

Sites of Memory of the First World War



The group at Café de Dreve



Dr Roel Timperman

Scot Bell and Felix Behler took a group of 26 students to Ypres, Belgium, from 26th October till 29th of October. The excursion was designed to explore commemorative sites still visible to this day in The Ypres Salient.

Nele Bille and Dr Roel Timperman of The Commonwealth War Graves Commission gave us an overview of the history and the work of the commission, which includes the upkeep of memorials and the provision of education for visiting school groups. This was followed by a tour of The Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, one of the central memorials in The Salient. Immediately after this, we had the privilege of taking an active part in The Last Post Ceremony, a poignant ceremony which has been carried out every evening since July 1928. Scot Bell played a lament on the bagpipes, and Felix Behler and two students laid a wreath on behalf of the University of Paderborn.

The excursion included a visit to The Flanders Fields Museum, which is housed in the iconic Cloth Hall, the centrepiece of the town's restoration after World War One. We were also fortunate to visit two privately owned museums. At The Café De Dreve on the edge of Polygon Wood, the scene of heavy fighting in the third battle of Ypres in October 1917, local amateur historian and battlefield archaeologist Johan Vandewalle gave us a talk on his Brothers in Arms Memorial project, and enthralled us with a personal tour of the artefacts in his museum. The second of these private visits was to Pond Farm near St Julien. Stijn Butaye gave us a fascinating insight into what it is like even today coping with the remains of the 'iron harvest' on a working farm today.

We also visited the two largest war cemeteries in The Salient. Tynecot is the largest British and Commonwealth Cemetery in the world, with almost 12,000 graves and panels bearing the names of over 35,000 soldiers who have no known grave. Two of our students laid a wreath at The Cross of Sacrifice. We then visited Langemark Cemetery, with over 44,000 burials the largest German Cemetery in the area. About 3,000 of the graves there are those of young student volunteers who had died in the Battle of Langemark in 1914. The cemetery became known as "Der Studentenfriedhof", and it was this academic connection that brought the perspective of our tour much closer. When we laid a wreath, the group shared a very touching moment of contemplative silence.

This excursion to Ypres was a very moving and informative experience and gave us plenty to contemplate on the way back to Paderborn. Felix Behler and Scot Bell have since maintained close contact with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to establish future internships for our students, and the prospect of a guest lecture delivered by Dr Roel Timperman here in Paderborn is in the pipeline.