



McCrae's Battalion Trust

Contalmaison Pilgrimage 2025

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.

Our itinerary for 2025 is bookended by Third Ypres – otherwise known as the Battle of Passchendaele. It lasted just over a hundred days and resulted in a gain of only five miles of enemy ground. 250,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers were killed, missing or wounded. We start our pilgrimage at the new museum at Zonnebeke and end it at nearby Tyne Cot Cemetery, where we’ll hear the story of a young Royal High School officer who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. In the time in between, we’ll concentrate on the war behind the front lines – with visits to the Underground City of Naours and to the astonishing ‘forgotten’ soldiers of Vignacourt.

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 of 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 2025

Sunday 29 June

08.30 assemble at Regent Road, Edinburgh. Our Bibby's Travel coach will be waiting (with McCrae's Battalion crest in front window) on the westbound carriageway beside the Burns Monument. Front seats both sides of the passageway are necessarily reserved for Trust officials.

09.00 coach will depart Regent Road for St George's Dock, Hull.

12.15 arrive Durham Services for lunch and pick-up.

13.15 leave Durham

16.00 arrive Hull and board ferry – adjust watches to continental time. Rifles, side-arms, knuckle-dusters, hand grenades and all live ammunition to be left on jetty.

Monday 30 June

06.30-07.30 breakfast

09.00 (approximately) leave Rotterdam for the Museum of Passchendaele at Zonnebeke. We'll be there for a few hours. There is a well-stocked cafe with toilet facilities. We expect to arrive at our hotel in Arras by around 16.00 – in time for check-in, room distribution and a free evening. The bar will be open for early burdz.



For those of you who haven't visited Arras before, you'll find a multitude of excellent taverns, 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. Dick Harker, who played for both Hibs and Hearts is also listed among the Northumberland Fusiliers.

Tuesday 1 July

CONTALMAISON CEREMONY

07.30 board coach. Dress is up to the individual. Casual or smart but remember that it can get hot later in the day.

07.40 *sharp* depart hotel for Contalmaison. Please be prompt. Timings are critical for the French this morning and beyond our control, so stragglers could find themselves marooned in Arras.

09.00 ceremony begins, culminating in the laying of tributes at the Edinburgh Cairn and the Contalmaison Village Memorial.



12.00 Lunch with our local friends under canvas outside the *Salle de Fêtes*. With whisky chat from Julian Hutchings, music from international folk legend Craig Herbertson, who'll be giving his concert in the village for the umpteenth time – ably supported by Scotland's own 'Cheery Chappie' Christie Woods (in a rare outing from secure accommodation) and an abundance of chums – as well as informal speeches and presentations from around the tables. Look out this year for Ed Dalgleish's rousing medley of 'Old Kazoo Favourites' – seldom seen but not easily forgotten. Ed cordially invites any kazoo enthusiasts join him on the day.



17.00 board coach in one piece and return to Arras for a free evening.

Wednesday 2 July

BATTLEFIELD TOUR DAY

09.00 depart hotel for Naours and Vignacourt.

Two visits today – one in the morning and another in the afternoon. The Underground City at Naours is still something of a well-kept secret on the old Western Front. For centuries, Picardy has known numerous wars and invasions. The chalk mines were used as shelters for the inhabitants and their property and then became underground hiding places. They are known as *muches* or hiding places in the Picard language. The *Cité Souterraine* was dug entirely by hand. At its peak, there were 28 galleries and 300 rooms. It was occupied from the Middle Ages until the 17th century; the underground passages fell into disuse until they were rediscovered by Abbé Danicourt in 1887.



The visit consists of a tour of the Underground City, the Museum of Ancient Trades and a new interpretation centre telling the story of the countless soldiers from Britain and the Empire who visited the area and left their mark for posterity. It's an astonishing place. Note that they've incorporated a restaurant with toilet facilities.

In the afternoon we'll move on to Vignacourt, which was the site of an important military base behind Allied lines during the Great War.



Two local farmers, Louis and Antoinette Thuillier, owned their own camera, which was rare in the early 20th century. Louis taught Antoinette how to use it and they turned their dwelling into a studio. Civilians and soldiers would come to the farmhouse to have their photographs taken in the yard or in front of an improvised backdrop.



When the war ended, the photographic plates were stored in the attic and forgotten for over a century. They now form the Thuillier Collection, a unique set of images, fittingly displayed in their original home, the restored Thuillier farmhouse. Meeting the faces in the photos is like engaging directly with the past. There's also a garden where you can relax before we return to our hotel.

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



Thursday 3 July

FLANDERS DAY

07.00 rise and pack

09.00 depart Arras for Tyne Cot Cemetery.

11.30 (approximately) arrive Ypres for lunch and a free afternoon.



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. 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. You'll be well-briefed about our leaving time and the bus pick-up location. We time our departure in order to conform to P&O's instructions for ferry boarding, so (once again) please be prompt.

Friday 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, November 2025

