

Tyne Cot Cemetery, the Menin Gate, Passchendaele and the "Coming World Remember Me" workshop - these are just a few of the places we had the honour to visit earlier this year. In March we were lucky enough to be picked for one of the pilot trips for The First World War Centenary Battlefields Tours. The whole experience was an emotional one, with the aim of showing young people the conditions, sights and experiences of war. We embraced every second of it and are proud to say we can pass on the stories we heard and the learning we acquired.

Our visit to Belgium and France was very different to how we expected it to be. At the Menin Gate, a huge archway in Ypres, were the names of all the lost soldiers from Belgium engraved into its walls. We attended the Last Post ceremony which takes place every evening. The military were in attendance and people were laying down poppy wreaths to remember those who had sacrificed their lives. Whilst we were there it made us reflect, with sadness, on the events which had taken place during the war. It gave us an even greater respect for the members of the armed forces who are serving and defending us today.

The battlefields we visited were not how we imagined them. The trenches were narrow and we realised just how awful living conditions must have been. We were able to picture, with more clarity, what it might have been like to be a soldier on the Western Front. It was weird to think that so many individuals had fought and died in the exact places where we were standing. Our research into the life and death of an individual soldier, (John William Stracey), from our locality, Carshalton, was fascinating. We discovered photographs of him before and during the war, were able to see where he had served and been killed and were able to visit his memorials at Tyne Cot in Ypres and in Carshalton. We even traced his closest surviving relative, his 82 year old nephew, who came to visit us at school. This was so powerful and gave us more of a 3D image of the war. It allowed us to realise that it is so important to understand the individual stories of those who took part in the war to help comprehend the horror and magnitude of the suffering.

When we visited Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries, we were shocked to see rows upon rows of white, gleaming headstones. It really brought home to us the scale of the deaths and the numbers of families who lost someone. When walking around the various cemeteries you could not help but notice the ages of some of the dead soldiers. It had a huge impact on us to think that 100 years ago many members of our families would have gone to fight and it could have been us who would have had to fight if we were a few years older. At the last cemetery we visited, a serving member of the armed forces, Faz, told us the story of his struggles in war and how he lost his best friend in Afghanistan, which made it the most touching of all, as we realised that soldiers are still making sacrifices for us today.

Finally, we visited a pottery workshop in Ypres, (the Coming World Remember Me workshop), where we made a clay model of a man. Each model is going to form part of a memorial to the 600,000 soldiers who gave their lives whilst fighting in Belgium during the First World War. It was very poignant to make something which is tangible and will form part of a special memorial, as our small contribution to remembrance.

Today we feel like ambassadors, who have a duty to share our experiences and passion for all that we have learnt. Through all of this, the question that has been asked of us is, "Why do you think this is important?" Our answer has always been, "Because millions of men died for us to be free today and it is up to our generation to remember those who have fallen for us." We have shed many tears on this experience and we are honoured to be able to pass on the legacy of men such as John William Stracey. These kinds of trips are not just your average school visit to a museum, where you're just reading from a piece of card in a glass cabinet or learning from the comfort of the school classroom. We were able to walk through and stand in real trenches and in the middle of actual battlefields and this has been an experience that will stay with us forever.

This is our history and we shall always remember what all those soldiers did for us and why.

By Sam and Regan