

Flanders Tour

Diary 26-30 May 2013

The McLoughlin brothers Mike and Barry from Limerick city organised a tour of Flanders in Belgium to look at the impact of World War One, its battlefields, memorials and the Irish influence. There were twenty four in our group with a diverse array of nationalities, Irish, English, Austrian and South African. The largest representation in our group was from Limerick with thirteen between the city and county

Sunday, 26 May

After a day's travelling the whole group met up the Messines Peace Village ten kilometers south of the city of Ieper (Ypres). This was our base for the next three days. Our daily tours were by coach and we had an extensive itinerary laid out. However we often strayed from our plan to assist those who wanted to find the graves of relations and those of their neighbours or friends.

Monday, 27 May

In brilliant sunshine we set off at 9.30am for France. Our first stop was at the Le Touret cemetery on Rue du Bois via the village of Neuve Chapelle. Listed on one of the memorial panels here is Sergeant Daniel Mc Cormack, 2nd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers. Daniel's grandson Michael from Limerick was one of our group and we took time out to take appropriate photographs. Next we went to the exact site on Rue du Bois where the Munsters received their General Absolution from Fr. Francis Gleeson on May 8th 1915 before going into battle the following morning. This ceremony is forever captured in a painting by the Italian war artist F. Matania and the picture can be seen in many homes and public houses throughout Munster. Mike gave a short presentation on the events here and distributed copies of the painting. Barry spoke about the disastrous battle of Aubers Ridge, 9 May 1915. Before moving on we took a group photograph here. We then attempted to locate the cinder track which was the jumping-off point for the 2nd Munsters but to our regret could not locate same. The Rue du Bois is a narrow, much-frequented road so it is difficult to drive around to find a specific location.

Next we moved onto the Canadian Memorial at Vimy. Because of time schedule, tours of trenches and Visitor Centre were hasty. However our tour photographer Tom Dillon (Listowel) gave a presentation here. He spoke on how the Canadian army captured Vimy Ridge from the Germans in April 1917, thus gaining the high ground over the plain of Douai.

Next it was on to the French town of Arras to visit the famous tunnel system and museum at Wellington Quarry (Rue Arthur Deletoile). The centre had computer problems so in typical Irish fashion we negotiated a discounted entry fee much to everyone's amusement. We next moved onto the British Cemetery at Ligny-St. Flochel near Avesnes. Here one of our group Buddy (Christy) Brennan found the grave of his grand uncle: Private J. Nugent, 1st Munsters, died 03.9.1918. This was one of the most picturesque cemeteries we visited in sun drenched France. Long drive back to Messines for dinner at Peace Village.

Tuesday, 28 May

Mixed weather. Bus left 9.45. Arrived at Heuvelland Toerisme office in Kemmel at 10.00. Here we watched a film titled 'Zero Hour' which details the tunneling and mines laid by the British forces. 19 deep mines with a total of 937,450 lb of explosive were fired along the 10 km front at zero hour, all within 30 seconds of each other. The explosions were clearly heard in London and registered on a seismograph in Switzerland. This was the prelude to the battle of Messines on 7 June 1917. Most German defence systems were totally shattered with several thousand German troops obliterated by the explosions. One of the most strongly fortified positions on the Western Front was thus taken within an hour or so. Then we took the bus onto the village of Locre. We went to see the grave of Irishman Willie Redmond then the MP for East Clare and a major in the Royal Irish Regiment. Barry gave a talk here about the life of Willie and how he died at the start of the Messines offensive. Then we all walked to Mount Kemmel. Talk here by Jacques de Vries (SA). He told us about how the South African army fought and died bravely in this area. Next stop was Kemmel Chateau Cemetery and the graves of Lieut. Michael Wall, Royal Irish Regiment, Captain C.D. Butler-O'Brien, M.C. of the Royal Irish Regiment, both killed on 7th June 1917. Beside them is Captain J.P. Roche of the RFA, brigade trench mortar officer, killed in the Leinsters' dugout on 7th June 1917. Part of his inscription is in Irish. We then moved on to Croonart Wood and Bayernwald trenches. These were German trenches that had an elevated view of the surrounding countryside. Adolf Hitler served here in 1914/15. Bus to Wijtschate to view 16th Irish Division Memorial. Later that evening we all visited Ieper (Ypres) to see the Last Post ceremony at the Menen Gate. This ceremony is performed every evening at 8.00pm. It began in 1927 and was suspended for a brief period during WWII.

Wednesday, 29 May

Bus leaves 9.30. First to Yorkshire Trench system north of Ieper (Ypres). This site is not being maintained, in fact disintegrating. Diversion to Essex Farm bunkers, to see memorial commemorating Colonel John McCrae, the doctor who wrote "In Flanders Fields". We then proceeded to Boezinge a suburb of Ieper. Here we visited the memorial to the Irish poet Francis Ledwidge (killed 31 July 1917) and his grave in the adjacent Artillery Wood Cemetery. Mike gave a talk here on the life of the poet and handed out copies of his presentation and pamphlets of the Ledwidge museum in Slane. Then it was on to Langemark German Cemetery, with talk by Barry on cemetery and taking of bunker in the grounds by Private Fredrick Dancox V.C. of 4th Worcesters during Third Ypres offensive (July-November 1917). Next on to Vladslo German Cemetery, talk on "Kindermord bei Langemark" by Barry, and on sculptures of "Grieving Parents" by the Berlin artist Käthe Kollwitz there. Passed by "Brooding Canadian" memorial (Sint Juliaan) on the way to Zonnebeke. Raining, so we stayed in the bus. Barry talked of German gas attacks and course of Second Ypres in April and May 1915. Next we visited the Memorial Museum Passchendaele at Zonnebeke. Bus to Tyne Cot Cemetery, few visited cemetery because of persistent rain but the museum here was tastefully presented. Bus back to Mesen with two detours: a) Sergeant W. Elligott, Leinsters, 04.09.1918, at Strand Military Cemetery Ploegsteert Wood (Warneton),. This was at the request of Mike McCormack's neighbour; Mary McMahan and b) Prowse Point Military Cemetery on Messines Road, the grave of Private P. Brown from Limerick, Royal Irish Rifles, d. 25.10.1917. His descendants are well-known musicians in Limerick and friends of Buddy Brennan.

This was to be our last night of the tour and we had a very enjoyable three course meal which included a Flemish stew. There were a few songs sung and stories told of a somewhat tall nature

Thursday, 30 May

Before we departed we had one last group photograph as our English visitors had an early ferry to catch. Before we left Mesen we visited the Irish Peace Park which was opened in 1998. A group photograph was taken in front of the Munsters memorial cross behind the Cloth Hall. Next on our list to visit was the 'In Flanders Fields Museum', Cloth Hall Ieper. We were a bit caught for time here because our flight check in time was 2.00pm in Brussels. At the airport we bade farewell to the Austrian and South African contingent. We arrived back in Dublin at 5.00pm to glorious weather and our bus trip home did not seem that lengthy at all.

Tour Organisers

Tour Leader: Michael McLoughlin lives and works in Limerick and is a keen rugby supporter and amateur historian.

Historical adviser: Barry McLoughlin, (Mike's brother) is a history lecturer at the University of Vienna.

For future WWI historical tours contact mike @ mikejmcoughlin@ericom.net