

## Retford U3A Military History Group Trip to France

An early start for thirty one members of the Military History Group, from Kettlewells yard on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2017.

We travelled to Folkestone on the coach to catch the shuttle train to Calais through the Euro tunnel, with a halfway stop for refreshments and to stretch our legs at Bishops Stortford. We arrived at Folkestone around midday, so we had plenty of time to eat, stretch our legs and browse the duty free shop.

The journey through the tunnel took about 35 minutes, and we were in Calais around 4.30pm, French time. Then we drove down to Etaples Cemetery, which is the biggest allied cemetery in France.



It is always sobering to see any war cemetery, and we were all moved by the sheer scale and number of graves which lay in front of us. Our first day journey culminated at the Mercure hotel in Arras, where we had the opportunity to explore the local area and restaurants.

The following morning we travelled to Azincourt, where King Henry V defeated the French nobility, with men armed with bows and arrows. That does not sound much, but imagine riding a horse towards your enemy with 5,000 arrows in the air approaching you.



Traveling east from Azincourt, we drove to the Canadian Memorial Park at Vimy Ridge. Here 100 years ago this month, four Canadian Divisions won a famous and desperately needed victory, pushing the entrenched Germans off the 14 mile long Ridge.

The memorial holds the names of 11,285 Canadian Soldiers, who have no known grave, and was unveiled in July 1936, by King Edward 8<sup>th</sup>.

Reconstructed trenches and tunnels, alongside original ones, surround the area with a new visitors centre.



On Sunday, we visited several cemeteries on the Somme Battlefield, where a number of members paid their respects and laid poppy crosses on their relatives' graves. It was a moving experience for all. The next stop and lunch break was at Lochnagar Crater, which was truly breathtaking, to think that one piece of war fare had created it.



After lunch we continued to the visitors centre at Thiepval, where there are the names of 72,246 allied soldiers, with no known graves. Again, a sad, touching, thought provoking and definitely a memorable experience. Our day ended with the drive back to Arras via the Newfoundland Memorial at Beaumont Hamel.



After checking out of the hotel on Monday morning, we travelled to St Omer to see La Coupole, which is an enormous concrete dome, designed to house and fire V-2 'terror rockets' against London. During that time the resistance movement realised what the Germans were building, and this led the RAF to drop bombs nearby and destroyed the underground tunnels, consequently the site was abandoned by the Germans. Once again, it was a very moving experience, the sheer size of the operation and the risks and penalties people had to pay and endure.

Our final journey took us through the tunnel, with a break near Cambridge, arriving at Retford around 8.00pm. As well as the memorable historic experience, the trip was engaging and allowed members to form friendships and develop mutual interests.

We are already planning next years trip, this time to Holland & Germany, so look out for details.