

OBH Great War Commemorative Tour

“This is a great life, and no money on earth would induce me to change my job; it is you at home who have the harder job, and we ought to know, who get some of the thinking and waiting, too.”

Maurice Fitzmaurice, letter home, 5th August 1915

He was fatally shot on the 6th August 1915

On the last day of the Lent term, our group managed an early rise to start our odyssey to trace the footsteps of former South Lodge (OBH’s previous incarnation) pupil Maurice Fitzmaurice and his experience in the Great War, leading to his untimely death in 1915 and, finally, his grave. None of us had any idea what a thought-provoking, educational and emotional experience this would turn out to be.

Our first day’s travelling brought us to our first destination: the Commonwealth cemetery at Lijssenthoek to learn about the outbreak of the war. This, for many, was the first time that they have come face-to-face with the human cost of the war as we stood and faced ten thousand headstones. Examining some of the dates really brought home the reality of war: boy soldiers of fifteen years of age, women nurses, men who died on the 10th of November – the day before Armistice. 10000 was really just a number we had experienced in Maths, but here were the graves of this number of men, women and boys.



We then went to Poperinghe to experience one of the other dark sides of the war: the execution cell and post where soldiers who had been sentenced to death for crimes and desertion spent their last night before being shot the next day. A tragic, thought-provoking but very real part of the Great War story. There was much to think about as we had our evening meal and went to our hotel for an early night.

The next morning saw us arrive at Hill 60 where we discovered the use of mining to dig under enemy trenches and lay thousands of kilograms of explosives before detonating them. This site – made from spoil from



when the neighbouring train line was built – was high ground and, as such, it was fought over continually. A very real sense of devastation could be felt when we saw Caterpillar Mine Crater: an enormous crater, now a massive pond, caused by underground explosives.



We then went to Langemarck German Cemetery. This is the final resting place for over forty thousand German soldiers. There was a calm but cold atmosphere at this cemetery, made even more chilling when we saw the site where Hitler used the cemetery to deliver speeches before the Second World War. We then went to Vancouver Corner, where the Brooding Soldier stands as a memorial to over two thousand Canadian troops who were killed in gas attacks. This

gave us the chance to learn about gas warfare and the development of the gas mask. Interestingly, progression in the development of the gas mark meant that gas caused less than 1% of all casualties during the war.

We then went to Passchendaele Museum. This is a brilliant museum housed in what was German headquarters. The museum follows a trail which guided us through the entire course of the war from 1914-1918. It then brings you out into a reconstructed bunker system which had been recreated to exactly as it would have existed during the war. This was then followed by a complicated trench system which showed you the different trench styles adopted by both sides. Whilst it was fun to explore these systems, it really gave us an idea of what life in these trenches would have been like. We then had a chance to dress Tom Buckle up as a British soldier in full kit, including rifle and bayonet.

This led us to Tyne Cot, one of the most famous Commonwealth War Graves. As well as being the resting place of over twelve thousand soldiers, there is also a wall which bears the name of over fifty thousand soldiers who can only be listed as ‘missing’ due to the fact that their bodies have never been recovered.



After dinner, we experienced a truly memorable event: the Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate. The gate stands as a memorial to missing

soldiers and over thirty thousand names line its interior. Although it has become a popular tourist destination, nothing can detract from the power and emotion of this simple ceremony; to hear the Last Post sounded under the names of the missing, and to then speak the words “We will remember them”, could not have been emotive. To have this followed by watching three of our pupils – Charlotte Bowman, Grace Gregory and Finn Milbank – march perfectly across the gate to lay a wreath from OBH to all the fallen was perhaps one of the most

emotional moments I have experienced as a member of the OBH family: we were all moved but full of pride.

This was a fitting end to the day and as we had lost two hours – one for being on the continent, one for the clocks going forward – an early night was on the cards before our final day.

The final day was devoted to Maurice Fitzmaurice and his story. Our first stop was the Indian Memorial at Neuve Chappelle. Maurice was an officer in the Indian Division and it was whilst on duty at Neuve Chappelle that he was shot by a stray bullet between the shoulders. We then went to Arras to experience the war almost first hand as we entered Wellington Quarry to walk in the tunnels dug towards the German trenches. We donned hard hats and went twenty metres under



the ground to explore the allied tunnels in which the soldiers and engineers lived and mined, as they dug ever closer to the German front line. The battle of Arras would go on to be one of the most bloody of all battles and, if you don't know much about it, I would recommend that you find out more about this fascinating episode.

Lunch saw us embark upon the final part of our journey. Before reaching our final destination, we had the opportunity to see one of the most incredible cemeteries: the German cemetery at Neuville St Vaast. Our guide has told us this was what is known as an “Oh My God” cemetery and it soon became apparent why. As you enter the gate, you are faced with over forty thousand iron crosses – one for each German soldier. They stretch literally to every



horizon and you cannot help but utter “Oh My God” as you enter.

We finally moved to the most important part of our tour: the grave of OBH old boy Maurice Fitzmaurice at Cabaret Rouge. Having found out so much about this past pupil, having organised the whole tour around him, I had a tingle of anticipation as we entered and located his grave. Cabaret Rouge is a most beautiful and peaceful cemetery and this allowed us to gather together at his grave. I was able to tell the children about his life and his untimely death. We were able to read from his final letter home – written the day before he died – before hearing the glowing testaments from his officers written after his death. We were able to offer our prayers and thoughts to

Maurice and to all OBH pupils who have fallen serving their country in conflict before leaving a poppy cross as a lasting testament to these brave pupils.

This was an incredible journey in every sense of the word. It allowed us, as pupils and staff, to connect emotionally and physically with this very important part of our history and gave us a great sense of the depth of history we as a school are fortunate to hold.

This is just a brief outline of the tour. I couldn't possibly replicate the sense of fun and adventure shared by the group, nor the strength of the many emotions felt on the trip: pride, loss, sadness, history, community and family.

My thanks go to Anglia Tours for their organisation, Mrs Hayes for all of her help and support throughout the whole process and trip, Mr Brett for his thoughtful words and support, Samuel Hill – whose tireless research was the inspiration and genesis for this trip, to all the parents whose support allowed this tour to actually happen and to the children who were a joy to be with every minute of the trip: Maurice Fitzmaurice would have been very proud.

“His loss to us is very great; always devoted to his work and cheery, he was a great favourite with all with whom he came in contact.”

Maurice Fitzmaurice’s commanding officer, Colonel Goffin

“His loss will be deeply felt in the company in which he has always set such an example of hard work and cheery endurance.”

His company commander, Captain Rawlence

