

Balfour Battlefield Trip

By Holly and James

Last summer, students at Sir Graham Balfour had the opportunity to visit the battlefields of World War I in France and Belgium. I was desperate to go on the trip as the army has always been a big part of my life due to my dad being a soldier. Furthermore, it seems that every time I go on holiday in Europe, that most countries have some connection with the First World War. When the opportunity arose at school, I was desperate to find out more

We left school early (5am!) and travelled to France via the Euro Tunnel. Everywhere we looked out of the window, we were struck by all of the beautiful landscape. Lille was our main destination and we spent three days in the Lille Aeroport hotel.

Our first day was spent visiting Commonwealth cemeteries, which was very emotional. We saw the graves not only of soldiers, but also of a nurse and some Chinese labourers who were drafted in to help the war effort. That night, we went to the Last Post Ceremony in Ypres where I was lucky enough to be selected to place a wreath before the Last Post was played. The night was moving and gave us plenty of thoughts about the effort that the men and women must have put in to fighting for their country.

The next day we went to the Sheffield Memorial Park, which commemorates the men who died in the Battle of the Somme. We had a good talk from our guide, Andrew, who told us all about the fighting and the tragic loss of life. There was still a lot of shrapnel on the ground where we stood; we even saw some shells which had not exploded and were due to be collected in order to be disposed of.

We also saw the Lochnager Crater, which was the largest of the mines to explode in the war. Everybody was amazed by the sheer size of it.

That afternoon we also visited the Thiepval Memorial to the missing as well as Mansel Copse, which saw all of the 8th and 9th Devonshire regiment wiped out by a German attack as they were pinned in.

Our final day was equally as moving. We visited the Firing Post at Poperinghe.

This made the stories of the war incredibly sad as we discovered that many soldiers were shot for desertion and "cowardice". Nobody on the trip could blame any of those poor soldiers for being so scared.

The Passchendaele Museum was a brilliant place to visit and we saw all kinds of artefacts from the war such as the huge field guns, uniforms and propaganda posters. We also had the opportunity to go through a trench system used by the British army and then saw the German army ones. It was clear that the German trenches were far more advanced and comfortable than ours!

Tyne Cot was our final destination. This was a very sad but beautiful places as it is the biggest cemetery and although the graves are very old people still treat them with such respect and keep them looking nice and clean by washing them and decorating them with flowers. It was quite emotional as it filled so much land and it only has a fraction of the graves of the men who fought in the war.

Sadly, there were graves of people aged just 14 who had died. That was the same age as some people of the trip! It was nice to see the men remembered; even those who were never found were commemorated on a big wall that surrounds the cemetery.

Despite being incredibly sad, I loved the trip and got to see some beautiful parts of the country. I would highly recommend the trip to students who are considering it.



Holly

