

Battlefields' Tour April 1987

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In his preface to *The Wet Flanders Plain* Henry Williamson describes how, when high up in the tower of Georgeham Church, the thunderous peal of the bells transported him in memory back to the Western Front:

The great sound sweeps other thought away into the air, and the earth fades; the powerful wraith of those four years of the War enters into me, and the torrent becomes the light and clangour of massed guns assaulting heaven. . . . The wraith of the War, glimmering with this inner vision, bears me to the wide and shattered country of the Somme, to every broken wood and trench and sunken lane, among the broad straggling belts of rusty wire smashed and twisted in the chalky loam, while the ruddy clouds of brick-dust hang over the shelled villages by day, and at night the eastern horizon roars and bubbles with light. And everywhere in these desolate places I see the faces and figures of enslaved men, the marching columns pearl-hued with chalky dust on the sweat of their heavy drab clothes; the files of carrying parties laden and staggering with the flickering moonlight of gunfire; the waves of assaulting troops lying silent and pale on the tape lines of the jumping-off places.

We know that Henry Williamson never escaped from the nightmare of that horrendous experience. It haunted his mind during the dark watches of the night and even amid the bright sunshine on the sands of Ventnor or the Burrows, for a sudden sight or sound could return him in an instant to a grim memory of the War. As a young man in South London, starting out on a career as a writer, and throughout his long and eventful life, right up to the time of his sad departure at Twyford Abbey, the wraiths of 'old comrades in Ancient Sunlight' were forever at his side.

References and recollections of the Great War are sprinkled throughout his writing. Not just in the war novels of the *Chronicle*, but in practically every subject covered by his pen, be it nature essay, village tale or family saga. Again and again he goes back into that dark, violent world to the great nerve-shattering experience that rode upon his shoulders like an Old Man From The Sea. For us, the reader steeped in the novels and the writings, we feel personally that we have shared in a small part of this inhuman drama. The graphic descriptive prose works upon our imagination so that the old battlefields of the Ypres Salient and the Somme become very real to us indeed. But, although the place-names of shattered town, storm-blasted wood and trench, along with the characters of the novels are old friends, the actual topography and terrain of Flanders and Artois when gleaned only from the printed page seems hazy and without substance. For many of us this creates a sense of loss and a need to enter that landscape and absorb its unique atmosphere, the urge to go on a pilgrimage of discovery to see for ourselves the countryside over which that terrible conflict was fought.

Thus it was for me, but the dream did not become a reality for many years until I had the good fortune to meet Paul Reed, fellow member of the HWW Society, student of the military history of the Great War, and veteran pilgrim 'footslogger' of the old battlefields. As a result of our meeting we made several trips to the battlefields together where I was delighted to learn how well-informed Paul was not only on the history and geography of the 1914-18 battles but, even more interesting for me, the considerable research Paul had made into the service careers of Henry and his 'Doppelganger', Phillip Maddison. Soon the idea began to formulate of organising a tour of the battlefields for members of the Henry Williamson Society. Our intention on such a trip would be take

in on the journey as many of the locations, both in fact and fiction, referred to in the *Chronicle*.

Several months of planning and research were then undertaken. Because of his special knowledge 'in the field' the brunt of this work unfortunately fell upon Paul. Once we had a complete package to offer members the tour was advertised in the Autumn 1986 mailing. The trip comprised a six-day minibus tour of France and Belgium. We had resolved quite early in the planning to restrict the numbers to twelve, believing that a small party would prove to be easier to manage and accommodate. We had decided on early April 1987 as being the best time for the trip as this allowed us to obtain reasonable hotel and minibus hire tariffs. After the usual last-minute crew changes and adjustments to the programme, the great day of departure was at hand.

Our journey began at Crawley railway station, where six members of the party assembled. From here we drove on down to Dover where the rest of the crew were waiting. A twelve-seater minibus we soon learned does not provide much luxury and comfort for a full complement of passengers and baggage, but the 'Platoon' was soon settled in aboard and spirits ran high at the prospect of the adventure that awaited us on the other side of the Channel. After a calm ferry crossing we set off through the flat, rather uninteresting countryside of the Pas de Calais and on to St Omer where, in *How Dear is Life*, Phillip and the London Highlanders marched out one morning in late October 1914 to take part in their first action at Messines.²

We reached the small town on Poperinghe in the early evening, our destination for the first night being Talbot House in the rue d'Hôpital. It was in this tall grey unimpressive building (once used as a hop store) that the Rev. 'Tubby' Clayton of 'Toc H' fame, provided a haven of sanity and peace for over twenty thousand soldiers of all ranks. A brief respite away from the terror and untold horrors of Third Ypres and the Passchendaele battles. We remembered 'Westy' and Phillip climbing the steep wooden stairs up to the small chapel in the converted hop loft as described by Henry in *Love and the Loveless* (Henry did himself visit Talbot House in 1917 and again after the war).³ For us, therefore, this was a wonderful place to begin our tour. We were welcomed to the historic house by its present warden, Jaques Ryckebosch, who showed us to our 'billets' where we quickly dumped our gear before setting off again for the ancient town of Ypres. The reason for this haste was the desire to be present there at the nightly sounding of the 'Last Post' by members of the Town Fire Brigade beneath the arch of the huge Menin Gate Memorial to the Fallen. Our party assembled there just in time. Few can fail to be moved by this simple poignant Ceremony of Remembrance that takes place each evening. For a few minutes all traffic is stilled and the sweet, clear notes of the bugle echo upwards on the great stones etched with the names of thousands who found no known resting place out there on the Salient. Our thoughts were of those countless young men drawn to this place from all over the globe, and who marched out through the ruins of the original Menin Gate with fear and apprehension, so many never to return.

At the close of the short ceremony we walked around the galleries of the massive monument gazing at the names and the regiments, and then looked out over the wide moat from the restored ramparts, once part of the old town's embattled defences. Later, we returned to the 'Pop' for a meal. Unfortunately 'Skindles' (Hotel de la Bourse du Houblen described by Henry in *The Wet Flanders Plain*)⁴ was not to be found but we sought out the solitary estaminet remaining open in the town. After a festive evening we went back to Talbot House and, being the only guests there (apart from three Australian racing cyclists!), we were able to examine the many treasures and nostalgic memorabilia of the war years that still adorn the walls. During the night some had their slumber disturbed by what claimed itself to be the ghost of 'Tubby' Clayton, but which on

investigation proved to owe its origin and substantial presence to somewhere closer to the Welsh Border!

Day Two was taken up with an exploration of the Salient. We began with a visit to the remarkable Ypres Salient Museum contained within the fabric of the splendid Cloth Hall rebuilt faithfully to the plans of the medieval structure. Members were most interested to discover there amongst the numerous exhibits associated with the Great War, a photograph and references to the Town Major of Ypres on whom Henry Williamson had based the character of A.P.M. Major Brendon. This recalled memories of the Gaultshires at Heathmarket, and Phillip's daring 'loan' of the Town Major's charger in order to reach GHQ at Westcapplle with the wounded Major 'Spectre' West's report on the Passchendaele defences (as described in *Love and the Loveless*.⁵

From the Cloth Hall we drove out of the town towards the old battlegrounds of the Salient. Our first stop was at Essex Farm Cemetery to visit the battered dugouts once used as a First Aid Post, where Lt.-Col. John McCrea tended the wounded and wrote his famous poem 'In Flanders Fields'. There we saw the memorial to Lt.-Col. McCrea and also the grave of the 15-year-old Pte. Valentine Strudwick of the Rifle Brigade. Leaving Essex Farm we travelled north along the Yser Canal and through Boesinghe to Langemark German Cemetery, passing the Calvaire Dolmen Memorial commemorating disastrous French losses from a gas attack near Langemark. Later in the morning we moved on to Passchendaele, parking outside the New British Cemetery on Bellview Spur for a view of the 1917 battlefield. Gazing out across the fertile valley of the Stroombeck looking towards Crest Farm and the infamous Marsh Bottom to the gentle, sloping uplands approaching Passchendaele village, it was difficult to visualise what ghastly different scene would have met our eyes seventy years ago.

We drove down from the ridge into the valley and the vast acres of white headstones in Tyne Cot Cemetery where lie many of those who fell amid the mud and water-filled craters during the desperate struggle to gain the Paschendaele heights. After lunch we went on to Sanctuary Wood Trench Museum with its grim relics. While there we walked a short distance to visit the grave of Capt. Gilbert Talbot, killed in the flame attack on Hooze, and in memory of whom his great friend the Rev. 'Tubby' Clayton named the house of refuge and peace in Poperinghe. The Hooze battlefield and mine craters were our next place of interest, and the day of exploration ended with a walk over the crater-dimpled landscape of the once-fearful Hill 60 (reaching there after a quick stop at the notorious Hell Fire Corner on the Menin Road). Before returning to 'Pop' we passed once more in the Grand Place, Ypres, for a brief look around St Martin's Cathedral and St George's Memorial Church.

On Day Three, after an early breakfast, the minibus was loaded with our baggage and we bade farewell to our host Jaques and Talbot House. Leaving Poperinghe we travelled via Ypres to the Messines Ridge, passing en route the old mill at Vlamertinghe used as a Casualty Clearing Station. This was the mill referred to by Henry in *Love and the Loveless* where Phillip Maddison meets the wounded and shell-shocked Capt. Douglas of the London Highlanders, after the taking of the Gheluvelt Plateau on 20 September 1917.⁶

Arriving at the Ridge our first halt was on the high ground overlooking Wytschaete ('Whitesheet'). This was the spot where in *A Fox Under My Cloak* Phillip comes in search of Willie during the 1914 Christmas Truce.⁷ We then moved on down the ridge to the tranquil, water-filled Spanbroekmolen mine crater, now the beautiful 'Pool of Peace' memorial owned by 'Toc H'. A few yards from here is the Lone Tree Crater and its small cemetery where lie the Royal Irish Riflemen killed in the eager rush across No Man's Land too soon after the great mine exploded. We recalled that it was near this spot that

Capt. 'All Weather Jack' Hobart was killed in *How Dear is Life*.⁸ Back once more on the Messines Ridge, our next stop was at the London Scottish Memorial at Messines which recalled for us memories of the Halloween battle in October 1914, so graphically recounted by Henry in *How Dear is Life*.⁹ In the Town Hall the curator specially opened the small museum for our party so that we might examine the many interesting relics of the London Scottish action in 1914 and the Australian Division's capture of the Ridge in 1917. We then made our way to Ploegesteert ('Plugstreet') Wood, driving through the old 1914 No Man's Land where the famous Christmas Truce took place, an event that had such a dramatic effect on the thought and writing of Henry Williamson. Whilst in this evocative area we were able, with the help of an old trench-map, to locate the site of the notorious 'Diehard T-trench', east of Plugstreet Wood and described by Henry in *A Fox Under My Cloak*.¹⁰

Leaving Belgium and crossing the border at Armentières, we had our lunch outside Rue David Military Cemetery at Fleurbaix. (On the tour most of our lunches were taken outside one of these lovely quiet garden-cemeteries. This may at first seem somewhat lacking in respect and rather macabre, but I should hasten to explain that there are few lay-bys on French country roads — except for those outside military cemeteries!) After lunch we motored on through the 1915 battlefields of Neuve Chapelle, Richbourg, Festubert, Givenchy and Cuinchy (site of the dreaded 'Brickstacks' written about so vividly by Blunden and Graves). Eventually we reached the Loos battlefield where a halt was made to visit the wayside shrine and nearby Le Rutoire Farm at Vermelles, with its association with 'The Mediator's', 'Tower Bridge', and Phillip's first meeting with Capt. 'Spectre' West at the Battle of Lone Tree in *A Fox Under My Cloak*.¹¹ Driving on we reached Dud Corner Military Cemetery. Here on the Loos Memorial to the Missing are recorded the names of Rudyard Kipling's son, the Queen Mother's brother, and 'Albert Hawkins' of the *Chronicle*. In this beautiful cemetery we also saw the grave of Lt. Moutray Read VC, RFC, who is almost certainly the person on whom Henry based the character of Major Kingsman's pilot son in *The Golden Virgin*.¹² (Henry Williamson of course himself served in the battle of Loos in 1915 as a Gas Officer.)

Pressing on, in the late afternoon we halted at the German Concentration Cemetery at Neuville St Vaast. Henry describes this awesome place in *The Wet Flanders Plain*:

*. . . a wide expanse of chalk darkened when the sun shines with the shadow of crosses; but one does not notice the shadows. For, packed close together, and in pairs, back to back, the crosses that are planted in the bare chalk are a vast and terrible sight . . . black, black vast and terrible, the charred forest sweeps over the horizon.*¹³

Happily now, many of those scars are healed for lush green grass clothes the stark whiteness of the chalk, but the regimented rows of black crosses still stretch as far as the eye can see, a grim place where 'old agonies dim the noonday sun'. In reflective mood we journeyed on to our hotel in Arras.

Day Four, this day, 9 April 1987 was of special significance, being the 70th Anniversary of the Battle of Arras. We were fortunate to be in the town on that day as our visit coincided with the Ceremony of Remembrance being held in the morning up on Vimy Ridge. When the minibus was loaded we drove out from Arras to join the many hundreds of people, French, Canadian and British, making their way towards the Canadian Memorial. It had been raining hard throughout the night and early morning, but as we came out of the pine woods that have grown up out of the dimpled trench systems and craters of the preserved Vimy battlefield, pale sunlight broke through the dark rain-clouds. From a vantage point close to the memorial — huge, twin white stone towers that dominate

the Ridge — we had a fine view of the impressive and moving ceremony attended by contingents of Canadian and French troops together with a wonderful small group of survivors of the 1917 battle. We were reminded that Henry Williamson as a young Transport Officer saw action with the Machine Gun Corps at Bullecourt and, on Easter Morning 9th April 1917 at La Targette crossroads, watched the hundreds of German prisoners, mud-splattered and exhausted, streaming down to the cages from the Vimy battle. As he wrote in an article for the *Daily Express* in 1967 about that action:

*Today the Canadian Memorial stands under the spring sky, overlooking acres of young corn in the fertile fields around Arras. Now the ghosts are gone and I with them.*¹⁴

At the end of the ceremony we walked round the preserved trenches of the Canadian and German front lines. The rain had begun to fall again and after lunch we motored over to Agny Military Cemetery to visit the grave of the poet Edward Thomas, 9th April being the anniversary of his death in 1917. We were pleased to see that a large wreath had been placed on the grave that morning on behalf of the Director General of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Before continuing on down to the Somme, we made a detour to Hermies British Cemetery to look at the grave of Brigadier-General R. Boyes Bradford, VC, MC, Commanding Officer of the 186th Brigade, killed during the counter-attack at Cambrai. This was the 'Boy General' who, in *Love and the Loveless*, Phillip meets in Bapaume and is offered a 'cushy' Instructor's job by the sympathetic young General.¹⁵ From Hermies we passed on down to the Somme via Bapaume pausing for a short break in order to visit that much-fought-over mound, the sinister Butte de Warlencourt, taking good care not to handle any of the heap of rusty high-calibre shells turned up by the plough at the base of the small hill. From the Pozières ridge we got our first glimpse of the Golden Virgin on the basilica tower in Albert, finally reaching our hotel at the end of another day full of interest and excitement.

Day Five, and determined to take full advantage of our last complete day on the Somme we got 'on the road' early and drove through the valley of the Ancre, past Aveluy Wood and Hamel village on to the Newfoundland Memorial Park. From the high observation mound that incorporates the imposing Newfoundland Caribou Memorial a dramatic view is obtained of the preserved 1st of July 1916 battlefield. It was an emotional experience to walk from the British jumping-off trenches across No Man's Land following in the footsteps of the ill-fated 1st Newfoundland Regiment and their British comrades, on that tragic bright July morning, right up to the German wire. There are few places in France or Belgium more charged with a chilling sense of tragedy and horror than this green, pitted landscape — even on a fresh, sunlit morning in early spring with the larks singing high in the azure blue. After exploring the preserved trenches and steep slopes of 'Y' Ravine with its crumbling German dugouts, we set off on the short journey to Frankfurt Trench Cemetery, there to discover the promised 'surprise' of the tour! A short walk from the 'bus across a muddy field to the small, neat stone-walled cemetery high on a windswept ridge, and the 'secret' was at last revealed! A headstone inscription giving the identity of Henry Williamson's favourite country cousin, 'Charlie'. The 'Percy Pickering' of the *Chronicle* novels, his real name Pte, John Charles Boon of Apsley Guise, Bedford. He was killed in November 1916, serving with the Machine Gun Corps.

Back to the minibus again and on to the massive Thiepval Memorial to the Missing visible from miles around the Somme countryside. Here are recorded the names of 73,000 men killed on the Somme, with no known place of burial. A number of Henry's 'lost comrades in Ancient Sunlight' can be identified on the engraved panels here, including the 'Crowstarver' from *The Flax of Dream*, Jim Holman. In accordance with the now

established custom we had our lunch at Ovillers Military Cemetery. From this position we were given a panoramic view of another evocative scene of death and lost endeavour, so vividly described in *The Golden Virgin* for we were looking out over Mash Valley:

*The white scar of trench lay beside the Bapaume Road for a quarter of a mile before returning north again across a shallow valley in the downland imperceptibly rising to a skyline of 110 metres. This slight hollow between two spurs was known as Mash Valley, up which the battalion was to advance on Z day.*¹⁶

Walking at the edge of this broad sweep of ploughed loam we found, amid the green spears of young corn, rusty steel shards from an ancient bitter harvest. After our lunch of 'Bully Beef' and wine we drove on to La Boisselle village to see the enormous Lochnager Mine Crater now preserved as a private memorial. On then through Contalmaison to Mametz (where we saw from a distance Mametz Wood and the site of the new monument to the 38th (Welsh) Division, then still in the course of construction. From Mametz we moved on via Montauban and Longueval to Caterpillar Valley Cemetery, to see the grave of yet another familiar *Chronicle* character, Henry's friend Norman Baldwin of the London Rifle Brigade. Our next halt was at the South African Memorial and new Delville Wood Museum, where a welcome cup of tea was enjoyed. Before we made our way back to the hotel at Albert, Paul directed us to a sadly neglected private memorial in an overgrown strip of woodland, littered still with rusting live shells. This was the memorial to Major Charles Cedric Dickens of the London Regiment. Major Dickens, killed at Leuze ('Lousy') Wood, was the grandson of Charles Dickens. Back in the Hotel De La Paix in Albert, we shared together a most entertaining 'Mess Dinner', celebrating the last night of our tour with speeches, toasts, and much merriment.

Day Six was greeted with some regret, for our tour was almost at an end. To round off our tour of battlefield sites and locations associated with Henry Williamson and the *Chronicle*, we made a brief exploration along the Ancre valley where Henry served with his company of the Machine Gun Corps during 1916–1917; Station Road, Railway Road, Beaumont Hamel and Baillescourt Farm (nostalgic names, familiar to readers of *Love and the Loveless*!)¹⁷ We had an early lunch at the ANZAC Memorial, Pozières, and a last farewell to the Somme drink together in a nearby café before starting on our long, gale-swept drive to Calais and the ferry home to 'Blighty'.

It had been a unique and rewarding journey of discovery. There will be other visits to the battlefields made by members of the Henry Williamson Society, but we were the first to go over there as a group, which made the experience special for all who took part. We shall long cherish the memories of all that we saw, and the warm fellowship shared during those six crowded days. In my capacity as Transport Officer on the tour, I must pay tribute to Paul Reed, our own 'Boy General', acting in a variety of roles including Pathfinder, interpreter, and historian. Paul added an extra dimension to our enjoyment with his informed commentary on places of interest, and a wise selection of the sites visited. Then there were the tourists themselves; first, a sincere thank-you to the ladies, Margaret White, Mary Tierney, and Margaret Clarke, for their kind help in the 'cookhouse', and ministering to the sick. The rest of the 'platoon'; Fred Shepherd, Peter Lewis, Wheatley Blench, Eric Starr, Jim Gorge, Pat Murphy and of course Bob Tierney who, in spite of a gammy leg, never allowed the rough terrain to handicap him. Happy pilgrims all, whose lives have been touched by the travail and sacrifice of a generation:

*. . . Lost for ever in Ancient Sunlight, which arises again as Truth.*¹⁸

NOTES

1. See *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929) 'Apologia Pro Vita Mea' pp. 14–15.
2. See *How Dear is Life* (1963) Chap. 18 'Lines of Communication' p. 215. Please note, all references to the *Chronicle* novels are taken from the Panther paperback edition (they being more transportable on the tour!)
3. See *Love and the Loveless* (1963) Chap. 14 'Phillip Is For It' pp. 214–215.
4. See *The West Flanders Plain* (1929) 'Skindles' p. 39.
5. See *Love and the Loveless* (1963) Chap. 18 'Mouse to Lion' p. 278.
6. See *Love and the Loveless* (1963) Chap. 16 'The Green Line' p. 253.
7. See *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1963) Chap. 4 'A Bicycle Ride' p. 49.
8. See *Love and the Loveless* (1963) Chap. 8 'Messines Ridge' pp. 14 – 145.
9. See *How Dear is Life* (1963) Chap. 22 'Hallowe'en' pp. 253–261.
10. See *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1963) Chap. 5 'The Diehard T-Trench' pp. 53–61.
11. See *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1963) Chap. 18 'A Cushy Job' pp. 226–227.
12. See *The Golden Virgin* (1963) Chap. 3 'New World' pp. 58–63.
13. See *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929) 'The Labyrinthe' pp. 119–120.
14. See the *Daily Express* 6th April 1967 (reproduced in *Days of Wonder* The Henry Williamson Society (1987) p. 22).
15. See *Love and the Loveless* (1963) Chap. 19 'Flanders Sanatorium' p. 291.
16. See *The Golden Virgin* (1963) Chap. 15 'The Raid' pp. 204–205.
17. See *Love and the Loveless* (1963) Chap. 6 'Ancre Valley' p. 104.
18. See *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929) 'The Valley of the Ancre' p. 148.

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