



McCrae's Battalion Trust

Contalmaison Pilgrimage 2023

Remembering Gary Tait and Patricia Leroy

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 their 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.

More than a 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 suitably prepared for the next hundred years.

As usual, our itinerary for 2023 focuses on the events of 1 July 1916. This year, however, will be a wee bit more poignant. Immediately after our ceremony we will unveil a handsomely carved wooden bench in memory of Lieutenant-Colonel Gary Tait, MBE and our friend Patricia Leroy, the former maire of Contalmaison. Gary and Patricia died within weeks of each other in 2019 and



we are still coming to terms with their loss. The bench has been paid for by donations from many members and friends of McCrae's Battalion Trust.

We've also planned a couple of unusual visits for this year's pilgrimage – the first to the Commonwealth War Graves continental base in Beaurains for a unique glimpse behind the scenes at the work done by the Commission to maintain its cemeteries and memorials in France and Flanders. On our Battlefield Tour day we'll visit Gordon Dump Cemetery in the morning to call on a remarkable member of McCrae's Battalion who fell near there on



1 July 1916. Then after lunch in Cambrai we'll catch up with Deborah, the tank that some of our pilgrims last saw in a barn near Flesquieres more than ten years ago. Deborah has now been moved to a purpose-built museum facility and we've arranged a special tour.

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 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 2023

Thursday 29 June

09.30 assemble at Waterloo Place, Edinburgh. Our Austin 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.

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

13.15 arrive Durham Services for lunch and pick-ups.

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

Friday 30 June

07.00 breakfast

09.30 (approximately) disembark ferry and drive to Beaurains, near Arras (with a short break en route for lunch) to visit the headquarters of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission – a unique opportunity to see the how the Commission works – from the process of discovering



and reburying remains to the maintenance and replacement of gravestones and larger memorials.

16.00 (approximately) leave Beaurains for the 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 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.

Saturday 1 July

CONTALMAISON CEREMONY

07.30 board coach.

07.45 *sharp* depart hotel for Contalmaison.

09.00 ceremony begins, followed by laying of tributes at the Contalmaison Village Memorial and (immediately after the benediction) the formal unveiling of the 'Friends' memorial bench beside the Salle de Fêtes.

12.00 Lunch with our local friends under canvas outside the *Salle de Fêtes*. With whisky instruction from Julian Hutchings, music and autographs from international folk superstar Craig Herbertson – supported by the redoubtable Christie Woods and an abundance of chums – as well as informal speeches and presentations from around the tables.

16.30 board coach and return to Arras for free evening.

Sunday 2 July

BATTLEFIELD TOUR DAY

09.15 depart hotel for Gordon Dump Cemetery, near La Boisselle, to hear about the Big Push on 1 July 1916 and to spend some time at the graveside of one of the most remarkable men in McCrae's Battalion.





After that we'll drive to Cambrai for lunch, followed by a visit to the village of Flesquières, where an almost intact British tank D51 (or 'Deborah') was recently moved into a purpose-built museum dedicated to her remarkable story. We last saw Deborah in 2008, when she was sheltering in a local barn. The tale of her journey from the Battle of Cambrai in 1917 to a filled-in shell-hole in 1999 is poignant and (at times) funny – and it demonstrates perfectly the enduring capacity of the Great War to inspire new generations with the spirit of Remembrance.



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

Monday 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.

15.30 depart Ypres for Rotterdam–Hull ferry.

Tuesday 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
October 2022

