

# MEDITERRANEAN

SIGGY AND HEATHER | TRIP AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN | MONDAY, 24 JUNE 2013

## Memories of the Somme

It remained bitterly cold all day today as we continued our tour of Australian WWI memorial sites in the Somme region. The reality of the vast number of Australians that died in this conflict really hit home at Ypres. That was the last place we visited today, but let's start at the beginning.

Albert is a tiny little village not far from Villers-Bretonneux. It has an amazing tunnel complex that has been converted into the Somme Museum. These tunnels, dating from the 13th century, were built under a huge church. They were transformed into air raid shelters in 1938. Today 250m of the tunnels have been transformed to feel like the trenches and underworld caverns that WWI soldiers occupied.

There was a expansive display of weapons, uniforms and every day items. Personal letters and notebooks were also on display. One particularly interesting case showed "trench art" that was made by the soldiers.

The most effective part of the whole presentation was the last 100m that has been left cold, damp and dark.



First Australian Division Memorial

With the added sound of warfare blaring out, you get some little feeling of what it must have been like on the battlefield in the mud.

We then went on to Pozieres to see another Australian memorial. It was the site of a two week battle for the village and the ridge on which it stands. Apparently it was primarily an Australian battle and ended with the Allies in possession of the ridge and being able to menace the Germans from the rear. A quote from an Australian war historian says it all - "Pozieres ridge is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth".

We next visited a British cemetery where we found a large number of Australians interned. Many smaller cemeteries exist but their access routes were not meant for motor homes and our time was limited.

We did spend time with two of the Australians we met yesterday at Le Hamel - Henny and Michael Matheson. We chatted with them for one and a half hours about all manner of things.

Eventually we hurried on to Ypres, in Belgium. The GPS, however, was playing hardball, and would not accept the spelling. Eventually we realized that it had an alternative



LA BOISSELLE BOMB CRATER - 100M WIDE, 30M DEEP

## ALBERT MUSEUM



spelling “leper”. With that solved we were up and away.

The reason for the rush was that Ypres (leper) has a monument to the war dead called the Menin Gate. On it are inscribed the names of 55,000 soldiers of Commonwealth nations who have no burial place. Every night at 8 pm, since the end of the war in 1918, the last post has been played. The only time that it has not happened was during the German occupation of WWII.

Heather had read about this years ago and actually kept a copy of an article about the Menin Gate in her “want to do list”.

We arrived at our preferred caravan park in the middle of town only to be told it were full. This was a first for our trip! Reluctantly we headed out of town and eventually found a place to camp for the night in an adjoining town. A quick dinner and we hurried back to find a parking spot close enough to walk to the Menin Gate.

Wow. What a surprise.

Firstly, the “Gate”, a type of long archway through which the main street flows, was really huge.

Secondly, we were only just in time to get our place amongst the large crowd. - I estimated close to 2000 people. Remember this happens every night, so if our crowd was

representative, what numbers must be present in a year!

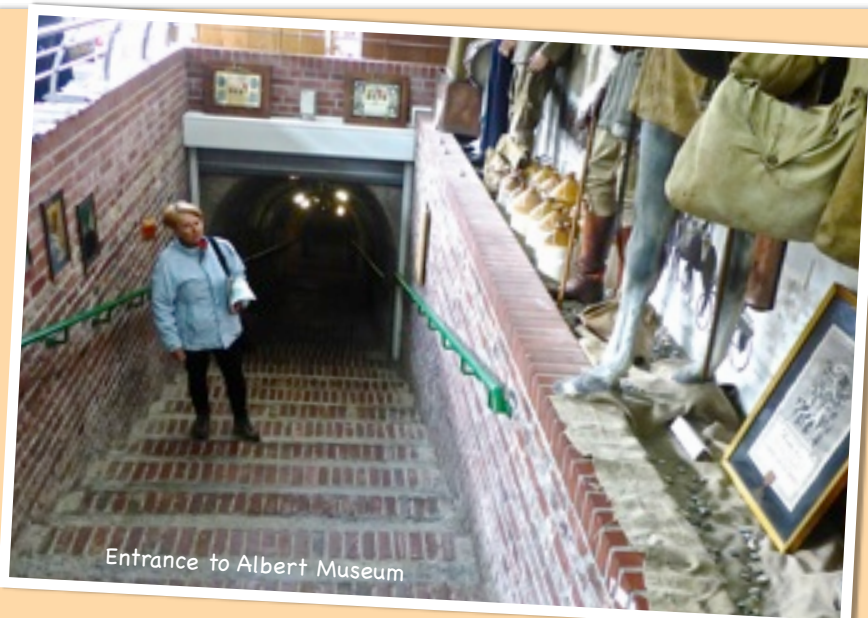
The third thing that surprised us was the mass of names appearing all around us. We happened to be standing in front of a wall of Australian names. Later on, we found many more panels “devoted” to our countrymen to the side and around the back. It was very humbling.

The last post was played beautifully by four uniformed men. An Australian voice (one of the visitors I would say) read out the appropriate words that are always said at a last post ceremony. Various people, including school kids then laid wreaths. It was very moving. We both needed some tissues. We saw one fellow wearing a Kokoda shirt.

After the ceremony was over we studied the names to see if we could see any “family” names. We saw about five “Walkers” and one “Lamb.” This will now provide Heather with a bit of raw material to check on her family tree. She has not looked into this aspect before.

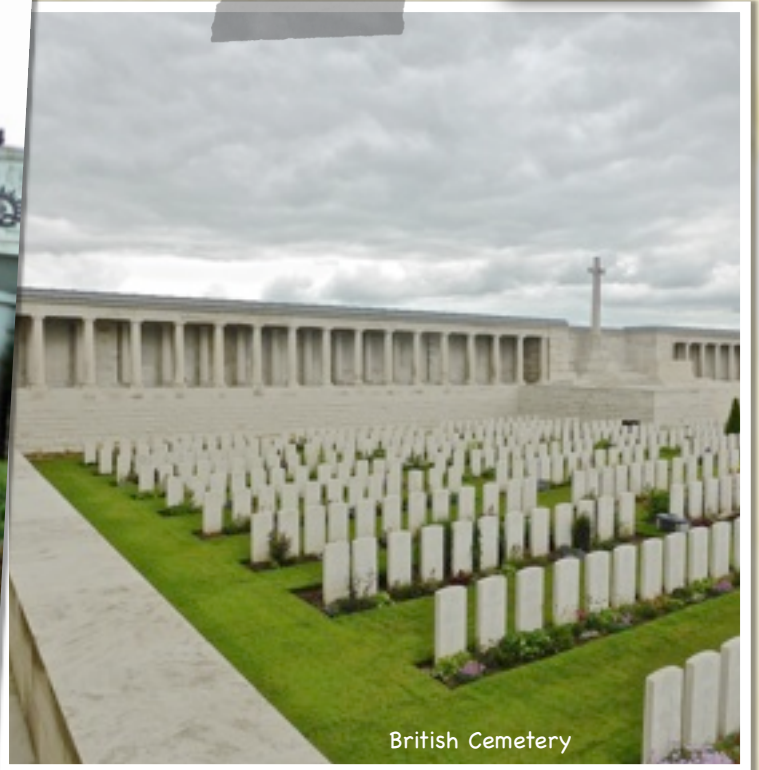
We then ambled into the centre of town and were very impressed with what we saw. There was an amazing church and some very interesting Flemish architecture.

More to come tomorrow when we visit the famous Brugge (or Bruges).

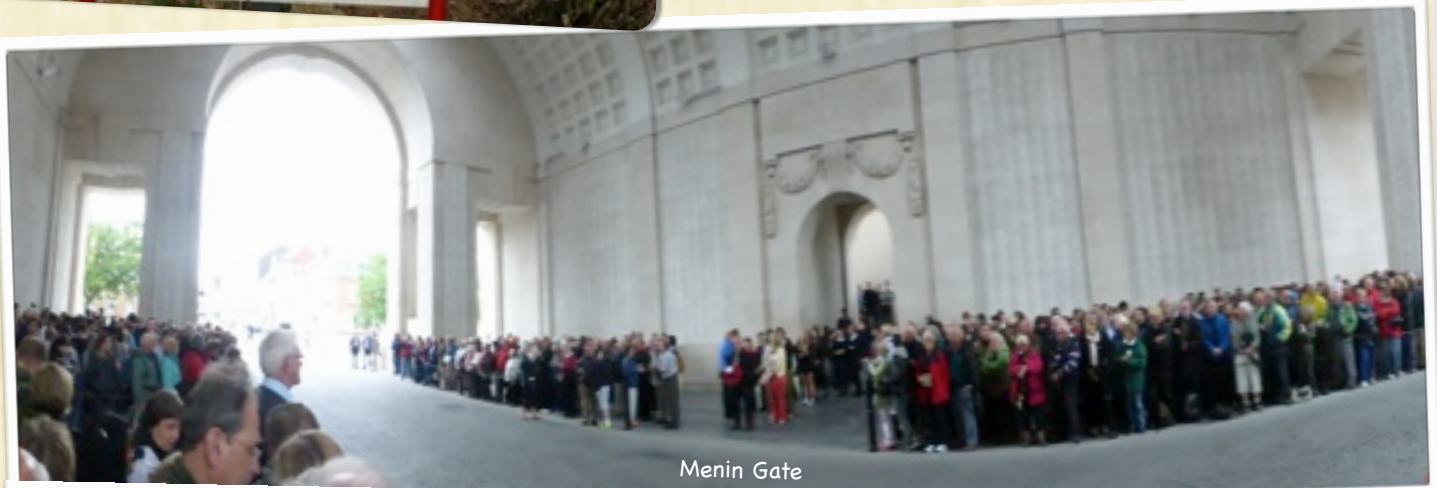


Entrance to Albert Museum

# PHOTOS



British Cemetery



Menin Gate



Ypres or Ieper



British Memorial Cemetery

