserve the right of countries to decide their own futures and that therefore if the extension to the coast is needed, then so be it, for me the only proviso would be that no cemeteries should be disturbed.

So ended a fantastic full packed day, which having looked into the possibility of going on one of the commercial tours of the Salient advertised in Ypres, I am sure that no money could have bought.

Notes:

(1) Bernard told us an interesting anecdote relating to this bunker in WW2. He told us how in 1939 he and the rest of his family moved into a brand new house, the roof of which we could just see from the bunker. After the phoney war, when the Germans were advancing through Belgium, the British army got to the bunker first and needless to say occupied it. When the Germans arrived they set up a machine gun post in the loft of the house and attacked the bunker through the skylight, at which point the British promptly called up artillery support and demolished the house. With a glint in his eye, Bernard, explained that after the war the Germans very kindly paid for the house to be rebuilt.

(2) Ypres Town Cemetery Military Extension.

(3) The Prince of Wales Own.

(4) Edgar Mobbs lived in, and played rugby union for Olney before moving on to captain Northampton Saints and England. The Mobbs Memorial match is still played each year between a Midlands Select side and the Baa Baas.