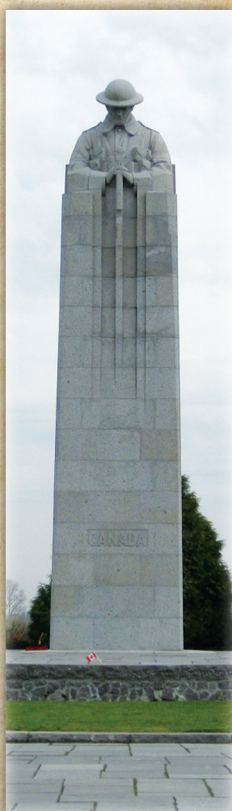


TRACING YOUR GREAT WAR ANCESTORS: YPRES

A GUIDE FOR FAMILY HISTORIANS



SIMON FOWLER

TRACING YOUR GREAT WAR ANCESTORS

Ypres

FAMILY HISTORY FROM PEN & SWORD

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Ypres

A Guide for Family Historians

Simon Fowler



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Army paperwork is full of abbreviations which can be puzzling to the novice, and the following list provides definitions for the most common ones.

ACI	Army Council Instruction
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ASC	Army Service Corps
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BRCS	British Red Cross Society
BWM	British War Medal
CEF	Canadian Expeditionary Force
CCS	Casualty Clearing Station
CLC	Chinese Labour Corps
CO	Commanding officer
Cpl	Corporal
Cpt	Captain
CQMS	Company Quartermaster Sergeant
CRA	Commanding Royal Artillery
CRE	Commanding Royal Engineers
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
FP	Field Punishment
GCM	General Court Martial
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GSW	Gunshot Wound
HA	Heavy Artillery
HE	Heavy Explosive
HS	Home Service

Tracing Your Great War Ancestors: Ypres

HAC	Honourable Artillery Company
IOR	Indian Other Rank
KIA	Killed in Action
KR	King's Regulations
KRRC	King's Royal Rifle Corps
L/Cpl	Lance Corporal
LofC	Lines of Communication
L/Sgt	Lance Sergeant
Lt	Lieutenant
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
MGC	Machine Gun Corps
MiD	Mentioned in Despatches
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
OC	Officer Commanding
OR	Other Rank(s)
POW	Prisoner of War
Pte	Private
PU	Permanently Unfit (found in service records)
QAIMNS	Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service
QARNNC	Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Corps
RA	Royal Artillery
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RE	Royal Engineers
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RFA	Royal Field Artillery
RGA	Royal Garrison Artillery
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
RND	Royal Naval Division
SAA	Small Arms Ammunition
Sgt	Sergeant
TF	Territorial Force

List of Abbreviations

VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment
WAAC	Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
WO	War Office

The Long, Long Trail provides a comprehensive list of abbreviations at www.1914-1918.net/abbrev.htm.

INTRODUCTION

Even after a century the First World War and, in particular, the Western Front exerts a powerful attraction on millions of people. To us the war seems senseless, which makes it even more of a tragedy. But nowhere was it a greater tragedy than along the Western Front in Belgium. Hundreds of thousands of young men lost their lives or suffered life-shortening wounds in the mud of Flanders, in the ‘Immortal Salient’, in the words of one contemporary writer. The local Flemish people saw their livelihoods and their houses destroyed before they were forced out of the war zone altogether. But there were many heroic actions – recorded and unrecorded – and many men felt their time in the Army was one of the highlights of their life.

This short book attempts to offer a guide to researching the men and units who fought in Belgium. With so much material now online it is fairly easy to do, although there are a number of shell holes to trap the unwary and so keep things interesting. However, there is very little here about the fighting itself – there are dozens of books that explain, in a far better way than I ever could, what went on in greater or lesser detail – instead I have tried to give a glimpse of what it was like to be in the Salient during the war. There is also a section devoted to visiting the battlefields today (and what it was like visiting ninety years ago), because you should go if you have not already done so.

My personal links to the battlefields are not strong. My Great-Uncle Rifleman 44005 Stanley Crozier, 18th King’s Royal Rifle Corps certainly spent time in Flanders during 1918. Unfortunately, he was killed three weeks before the Armistice by a stray shell when his unit was bivouacked outside a village near Kortrijk (Courtrai) during the Final Push to victory. And I have

been on a number of trips to the Salient since the mid-1980s, when visitors to the battlefields were still fairly rare, up to the present day when battlefield tourism is now big business and likely to grow further between now and 2018.

There is a danger that the First World War has become sanitised to meet the needs of a more squeamish sentimental generation, think of the emphasis on the Christmas Truce, horses and the fallacy that Britain need not have gone to war in August 1914. The Great War was brutal, bloody and broke many a good man. And it was undoubtedly made worse by a high command slow to learn the lessons of trench warfare and total war, although critics at the time, and subsequently, have failed to come up with any satisfactory alternatives.

The sideshows in Italy, Salonika, Palestine and, above all, Gallipoli were just that, sideshows draining men and materiel for little real contribution to ultimate victory over the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. It was clear that ultimate victory had to come on the Western Front – the 450 miles of trenches, barbed wire and decomposing bodies which began in the boggy marshes around Nieuwport on the North Sea coast and snaked around Ypres and thence through Northern France and the Vosges mountains to reach Switzerland at the small border crossing at Pfefferhausen.

The Revd Tubby Clayton, who had spent much of the War at Poperinge, crossed the Western Front on 10 November to the newly liberated areas to the east. He found:

On each side there is a crescendo of desolation. Trees first scarred, then blasted, then stumps, then non-existent. Houses first roofless, then barely recognisable, then pieces of wall with dugouts against or under them, then brick-heaps; then vanished utterly. If you dug you might find bricks, even floors and cellars; but it is wiser not to. For the rest, wire all rusted and tangled, rotting sandbags, broken

wheels, piles of unused shells, boxes of ammunition, timber for the roads, duckboard tracks, grotesque direction posts in two languages, dead mules flung into inadequate shell holes go on in one vast nightmare across the rise and fall of the ground . . .

The aims were simple: either the Germans would drive the British into the sea and take Paris, or the British, French and their allies would push the Germans back towards the Rhine. Whoever succeeded would be the winner.

At the simplest the winner would be the country which produced the most shells and who killed more of the enemy. Passchendaele (Third Ypres) in particular was a breathtakingly horrifying plan to bleed the German Army dry: that is to kill more of their men than they managed to kill of ours. And although the figures have been disputed, it is clear that, in this respect at least, the plan worked. In the Official History, Brigadier-General J. E. Edmonds put British casualties at 244,897 and claimed that estimated German losses were around 400,000 men. After the war the German General Staff concluded: ‘Germany had been brought near to certain destruction by the Flanders battle of 1917.’

To secure this victory the economies of Britain, France and Germany were transformed. Millions of men joined the forces and women entered the labour market in unprecedented numbers, taking over from their menfolk who had enlisted or working in huge new factories making munitions, aircraft or tanks. And a small number even enlisted and saw service on the Western Front, although none were close to the fighting. Meanwhile, every aspect of the citizen’s life at home was being regulated as never before: what they ate, how they occupied their leisure hours, and even when they visited the pub.

For over three years from October and November 1914 when the opposing armies ground to a halt along what both sides called

the Western Front there was stalemate, because neither side was strong enough to defeat the other. Millions of shells and bullets were fired and hundreds of thousands of men were killed or mutilated in futile attempts to break this deadlock. Cunningly, the Germans generally occupied the high ground, which made it that much more difficult for British and French attacks to succeed. Thereafter, the Germans strengthened their positions and repelled attack after attack.

The old certainties were broken in March 1918 when Germans suddenly swept aside British and French forces advancing deep into France. Operation Michael was a gamble that almost worked but within weeks ground to a halt because the advancing troops could not easily be resupplied. Around Ypres too the Germans made small gains and forced civilians and non-essential troops to flee from Poppinge.

In turn the 'Hundred Days' of the Allied advance began in August. Military historians have called it the greatest British military triumph of all, although in all honesty it was against an increasingly enfeebled and demoralised enemy. At Ypres the British only began to advance at the end of September. The Germans finally agreed to an Armistice on St Martin's Day, 11 November 1918. They had had little choice because the stresses of the war had finally caused a revolution back home (and increasingly there was unrest in the Army as well).

As is well known, in 1914 the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was tiny in comparison with European armies, but it was well-trained and well-led, so accounted for itself very well in the first bloody encounters with the Germans. And bloody they were: by the end of 1914 the BEF had received 90 per cent casualties, that is, nine out of ten men were either killed or wounded to some degree. In many ways these battles were more akin to those fought in the Napoleonic Wars to any fought subsequently. According to Max Hastings:

Contrary to the popular myth that 1 July 1916, the first day of the Somme, was the bloodiest day of the conflict, in reality this was 22 August 1914, when France lost 27,000 [men]. The British army fought its first battle at Mons the following day, then, on 26 August at Le Cateau, they staged a rearguard action that is almost forgotten today, but that resulted in roughly the same losses as D-day in Normandy, 1944.

After the Western Front settled down the British were assigned the area around Ypres to defend. It was where the British had arrived in October 1914, at one of the last places where trenches had yet to be built. With great sacrifice they stopped the advancing Germans.

The Western Front took a detour around the town: it was less than an hour's brisk march from Ypres to the front line. The Western Front then went south around the small villages of Ploegstreet (Plug Street to the British) and Menen (Menin) to the French border near Armentières. These were generally much quieter areas.

To the north were the Belgians, who occupied the line through the marshy lowlands north from Dixmude to the North Sea coast, and from Armentières to the south lay the French. As British reinforcements grew during 1915 the French handed over the area of the Western Front north of the Somme River. And for periods in September and October 1914 and the summer of 1918 there were also British troops on the Marne, the part of the Western Front closest to Paris.

Apart for a few hours on 14 October 1914 Ypres remained in British hands throughout the war. It lay in a salient jutting into German lines that surrounded the town on three sides. The town possessed a strategic importance far greater than its size warranted. There are several reasons for this:



An aerial photograph of Ypres taken in 1919 showing a little of the devastation suffered by the town. (Author)

- It protected the Channel seaports of Dunkirk, Boulogne and Calais from German attack. And without these ports it would have been almost impossible to reinforce British forces along the rest of the Western Front. In turn Ypres offered a good position from which to advance to seize Ostend, so preventing the Germans using the port for U-boat attacks on Allied shipping. Taking Ostend was one of the objectives of the Battle of Passchendaele;
- Psychologically, defending Ypres was very important to the Belgian people as it represented the last part of Belgium land still under its sovereignty;