



# Great War GREENLANES

PHOTOS: JEROME ANDRE AND PAT SUMMERS

John Pearson joins a French greenlaning adventure with a difference, driving WW1 tracks and visiting battlefields, cemeteries and memorials

## BATTLEFIELDS BY 4X4

### TOUR ORGANISERS

● Battlefieldsby4x4.com currently run four different tours: Arras 1917, D-Day 1944, The Tank 1917 and the one we joined, The Somme 1916. They can also arrange combination tours and customise tours to visit a relative's grave, where possible. Our tour cost £299 per vehicle with two occupants, which includes camping – hotel also available – and Albert museum entry. See [battlefieldsby4x4.com](http://battlefieldsby4x4.com) for 2015 dates. Pictured right are John and partner Pat, with Carl Liversage, Nick Gage and Nigel Stevens.



It's early in the morning on July 1, 1916, near Beaumont-Hamel in northern France. A platoon of British soldiers is resting in a sunken lane, out of sight of the German front line, just a few hundred yards away in a dense wood across the nearby valley.

The Battle of the Somme is about to start and 750,000 soldiers will be fighting along the 21-mile front. First there will be a series of explosions caused by mines being detonated under the German lines.

Royal Engineers have tunneled quietly into 10 sites, placing high explosives literally underneath the Germans, the plan being to detonate the mines at 7.28am and then the infantry will advance during the ensuing mayhem at 7.30am. Sadly, in a costly error of judgment, the closest

mine to this platoon, the 18 tonnes of explosives at nearby Hawthorn Ridge, is detonated at 7.20am. The Germans have not only regrouped by 7.30, but are aware an attack is imminent.

So when these brave British soldiers crawl through a tunnel from the sunken lane and emerge into daylight, advancing towards the wood, the enemy's machine guns are sweeping the area and all of them perish. They are among the 60,000 British casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, which proved to be one of the bloodiest of the whole 1914-1918 war.

Almost 100 years later I've parked my Defender on that same sunken lane and I'm standing in exactly the same place as those soldiers waited on that fateful morning. It's a poignant moment, but fascinating, as Nigel Stevens, our guide from

[battlefieldsby4x4.com](http://battlefieldsby4x4.com) talks us through what happened, shows us where the soldiers were, where they entered the tunnel and where the German guns were in the wood.

We also walk to Beaumont-Hamel British Cemetery, where they are all buried.

I'm with a group of 4x4 enthusiasts, including three other Land Rovers, on a three-day drive through the Somme battlefields. There are many guided tours around the WW1 locations, but [battlefieldsby4x4.com](http://battlefieldsby4x4.com) is the only one to take you along greenlanes into the historic battle zones.

Nigel, along with colleagues Carl Liversage and Nick Gage, take us deep into the French countryside to show us where the battles took place and provide informed commentary that really brings it to life and into perspective.

## PLACES WE VISITED: 1

● **BEAUMONT-HAMEL, NEWFOUNDLAND MEMORIAL PARK:** Preserved trenches, shell and mine craters. Bronze caribou memorial to the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, which sustained exceptionally heavy casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Visitor centre (with photos and films from the battles) and free, highly informative guided tours by students from Canada, sponsored by that country's government.

Free admission, open 9am-5pm every day except December and January. Rue de l'église, 80300 Beaumont-Hamel.



Driving a track that was a railway line during WW1

'The big craters behind the trench were inflicted by British artillery's shells falling short'

## Day 1

Beaurains to Albert, 20.5 miles

**Highlight:** Railway Hollow

Nigel and Carl's full-time jobs are with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This organisation is responsible for graves and memorials in 153 countries, at more than 23,000 locations and commemorates the nearly 1.7 million people from the Commonwealth forces who lost their lives in WW1 and WW2. The CWGC's base is in Beaurains, south of Arras in northern France, where LRO was given a tour around the workshops where stonemasons, carpenters and blacksmiths use traditional methods and materials in their upkeep of the cemeteries.

Then we drive south on the D919 to start the battlefields tour, heading past the Bucquoy Road cemetery in Ficheux, which contains the remains of Joseph Standing Buffalo, grandson of the famous Sitting Bull of the battle of Little Big Horn fame. Standing Buffalo, who fought in the Canadian Infantry, was used for his tracking skills and transmitting messages in his native language, which German intelligence didn't have a hope in hell of deciphering.

Our first greenlane is in the village of Ayette. It's a short farm track that takes us to a unique cemetery – for Indians and Chinese, who were from the Labour Corps. Says Nigel: 'Although their duties were non-combat – they kept troops supplied with food and ammunition – sadly

many of these men died during a Spanish Influenza pandemic during 1919.'

Two of the trees in the cemetery are Chinese Ginkgo Bilobas, which were the only ones in France when the cemetery was built.

On the move again, we turn right in Puisieux, then left on to a track that's the route of what was a railway line during WW1, towards three cemeteries: Luke Copse, Queens cemetery and Railway Hollow. The last is so named because the ground sweeps down from the old railway line towards where there was a light-gauge railway track that brought in supplies and munitions and took out casualties.

We stand by the lane, in what was the British front-line trench, and Nigel creates a vivid picture of what happened here. He pinpoints where there were six German machine guns across a field, which when the British troops advanced were firing at two feet off the ground, literally cutting the men down as they ran.

But equally horrific are the big shell craters behind the front-line trench, which were inflicted by British artillery's shells falling short of their intended target. 'They were nicknamed the Dropshorts,' says Nigel.

From here we turn right out of the track and visit the Serre Road cemetery. Situated right on the border between Pas de Calais and the Somme regions, this is the largest in the area, with 8000 casualties. Places like this are poignant reminders of the horrors of the war, where so many young men died in such violent circumstances. At least today they are resting

in wonderfully tranquil places, impeccably maintained by the CWGC, with colourful English garden flowers growing among the rows of white gravestones.



## Day 2

Albert-Albert circular route, 40 miles

**Highlight:** Lochnagar Crater

We're with a good group of people, sharing a barbie and cold French beers at the Albert campsite.

Albert was in British hands for the majority of the war and its Basilica was an iconic symbol. The golden statue of the Madonna with her child was hit by enemy artillery but remained at a precarious angle for some time.

The Germans captured the town during their Spring Offensive in early 1918. A certain Sidney Pearson sustained injury in Albert during February 1918, the third time he was wounded in various battles since enlisting on the day after Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914. He survived and his grandson is now the proud keeper of his medals. British artillery then targeted the Basilica, which was

a strategic observation point for the enemy, finally knocking it down and toppling the Madonna. Superstition had it that the war would end only when the statue finally fell.

We head east out of Albert and drive a series of tracks into what was known as Mash Valley by the troops. Says Nigel: 'A German observation balloon was over the parallel valley, and so that was known as Sausage Valley – Sausage and Mash!'

Our route passes the Norfolk and Becourt cemeteries, the ridge in front of which was the front line on July 1. Then we loop around the village of La Boisselle, following signs towards La Grand Mine. Here is the site of the Lochnagar Crater, the monster hole in the ground that was created by 27 tonnes of explosives at 7.28am on July 1, 1916. The name comes from a British trench called Lochnagar Street, from which tunnelers went down about 90ft into the chalk, and then went 300 yards under the German lines to place the explosives. It's a popular place to visit, but very few of

the estimated 200,000 visitors a year can do what we did, continuing past the crater on a greenlane, then turning right along another that runs above Becourt.

We continue west towards Fricourt along a track that was the main route to the front line. I'm told that in the spring the fields around here are bright red with poppies, that evocative symbol of remembrance of those who gave their lives.

Fricourt has a reminder of the sad losses sustained by all who fought in the Great War; here is the site of a German cemetery. Among the 17,027 originally buried here was the infamous fighter pilot Manfred von Richtofen, or the Red Baron, who was eventually shot down and killed near Amiens in April 1918. His body was later exhumed and taken to Berlin.

Our next greenlane takes us close to Mametz Wood, which saw two weeks of non-stop fighting. There's a Welsh dragon memorial overlooking the wood, which the 38th Welsh Division eventually occupied after heavy losses.



We camped both nights in the town of Albert



English garden flowers brighten the cemeteries

## PLACES WE VISITED: 2

● **DELVILLE WOOD, LONGUEVAL:** Museum dedicated to South African forces with exhibits from WW1 and other conflicts. Also memorial to the many South African soldiers who died in the Delville Wood and other battles. Opposite is Delville Wood cemetery. Free entry to museum, open Tuesday to Sunday, 10am to 6pm. Closed public holidays. Location is signposted from Longueval, Somme, France. [delvillewood.com](http://delvillewood.com).



Delville South African memorial and museum

We drive a series of greenlanes, including Caterpillar Valley, before turning on to a track used by troops heading to fight at Delville Wood, near the village of Longueval. This was obliterated during a protracted and bloody battle, with only one hornbeam tree remaining standing at its conclusion.

South African infantry suffered heavy losses here and the regrown wood now has a museum and memorial in their memory, and where that old tree can still be seen. Opposite is the Delville Wood cemetery, which has 5527 graves, 3593 of them unidentified and bearing the typical phrase 'A soldier of the Great War, Known unto God.'

From Delville Wood we take a track near a very significant location, where the first tank was used in battle – at Flers-Courcelette on September 15, 1914. Then we take a narrow rutted greenlane between a field of maize and the eerie High Wood (Bois des Fourcaux), where the remains of more than 8000 British

and German soldiers were never found. Passing the London cemetery, which contains bodies from the battle here, we turn right at the south-west corner of the wood. The area here is rich with maize and sugar beet, but back in 1914 it would all have been a horrible sea of mud.

We loop around Bazentin and Contalmaison before heading north-west towards Martinpuich. Nigel tells us this village was occupied by the Germans and was heavily fortified. On the outskirts are some concrete bunkers, and we visit one that shows the scars of battle, being marked with bullet holes and with evidence of a direct hit by a shell on one corner. It's fascinating to visit such places, visualising what would have been happening at the time.

After visiting the Thiepval memorial (see below), we head back to Albert, taking a guided tour of the Somme Museum, located in tunnels underneath the Basilica. These tunnels have been here since the Middle Ages, and were used to protect people and troops in WW1 and WW2.

### BATTLEFIELDS BY 4X4 NEED TO KNOW

- **LANGUAGE:** The organisers are British, but include fluent French speakers.
- **COST OF FUEL:** €1.25 - €1.29/litre (£1 - £1.03) at supermarket filling stations (at least €0.10 more on the autoroutes).
- **CURRENCY:** Euro (€1 = 80p approx).
- **CAMPING:** We camped both nights at Camping le Vélodrome in Albert.
- **MAPS:** Fully guided adventure, so maps not required. If you want to follow the route, IGN's Serie Blue is the French equivalent of UK's Ordnance Survey, 1:25,000, number 2408.
- **DURATION:** 3 days (½-day Friday, full day Saturday, ½-day Sunday). Nick Gage meets participants in Dover early on the Friday morning and convoys them to the starting point.
- **PAPERWORK:** Passport, of course. And make sure your insurance covers you for overseas travel. Overseas breakdown cover is wise. Take your V5c.
- **HOW WE GOT THERE:** We crossed the Channel with P&O Ferries, which has up to 46 sailings per day to and from Dover/Calais, with prices starting from £35 for two with a car, if you shop for offers and are willing to travel at off-peak times. We paid £12 extra each for Club Lounge entry (a haven of tranquility even on the busiest crossings). Priority boarding (and departure) costs £12 per vehicle.

If you find one, don't pick it up



French cheese and baguettes for lunch



### PLACES WE VISITED: 3

● **THIEPVAL MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM OF THE GREAT WAR:** Impressive 45-metre high monument designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens commemorating more than 72,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Battle of the Somme with no known grave. Also a visitor centre, with film show, and the best shop for replica Great War memorabilia. Free admission, open every day, 10am-6pm, March-October, 9am-5pm November-Feb. Rue de l'Ancre, 80300 Thiepval.

Imposing Thiepval memorial to 72,000 soldiers



The tracks on the tour are suitable for all 4x4s



### PLACES WE VISITED: 4&5

● **ALBERT, MUSÉE SOMME 1916:** Museum set in tunnels underneath the basilica in the centre of Albert. Wide selection of military armaments and memorabilia, with alcoves showing scenes of what life was like in the trenches during WW1.

Admission €6. Open 9am-6pm every day (9am to 5pm December), closed lunchtimes Feb, Nov and early Dec, closed mid-December to end of Jan. Rue Anicet Godin, 80300 Albert; musee-somme-1916.eu

● **LOCHNAGAR CRATER, OVILLERS-LA-BOISELLE:** Spectacular 300ft (91 metres) wide and 70ft (21 metres) deep crater, the biggest-ever crater caused by a man-made explosion. British military engineers tunnelled silently under the German lines and set off a massive explosion. Debris rose more than 4000ft (1220 metres) into the air.

Free admission. Route de la Grande Mine, Ovillers-la-Boisselle. lochnagarcrater.org

Many cemeteries are reached only by greenlanes



### Day 3

Albert to Arras, 33 miles

**Highlight:** The sunken lane

Today's journey starts by heading towards La Boisselle, there the front line was on July 1, 1916, and where more than 5000 soldiers were killed on the first day of the battle. We travel along Thiepval Ridge and pass the Lonsdale cemetery en route to Authuille in the Ancre Valley, which runs parallel with the Somme Valley. This was a horribly boggy area, but an important strategic area for the British.

Then we take more greenlanes, passing the Knightsbridge and Mesnil Ridge cemeteries which, like a lot of others, are accessible only on these tracks – either by 4x4 or on foot.

From here we take a guided tour around the preserved trenches and bomb craters at the Newfoundland Memorial Park near Beaumont-Hamel. Staffed by Canadian students, this is one of the best places to see how the trenches would have been like, although you have to imagine the sea of mud rather than the lush green grass that we can see all around us today.

The story of the Newfoundlanders is a terrible one. Of the 780 men from the small Dominion of Newfoundland (then not yet part of Canada) who went over the top on July 1, only 64 survived. A bronze statue of a caribou looks over between the trenches and the German front line, where these men died.

We go through Beaumont-Hamel, which was totally destroyed during the war, passing the now tree-filled crater of the mine explosion at Hawthorn Ridge and then turn into the sunken lane where this story began.

And that's the end of our visit to the Somme battlefields. We continue along the sunken lane and eventually emerge on to the D919 again, finishing the trip in Arras, at the Fabourg-D'Amiens cemetery, which includes the Arras memorial and Flying Services memorial.

This haven of tranquility to the west of this attractive town commemorates more than 35,000 Commonwealth soldiers who lost their lives in the area between 1916 and 1918 and who have no known grave; and it also marks the 2650 burials of men who were killed during the Arras offensive. The Flying Services memorial commemorates more than 1000 RFC,

RAF and Royal Navy servicemen who have no known grave.

It's been a fascinating adventure; poignant at times when seeing the rows of headstones of those mainly young men who died, or when thinking about the ones who survived – like my grandfather – but who lived with the memories of the horrors of trench warfare for the rest of their lives. They rarely spoke about the war, but thoughts of the mud, the constant shelling, the snipers, the rats, the lice and the fear they must have experienced when ordered to climb out of their trenches and advance towards the enemy's machine guns – plus the lost comrades – couldn't have been far from their minds.

The battlefieldsby4x4.com journey takes you where no others can, right into the heart of the battle zones, with Nigel Stevens' informed and passionate commentary bringing it all to life. It's an overseas adventure, but it's only a hour-and-a-half drive from Calais, so is accessible to many. Most of the greenlanes we've driven over the past three days have been what photographer Jérôme André called 'mellow', being driveable by any Land Rover, but it's one of the best trips I've ever been on. **LRO**