

World War One

Field Resource Pack

A brief summary of the historical sites of the WWI conflict.
Written specifically to assist school groups travelling to France and Belgium.



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Introduction



This guide is designed primarily as a planning resource for staff, whilst NST holds the copyright feel free to photocopy and issue the maps and information sheets as you think appropriate. It is intended to be a brief guide to some of the events of the WW1 Western Front conflict where you are likely to visit.

It is by no means a complete gazetteer of all the sites available and many well known and hundreds of lesser known sites are omitted. You may well wish to make visits other than those listed particularly if visiting a cemetery or battlefield site that has specific local connections to your school.

Finding a guide book which will help you plan such a visit is becoming easier by the year as the range of specialist battlefield publications continues to expand rapidly. A problem that you may face is making a selection from the huge choice of literature available.

The guide covers four areas of the Western Front;

- The Ypres Salient,
- The Somme,
- The Belgian Army Sector
- The Arras / Vimy sector

Each area would constitute a full or part day visit. Most British school groups tend to concentrate on the old British battlefields, particularly Ypres and the Somme, and this is reflected in the emphasis given to these areas in this guide.

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Introduction



This guide includes historical notes providing a brief outline of events in each area, maps, and information sheets on specific sites. The outline of events is intended to be the basis of any pre-visit briefing and to help make the link between the events being studied and the sites themselves. The outline maps of the principal areas are intended to show the location of the sites visited relative to the battlefield as a whole.

Site Selection - It has not always been possible in the text to explain why one particular site has been chosen from the many available. Some, such as the Menin Gate or the Newfoundland Park, select themselves and you are unlikely to visit the area without seeing them. Others have been chosen from a number of possible options partly on practical grounds such as ease of access, and partly to ensure that you see a representative sample of what is available. One of the most difficult and yet potentially most useful aspects of these sites is to see how they relate to each other and to the events being studied. One of the major benefits to be gained from a visit to the area is some appreciation of the sheer scale of a First World War offensive and the sorts of distances covered in relation to the expenditure of men and materials.

Special Visits - Many schools choose to visit an area of the battlefield or a site or cemetery that has some local or personal relevance. These visits can be the most rewarding of all and are well worth undertaking. If you need help locating a particular grave then you will find the staff of the War Graves Commission extremely helpful. Send as much information as you can gather to:

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission,
2 Marlow Road,
Maidenhead,
Berks,
SL6 7DX
Telephone: 01628 634221 Web address: www.cwgc.com

Finally, it is the intention that you use this guide along with other learning resources provided by NST and an NST Guide Lecturer on your visit.

I hope you find this guide useful and have a safe and interesting visit.

Jeff Garner

NST History Tour Programme Co-ordinator.

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Ypres and the Salient



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Ypres and the Salient



Ypres

Before WWI, Ypres was one of the most picturesque towns in Flanders. Its major buildings, the Cathedral and the Cloth Hall, dated from the period of the town's greatest prosperity as a cloth centre in the late Middle Ages. At its height, the town and surrounding countryside had a population of 200,000. By 1914 it was a sleepy market town of less than 20,000 inhabitants which drew its main income from hops.

The Salient

A salient is a piece of land pushing into hostile territory so that the enemy is ranged around it on three sides and is thus, by its nature, a dangerous place to be. British troops in the Ypres Salient were subject to fire from not only three sides but, until the capture of the Messines Ridge in 1917, also from the rear. A combination of geography, the military technology of the period, and the differing tactics of the two sides made it a terrible place – the most hated and feared sector of the whole Western Front.

Geography

The name Flanders derives from the old Flemish for flooded land. This area of heavy clay soils is, by nature, a bog requiring constant and careful drainage. Nowadays the landscape looks solid enough but to this day a farmer failing to keep his drains in good order is heavily penalised. Under constant shelling the drainage quickly broke down and this very fragile landscape reverted to a bog. It was bad enough for the Germans on the high ground and they were able to drain much of their water away into the lower British trenches.

The town of Ypres is situated on the edge of a flat plain which stretches off to the west and north. To the east a series of low ridges run round the town, roughly in a semi-circle, before joining the Messines Ridge which goes off south towards the French border, like the tail on a slightly skewed question mark. The hills making up the ridge look insignificant enough – their names, Hill 60, Hill 62 etc. refer to their height above sea level in metres – yet they gave the Germans a huge advantage.

In WWI the biggest killer was artillery. The key to successful use of artillery was not so much the position of the guns themselves as the availability of vantage points from which to observe the enemy and direct the artillery fire. With good observation points, which the Germans had, huge and accurate concentrations of artillery fire could be put down in the Salient where movement could be seen.

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Ypres and the Salient



Tactics

The Salient came into being during the last phase of the war of rapid movement of 1914, when a German attempt to break through to the coast failed but left them in possession of the ridges. The British dug in on the lower slopes. The Germans strengthened their position by constructing a series of ferro-concrete defences (e.g. Tyne Cot) whereas the British High Command did not think them necessary or desirable. The losses sustained by both sides in the Salient were terrible. Of the more than one million British and Empire servicemen who died in the First World War, about 1 in 4 died there. Given such losses and such disadvantages, the obvious question to ask is why did the British hold on to the Salient at all? (a staff officer who asked this very question in 1915 was immediately sacked.) There are several reasons why the British High Command thought it worthwhile.

- a) Only 25 miles away from the Channel ports, the British were aware of having their backs to the sea and felt that they could not pull back any further. The loss of the Channel ports would disrupt the supply line of the B.E.F. and almost certainly force a British withdrawal from mainland Europe.
- b) The British were fighting as the allies of the Belgians whose land this was. The Belgians and the French would not give an inch of ground to the invader so neither should the British. Coupled with this the British High Command believed more fervently than the Germans that any retreat was bad for morale. The Germans would give up land when necessary to pull back to a better defensive position.
- c) After a series of retreats in 1914, the defence of Ypres caught the popular imagination in Britain, as well as that of the popular press. It was considered important for morale at home that the town was held. The more lives invested in its defence, the more this became true.

The Battle of Ypres

More than any other sector of the Western Front, the fighting here was continuous. Quiet months in other areas could literally be that, but in a quiet month here the British might lose up to 5,000 troops. The Germans, aware of their advantage, kept the pressure up the whole time and shelling occurred daily. The British, aware of their disadvantage, made frequent attempts to acquire some of the higher ground. After the war the Battles Nomenclature Committee identified three periods of more intensive activity which became known as 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battles of Ypres.

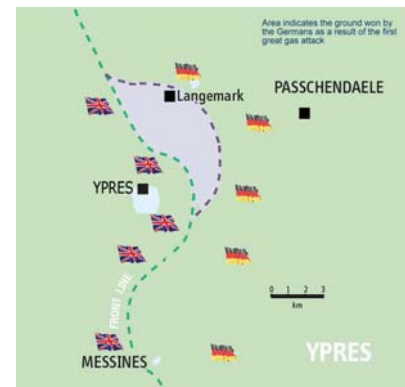
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1st Ypres – 19th October-22nd November 1914

In the closing phases of the ‘race to the sea’ a German attempt to break through to the French channel ports was stopped on the ridges above Ypres. There were terrible casualties on both sides. The B.E.F, the old regular army, was more or less destroyed in the fighting. The German drive to the sea was halted but they were left in possession of the ridges. The Ypres Salient had come into being.



2nd Ypres – 22nd April-25th May 1915

On the 22nd April the Germans experimented with the first use of poison gas in the north of the Salient. The extent of their success was so unexpected that they failed to take full advantage. A desperate situation for the Allies was relieved by an effective but costly series of counter attacks, largely by Canadian troops. By the end of May a German breakthrough had been prevented but a large dent had been made in the north of the Salient and Plumer, the British commander, pulled the line back to form a semicircle running in an arc not much more than two miles from the town. Throughout 1916 things were fairly static in the Salient as attention was turned to the Somme, 70 miles to the south.



3rd Ypres – 31st July-10th November 1917

Messines Ridge, June 1917. In the summer of 1917 French morale was at breaking point in the aftermath of the Nivelle Offensive and there were serious mutinies. It was decided to take the pressure off the French by a limited offensive at Ypres, the main aim of which was to dislodge the Germans from the high ground to the south of the town to the Messines Ridge. The main feature of the battle was the use of 19 huge mines totalling nearly one million pounds of high explosive. The effect was like an earthquake and so effective were these that most of the ridge fell on the first day. Although the offensive was limited in its aims, Plumer’s Second Army secured all its objectives at the relatively low cost, by Western front standards, of 17,000 casualties.

