Remembering the First World War: using a battlefield tour to help pupils take a more critical approach to what they encounter

A unique challenge and opportunity

Having visited the Western Front battlefield sites on several occasions, as tourist and as teacher, I have witnessed at first hand school parties undertaking their tours of Ypres and the Somme. What often strikes me is how many of these seemed to race from one historic site to another, thirty minutes spent here and thirty minutes spent there, tightly led groups of pupils clutching their worksheets, tour guides determined to cram in as much as possible, a quick visit to the Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate and a Belgium chocolate shop before dashing back to Calais for the ferry home. I can only imagine that by the end of their visit to Flanders and Northern France, the pupils had at best gained a little more knowledge of the Western Front along with an emotional connection to some of the sites visited, and at worst, were left feeling a little bewildered by what they had seen and suffering from what one teacher described to me as ‘cemetery overload’. Even some of the more thoughtfully planned visits struggle to move from individual local stories about the impact of the First World War to shed light on the wider more significant questions relating to it. That is not to say that there is not any good practice, and I was greatly encouraged by what some of the teachers who accompanied us on our recent pilot tours had to say about their own experiences. The challenge for the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme, however, is to make these more commonplace and to build on the pedagogy that exists already to ensure that we do not end up, in the words of Nemko, ‘creating a generation of historical tourists’!

The sheer scale of our project, to take a minimum of one teacher and two pupils from every state funded secondary school in England to the battlefield sites over the next 5 years, provides us with a genuine opportunity over time to develop, trial and embed the effective use of historic sites by history teachers, in order to create a fitting legacy for future generations of pupils visiting the Western Front. The 1:2 teacher/pupil ratio, which is a unique feature of this programme, also provides us with the chance to work intensively with schools on the battlefield sites. As we have already discovered on our pilot tours, even very experienced history teachers benefit from being able to work closely for four days with teachers from other schools. Being freed from the constraints of having to manage their own tours and supervise large groups of pupils, they have the space to try out different
approaches to using the battlefield sites, can exchange ideas, and have the time to learn more about what each site has to offer.

**Why visit the Western Front?**

For any school planning to go the Western Front the foremost question is why go at all? How will a visit to some of the battlefield sites enhance pupils' knowledge and understanding of the First World War? History departments organise these types of visits for a variety of reasons. Some, such as Philpott and Guiney, believe that the most effective way of helping their pupils make a personal connection with the war, and gain an insight into its complexities, is to retrace the footsteps of a local soldier, battalion or regiment on the Western Front. Others, as indicated by our recent national survey on the teaching of the First World War, pursue an historical enquiry around a wider aspect of the war, perhaps focusing on the Battle of the Somme and using the battlefield sites to explore the extent to which it was a success or failure, or focusing on what it was actually like to fight on the Western Front and using archaeological evidence and onsite reconstructions to add another dimension to classroom learning. As well as the desire to make local connections, carry out historical enquiries and generally increase pupils' knowledge and understanding of the war, a motive common to many school visits is around remembrance and, as the First World War Centenary gets underway, this is likely to start to feature even more strongly.

The issue of remembrance has already attracted some controversy in the months leading up to the centenary, and it brings its own challenges when working with pupils on battlefield sites. Who and what is being remembered? How has the war been remembered over time? How and why has this changed? Does this affect what we see and understand? How should we remember the war one hundred years later? The issue here, and one often neglected on school visits, is that pupils encounter a bewildering variety of interpretations and representations – memorials, cemeteries, museum displays, trench reconstructions, archaeological sites, presentations by battlefield guides - and they need well structured learning activities to help them make sense of these, to develop their understanding of the war, and to start, as Wrenn suggested in 1998, to disentangle their own emotional responses from the need to view these with some critical objectivity.

Both England’s existing (2008) and new (2014) national curricula for history for the lower secondary school (‘Key Stage Three’) make helpful references to how historic sites could be used with pupils. The 2008 national curricula, in its definition of interpretations, stated: ‘Interpretations reflect the circumstances in which they are made, the available evidence,
and the intentions of those who make them’. In addition, it required schools to provide pupils with opportunities to: ‘appreciate and evaluate, through visits where possible, the role of museums, galleries, archives and historic sites in preserving, presenting and influencing people’s attitudes towards the past’. The 2014 national curricula is briefer but nevertheless sets out in its aims that all pupils: ‘understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed’.

As history teachers, I think we should take the chance to help pupils reflect critically on what they encounter during their battlefield tour and to begin to deconstruct what they see. Using historical interpretation to explore the multiple layers of remembrance – global, national, local and personal – as the students move from site to site, is one way of injecting rigour into any tour and providing it with real meaning.

What can we learn from existing good practice?

A number of previous articles in *Teaching History* have focused on the use of First World War battlefield sites, and in particular on developing pupils' understanding of historical interpretations. A number of history teachers have published analyses of their use of First World War battlefield sites and, in particular, on developing pupils' understanding of historical interpretations. Wrenn, for example, recalls taking his pupils to the Newfoundland Memorial Park on the Somme and investigating the nature and purpose of the site. As they explored the site, the pupils were asked how their personal reactions to the Memorial Park changed as their knowledge of it and its evolution developed. Through this, they were able to reflect upon the cultural and political values that led to the site being created, altered and preserved.

Newfoundland Memorial Park commemorates the Newfoundland regiment which was largely wiped out on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. In my experience, in order to understand it properly, pupils need to appreciate that its purpose is not only to remember the dead but to educate visitors about the events of the 1st July 1916. Furthermore, they need to be made aware of the site’s powerful resonance to Canadians today, as a Newfoundland symbol of sacrifice and as a source of national identity. Nearly a centenary on, Canadian students still volunteer to travel thousands of miles from Newfoundland to Northern France to act as guides at the site – something you do not see at nearby Thiepval Memorial, for example. To complicate matters, the site has changed over time, and this is most clearly
evident when looking at the carefully preserved battlefield now grassed over and intersected by neat gravel paths (see Figures 2 and 3).

![Image of the Newfoundland Caribou Memorial](image1)

![Image of the preserved battlefield at Newfoundland Memorial Park](image2)

Figure 2: The Newfoundland Caribou Memorial

Figure 3: The preserved battlefield at Newfoundland Memorial Park

Building on Wrenn’s article, Nemko provides a very useful framework for planning for and assessing pupils’ progression in interpreting First World War battlefield sites. This is shown in Figure 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil ideas</th>
<th>Characteristics of this notion</th>
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<tr>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>Enjoys visiting the sites but fails to identify the interpretation of the historian held within every selection made of the past – even a physical representation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorialisation</td>
<td>Understands that the site is a product of an historian’s selections but does not question the purpose of the call to patriotism or heritage offered by the curator.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>The ability to recognise that a reconstruction is not just a product of an historian’s thoughts. It is also a reflection of the times when it was produced. The capacity to reflect upon why a society has chosen to preserve this particular site and not others. To reflect upon the processes that made this possible by evaluating its components.</td>
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Nemko cites research by Sexias and Clark into pupils’ understanding of historical monuments, which suggested that the attitudes of many towards memorials tends to be reverential, and that ‘this attitude seems to cloud their ability to think about the monuments historically’. ix

The challenge for teachers, according to Nemko, is therefore to ‘promote a critical analysis of the historical exhibits being observed’, and to help pupils ‘tease out the meanings and purpose of their construction while reflecting upon their continuing significance’. x

**Battling on to explore remembrance**

Preparation is the key to any successful tour of the battlefield sites. The most difficult choice to be made is over which sites to visit, although some sites present themselves more obviously than others. You could ask yourself why you have selected a particular site, and, if one of your main themes for the tour is remembrance, how a specific site will further your pupils’ understanding of how the First World War has been, and is, remembered. Selecting a variety of sites can be helpful, as this offers your pupils the chance to compare and contrast different interpretations. Our programme research also shows that both teachers and their pupils need time at each site to orientate themselves, explore, ask questions, record and reflect on what they see and feel.

Our recent experience working with schools on our pilot tours suggests that it is unrealistic to expect pupils to be particularly skilled at interpreting historical sites if they have not had the opportunity to do so beforehand. In seeking to secure progression from their pupils when visiting historical sites, Wilson and Hollis made it clear that, in their experience, what is critical to the success of these visits is the contextual knowledge and understanding of the topic they are able to bring with them from the classroom. xi It enables pupils to explore the sites in more depth and with a more sophisticated eye. Wilson and Hollis choose to locate their work on historic sites within a particular feature of England’s history curricular tradition – namely ‘interpretations’ and ‘significance’. xii Starting with a visit to Mountfitchet Castle in Year 7, and ending up with a residential visit to the Western Front as part of their GCSE course, their pupils gradually develop their skills of onsite interpretation.

The following are just five sites from many on the Western Front which, according to my experience of visiting the battlefields, lend themselves particularly well to the theme of remembrance.
The Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle

The Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle (see Figures 4 & 5) was built specifically to commemorate the 4742 soldiers of the British Indian Army who were killed in the First World War and have no known grave. Its unique design makes it stand out from many of the other memorials on the Western Front, and a visit to it may help pupils begin to appreciate the contribution of former Empire and Commonwealth countries to the Allied effort during the First World War. Designed by Sir Herbert Baker and unveiled in 1927, it is a circular structure with carvings of the Star of India and the Imperial Crown, and the names of the dead are recorded on panels. Here it is possible with pupils to uncover clues, which reflect the time when it was built. For example, there are no references to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, where many of the soldiers came from. This is because these countries were subsumed under the name of India, which at the time was part of the British Empire. The names of the individual soldiers on the panels tell another story, however, and pupils could be asked whether the memorial should be modified to reflect the post imperial world in which we live today. Another clue lies in the fact that all the British names on the memorial are those of officers – another vestige of the former Empire.

Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery

Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery is the first new Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery to be built for more than fifty years. It contains the individual graves of 250 British and Australian soldiers who died in the Battle of Fromelles (see Figure 6), which were only discovered in a nearby mass grave in 2009, after painstaking research by archaeologists. Questions to tackle with pupils around remembrance could include why the
design of the cemetery is identical to other CWGC cemeteries on the Western Front (see Figure 7), and why the bodies of the soldiers were not buried back home, close to their families. A close look at the messages on some of the individual headstones contrast quite markedly with those found elsewhere; they are much longer in many cases and much more personal, an indication perhaps of changing attitudes towards the dead.

![Figure 6](image6.jpg) Figure 6: A new gravestone in Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery: “Beloved son of Alice and Colin Arnott Senior of Laukieton. You were lost and now are found.”

![Figure 7](image7.jpg) Figure 7: A gravestone in an older CWGC cemetery: “A good soldier of Jesus Christ.”

The Menin Gate, Ypres

The Last Post Ceremony at the Menin Gate (see Figure 8 for a picture of the gate) is featured on most school tours of the Western Front, yet how many take the trouble to examine how attitudes towards remembrance and commemoration have changed over time? In the immediate post war years there was a mixture of bitterness, as seen in many war poems, and grief. This is why the Menin Gate became a place of pilgrimage for many relatives of the dead and missing, and why the words of General Plumer, ‘He is not missing. He is here’, spoken at the opening in 1927, evoked such powerful emotions. Will Longstaff’s 1927 painting (see Figure 9), which shows the ghosts of soldiers passing by the Menin Gate at night, reflects the interest in 1920s spiritualism: the idea that the war dead could be contacted through mediums. The issue of remembrance could be taken a step
further by encouraging pupils to reflect upon why the Menin Gate is still such a focal point for First World War remembrance, and why ever greater numbers of visitors are drawn to the Last Post Ceremony.

Tyne Cot Cemetery and the German Cemetery at Langemark

These two cemeteries on the Ypres Salient (see Figures 10 and 11) are frequently visited by British school parties. They offer vivid contrasts to each other and, in my experience, tend to evoke strong emotions from pupils, especially the scale and visual impact of both sites. Our work with the pilot schools suggests that it is important, however, to move pupils beyond the ‘reverential’ and urge them to view these sites historically. You could ask them to explore the features of both cemeteries and make comparisons. Tyne Cot reflects the egalitarian principles laid down by Fabian Ware and has in some respects the appearance of an English country garden, whereas Langemarck is dark and sombre, reflecting perhaps what Wrenn terms the ‘psychology of defeat’. At Langemarck you could ask pupils to consider why even today there are more visitors from English schools than from Germany.
Finally, some of the following activities could be used to draw together pupils' knowledge and understanding of what they see and experience during a tour of the Western Front, and to consolidate the theme of remembrance. Pupils could engage in a debate about what we choose to memorialise and how this could be done. Alternatively, they could design their own memorial, perhaps to soldiers from their own communities, considering how the purpose and location of their memorial would impact upon the images, text, symbols, colour and shape that they use. Another option could be to produce a tourist guide for a particular site, explaining its multiple purposes, exactly how and why it has changed over time, and why it continues to be significant. In completing these activities, pupils can consider the processes of memorialisation and remembrance and how these processes are a reflection of many factors, including changing attitudes over time. Through this considered approach, a tour of the Western Front can enable pupils to become much more than 'historical tourists', even if you do end with a visit to a Belgian chocolate shop.xvi

References

viii Wrenn, op. cit.
ix Nemko, op. cit.

x Nemko, op. cit.
xii QCA, op. cit. and DfE, op. cit.
xiv Seixas and Clark, op. cit.
xv Wrenn, op. cit.
xvi Nemko, op. cit.