



McCrae's Battalion Trust Contalmaison Pilgrimage 2024

McCrae's Battalion Trust is the world's first registered charity to be inspired by the sacrifice of an infantry battalion of the Great War. On 1 July 1916 – the bloody opening day of the Battle of the Somme – seventeen British divisions assaulted an impregnable German defensive system, bristling with barbed wire and machine-guns.

20,000 British soldiers died that morning – the idealistic best that the New Armies had to offer. A further 40,000 were wounded. Entire battalions of pals, brothers, neighbours and work-mates were wiped out in a matter of minutes. Amid the carnage it was a unit from the capital of Scotland that penetrated furthest into the enemy position. The 16th Royal Scots, the 2nd Edinburgh City Battalion, named after their charismatic colonel, Sir George McCrae, lost almost three-quarters of their strength. Somehow, though, a small party pressed on to reach the tiny ruined village of Contalmaison, deep inside the German



trench system. In their time they were recognised as heroes, but posterity is unkind and their achievement was forgotten.

In November 2004 a fourteen-foot-high traditional Scottish cairn was unveiled in Contalmaison to finally right this historic wrong. Constructed by Scottish craftsmen, using entirely Scottish materials, sourced in Caithness, Nairnshire, Moray and the Lothians, it is now recognised as the most handsome battalion monument to be erected on the Somme since the high-water mark of commemorative projects in the 1920s. It is truly 'the last of the Great War memorials' and has already become a distinctive Scottish presence on the Western Front.

More than a hundred years have passed since the Armistice of 1918 but the tradition of Remembrance continues. Nearly a million British and Commonwealth soldiers gave their lives, more than a million French and Belgian, *three* million German and Austrian. In Siegfried Sassoon's immortal words, 'Look down and swear by the slain of the War that you'll *never* forget!' In 2018 McCrae's Battalion Trust spent a considerable sum restoring the fabric of our stunning bronze plaques. The Contalmaison Cairn is now suitably prepared for the next hundred years.

Our itinerary for 2024 focuses on the fortunes of the 16th Royal Scots on 1 July 1916. We'll follow the line of advance that morning and pick out some of the places where members of the battalion were killed or wounded. We'll then visit the fallen in the local Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries to hear their stories and learn why some of them are buried nearly five miles away at High Wood. Lunch at the world-famous Le Tommy in Pozieres will recharge the batteries before we go up to Thiépval to continue the story. The professional footballers from Heart of Midlothian and Raith Rovers are commemorated there and Jack will explain exactly why the Missing are so many and the named gravestones are so few.

We've also planned a couple of unusual additional visits – the first to the Commonwealth War Graves continental base in Beaurains for a unique glimpse behind the scenes at the work done by the Commission to maintain its cemeteries and memorials in France and Flanders. Sandy Potter will be laying a very special wreath at a cemetery near our Arras base: astonishingly we will be the first organized group to visit this casualty – though hopefully not the last.

Yet again McCrae's Battalion Trust has secured excellent accommodation in the Holiday Inn Express, right in the centre of the beautiful city of Arras. This year we'll be spending three nights there, so you'll have plenty time to explore.

The establishment of the Contalmaison site and our annual pilgrimage has firmly cemented Scotland's links with France and the Somme. We have established a new tradition of Franco-Scottish remembrance, reviving the ancient friendship of Europe's oldest alliance. The Scottish Footballers'



cairn is now an important part of the local fabric. As always, the McCrae's Battalion Trust and our friends in Contalmaison look forward to welcoming anyone who is interested in joining us on 1 July to commemorate the finest unit in Lord Kitchener's volunteer Army.

McCrae's Own – Scotland's Sporting Battalion

ITINERARY 2024

Saturday 29 June

08.30 assemble at Regent Road, Edinburgh. Our BIBBY'S TRAVEL coach which will be waiting (with McCrae's Battalion crest in front window) on the westbound carriageway beside the Burns Monument. Front seats both sides of the passageway are necessarily reserved for Trust officials; otherwise you may sit anywhere.

09.45 coach will depart Regent Road for St George's Dock, Hull.

13.00 arrive Durham Services for lunch and pick-up.

14.00 leave Durham

16.30 arrive Hull and board ferry – adjust watches to continental time.

Sunday 30 June

06.30-07.30 breakfast

09.00 (approximately) leave Rotterdam for the Museum of the Battle of Fromelles, which tells the story of the 250 British and Commonwealth soldiers whose remains were discovered near Pheasant Wood in 2009. Then back on the road to Arras with a short visit *en route* to Bucquoy Road Cemetery, just south of Beaurains (40m) to lay a special wreath at a most unexpected grave. We're ten minutes from our hotel, so we'll then go straight to the Holiday Inn for check-in and a free afternoon and evening.

For those of you who haven't visited Arras before, you'll find a multitude of excellent bars, restaurants and shops. Arras is built on 10th Century limestone quarries and it's possible to circumnavigate the honeycomb of cellars in a popular guided tour. Climb to the top of the *Belfroi* (the belfry of the Town Hall) for a panoramic view of the town and the surrounding area. The Arras Memorial, fifteen minutes' walk from our hotel, commemorates 35,000 soldiers from the United Kingdom, South Africa and New Zealand who have no known grave. Among the men whose names are inscribed here is Walter Tull, the first black professional footballer and one of the first black officers in the British Army. You'll find him on the panel dedicated to the Middlesex Regiment. Hearts players, John Allan and David Philip are not far away – John in the Royal Scots panel and David in the Northumberland Fusiliers.



Monday 1 July

CONTALMAISON CEREMONY

07.30 board coach.

07.40 *sharp* depart hotel for Contalmaison.

09.00 ceremony begins, followed by laying of tributes at the Contalmaison Village Memorial.

12.00 Lunch with our local friends under canvas outside the *Salle de Fêtes*. With whisky instruction from Julian Hutchings, music and autographs from international folk superstar Craig Herbertson – supported by the redoubtable Christie Woods and an abundance of chums – as well as informal speeches and presentations from around the tables.



16.30 board coach and return to Arras for free evening.

Tuesday 2 July

BATTLEFIELD TOUR DAY

09.00 depart hotel for La Boisselle. The entire day will be spent in the area where 16RS and 15RS attacked on 1 July 1916. We'll follow the line of advance and tell the stories of the bodies that were found and identified – and the stories of the ones who weren't and who ended up with their names on Thiepval. Lunch on the old front line at the world famous restaurant/museum, *Le Tommy*.

We'll be on the road between Fricourt and Contalmaison, Lochnagar Crater, Gordon Dump Cemetery, Thiepval – and five miles away at London Cemetery, where several 1 July bodies are buried in named graves.

17.30 (approximately) board coach and head back to Arras for a free evening.

Wednesday 3 July

FLANDERS DAY



07.00 rise and pack



08.30 depart Arras for CWGC Experience at Beaurains (10m) to learn about the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and see their craftsmen carving replacement headstones and memorial panels.

10.00 depart Beaurains for Ypres (1h 10m) for a free afternoon.

The cloth-producing city of Ypres was almost entirely destroyed during the Great War. Its sensitive reconstruction remains one of the wonders of modern Europe. In many places it's hard to believe you're not looking at a genuine medieval townscape. Pubs, restaurants and cafés are found in abundance – along with its numerous chocolate and confectionery shops. Cheap tobacco is available in a couple of establishments in the *Grote Markt*, opposite the Cloth Hall.



The famous *In Flanders Fields* museum in the Cloth Hall has recently undergone a major refurbishment. Most of the galleries have been substantially redesigned and it's well worth seeing. You'll also want to visit the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, which commemorates nearly 55,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Salient between 1914 and 1917.

15.30 depart Ypres for Rotterdam–Hull ferry.

Thursday 4 July

Set watches back one hour.

09.00 (UK time) depart Hull for return journey to Edinburgh. Again there will be regular toilet stops and one longer break for food.

15.00 (approximately) arrive Waterloo Place, Edinburgh.

We hope you'll enjoy your trip with us and that you'll consider joining us again in the future. And thank you for coming. We couldn't do it without you!

Trustees of McCrae's Battalion Trust, November 2023

