

Battlefields Trip 2019

The forty pupils we took on the First World War Battlefields trip to France and Belgium this year, were outstanding ambassadors for the school. They were compassionate, inquisitive and most of all hardened history pupils.

We stayed in the village of Messines, south of Ypres, which was occupied by the German army from 1914-17. The trip was incredibly emotional, as you would expect, but featured a strong narrative on the way that war is perceived by different nations. To accomplish this, we began our tour by meeting a Dutch school, Sintermeerten at Tyne Cot cemetery, where our pupils said hello. Our two schools have worked together in the past to understand the nature of conflict in both the First and Second World Wars. We jointly explored the Memorial Museum Passchendaele where we investigated a reconstructed British dug out and trench network. Other sites throughout our trip included the German cemetery at Langemark and the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery at Ljissenthoek, which contains the graves of French, German, American and British forces, as well as Chinese Labourers and the only female nurse. In the evening we took part in the Menin Gate ceremony where three pupils in school uniform presented a message of peace which was laid among the other wreaths during the ceremony that takes place in Ypres every night.



Our second day involved taking a journey down to the Somme battlefield where we visited Lochnager Crater, Newfoundland Park and took a tour of Thiepval Wood. Pupils understood how the battle was fought in 1916 and each historic visit gave them a deeper understanding of the nature of First World War combat, from the underground warfare at La Boisselle to the impact of holding the high ground. We were able to explore the Thiepval Memorial with some information cards about different soldiers who were



missing from the Somme Offensive. The opportunity to see a photo of a soldier whose name was on the memorial made it much more personal. Several families had given us information of relatives before the trip who were buried or named on memorials and tried to locate those who were close to our locations. Mrs Barton from PE brought a selection of names and photos who were part of the England Rugby team at the time.

On the third day, the visit to Langemark was excellent, as we had the whole cemetery to ourselves. This gave pupils the chance to reflect upon the numerical difference in burials between Tyne Cot (12,000 burials) and this cemetery (44,000), where four times the amount of dead were buried in a much smaller plot. This was followed up by a tour of Essex Farm where the poem *In Flanders Field* was written and an advanced dressing station had been built. In the afternoon, I led a walking tour

of Messines and we visited the site of the Christmas Truce. During the evening's feedback session, pupils were incredibly thoughtful of the type of message they would pass on regarding the legacy of war and each group shared the site that had made the most impact on them.

The final day gave our group the experience of standing in German trenches at Bayernwald to see where the German positions were and how they defended the terrain they had captured. A visit to Talbot House in Poperinge was the final location on our itinerary and this was because the house



was set up in 1915 and offered a place of rest and recuperation, from where the soldiers could leave the war behind. For us, it was the perfect place to reflect upon the journey we had taken from Sanctuary Wood's trenches through to the experiences of battlefield warfare. The most fitting tribute was a message left on a wreath by one of pupils at Langemark, which read *"We were against each other in the war but now we lay peacefully together"*.

I wish to say thank you to Mrs Barton, Mr Peake and Ms Walton, who accompanied the trip and shared their family stories with the group. Their energy and enthusiasm added to the experience.

A wonderful trip with wonderful pupils.