

Spirit Of History - 5 Day Study Tour

The First World War Battlefields from the Channel to the Ypres Salient –Belgium.

A Salient of Mud, Bullets, Shells and Death

From October 1914 until November 1918, the British, French and Belgian Armies and their Empires, under pressure to show their strength, held on to this part of the line, with grim determination. The cost in soldiers' lives and horrendous injuries was a terrible price to pay, but pay it over and over again they did. The dead were several hundred thousand collectively. In the Ypres salient alone, there are over 120 military graveyards and many memorials listing the names of those 'Known unto God', as Kipling put it. Defending a salient presents great dangers, as you can be attacked on both flanks as well as the front. Poison gas, from 1915, added to the peril. So why hang on to it? To make matters worse, the land surface of Flanders, which means flooded land, can only be kept dry by an extensive network of drainage channels. Once these were shot to pieces, the land became a soggy morass when it rained and stayed that way for months. Drowning in mud was an agonising death for men and beasts. The animals at least, could be put out of their misery, but shooting a pal was another matter.

The Ypres sector saw fighting in every year of the war, with three major battles, the First, Second and Third Battles of Ypres, as well as other fighting and mining. The men called it 'Wipers' and the town was almost wiped off the map. But such is the human spirit, that it was rebuilt, with German war reparation money, as a replica of the old town, at least externally. North of Ypres, the Front Line extended to the town of Nieuport, where the sea is normally kept out by a series of sluices and other flood barriers. In October 1914 the Belgian king, Albert, took the decision to allow the surrounding land to be inundated. This wet area, then became the northern tip of the Western Front. The fierce battles that raged in this area are collectively known as the Battle of the Yser. The Belgians held this line with British and French support. The town of Dixmude was the centre of the fighting and was ruined by shelling before being captured by the Germans in November 1914. They held it until September 1918.



The Cloth Hall Clock Tower in Ypres today.

- How did the forces manage the front line near the sea?
- How much land was flooded?
- Why did Ypres have to be defended at all costs?
- How difficult is it defending a salient?
- Why did the tunnellers spend nearly 2 years excavating the Messines ridge near Ypres?
- How successful were the battles in this area?
- What was the political and military strategy of the fighting in this area?



The Ruins of Ypres 1918.

(The photo is from the www.gwpda.org website and can be used as long as attributed. See their site).

This Tour consists of:

2 days study in England: 2 nights at a 3* hotel with pool and spa, near Maidstone.

3 days guided visits to key sites in the Ypres and Yser Areas. 2 nights in a 3* hotel in Ypres.

Saturday

- 9 – 10 am Arrive at hotel. (Friday night's accommodation can be arranged at an extra cost of £50 per head with breakfast).
- 10am Course starts. Icebreaker activities. These are important as we want the group to get to know each other and interact before starting the course itself. Introduction to the study module.
- 12:30 **Lunch.**
- 1:30 Study module on the Ypres Area. All course materials included.
- 3:30 **Tea/Coffee Break.** (Bedroom allocations, where required).
- 4:00 Study activities.
- 6:00 Free time. You can use the pool and/or spa facilities
- 7:00 **Dinner**
- 8:30 Fun study activities to reinforce earlier learning.
- 10:00pm Finish

Sunday

- 8.00 **Breakfast**
- 9:30 Course begins
- 10:45 **Tea-Coffee Break**
- 11:00 Study activities.
- 12:30 **Lunch**
- 1:30 Guest speaker on World War One. Questions and discussions after talk.
- 3:30 Tea- Coffee **Break**
- 4:00 Study activities.
- 6:00 Free time.
- 7.00 **Dinner**
- 8:30 Course overview. Final questions and team quiz.
- 10pm Finish.

Monday

- 8.00 **Breakfast**
- **If not participating in the study sessions, arrive at hotel by 8:30am. (Alternatively, Sunday night's accommodation can be arranged for £50 per head, including breakfast.)**
- 9:00 Depart Hotel by coach for tunnel crossing to France
- 10:30 Crossing
- 12:15 (local time). Travel towards Nieuport, then south towards Ypres. Visit Dixmude, which remained in German hands after the Battle of Yser. The Nieuport area was flooded in 1914, to prevent the Germans advancing towards Calais and the other Channel ports. See the sluice gates which were opened to stem the Germans tide. Visit memorials that commemorate the flooding.



Sluices at Nieuport today.

- 2:00 **Snack Lunch** in Nieuport.
- 3:00 Drive down the line of the Front en route to Ypres. Visit the Ramskapelle British Cemetery where 800 defenders of the sector are buried.



- Visit the Vladslo German Cemetery where 25,000 Germans are buried, including the son of the sculpturess who designed the haunting memorial figures. See the graves of some famous soldiers and other interesting stories.



Vladslo German Cemetery

- 4:00 Visit the Trenches of Death at Dixmude.
- 5:00 See the graves of double VC holder, Noel Chevasse at Brandhoek Cemetery
- 6:00 Check into hotel.
- 6:30 Free time to wander about the town centre and study the Menin Gate.
- 7:50 Meet up as a group under the Menin Gate for the Last Post.

- 8:30 Evening free for a [dinner](#) in the town centre.

Thursday

- 8.00 **Breakfast**
- 9:00 Coach to Poelcapelle British Cemetery where 7,400 graves lay in testament to the fighting. Perhaps the youngest soldier, Private J Condon, Royal Irish, aged 14, is buried here. Brief stop at Languemarck German Cemetery, the site of over 44,000 German burials.
- 10:00 Coach to Passchendaele and the Tyne Cot Cemetery. Followed by visit to the museum at Passchendaele (the Third Battle of Ypres). From July 31st until November 6th, the Allied forces struck the German frontline trenches in an attempt to breakthrough to Passchendaele Ridge and beyond. This would also take pressure off the French who were suffering mutinies and despair after the Nivelle Offensive further south, near Arras. In a desperately fought battle of mud and blood, it was the Canadians who finally took the ridge. The cost in human suffering, on both sides amounted to over 750,000 casualties. The Germans had good trenches along with pillboxes, which the shelling had not destroyed. Once again the notion of a big push had proved disastrous in terms of men, material and reputations.

'I died in Hell. (they called it Passchendaele);.... Siegfried Sassoon.

- Tyne Cot, near Passchendaele, is the largest cemetery for Empire forces anywhere in the world. It contains 34,888 names of the missing engraved on the memorial wall and 11,908 graves, including a few Germans! This area was captured by the Australians in October 1917, only to lose it again in March 1918, along with Passchendaele itself.



Memorial Wall. Tyne Cot Cemetery. Passchendaele.



Graves at Tyne cot, with Ypres in the distance.

- 1:00 [Snack Lunch.](#)
- 2:00 Coach to Polygon Wood and the Hill 60 area.



Fighting ground at Hill 60

- 3:30 Coach to Messines Ridge area. Walk/coach tour along a section of the front where 19 mines were laid under the German trenches and exploded on June 7th 1917. Find out what happened and visit some of the sites of the explosions that were heard in England. Visit the Messines Ridge Cemetery and other sites such as the Irish Peace Park, opened in the early 1990s, by the Queen and Irish President.



Craters in the Messines Ridge Area today

- 5:00 Coach to the Ploegsteert area. On to the Berkshire Extension Memorial. [Tea Break](#) in one of the cafes. Visit the Hunter's Avenue and cemeteries nearby.
- 7:00 Coach back to Ypres.
- 7:30 Walk to the Menin Gate for the Last Post
- 8:00 The Last Post at the Menin Gate
- 8:30 [Dinner](#) in the town centre.

Friday

- 8.00 [Breakfast](#)
- 9:00 Visit the Cloth Hall Museum in Ypres. Apart from a few days in October 1914 Ypres remained in Allied hands and suffered a heavy toll of death and destruction. After the war Winston Churchill wanted Ypres to remain as it was as a permanent reminder of the forces who had sacrificed their lives to hold this ground. The locals, however, were determined to rebuild their town. Reconstruction work began soon after the end of the war. The Cloth Hall was rebuilt on the original medieval lines, although not completed until 1962. Today it houses the 'In Flanders Fields' Museum.
- 10:30 Visit to St George's Church.
- 11:00 Coach to the Sanctuary Wood Trench Museum, where there are remnants of trenches and perhaps even more interesting 3D images of scenes from the War. Walk on to the Canadian Memorial at Hill 62. Find out what happened in this area as we walk round.
- 1:00 Coach back to Calais.
- 2:30 [Lunch](#) and shopping at Cite Europe
- 4:30 Crossing
- 5:00 Back to hotel in Maidstone or railway station for homeward journeys.

Tours are planned for;

April 12th 2008 Saturday
May 19th 2008 Monday
June 30th 2008 Monday
September 27th 2008 Saturday.

The cost of the tour is £475.

This includes all meals in England (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and BB in Belgium, guest speaker, all travel in a luxury coach, all museum entrances and all the study activities with specially prepared educational packs designed to go with our itinerary.

The overall group will never exceed 36 persons. Each class will be small enough so everyone can easily participate in activities and discussions. We will mix people around, so you meet everyone in the overall group.

The price does not include lunches and dinners in Belgium as you will have free time to choose your own restaurants or cafes.

Our Company Insurance is included. However, you need your own holiday insurance, as well as your E1 11 card in case of personal injury requiring hospital treatment (or adequate insurance cover). See booking terms and conditions.

The tour by itself is also available without the educational package at £295.

Alternately, the study weekend in England can be attended full board, without the foreign travel, at a cost of £240.