

THIEPVAL

Thiepval was one of the fortress villages held by the Germans on the Somme front in 1916. The village was destroyed by the bombardment, except for one part of the chateau (the ruins of which contained machine gun nests).



The houses in the village, although flattened, had deep cellars where the Germans held out, and their machine gun posts were not destroyed by the bombardment. X Corps was the attacking formation here on the 1st of July, 1916. In front of, and to the south of the village, the 32nd Division attacked (see Leipzig Redoubt). The 36th Division attacked just to the north of the village.

In the early morning of 1 July 1916, thirteen divisions of British forces launched an offensive on a line from north of Gommecourt to Maricourt at the River Somme. South of the river the attack was made by the French Army.

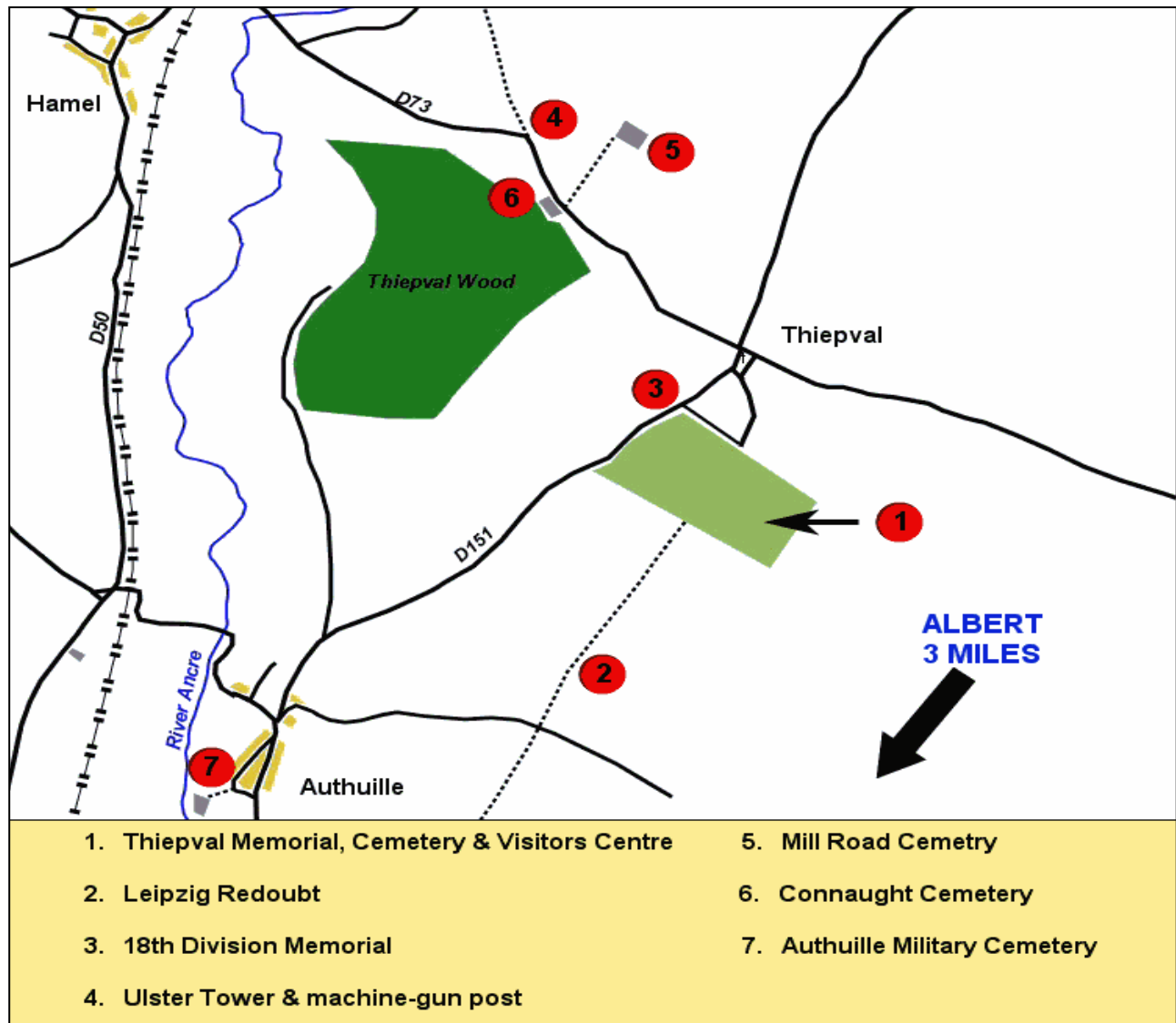
The attack was preceded by a preliminary bombardment lasting seven days from 24 June. Although the German Front Line and rear positions were damaged by the Allied artillery during this time, and the Germans' nerves were severely tested by the end of the seven days, the German barbed wire defences were not as badly damaged as had been intended.

In the southern sector of the British attack, from Mametz village to Montauban village, the German defence did crumble, and the British reached their objective there by the end of 1 July. However, in most other parts of the line the German defence held out and the British met with unexpected resistance from well-placed machine guns.

In the far north of the sector from Gommecourt to Thiepval, numerous large bunkers dug deep underneath the chalk downs had provided enough protection in key strongpoint locations, such as Gommecourt, Serre, Beaumont-Hamel and Thiepval,

for those German troops to survive the preliminary bombardment with few casualties.

The losses to the British on the first day of the attack were unprecedented for the British Army, with approximately 58,000 casualties for that day alone including 19,000 of them being killed.



In the following weeks, the British continued to attack the German line in smaller-scale attacks with limited objectives. The German Army put up a stubborn resistance for every inch of ground.

The battles of the Somme 1916 carried on over a period of several months from the first day of July to the middle of November. Every village, hamlet, farmhouse, wood and copse were fought over until the winter weather closed in. Only a few miles of ground were gained by the British by the end of the Battles of the Somme and huge numbers of men had been wounded or killed on both sides.

Thiepval Recaptured

The village of Thiepval, which had consisted of a few houses, a chateau and some outlying farms when the Germans first arrived here at the end of September 1914,

was finally captured by the British at the end of September 1916. Exactly two years later. Originally one of the objectives of the first day of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July, Thiepval was successfully defended by the Germans for three months.



The Memorial is a massive arched structure, with large laurel wreaths carved on top of the pillars and towards the top of the memorial. At the time of the unveiling in 1932 there were 73,357 names were commemorated here; the slight decrease to today's number (72,116) represents the identification of bodies since then resulting in soldiers no longer being 'missing'. Some additional names have however also been added (omissions in the original list of commemorations).

On the panels of the arches are the names of those who have no known grave, and are thus 'the Missing'. However, many of these may be buried in the Somme, but in an unknown grave marked as 'Known unto God'.

The Memorial covers the missing of Britain and South Africa. The Missing of other nations have their own memorials; for example Canadians at Vimy Ridge and the Newfoundlanders at Beaumont Hamel. The panels on the memorial are arranged by Regiment, then within each Regiment by Rank and within that alphabetically.

There are Cemetery Registers. Behind the Memorial is a joint British - French Cemetery, intended to symbolise the losses both suffered.

The idea of a joint memorial of some kind had been suggested as early as 1923, and La Ferte-sous-Jouarre was suggested as a possible site, as was Amiens. A Memorial to British and Empire Missing was in fact constructed at La Ferte-sous-Jouarre. Plans for a joint memorial originally included side chapels where the names of the dead would be inscribed, and the possibility that a subscription of £5 would enable a name to be engraved in bronze on the memorial wall. If this had gone ahead, the

names inscribed would most probably not have represented a fair cross-section of those who fought; and perhaps this idea was doomed from the start.

In the event the Cemetery here at Thiepval was made, after the Memorial itself had been constructed. Within the cemetery are 300 Commonwealth burials and 300 French burials. Many of the Commonwealth graves are those of bodies recovered from the 1916 battlefields on the Somme, but also bodies were reburied here which had been recovered from as far away as Loos and Le Quesnel.

The fact that these bodies were recovered in late 1931 and early 1932, 13 or so years after the end of the war demonstrates how many men still lay then in the fields of the Western Front. Of course the Memorial itself demonstrates how many more still lie there today, or else in one of the many 'Known Unto God' burials in the war cemeteries.

Only 61 of the 300 British and Commonwealth soldiers buried here are identified, and even fewer (47) of the French soldiers. The online CWGC database lists the total number of identified casualties as 106, although only the British and Commonwealth names are actually displayed. At the base of the Cross of Sacrifice are the words "That the world may remember the common sacrifice of two and a half million dead, here have been laid side by side soldiers of France and of the British Empire in eternal comradeship".



The 18th Division Memorial at Thiepval

The 18th Division fought here on the 26th of September 1916, in the Battle of Thiepval Ridge, when most of the village was taken (the 12th Middlesex advanced through the village itself) with further advances made later.

The attackers left their trenches and crept forward into No Mans Land before the British barrage lifted, meaning that they had less distance to go to reach the German front line, and that the German counter-barrage fell on the British front line, while the troops were ahead of it in No Man's Land.

On the front of the 18th Division Memorial is inscribed "To the Glory of God and in imperishable memory of the officers, NCOs and men of the 18th Division who fell in the Great War 1914-1918". On the left side are listed the Division's battle honours 1916-18, whilst on the right are listed the units which made up the Division. On the rear it is stated that the Roll of Honour is held at Colchester.

There is another memorial to the 18th Division not far away at Trones Wood, which is different in appearance, and a third which is identical to this one near Gheluvelt in the Ypres Salient.

Site of Leipzig Redoubt

If you stand in line with the entrance to the Thiepval Memorial site, with the Memorial itself to your right, there is a grass path straight ahead which leads across fields in a south-easterly direction. If you take this path, it crosses the site of German

support trenches, and leads to the site of the **Leipzig Redoubt**. From the path on the ridge there are commanding; looking left one can see the radio mast at Pozieres on its ridge. To the right are the positions from which the 16/Northumberland Fusiliers advanced on the 1st of July, 1916 - preceded by a football kicked ahead. This was not the more famous Captain Nevill and his footballs; that incident was further south near Montauban.

A clump of trees and bushes just as the track starts to drop downhill marks the location of a quarry which lay at the centre of the Leipzig Redoubt. This was at the tip of the Leipzig Salient, just about due east of Authuille, and the Redoubt was a huge strongpoint with numerous machine guns, which completely commanded No Man's Land to its south and west.



The site of the Leipzig Redoubt today

The 32nd Division attacked here on July the 1st 1916. No Man's Land here was narrower here than to the north and the south, and men of the 17/Highland Light Infantry crept forward at 7.23 a.m., even before the British barrage had ended. They advanced to within about 40 yards of the German front line, and when the barrage did lift, at 7.30 a.m. the Highlanders rushed forwards and took the Leipzig Redoubt, catching the Germans in their dugouts in the quarry at the centre of the Redoubt.

They then pressed on to the next objective, but were forced back to the Leipzig Redoubt, where they consolidated with help from troops of the 2/Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. Later they were joined there by men from the 11/Border Regiment and from the 1/Dorsets, but further advance from the Leipzig Redoubt proved impossible. The small advances made here, in taking the Redoubt, were the only success for the 32nd Division that day. The position was strengthened and held against several German counter-attacks.

After the War ended, Thiepval was chosen as the location for the Memorial to the Missing to commemorate those who died in the Somme sector before the 20th of March 1918 and have no known grave. This is the largest and most imposing of the Memorials to the Missing, and visiting here is a moving and sobering experience. Those who died in the Somme after 20th March are commemorated at Pozieres.

The Thiepval Memorial to the Missing

The Thiepval Memorial is the largest of the Memorials to the Missing, and the last on the Western Front to be unveiled (one day after that at Arras). Negotiations to purchase the site were started in the late 1920s, and the memorial was unveiled by

the Prince of Wales (then President of the Imperial War Graves Commission) on Monday the 1st of August, 1932. The Prince's speech, part in French, the rest in English, was carried on radio broadcasts, and he called the memorial "the crowning stone" of the work of the IWGC. He added that "our first thoughts today should be with the relatives of those whose death has purchased our current freedom". Just seven years before the clouds of World War were to descend once more, he hoped that this was the opening chapter in a "Book of Life" from which the horrors of war would be banished, and that it would be a call to a better civilization. At the end of the Ceremony, the Last Post was played.



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