



McCrae's Battalion Trust Contalmaison 2017 ♦ The Arras Centenary

McCrae's Battalion Trust is the world's first registered charity to be inspired by the sacrifice of an infantry battalion of the Great War. On 1 July 1916 – the bloody opening day of the Battle of the Somme – seventeen British divisions assaulted an impregnable German defensive system, bristling with barbed wire and machine-guns.

20,000 British soldiers died that morning – the idealistic best that the New Armies had to offer. A further 40,000 were wounded. Entire battalions of pals, brothers, neighbours and work-mates were wiped out in a matter of minutes. Amid the carnage it was a unit from the capital of Scotland that penetrated furthest into the enemy position. The 16th Royal Scots, the 2nd Edinburgh City Battalion, named after their charismatic colonel, Sir George McCrae, lost almost three-quarters of their strength. Somehow, though, a small party pressed on to reach the tiny ruined village of Contalmaison, deep inside the German trench system. In their time they were recognised as heroes, but posterity is unkind and the achievement was forgotten.

In November 2004 a fourteen-foot-high traditional Scottish cairn was unveiled in Contalmaison to finally right this historic wrong. Constructed by Scottish craftsmen, using entirely Scottish materials, sourced in Caithness, Nairnshire, Moray and the Lothians, it is now recognised as the most handsome battalion monument to be erected on the Somme since the high-water mark of commemorative projects in the 1920s. It is truly 'the last of the Great War memorials' and has already become a distinctive Scottish presence on the Western Front.

The 2017 pilgrimage will be particularly poignant. One hundred years have passed since the bloody engagements of 1917 – Arras, Vimy, Roeux, Messines, Hargicourt, Passchendaele, Poelcapelle. On the opening day of the Battle of Arras 44 Scottish battalions were engaged – McCrae's included. McCrae's were



heavily involved in a number of important actions during 1917 and this year's pilgrimage will visit several of the key locations. Once again McCrae's Battalion Trust has secured excellent accommodation with our friends at the Holiday Inn Express, right in the centre of the beautiful city of Arras. This year we'll be spending three nights there, so you'll have plenty time to explore. We're also pleased to report that we've managed to negotiate space on the Zeebrugge–Hull ferry for our return journey.

The future of Remembrance lies with the young (as we never tire of pointing out), so we're pleased to announce that a number of Scottish sixth-year students will again join our travelling band. As usual, West Calder High School are to the fore, and they'll be joined again by students from Falkirk and by a group of (almost equally) young soldiers from the Personnel Recovery Unit at Craigiehall who are recovering from a variety of injuries sustained on recent active service.

The establishment of the Contalmaison site and our annual pilgrimage has firmly cemented Scotland's links with France and the Somme. We have established a new tradition of Franco-Scottish remembrance, reviving the ancient friendship of Europe's oldest alliance. The Scottish Footballers' cairn is now an important part of the local fabric. As always, the McCrae's Battalion Trust and our friends in Contalmaison look forward to welcoming anyone who is interested in joining us on 1 July to commemorate the finest unit in Lord Kitchener's volunteer Army.

McCrae's Own – Scotland's Sporting Battalion

ITINERARY

Thursday 29 June

08.15 assemble Waterloo Place, where the executive coach from Abbot Travel will be parked on the eastbound carriageway with the McCrae's Battalion Trust crest in the front window. Couriers from MBT will be onboard throughout the trip.

08.45 leave Edinburgh for Ramsgate with ample rest stops *en route*, including a longer break for lunch. Our first night will be a free evening, spent in the Premier Inn, near the picturesque town of Minster. It's a comfortable, well-appointed establishment with its own bar.

Friday 30 June

07.15 board coaches.

07.30 leave hotel for Dover ferry crossing.

12.00 (approximately) arrive Calais. Adjust watches (forward one hour).

14.00 (approximately) arrive Holiday Inn Express, Arras. Check-in and allocation of rooms is followed by a free afternoon and evening in the town. For those of you who haven't visited Arras before, you'll find a multitude of excellent bars, restaurants and shops. Arras is built on 10th Century limestone quarries and it's possible to circumnavigate the honeycomb of cellars in a popular guided tour.



Climb to the top of the *Beffroi* (the belfry of the Town Hall) for a panoramic view of the town and the surrounding area. The Arras Memorial, fifteen minutes walk from our hotel, commemorates 35,000 soldiers from the United Kingdom, South Africa and New Zealand who have no known grave. Among the men whose names are inscribed here is Walter Tull, the first black professional footballer. Hearts players, John Allan and David Philip are not far away.

The Arras Memorial



Saturday 1 July CONTALMAISON CEREMONY

07.45 board coaches.

08.00 *sharp* depart hotel for Contalmaison.

09.00 ceremony begins, followed by laying of tributes at the Contalmaison Village Memorial and at the memorial to 2/Lt Donald Bell, the first professional footballer to be awarded the Victoria Cross.

10.30 depart Contalmaison for short battlefield tour, taking in (among other sites) the recently established memorial to Clapton Orient in the nearby village of Flers.



12.00 return to Contalmaison for lunch in the village – the return of our popular meal with the locals under canvas outside the *Salle de Fêtes*. With music from Craig Herbertson and Ed Westerdale and informal speeches and presentations from around the tables.

16.30 board coach and return to Arras for free evening.

Sunday 2 July



ARRAS–HARGICOURT BATTLEFIELD TOUR DAY

09.00 depart hotel for Beaurains Road Cemetery to hear about the fate of one of the artillerymen who supported the assault on Contalmaison on 1 July 1916. From there we move on to Roeux British Cemetery, on the north bank of the infamous River Scarpe. Many original members of McCrae's are buried here and we'll learn a little bit about how they got there. Lunch in Peronne, where you'll find several nice pubs, *cafés* and restaurants – and Museum of the Great War in the fortified *Historial* building near the town centre. Of particular interest is the extensive collection of drawings by the German artist, Otto Dix, depicting the grim reality of life in the trenches. Any British front-line soldier would recognise the images immediately. After lunch we'll move on to the villages of Hargicourt and Tincourt, following in the footsteps of a young lad from West Lothian who was posted to McCrae's in the aftermath of the terrible 1916 losses.

16.00 (approximately) board coaches and head back to Arras for free evening.

Monday 3 July

FLANDERS BATTLEFIELD TOUR DAY

07.00 rise and pack

08.30 depart Arras for Ypres



The cloth-producing city of Ypres was almost entirely destroyed during the Great War. Its sensitive reconstruction remains one of the wonders of modern Europe. In many places it's hard to believe you're not looking at a genuine medieval townscape. Pubs, restaurants and *cafés* are to be found in abundance – along with



its numerous chocolate and confectionery shops. Cheap tobacco is available in a couple of establishments in the Grote Markt, opposite the Cloth Hall.



The famous *In Flanders Fields* museum in the Cloth Hall has recently undergone a major refurbishment in time for the centenaries. Most of the galleries have been substantially redesigned and it's well worth seeing. You'll also want to visit the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, which commemorates nearly 55,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Salient between 1914 and 1917.

En route to Ypres (where we'll have lunch and a free afternoon) we'll visit Black Watch Corner to see Alan Herriot's sculpture commemorating nearly ten thousand officers and other ranks of the Black Watch regiment who gave their lives in the war. We'll also stop near the old railway line at Poelcapelle, where Raith Rovers' captain, George McLay was killed on 22 October 1917.

16.00 depart Ypres for Zeebrugge–Hull ferry

Tuesday 4 July

Put watches back one hour.

09.00 (UK time) depart Hull for return journey to Edinburgh. Again there will be regular toilet stops and one longer break for food.

15.00 (approximately) arrive Waterloo Place, Edinburgh.

We hope you'll enjoy your trip with us and that you'll consider joining us again in the future. And thank you for coming. We couldn't do it without you!

**Trustees of McCrae's Battalion Trust
January 2017**

VERY IMPORTANT STUFF

Remember that for the duration of the pilgrimage we expect everyone be on the coach at the appointed hour. Announcements will be made over the vehicle's PA system. No smoking or vaping is permitted on board. There will be regular toilet breaks and a couple of longer stops for meal breaks.

