One day in Ypres
A guided tour for historians and genealogists

a more sacred place for the British race does not exist in all the world: Winston Churchill, 1919
**Start Point**

This tour is planned to be undertaken on foot.

The best place to begin this tour is in the central town square. Much of the square is a marked car park (P Grote Markt), with pay-and-display tickets. There is also plenty of paid parking on the streets around the square and in a large area off Vandenpeereboomplein, between the rear of the Cloth Hall and St Martins’ Cathedral (P Lakenhalle or Leet). If you plan to follow our full suggested route you will need to pay for at least four and up to six hours parking. At time of writing this is about 3 Euro.

If arriving by train, Grote Markt is a 10 minute walk. On exiting the station, cross the busy ring road and take Gustave de Stuersstraat.

Before we move off, stand and look around the square. Dominated by the beautiful Cloth Hall on its north western side, the Grote Markt was on the direct march route from the camps and reserve areas west of the town to the front line. By late 1914, it was a scene of devastation and death: no men tarried here. The square was painstakingly rebuilt from the rubble after the war and now closely resembles the pre-1914 scene. Proceed along Meensestraat 400m to the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing. You are now following a route travelled by hundreds of thousands of British soldiers, out of Ypres and towards the front.

**Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing ***

Inaugurated in July 1927, the vast memorial bears the names of more than 54000 men of the British Army who lost their lives in the Ypres Salient up to August 1917, who have no known grave. Some of these men lie in the many cemeteries nearby, as unknown soldiers: most simply disappeared. Their names are arranged by regiment and rank, on all the walls of the memorial: facing inwards, up the stairwells and on the rear faces.

Remember to sign the visitor's book, which you will find behind a small bronze door set in the pillars on the town side, on either side of road.

On the north side ramparts, there is a bronze plaque telling of the Australian deeds in the area. Finally, take the south side steps up onto the ramparts. From here it a pleasant 15 minute stroll to our next stop, following the ramparts round with the steep drop to the moat on your left hand side. The moat is an ancient feature; the walls are part of defences built in the style of the military architect Vauban, dating from the 17th Century. To a large extent they withstood German shellfire. Below the ramparts, deep casemates provided shelter from shells coming from east. Arrive at the Lille Gate (Rijselpoort).
**Lille Gate**

One of the mediaeval gateways into the walled town. Under enemy fire and badly damaged but strong enough to be used as HQ during the Great War. There are some original Imperial War Graves Commission direction signs on plaques in the road tunnel. Cross busy *Rijselstraat*, following the yellow sign for “Rose Coombs Walk”. Rose was author of the renowned battlefield guide book *Before Endeavours Fade* and a great friend of Ypres. After a few metres, turn into the entrance gate at Ramparts (Lille Gate) Military Cemetery.

**Ramparts (Lille Gate) Military Cemetery**

Although there are many British military cemeteries in the Ypres area, there are only two within the town itself and only this one within the old walls. This cemetery is particularly tranquil and laid out very much as it was left in 1918. Make your way back onto *Rijselstraat*, turn left and follow the street to the *Grote Markt* once again. Cross the square and enter the Cloth Hall and the “In Flanders Fields” museum.

**Cloth Hall and *In Flanders Fields* Museum ***

The Cloth Hall is a magnificent example of middle ages Flemish architecture, and is symbolic of the wealth generated here by the weaving of cloth from flax. An obvious target – the Germans knowing that the tower would be used as an observation post - by 1918, barely a stone was left standing. Many men used the ruins for dubious shelter from shellfire. Some died here: for example 20 men of a detachment of the Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry were crushed by falling masonry when a shell hit the hall on 12 August 1915. In recent years, some of the rebuilt Cloth Hall has been turned over to become the “In Flanders Fields Museum”. This is well worth an extended visit. A tour of IFF takes you through the painful story of the Ypres Salient, from the viewpoint of soldier and civilian. There is a good gift shop and tourist centre here too. When you’re finished, exit and turn right. Turn right again into *Vandenpeereboomstraat*. Pass the town war memorial on your left. Within 50m, the street opens out to reveal St Martin’s Cathedral.

**St Martin’s Cathedral**

Like the Cloth Hall, St Martin’s was utterly destroyed during the war. The cathedral was also rebuilt, but not as an exact replica, for it had a spire added where before there was none. Free entry. There are several interesting memorials inside, including a plaque to remember all British and Commonwealth war dead. On exiting the cathedral, turn right. You can if you wish make a short detour here: by following the pathway round the cathedral there are some fragments of the original building to be seen and the splendid Celtic cross memorial to the Royal Munster Fusiliers. On the opposite side of the road, at the corner of *Vandenpeereboomstraat* and *Elverdingsestraat* stands our next stop, St George’s Memorial Church.

**St George’s Memorial Church ***

Built by 1929 in a very British style. Free entry but donations welcome. The church has a plain interior, every surface covered with memorials, to regiments, units and individuals. They are still being placed today. There is a particularly fine memorial to Sir John French, original Commander in Chief of the BEF. On exit, turn left on *Elverdingsestraat*.

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**Town prison and CWGC office**

As you walk along Elverdingsestraat, you pass on your right side the old prison, often used as a billet for battalions passing to or from the salient, and at No. 82 the regional office of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Turn right when you reach Marschalk Haiglaan, named of course after the British Commander-in-Chief. Turn right again on Marschalk Plumerlaan: this road is named after the popular commander of Second Army that held the salient for so long. Reach Reservoir Military Cemetery on your right.

**Reservoir Military Cemetery**

The first part of this cemetery was made during the war, starting in October 1915. Two other cemeteries that had originally been near the prison and one near the old infantry barracks were cleared into it after the war. The men of the DCLI mentioned earlier are buried here in Row AA of Plot V. The cemetery now holds the graves of more than 2600 men; one of them is Brigadier General Maxwell VC, who won the award at Korn Spruit in South Africa in 1900. He was killed in 1917. On exiting, turn right along Plumerlaan. Continue as it becomes Basculestraat and bends to the right. Turn left onto Zonnebeekseweg and take the entrance on the right into the Town Cemetery.

**Military Extension of Ypres Town Cemetery**

This is a particularly interesting cemetery as it contains graves from the earliest days of fighting at Ypres in 1914. There are plots of military graves among the civilians. A notable plot marks the burial place of Prince Maurice of Battenberg, a member of the British royal household who died while leading a company of the King’s Royal Rifle Corps. His grave was visited by many royals, peers and dignitaries over the years. Also in the cemetery are the graves of the staffs of 1st and 2nd Divisions, killed by a shell which hit headquarters at Hooge chateau during the climax of the First Battle of Ypres on 31 October 1914. On exit, turn left and left again and you will re-enter the town centre.

**Ypres tips**

The modern name of the town is Ieper, pronounced Ee-per. Ypres is the French form used at the time of the war. The British troops often called it Wipers or Ee-pree.

English is widely spoken in Flanders, especially in Ypres. Do not speak French in the belief that it is the language of Belgium: Dutch is spoken here.

There are public toilets behind the Cloth Hall.

If you are here in the evening, do not miss the daily 8pm Last Post at the Menin Gate. On some days great crowds turn out for this, especially at weekends, so arrive early to get a good view and stand under the roadway arch.

There is plenty of accommodation in town, but do book well in advance for 11 November, when Armistice ceremonies make access to the Menin Gate and St George’s Memorial Church difficult in the morning.

**One Day in Ypres** was written by Chris Baker, who has asserted his moral right as author of this work. Produced and © Milverton Associates Limited 2009

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