

A report from a participant of the Flanders Field - British Classic and Exclusive Cars Tour. 22 - 23 - 24 Aug. 2008.

It was via the website of Britishtour.be that in the beginning of the Summer of 2008 my attention was drawn to this tour through West Flanders and particularly around the city of Ypres.

Ypres had always been a city of interest to me and my Canadian wife (who, unfortunately died in Jan. 2007). Some of her country man of Neepawa in Manitoba , her hometown, fought in 1915 during the "second battle of Ypres" and lost their lives. More than 2000 Canadian soldiers are buried nearby the St Julien Memorial near Ypres.

It was the Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae who, there at the time, wrote the famous poem: " In Flanders field the poppies blow, Between the crosses, row on row, etc. etc."

Beside that my beloved wife had been invited by the Canadian Embassy of Brussels to be present at some ceremonies in 1998 and 1999, in memory of the Great War from 1914 to 1918.

Enough reasons for me to participate in this special tour, 90 years after the Great War.

So I drove on Aug 22nd 2008, with my Jaguar MK II , 1960 (a classic car of almost 50 years "young") and my new British ladyfriend to Ypres.

We arrived, via Gent and Veurne in Ypres, and found the Novotel in the middle of the city, where we could park our classic car in a secured parking area.

It was here that our "grand old lady" felt very safe and blow her last drops of petrol away, resting her weary joints.

We were welcomed by an enthusiastic committee of the Kemmel Historic Society. Very soon we were surrounded by other British classic car enthusiasts, who arrived by ferry to the "Continent".

Some of them even had a trailer, on which their classic car was transported.

Some of these cars were more than beautiful, jewels, I would call them, which one prefers not to park in the street.

Look at the website Flanders Field Tour 2008 and you will be flabbergasted with the beauties, accompanying us during those coming three days through Flanders Field.

The enthusiastic Committee showed us around the hotel and loaded us with documents, gifts and of course a roadbook and a rally-plate. Well !!!

What kind of rally-plate you may be wondering.

A special rally-plate, with a symbolic soldier in Flanders Field, which is now hanging in my garage on my "Wall of Fame"

After the opening speech and introduction we visited on this first evening the Menen Gate .

Here, every day, 365 days a year at 20.00 hours, the voluntary Fire brigade of

Ypres, plays the Last Post.

It is with great respect that one shows gratefulness to these young soldiers who gave their lives here, now 90 years ago.

On Saturday, we were welcomed in the Council Chamber of the Cityhall of Ypres, by the Olderman of the city of Ypres. This representative of the city informed us about the history of Ypres, before, during and after the Great War.

After which we visited the Flanders Field Museum, and witnessed the simulated fights which took place in and around Ypres during the Great War.

Here one can experience in full the horror the soldiers on both sides of the frontier had to go through.

After the visit to this excellent museum we left in silence, Laken Hall, where this museum is located.

Escorted by motorists we left for the Kemmelberg, and enjoyed a "Heuvellands Buffet" in hotel "De Hollemesch", with lots of Belgian Beers.

After this luncheon everyone left at his own speed for the Passendael Museum nearby Zonnebeke, for a tea-break.

Also this museum gave us a true storey of the trench war.

Ypres was our next destination for the day, and on arrival at the hotel parked our cars in the secured parking area.

For the evening we were invited as special guests, for the Commemoration Service of the Last Post at Menen Gate.

This was one of the most impressive and poignant ceremonies I ever experienced, it was hard to keep my emotions to myself.

This special Last Post was a Homage to the 54.896 unknown soldiers, who lost their lives here between 1914 and 1918.

After this ceremony we walked in silence back to the hotel and gathered for a 4 course meal with all the appropriate drinks, one could think of.

During our dinner, pictures / photographs were shown on a big screen, of our trip of that day. Always an entertaining diversion.

On Sunday morning we displayed our cars on the Market square nearby the Laken Hall and City hall, for public viewing.

Enjoyed coffee in one of the many restaurants around the square and waited for our Belgian "Day Participants" for the Sunday tour, which took us along the many grave yards, trenches nearby the river IJzer and the city of Diksmuide.

Diksmuide a city, with a bombastic and characteristic tower, standing out in Flanders Field.

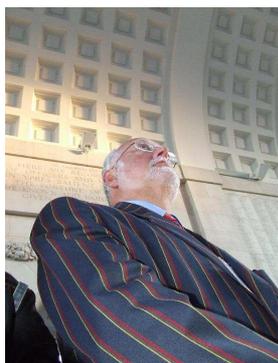
From there we drove with our Jaguar, displaying the Canadian flag, to the Canadian St Julien Memorial and honored our Canadian heroes with great respect.

From there we drove to a Cheese factory and museum and enjoyed a beautiful luncheon again. Continuing our tour through the beautiful rolling country of Flanders Field.

Where around each curve in the road you would see flat farmers fields, another corner you could see a rolling hill so very important to be taken and held, another bend and traveling through woodlands a place you could hide from the enemy. Each moment a different view, what beauty and sadness these fields hold. So many lives lost, so many young men, so many cemeteries, always beautifully manicured with respect to the fallen. Monuments in stone standing each individually crafted with poignancy, so moving. Lest we forget.

We finished the day and our 3 day tour, with a great menu, while slides were shown of our trip of this day. Some spontaneous speakers gave a speech and we said thank you to the Kemmel Historic Committee for their well organized tour through Flanders Field.

On Monday, many of us were still there. We packed our suitcases and were witness to the way our British friends packed their trailers with their historic cars. Ready to drive back to the UK. Ourselves, we took the scenic route through West Flanders on our way back to Antwerp, loaded with lots of good memories and laughs, with interesting British Classic Car Drivers.



Peter Vd Lustraaf