



The 2019 advance party enjoy the continental atmosphere outside our beautifully appointed hotel in sunny Arras

McCrae's Battalion Trust Contalmaison Pilgrimage 2019

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.

One hundred years have passed since the Armistice of 1918 but the tradition of Remembrance continues. Nearly a million British and Commonwealth soldiers gave their lives, more than a million French and Belgian, three million German and Austrian. In Siegfried Sassoon’s immortal words, ‘Look down and swear by the slain of the War that you’ll never forget!’ In 2018 McCrae’s Battalion Trust spent a considerable sum restoring the fabric of our stunning bronze plaques. The Contalmaison Cairn is now handsomely prepared for the next hundred years.

This summer we’ll be joined for the first time in Contalmaison by representatives of Orient Football Club, whose players were instrumental in forming the English professional League’s response to McCrae’s Battalion, the 17th Middlesex. We’ll pay a short visit to their recently established memorial at Flers and then entertain them to lunch with our friends in the village.

Note that we’ve also recently donated an addition to Contalmaison’s own memorial – a replica French infantry *casque* (or helmet) which now sits proudly on top of the village’s commemorative stone as if left there by one of the local lads who died.

We’ve timetabled some interesting visits throughout our stay in France and Flanders – including the huge ‘hospital’ cemetery at Lijssdenhoek, near Ypres. Lijssdenhoek has a new visitor centre which incorporates a ‘portrait wall’ with the faces of a thousand of the men buried in the grounds. We’re also going to do a little battlefield exploring in search of the mysterious Foray House, briefly the HQ of McCrae’s Battalion headquarters during the early days in France. The story of their stay there and of Sir George’s first mention in despatches for gallantry is as amusing as it is inspiring.

Yet again McCrae’s Battalion Trust has secured excellent accommodation in 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.

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 join our travelling band. Thanks to Pat Reid, youngsters from Falkirk will again be to the fore and they’ll be accompanied 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 2019

Saturday 29 June

09.00 assemble at Waterloo Place, Edinburgh. Our Abbot Travel coach which will be waiting (with McCrae's Battalion crest in front window) nearby on the eastbound carriageway. Seats beside and immediately behind the driver on both sides of the passageway are necessarily reserved for Trust officials; otherwise you may sit anywhere.

09.30 coach will depart Waterloo Place for the International Ferry Terminal at King George Dock, Kingston-upon-Hull.

13.15 arrive Scotch Corner Services for lunch.

16.30 arrive King George Dock and board ferry (*adjust watches forward one hour*).

Sunday 30 June

07.00 breakfast

09.30 (approximately) disembark ferry and drive to Ypres for lunch. *En route* we'll visit Lijssthenhoek Military Cemetery, the second largest CWGC cemetery in Belgium after Tyne Cot. During the First World War, the village of Lijssenthoek was situated on the main communication



line between the Allied military bases in the rear and the Ypres battlefields. Close to the Front, but out of the extreme range of most German field artillery, it became a natural place to establish casualty clearing stations.



The cemetery was first used by the French *15ieme Hôpital d'Evacuation* and in June 1915, it began to be used by casualty clearing stations of the Commonwealth forces. From April to August 1918, the casualty clearing stations fell back before the German advance and field ambulances (including a French ambulance) took their places. Lijssenthoek was one of the cemeteries visited by King George V in May 1922. The King, who lost members of his own family in the war, embarked on a tour of a number of cemeteries while they were being formally established by the Commission. The cemetery contains 9,901 Commonwealth burials of the First World War, including 24 unidentified. There are 883 war graves of other nationalities, mostly French and German. 11 of these are unidentified.

Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery 1919



12.30 (approximately) arrive Ypres.

15.30 (approximately) leave Ypres and drive to 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

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 and one of the first black officers in the British Army. You'll find him on the panel dedicated to the Middlesex Regiment. Hearts players, John Allan and David Philip are not far away – John in the Royal Scots panel and David in the Northumberland Fusiliers.

Monday 1 July

CONTALMAISON CEREMONY

07.40 board coach.

07.55 sharp depart hotel for Contalmaison.

09.00 ceremony begins, followed by laying of tributes at the Contalmaison Village Memorial.

10.30 depart Contalmaison to visit the recently established memorial to Clapton Orient in the nearby village of Flers, where we will lay a commemorative wreath in the company of representatives of Leyton Orient Football Club.

12.00 return to Contalmaison for lunch in the village – our popular meal with the locals under canvas outside the *Salle de Fêtes*. With whisky instruction from Julian Hutchings, music from international entertainer Craig Herbertson – supported by Chris Woods – and informal speeches and presentations from around the tables.

16.30 board coach and return to Arras for free evening.



Tuesday 2 July

BATTLEFIELD TOUR DAY

08.30 depart hotel for a leisurely day exploring the Bois Grenier Line, just south of Armentières, where Mademoiselle lived. McCrae's had two spells in this zone – the first immediately after they arrived in France and the second (less comfortable) during the 'Georgette' phase of the German offensives of spring 1918.

We'll be visiting a few of the villages and the billeting areas familiar to the battalion and we'll see the low-lying farmland where they occupied a series of ramshackle breastworks. The stories of the first casualties are exceptionally poignant and we'll visit some of the lads in their picturesque secluded cemeteries. A break for lunch in Armentières (a town we've not visited before) will be followed by the story of Foray Farm, which reduced battalion veterans to tears of laughter and did no end of good for Australian-Scottish relations.

16.30 (approximately) board coach and head back to Arras for free evening.

Wednesday 3 July

FLANDERS DAY

07.00 rise and pack

09.00 depart Arras for the Ypres Salient

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 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.



16.00 depart Ypres for Zeebrugge–Hull ferry.



Thursday 4 July

Set 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 2019**

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.

