

# SOMME DAYS

John Pearson joins a tour of tracks through France's Somme region where 100 years ago bloody conflict raged

PHOTOS: BOB ATKINS





Somme area also has German cemeteries



Memorial to Charles Dickens' grandson



Heavy rain made some tracks muddy



Red Baron – shot from the ground?



Imposing Australian National Memorial



Villers-Brettoneux: a bloody battleground

**W**e're on a greenlane between cereal fields in rolling French countryside, near the Somme river. The sun's shining and it's a tranquil place. But 100 years ago things were very different. This whole area was a scene of bottomless mud, muddy frontline trenches, barbed wire, constant artillery bombardment, machine-gun fire, injury, death and destruction: the absolute horrors of World War 1. Thankfully, the conflict – which had raged over four terrible years from 28 July 1914 – was coming to an end in 1918. The guns that had pounded this now peaceful scene, turning towns and villages into rubble during a devastating war that killed around 40 million combatants and civilians around the world, would finally fall silent on November 11. Armistice Day has been commemorated on that date ever since to mark the peace treaty signed between the Allies and Germany to end hostilities on the Western Front. I'm with a group of Land Rover owners on a French greenlaning trip with a difference. We're on a battlefieldsby4x4.com adventure, driving the tracks where those soldiers marched, seeing the places where battles took place and getting an informed commentary over the CB radio.

Although it's 100 years since the war ended, there are many reminders out here – some trenches still remain, there are bomb and shell craters pock-marking the landscape, and farmers still plough up shells and grenades in their fields. More poignantly, there are numerous Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries in this part of France, where the dead lie under rows of white Portland headstones. I came here with the battlefieldsby4x4 team on their Somme adventure a few years ago, and found it fascinating. This time we're on their Somme Southern Sector tour, which deals with later wartime activity in the region, culminating in the end of the conflict 100 years ago.

### Day 1 Peronne to Albert

I should be meeting the group at Péronne's Museum of the Great War, housed in the town's castle. But busy Bank Holiday traffic and Channel crossings put paid to that plan and I join them on the outskirts of Rancourt, at a cemetery for German soldiers. We then set off to the south-west of Rancourt on a track through cereal fields, a big shell crater still obvious in an adjacent field, pointed out by

our commentator Keith Bowen. I first met Keith when, along with son Tim Price-Bowen (who's Keith's driver and trip leader on this adventure), he was organising the Help for Heroes 4x4 European Rally from 2010-2016. This hugely successful series of events raised more than £1m for Help for Heroes. To say he's passionate and knowledgeable about wartime activity on the Western Front is an understatement. The other battlefieldsby4x4 members on the adventure are two of the founders, Carl Liversage and Nick Gage. Carl's day job is with the CWGC, and I've learned a lot from him about the organisation's work on previous bb4x4 trips. They have nearly 1.7 million graves of members of the Commonwealth who lost their lives in WW1 and WW2, spread around 153 countries. The cemeteries are maintained to a high standard by skilled blacksmiths, carpenters and stonemasons based at their HQ in France, with locally based gardeners keeping the grass mown and plants tidy. Most have some traditional British flowers such as roses, along with a mix of local plants. Carl tells me that there has been a major policy change in recent times regarding keeping the headstones legible: 'We're conserving the original headstones, re-engraving them on site rather than replacing them,' he says.

There's been some heavy rain over the past few days and some of the tracks are muddy. Just east of Ginchy village we turn off the D20 to a memorial for Major Cedric Charles Dickens, grandson of the famous novelist Charles Dickens. He was killed during an attack on German trenches in nearby Leuze Wood. After the war, his mother bought the plot of land and created a memorial garden with an oak cross. As we drive along a track through Carnoy Valley towards Mametz, Keith creates a vivid picture of what was going on in these rolling hillsides during the Battle of the Somme. Vibrant red poppies wave poignantly in the breeze as he tells us about the bravery of the men of the Devonshire regiment, led by Captain Duncan Martin. Keith points out where their trenches were by Mansell wood on a nearby hill, and where the German front line was. Captain Martin was concerned about the position of a German machine gun post equipped with high velocity Maxim guns that had a 2km range. But he was ordered to lead his men across no-mans-land to attack German lines. They died in a ferocious hail of machine gun bullets and now lie in the nearby Devonshire cemetery, along with their Captain. We pass the cemetery while climbing a track past the wood, then turn right along a ridge which is where the Allied trenches were dug. It's

fascinating to have this insight into where the fighting took place, and quite surprising how close the frontlines often were. This track brings us out near the Point 110 old and new military cemeteries, near where there was a major German Luftwaffe air base. Point 110 refers to the map contour. Then we drop down on a track past the Citadel cemetery, south of Fricourt village, with its neat stone walls, before heading off to our campsite at Albert, which was an important railhead close to the frontline in WW1. Later we sit outside a restaurant in the town's main square, overlooked by the Basilica, which was destroyed during WW1 and later rebuilt. The Golden Virgin on top of its tower was hit by a shell early in the war and leaned at an acute angle until being finally toppled in April 1918.

### Day 2 Albert to Albert, circular route

We go south out of Albert towards Dernancourt, where we get onto a track that gives us views down over a major battlefield across the valley. In March 1918 the German forces launched a major Spring Offensive, pushing British forces back over ground they'd taken two years earlier.

### Driving in France: need to know

- LANGUAGE: The organisers are British, but include fluent French speakers.
- COST OF FUEL: €1.35/litre (£1.19) – but more expensive on autoroutes.
- CURRENCY: Euro (€1 = 80p approx).
- CAMPING: We camped both nights at Camping le Vélodrome in Albert (camping-albert.com).
- MAPS: Fully guided adventure, so maps not required. If you want to follow the route or plan your own, IGN's Serie Blue is the French equivalent of UK's Ordnance Survey, 1:25,000. There's even a Bataille de la Somme – IGN map (stanfords.co.uk).
- DURATION: 3 days (half-day Saturday, full day Sunday, half-day Monday). Nick Gage meets participants in Dover and conveys them to the starting point.
- PAPERWORK: Passport and driving licence, of course. It's essential to carry your V5C. And make sure your insurance covers you for overseas travel. Overseas breakdown cover is wise.
- ANYTHING ELSE? In France you need to carry a breathalyser, spare bulbs, a warning triangle and hi-viz jackets for all of the vehicle occupants. Headlights need beam adjusters, and don't forget a GB sticker if you haven't got a Euro symbol and GB on your numberplates.

'There are numerous CWGC cemeteries where the dead lie under white Portland headstones'



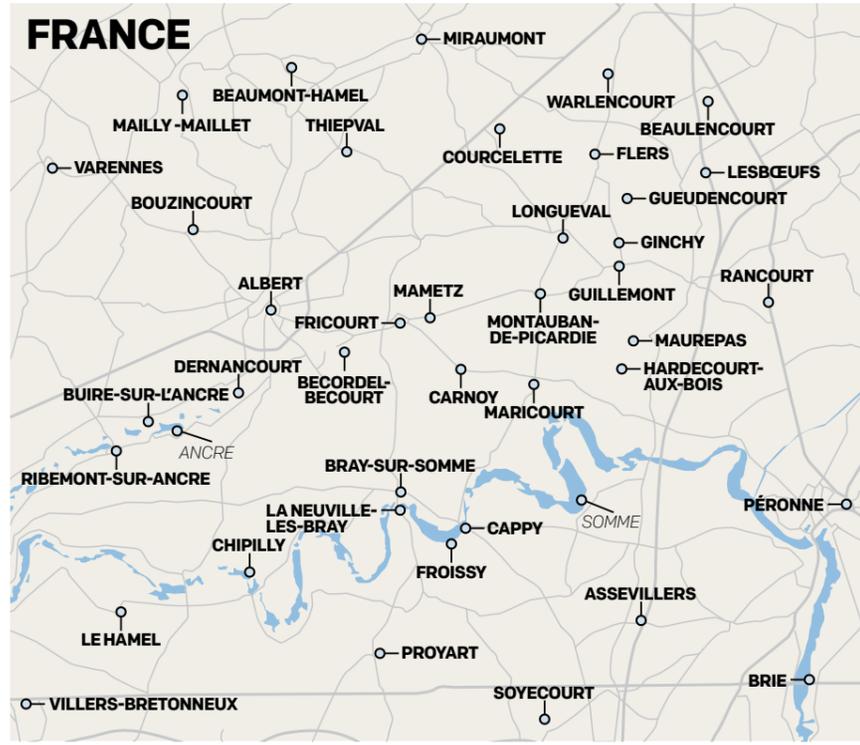
Museum at the narrow-gauge railway station



'Sausage Valley' as it was in WW1



Same location as above 100 years on



American forces were on their way to join the war and the German aim was to secure victory before they arrived. To halt this advance the Allies brought in the Australian Corps, who sustained heavy losses in the intense fighting.

It's a gravel track, muddy in places with some deep ruts. We continue south-west towards Buire-sur-L'Ancre and Ribemont-sur-L'Ancre, following the direction the German forces were sweeping through, bolstered by troops brought back from the Eastern Front.

There are fields of cereals and rapeseed. Where there's open soil, shell craters can still be seen.

Further south we pass a brickworks north of Vaux-sur-Somme, near where Manfred von Richtofen, the infamous Red Baron German fighter pilot, was shot down. Responsible for around 80 air combat victories, he was eventually killed in April 1918. A Canadian pilot is officially credited with the Red Baron's downfall, although there's a belief that he was actually taken out by an Australian soldier firing from the ground.

Despite the loss of their charismatic air hero, the Germans pushed on, with the goal of reaching Amiens and then Paris. Says Keith Bowen: 'If they had got through the end result would have been very different.'

They captured the town of Villers-Bretonneux in late April 1918, and their next objective

was Hill 104, held by the Allies. Two Australian brigades were brought in to bolster the British troops and this proved successful. The Germans were pushed back and the threat to Amiens was ended. WW1 was taking a different direction.

On the site of Hill 104 now is a large CWGC cemetery, where those killed in that crucial battle now lie, and there's the Australian National Memorial – designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens – with a 75ft tower that provides panoramic views over the surrounding Somme countryside. There are also walls bearing the names of the 11,000 Australian soldiers who died in WW1 but whose bodies were never found – a sobering reminder of just how horrendous conditions were.

Under the tower is something very special, the impressive new Sir John Monash Centre, devoted to Australia's role in the war. Opened in April 2018, a century on from that crucial battle on Hill 104, it provides a multimedia experience of how the war was for those brave men who came to fight from the other side of the world. The 360-degree cinema is hugely impressive, with sound, light and smoke assaulting your senses and emotions. The film gives a very real portrayal of what the action would have been like.

Sir John Monash was reputed to be one of the most astute Allied Generals in WW1, helping to bring the war to an end, and was Australia's most celebrated and decorated commander.

After driving through Bois L'Abbé, the limit of the German advance in spring 1918, and passing the site of the first tank-on-tank battle on 24 April 1918, we go south towards Hangard Wood. The beech trees here would have witnessed many horrors and is the last resting place for many. It also has personal significance for me because my grandfather Sidney Pearson was fighting here for the Northants Regiment. He survived the war, but many of his comrades didn't and some lie in the adjacent cemetery.

The bb4x4 team have arranged something special: Francois Bergez, a bagpipe player from the local Samarobriva Pipe Band leads us in towards the cemetery. Then he plays

while I place a cross on the grave of one of the Northants soldiers. The haunting notes of the pipes make it a very moving experience. The band regularly plays at events that commemorate the centenary of the Great War.

A track takes us to Lancers Wood, another battle location. There's a pile of rusting artillery shells by the trackside, dug up by the local farmer an awaiting collection by bomb clearance teams.

East of Le Hamel we take a track across the top of the Somme Valley. Flanked by cereal fields, it's rough in parts with some tricky cambers to negotiate. At Chipilly, north of the river, there's a really good track; narrow, twisty, with some technical sections to negotiate.

**Battlefields4x4.com**

Nick Gage (left) and Carl Liversage (centre right) are two of the tour company founders. Carl also works for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, so his knowledge of the WW1 cemeteries we visited is unrivalled. Nick, also a founder of the Four Wheel Drive Club, handles all battlefieldsby4x4 admin and well as guiding tours. Our commentator, Keith Bowen (centre left), and son Tim Price-Bowen (right) were organisers of the Help for Heroes 4x4 European Rally between 2010 and 2015, raising more than £1m for the charity.



A peaceful scene now – but not so 100 years ago



Another track takes us to Froissy, where we're boarding the historic P'tit train de la Haut Somme. It's a narrow-gauge railway line (60cm) that was built in 1916 by the British army to supply the front line, and was subsequently used to help with reconstruction of local villages. Since 1971 it's been run by volunteers for tourism.

## Day 3

### Albert to Thiepval

We set out on the morning of our third day to the east of Albert, joining a track through what was known as Sausage valley – so named because of sausage-shaped observation balloons tethered along it. The track through Sausage valley was a major supply route for the frontline.

Heading east out of Becourt we join a sunken lane which rises between cereal fields toward

**'The wood has shell craters and trenches. Trees have grown but the scars on the land remain'**

Fricourt. The track climbs east towards a wood, and Keith Bowen points out where the British trenches were to our right and the German ones to the left, making it all seem very real.

We stop at a wood near the crest of the hill, where there's the solitary grave of Soldat Thomassin, an early French casualty in 1914.

The arable land around here was ploughed and trenches filled in so life could continue after the war, but the wood was left with its shell craters and trenches. The trees have grown but the scars on the land remain.

At Carnoy cemetery there are many graves of Royal Artillery soldiers, indicating what was positioned here in an area that became known as Death Valley because of the slaughter.

We drive more tracks past Hardcourt-aux-Bois, and stop for coffee at Longueville before passing Flers, where tanks were first used in battle.

Then we loop past Gueudencourt and Warlencourt towards Courcellette, on a track that's really muddy. Silt has washed off the fields, and the sticky, gloopy surface is a reminder of the conditions those soldiers marched, lived, fought and died in 100 years ago.

The final destination on our adventure is at the imposing 45-metre high Thiepval memorial, which commemorates the more than 72,000 British and South African soldiers who died in the Somme sector and have no known grave. The Lutyens-designed memorial is a sobering

place to be, standing looking at all those names. They, along with the many others who gave their lives in this conflict, and the ones who did survive like my grandfather, helped bring about the peace that eventually came in November 1918.

This is my third Battlefieldsby4x4 trip, and I've learned a lot on each of them. The commentary paints a picture of what was happening during those dark days, helping us understand what went on 100 years ago. It's a lot more than just a greenlaning adventure. **LRO**

### Other WW1 locations to visit in the area

- **BEAUMONT-HAMEL, NEWFOUNDLAND MEMORIAL PARK:** Trenches, shell and mine craters, visitor centre, guided tours.
- **LOCHNAGAR CRATER, OVILLERS-LA-BOISELLE:** 300ft (91 metres) wide and 70ft deep crater where British military engineers tunneled under the German lines and set off a massive explosion.
- **ALBERT, MUSÉE SOMME 1916:** Museum set in tunnels underneath the basilica in the centre of Albert. Wide selection of military armaments and memorabilia.
- **DELVILLE WOOD, LONGUEVAL:** Museum dedicated to South African forces with exhibits from WW1 and other conflicts.