

Sawbridgeworth – High Wych - Gilston - St. Julien – Ypres.

On 29th, 30th and 31st July members of the Sawbridgeworth WW1 memorial group visited Ypres and St. Julien. We were part of a delegation from Hertfordshire, there to help unveil a monument to the Hertfordshire soldiers who perished in the fields around St. Julien. The offensive there was part of the 3rd battle of Ypres, also known as the battle of Passchendaele. The 31st July was the blackest day in the history of the Hertfordshire regiment. Within 2 hours of the morning of that day most of their number were either killed wounded or missing including all officers. When rations were brought to the line that evening and the question asked "*where are the Hertfordshires?*" the reply was "*there are no Hertfordshires*".

We gathered at 7.30 at the Bell Street car park and were met by Richard Bowran and Joanne Sargent who, together with Dan Hill of the Herts at War team, had organised our trip. We also met our driver and guide Jim Maynard, who stayed with us all three days. Jim then drove us to Folkestone where we boarded the Channel Tunnel train. On the other side our first stop was Lijssenthoek cemetery in Poperinge, the first of the six or so we visited during our trip. All in all there are more than **200** such graveyards in French and Belgian Flanders, places of rest for 250.000 war dead, victims of that terrible conflict. Numbers can of course never do justice to the reality of what went on, not even to the reality of just visiting these places after all those years. Lijssenthoek is the second largest cemetery for Commonwealth forces in Belgium. We spent about an hour there listening to Jim's explanations and wandering around. An impressive feature we found was a number of poles around the cemetery, one for every day of the war, with an indication how many of the Lijssenthoek fallen perished on that day. The last two days of July and the first day of August stood out as being particularly disastrous! We noticed some Hertfordshire boys, privates Pence and Simmons and also staff nurse Nellie Spindler from Wakefield the only woman buried in Lijssenthoek. At nearby Brandhoek cemetery we saw the grave of Captain Noel Godfrey Chavasse, one of only three people to be awarded the Victoria Cross twice.



Lijssenthoek Cemetery - The BBC's final rehearsal for their 30th July transmission.

Driving on we reached Ypres by late afternoon. Now respectfully restored to its mediaeval splendour; leper as the locals call it is a jewel of a place! After a rest and a freshening up we wandered down to the old market square where hundreds of locals and visitors were watching a BBC crew preparing a programme to be transmitted on Sunday. After a pleasant dinner we stood on the square watching Helen Mirren, Alfie Boe and other well known people doing their thing. I even had some time talking to some locals. As Dutch is my mother tongue I had hoped my knowledge of the language would come in handy. It did!

On Sunday morning Jim drove us to the Somme. On the way we stopped at no. fifty6 in la Boisselle which, so they say, is the best bed and breakfast in that area. I can well believe it. Expatriate Brits Julie and David Thomson made us very welcome with coffee and waffles. David is an avid collector of WW1 related paraphernalia, his collection of books on the subject weighing down the shelves. All rested we drove on to our first stop, the Lochnagar crater. This structure for lack of a better word was created by the British Army's 179th Tunnelling Company Royal Engineers underneath a German strongpoint called "Schwaben Höhe". The mine was exploded at 07.28 am at the launch of the British offensive against the German lines on the morning of 1st July 1916. Sadly, despite the successful explosion and the damage caused the enemy managed to get into well-placed positions to fire at the British soldiers. Within an hour of the start of the infantry attack many hundreds of them were dead or wounded. A great part of the time during our visit was spent wondering about the stories behind the simple name plates attached to planks on the walkway round the crater. "*Sapper D. Smith – Dorothy Lawrence – 179 Tunnelling Coy R.E. – A woman in the trenches.*" What went on there? Another one: "*Captain C. Fryatt – SS Brussels – Gt. Eastern Railways – Executed 27 July 1916*". Look up SS Brussels yourself and find out the full story!

The next stop was the Devonshire Cemetery. Already somehow the stories Jim told us and what we read on the explanatory plaques was wearing us down. Let me just quote the text on the first grave stone we noticed: "*1st July 1916 – the 8th and 9th Devons suffered very heavy casualties as they left their forward trench to attack. Later that day the survivors buried their fallen comrades in the same trench and erected a wooden memorial with the words that are carved in the cross above*". Those words were: "*The Devonshires held this trench, the Devonshires hold it still*" A lunch at Tommy's in Pozieres greatly refreshed us. The French owner had gone to great trouble decorating his place with suitable memorabilia.



The Thiepval Monument on the Somme – A postcard depicting how the Tommies saw themselves – The Menin Gate in Ypres.

On we went to the Thiepval Memorial dedicated to the missing of the Somme, French, British and Commonwealth. Edward Lutyens designed the monument as an arch to represent the alliance of Britain and France in the Somme 1916 offensive. British and French Flags fly from the top. It is said that 72,000 men from the British and South African forces were reported missing in the Somme before 20 March 1918. 19,240 lives were lost on July 1st alone.

In the souvenir shop I noticed some French language graphic novels on the subject of WW1 aimed at young people. You really can't call them comics anymore. Do English language equivalents exist of these? Before our return to Ypres we then went to Wallencourt British cemetery, situated amongst rolling hills. The beautiful landscapes in French Flanders are something to behold. It was past six o'clock when we did return to the Albion Hotel.

Our plan to attend the Menin Gate on Sunday evening had to be abandoned. Royalty, prime ministers, ambassadors and other VIPs had descended on Ypres and security was very tight indeed. Luckily we could still get a table at a restaurant on the main square. Outside that restaurant we watched the big screen and listened to speeches by Prince William and the Belgian King. Dinner was then washed down with a few fine Belgian beers

Monday, morning had to be another early start. Before breakfast I watched a bit of television and saw some of the excellent BBC coverage of the events of the night before. At 8 am we then set off to the Menin Gate to officially pay our respects. We noticed the names of three Sawbridgeworth soldiers from the Hertfordshire Regiment, Thomas Crouchman, Ernest Read and William Pettitt. Surely there are more Sawbridgeworth boys, mentioned but they belonged to different regiments so we could not easily find them. Ruth Buckmaster the Sawbridgeworth Mayor then laid a card in the corner next to the Herts names by way of a tribute from us all. We looked at the wreaths laid the evening before by all those luminaries that were there. Above all we looked at the names, those thousands of names, all with stories to tell if we only knew, husbands, sons, fathers, friends with families at home they never returned to.



Ruth Buckmaster at the Menin Gate – Countess Verulam lays a wreath at St. Julien – the Captain Bowlby Monument

At St. Julien our first call was at Pond Farm where Stijn Butaye showed off his little family museum whilst a local historian exhibited his collection of period postcards.

The unveiling of the Hertfordshire Monument was then performed by Countess Verulam representing the queen with speeches by Oliver Heald MP and Jon Grant, the Herts at War chair. Gary Hanson, minister of the Sawbridgeworth Congregational Church made a moving dedication. Through it all an extremely busy Dan Hill ran about getting us all organised.

After the unveiling we were taken for a Battlefield tour around the area where the ill-fated Hertfordshire Regiment offensive took place. Six very capable guides explained the situation in real time at various points. I walked part of the route in the company of some locals, people who lived near "Steenakkermolen", which the Germans called "Totenmuehle", the windmill of death. They were full of praise for Dan Hill's Herts at War team and surprised to learn so much about the history of their own area. That windmill by the way was an important observation post for the Germans and a point of reference for the advancing Hertfordshires. By the time 4 groups of Herts visitors had made their Battlefield Tour it was three pm and we were taken to a local hall in the centre of St. Julien where refreshments were laid on by Herts at War. Once again it was good to have the company of so many locals.

Having said goodbye to our Flemish friends we then went to the Bowlby monument nearby. Having been removed from its original location it stands on Begijnenbosstraat flanked by two similar private monuments. The structure was erected by order of the Bowlby family of Gilston Park in honour of Captain Geoffrey Vaux Salvin Bowlby of the Horse Guards. The Bowlbys were a military family, one grandfather was at Waterloo. Geoffrey excelled at polo and was promoted Captain at the early age of 24. On 13th May 1915 Captain Bowlby led a counterattack against the Germans. According to a report at the time "Poor old Bowlby was shot but refused assistance; he was almost instantaneously killed". After the War the captain's grave could not be found but Lettice Bowlby, his widow was determined to commemorate her husband on the spot where he fell and financed a monument. As requested by Gilston and Eastwick Parish Council I then laid a wreath and in doing so honoured the Captain and the 26 other soldiers from Gilston and Eastwick who fell in WW1.

Sawbridgeworth



We Will Remember Them



Paying tribute to
**Captain Geoffrey Vaux Salvin Bowlby of
 Gilston, Hertfordshire**
 who perished in these fields on 13th May 1915.

Also honouring 26 other young men of
 Eastwick and Gilston, Hertfordshire who gave
 their lives in the service of their country during
 the first world war.

**EASTWICK AND GILSTON
 PARISH COUNCIL**



The Sawbridgeworth Memorial Card – Captain Geoffrey Bowlby - The Gilston and Eastwick Tribute Card

Having done all we had set out to do we got back on the town council bus and were driven back to first Calais and eventually good old blighty! We arrived exhausted after an intense and exhilarating but extremely interesting three days. Thanks go to Richard Bowran and Joanne Sargant for being with us but above all to our driver, guide and guardian angel Jim Maynard who we cannot praise highly enough.

Sources this time were Jim Maynard, Wikipedia, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website and the greatwar.co.uk website.