

Do Those From The Past Enter Their Future World?

In 1998 as a way of getting the Somme bug out of my system my wife Marie, who unbeknown to me, had arranged for us to go for a one week holiday to a place in France called Albert. Up until then I had had something of a loose interest in the First World War. Being a child of the middle forties, one who would be classified today as a war baby, my interest had centered around the events which had happened during the second world war, the bravery and daring of our brave soldiers fighting and always winning the enemy which in our case as children, was the Germans. I came from and lived in an area of Liverpool near to the docks, bombed during the many attacks on Liverpool and surrounding areas in the early 1940s. Indeed many of my family died in Bootle in the infamous May blitz of 1941. As a child we would play on bomb sites (in Liverpool called ollers) and the back entries (called jiggers) - a plentiful amount of both in the area where I lived. As we recovered from the war, rationing was still part of our lives, and war films at the pictures were in abundance.

My interest about the First World War was first aroused in the 1980s while watching with my two daughters an episode of the BBC children's programme called "Blue Peter" In one particular episode they showed a place somewhere in France, or was it Belgium called Ieper or Ypres or to my scouse accent some other strange foreign sounding word.

In 1986 while coming back from a family camping holiday in Germany and en route to Calais we were diverted off the motorway and ended up at about 9 pm in some Belgian town driving underneath this large archway. It was here that we noticed the car had a flat tyre and after having emptied the family with good humour (I think not) out of the car with the numerous items in the boot, I began to change the wheel with the odd profanity thrown in for good luck. It was then I noticed a large selection of poppy crosses and countless names on the walls either side of the archway. It was then the Blue Peter programme came back to me and I realised that this was the place with the funny sounding name and I decided then that I wanted to know more about this place. And as they say the rest is history,.....or is it?

I never realised that that programme would have such an effect on my life over the future years, nor the effect it was to have on my finances. Nor did I realise how it would lead us to finding out about relatives of my wife who she had never heard of, let alone been aware of and who were two great uncles who had died in the war to end all wars.

In the early 1990s I went back there with my wife on a couple of occasions making friends with a tall elderly retired Belgian Gendarme called Alphonse de Splenter who knew everyone and everyone knew him and who went everywhere on a large rickety and rusty old bike with his trousers tucked into his socks. In the second world war he had been in the resistance and had been kept a prisoner for a while in Brussels. In Ypres in the Grote Markt, and in the main square and facing the Menin Gate and at the corner of the street on the right that leads up to the Menin Gate, his best friend had been shot by the Germans.

I went again about 1994 with 4 colleagues from work and we explored the area known as the salient but we only scratched the surface of the place and of what had happened there. In the following years and after reading many books and going back to Ypres a few more times, I said to my wife on more than one occasion that we must visit the place called the Somme, just once just to say we had been there.

From about 1998 until now some 13 or so years later I have been back some 40 odd times, sometimes with my wife sometimes with friends and colleagues from the Port of Liverpool police, the Merseyside police, the Mersey Tunnel police and the British Transport police. I have said on more than one occasion “this is the last time we come here” but the place is like a magnet which keeps pulling me back.

On one of those occasions, with my wife on a glorious sunny day we pulled up near High Wood, it was quite warm and there was a gap in the old wire surrounding the wood. While she stayed in the car, this bold intrepid explorer and adventurer climbed into the wood. After having wandered a few metres into the undergrowth and within a very short time, I experienced an extreme strange feeling of unease, there was no sound at all I just felt I should not be there and quickly I retraced my steps and got out. Not believing in ghosts, goblins or the little people I nevertheless got out of the wood. I then wandered across to London cemetery across the road from the wood and armed with the cemetery



book went in search of.....well anything of interest. I eventually stopped purely by chance at the grave Lance Corporal 200191 Alexander Williams of the 1/5th Battalion the Kings (Liverpool) Regiment who died on the 8th August 1916 and was the son of the late Alexander Williams and Elizabeth Williams of 276 Westminster Road Kirkdale Liverpool 4. He was 25 years of age. As a child and until I got married in 1967, I had

lived at 311 Westminster Road Kirkdale Liverpool 4. Our houses were on opposite sides of the road about 200 yards from each other. After coming home from holiday there were several programmes on ITV on Sunday afternoons concerning battles of the First World War. In the episode of the battle of the Somme it was stated that there are over 8,000 bodies still lying within High Wood. The following year 19 colleagues and I went for a long weekend on the Somme. I had never told anyone about my experiences in High Wood the previous year for fear of being laughed at. Several of my colleagues entered the wood and within minutes half of them left explaining that they had experienced similar things that I had the previous year.

My wife after commencing to research her family tree found that she had lost 2 great uncles in the First World War, 2444 Private William Marsden of the Kings (Liverpool) Regiment died of his wounds on the 21st August 1916 aged 27 years and is buried in St Sever cemetery Rouen. Her other great uncle was 14311 Private George Bickerstaff, the 13th battalion the Kings (Liverpool) Regiment who was killed on the 3rd May 1917 at Monchy le Preux. He was 25 years old and his body was never found.

Monchy le Preux is not far from Arras and is a sleepy little French village way off the main road that runs from Arras to Cambrai. The village memorial to the civilians killed there was paid for by the residents at the time of the villages of the Isle of Wight, one of which was Wroxall a place where my eldest daughter and her family now live.

One of my friends and a former colleague whose surname is called Clifford had originally come from Londonderry/Derry in Northern Ireland. We became friends because my father had also come from there and we had many conversations about that city and the surrounding area of County Donegal, an area were members of my family still live.

Several years ago while driving around the Somme area and for reasons unknown to me to this day I decided to drive to a cemetery called Croisilles Railway Cemetery. I had no reason to go there, I did not know of anyone of interest to me who was buried there, in fact I didn't even know where it was, and when we found the village we had about a half hour walk to get to it.

Croisilles is a village about 13 kilometres south-east of Arras. Croisilles Railway Cemetery lies off a track, approximately 2 kilometres long, to the south-east of the village on the road to Ecoust-St-Mein (D9). Wheelchair access to this cemetery is with some difficulty.

The 7th Division attacked Croisilles in March 1917 and took it on 2 April. It was lost on 21 March 1918 and recaptured by the 56th (London) Division on the following 28 August, after heavy fighting.

The Railway Cemetery was begun by the 21st Manchester's at the beginning of April 1917 and used by units of various divisions until January 1918. The cemetery was also used by the Germans in March 1918 and one further Commonwealth burial was made in September 1918.



The cemetery now contains 181 Commonwealth burials of the First World War. 26 of the burials are unidentified but there is a special memorial to one casualty known to be buried among them. There are also 26 German burials in the cemetery. Again armed with the book listing the burials I wandered about the cemetery which is a long walk from where the car was left and stopped at the grave of Private 4207 James Clifford of B



Company, 1st Battalion the Royal Munster Fusiliers who died 20th November 1917, the son of Elizabeth Clifford of 19 Sugarhouse Lane Londonderry. I took photographs on the off chance it was a relative of my colleague and when I returned home I asked him if he was. His reply was quite weird in a way, he was a relative and they had not known where he was buried in France. There are 243

Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries on the Somme and within them are 219 people with the surname of Clifford. Why did I go there? I do not know, why did I stop at the grave of Alexander Williams? I do not know. Why did my daughter and her family go to live in a place where the people had paid for a memorial at a small place we had never heard of, but where my wife's great uncle lost his young life? Again I do not know. I know a lady who was a history lecturer at Edge Hill College in Ormskirk. This lady is something of an expert on history and local history in particular having written a number of books on various matters. I told her these tales, her explanation was "I am convinced at times that the past world does at times intrude into the present" I don't know if she is correct, call it coincidence, call it a chance happening, I leave you the reader to judge.

Bill Borland