Commonwealth War Graves Commission

1916: The Somme
The 1916 Allied offensive on the Western Front was planned as an equal Commonwealth-French effort, to take place on the Somme – until then a relatively quiet sector – where the two armies joined. But, with the French distracted by a major German attack on Verdun to the south, a greater share of the burden fell to the Commonwealth force than was originally intended.

Fourteen divisions, entirely British with the exception of the Newfoundland Regiment, were to launch the offensive on a 23 km front between Serre and Maricourt, with a diversionary attack to the north at Gommecourt. The French would go forward on a 13 km front to the south. With superiority over the Germans an estimated seven to one, the Allies were supremely confident. The effort was to be enormous in scale and, if all went as planned, the initial strike would be decisive and the breakthrough immediate.

But 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, was to prove the most catastrophic day’s fighting in the history of the British army. Losses were appalling: of the 120,000 British soldiers who fought that day, almost half became casualties, over 19,000 of them dead. Sixty percent of the officers involved were killed. Of the 143 battalions that took part - about half of them from the New Army, many of these ‘Pals’ battalions seeing their first action - 32 lost 500 men or more. In just thirty minutes the Newfoundlanders suffered 85% casualties of those in the attack. This was a shockingly high price to pay for the modest gains achieved at the southern end of the British front. In most places the attack faltered and failed altogether.

With no breakthrough the Battle of the Somme quickly spiralled into the grim, protracted struggle that typified so much of the fighting on the Western Front, drawing in forces from all over the Commonwealth. After that first disastrous day the main effort was concentrated in a push north and east from the southern sector. A surprise dawn attack (including a rare First World War cavalry charge made by the elements of the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division) captured most of the Bazentin-Longueval ridge on 14 July but the Germans would not be budged from High Wood and Delville Wood where the South African Brigade was badly mauled. In early August Pozières ridge fell to the Australians after two weeks bitter fighting but progress in the weeks that followed was slow and uneven, with stubborn German resistance meaning a major fight for every copse, farm and village.
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The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has its greatest commitment in France and concentrated into the area covered by the Somme battlefields alone some 150,000 Commonwealth servicemen (50,000 of them unidentified) lie buried in 250 military and 150 civilian cemeteries. Six memorials to the missing commemorate by name more than 100,000 whose graves are not known. Commonwealth forces served on the Somme front from July 1915 and suffered greatly there in 1918 during the great German advance, but almost half of the identified burials and 80% of the missing relate to just twenty weeks’ fighting in 1916. The cemeteries and memorials, constructed by the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission in the years after the war, stand primarily as permanent monuments to the men who fought and died there, but they also say much about the 1916 battle, the way it was fought, and the monumental task of accounting for the dead that continued long after the war was over. They show what went on in the rear areas, they tell us who fought where and when, the units involved in the big pushes and when they happened, where the line moved and where it stood still. They speak of small incidents and large, disaster and success, the aftermath and the appalling cost in human life. Each cemetery, each memorial to the missing contributes its own part to the story of the Somme. Each has its own history.

On 15 September the offensive was given fresh impetus when tanks made their first appearance on the modern battlefield, and the line was pushed on beyond Courcelette, Martinpuich and Flers. Thiepval finally fell on 26 September. The slog forward continued through October as the weather deteriorated and when the fighting was finally called to a halt in mid-November after a last effort that took Beaumont-Hamel and Beaumont (July objectives), the Commonwealth had suffered almost 420,000 casualties, 125,000 of them dead. The French to the south had lost more than 200,000. In places the line had been pushed forward 11 to 13 km; elsewhere it had not moved at all.

A few months later, in the spring of 1917, the Germans made a strategic withdrawal to the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line giving up an area more than ten times greater than that had won by the Allies the previous summer, an area that had cost the Germans an estimated 600,000 men to defend.

The Somme battlefields are synonymous with some of the most bitter and costly fighting of the First World War and today the evidence of what happened there in the summer of 1916 is impossible to miss. Though restored to its rural tranquillity, the chalky landscape still bears the scars of trench systems, mines and colossal bombardment. Villages and farms devastated by shelling and now rebuilt look startlingly new. The area is thick with military memorials. And, of course, there are the cemeteries.

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By the spring of 1917 only a fraction of the Somme’s dead had been buried. Behind the lines orderly little cemeteries had sprung up around medical posts and in the lines of communication. The battlefield itself was dotted with hundreds of tiny cemeteries where men had been hastily buried by their comrades where they fell. But the nature of much of the 1916 battle – constant attacks and counter-attacks, little or no forward movement – left thousands dead in No Man’s Land. Their bodies could not be recovered while the fighting continued and the ceaseless pounding of artillery meant many were lost for good.

In 1917, with the devastated battlefield in Allied hands, the grisly work of bringing in and burying the dead was begun by the British V Corps, which created many new cemeteries. Battlefield clearance resumed in earnest after the Armistice and the area was swept at least six times in the search for bodies. As time went on, fewer and fewer could be identified – this was before the introduction of durable identity tags – and the many new and vast ‘concentration’ cemeteries filled up with ranks of the unknown. The last of these cemeteries was declared complete in 1934, but by the outbreak of the Second World War a further 3,000 bodies had been found and discoveries continue even today.

The names of the thousands of dead from the battle whose bodies were not recovered or identified were inscribed on memorials to the missing, the Australians, Canadians and Indians on their national memorials at Villers-Bretonneux, Vimy and Neuve-Chapelle, the rest on memorials on the old battlefield itself. The largest, the Thiepval Memorial, carries more than 72,000 names.

Burying the dead, counting the missing

The cemeteries of the Somme will give up their stories if the visitor knows what to look for. In all but the smallest cemeteries there will be a register - usually found in a bronze locker near the entrance or in one of the shelter buildings - listing all of the dead buried in the cemetery. The register also contains a historical note, giving a few details of what went on in the immediate area during the battle and how the cemetery was made, and a cemetery plan, showing the layout of the plots and rows.

As well as personal details, the headstones of the identified carry national, regimental or unit information and dates of death that chart significant events in the course of the battle. Special memorial headstones, usually arranged in groups or around the cemetery boundary, commemorate men whose known graves in a particular cemetery could not be found, perhaps because the cemetery was damaged in later fighting, or the temporary grave marker lost.

Visiting the cemeteries

But it is the graves of the unknown that characterise many of the Somme’s cemeteries. If partial identification was possible – rank, regiment or unit – this is given on the headstone. By far the most, those of the entirely unidentified, simply bear the inscription A Soldier of the Great War, Known unto God.

It is impossible to describe here every one of the Somme’s many cemeteries and memorials, but the following selection should give some idea of what can be seen in the battlefield area today. The cemeteries mentioned here are particularly significant to the 1916 battle, but many also have graves from earlier or later in the war – particularly 1918 – and in some there are French and German war graves. Burial numbers are mentioned primarily to give some idea of scale; they include unknowns, special memorials, and refer only to Commonwealth dead unless otherwise stated.

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Burying the dead, counting the missing
Behind the lines

Many little cemeteries were begun around medical posts, near supply or ammunition dumps, at the ends of communication trenches or trench railways, at roadsides, or as extensions to French communal cemeteries for the burial of those who had died of wounds or the dead brought back from the front.

Field ambulances stationed at Forceville, 10 km north-west of Albert on the main road to Doullens, used an extension to the communal cemetery, the graves in Plot 2 dating from July and August 1916, those in Plot 3 from later in the autumn. Forceville Communal Cemetery Extension (304 burials) was one of the first three Commonwealth cemeteries to be permanently constructed after the war. The 36th, 38th and 2/2nd London Casualty Clearing Stations, clustered near the railway halt at Heilly (10km south-west of Albert), were responsible for 85% of the 2,890 burials in Heilly Station Cemetery. At the battle’s height, burials were made so densely in long trenches that many of the headstones carry up to three sets of casualty details leaving no room for the regimental badges. These badges, 117 in all, were instead set into the wall of the cemetery shelter building.

Battlefield cemeteries

Created in the heat of battle, these cemeteries were often made in shell holes or sections of trench. Usually small, sometimes with only a handful of graves from a single unit, the dates of death spanned short periods or even a single day. Because the burials were made quickly, most of the dead were identified.

The Battle of the Somme left hundreds of these little cemeteries. Many grew as the battle progressed, particularly in the southern battlefield where gains made allowed the dead to be recovered and buried as the action moved on. Some were later damaged or destroyed by shell fire. A few of the more substantial battlefield cemeteries remain today in their original form, the majority in the July front line areas, but most were moved into the huge concentration cemeteries created after the war, or they became the nucleus around which these cemeteries were built.

On 1 July 1916 the 8th and 9th Battalions of the Devonshire Regiment suffered heavy casualties during an attack from Mansel Copse. Three days later the Devons buried 161 of their dead in a section of the old front line trench, now Devonshire Cemetery, Mametz, 6.5 km east of Albert. The emotive notice they placed over the grave, “The Devonshires held this trench, the Devonshires hold it still”, is now inscribed in stone. Nearby Gordon Cemetery tells a similar story; the 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders attacked alongside the Devonshires on 1 July and later buried 99 of their dead in what had been a support trench.

Two battlefield cemeteries to survive from the later fighting are the 2nd Canadian and Sunken Road Cemeteries, which lie close together in open farmland a little to the east of the Pozières-Contalmaison road and reflect the Canadian and Australian contribution to the fighting between August and October. The 2nd Canadian is unusual in that it contains the graves of a single unit – the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion – which brought 44 of its dead together for burial here over several weeks.
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Serre Road Cemetery No 2

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V Corps cemeteries

Today, the work carried out by V Corps in the spring of 1917 is particularly evident in the northern part of the battlefield which saw major action only on 1 July and 18 November 1916, the very beginning and very end of the battle. Here, there was little or no movement of the front line. These small, neat cemeteries, all of which were originally given the name ‘V Corps Cemetery No…’, very much reflect the local fighting and the units involved.

Most of the cemeteries mentioned here hug the 1916 front line, sitting right on or between the British and German trenches, and the dates 1 July and 13 November appear time and time again among the headstones. A high percentage of the burials are unidentified, the bodies recovered by V Corps having lain where they fell, unburied, for some months.

A little to the south, V Corps made three cemeteries on the Serre road. Two of these were hugely increased after the Armistice, but Serre Road Cemetery No 3 still has its original 84 graves. South of the Serre Road and north of Beaumont-Hamel are the three Redan Ridge cemeteries. Practically all of the graves in Redan Ridge Cemetery No 3, which is among the old German front line trenches, date from the November action.

Luke Copse Cemetery (V Corps Cemetery No 19, 11 km north of Albert), is one long grave with 72 staggered headstones. The most northerly cemetery on the main 1916 battlefield, it was named after one of four small plantations (the others Matthew, Mark and John) that stood on or close behind the front line. Nearby are Railway Hollow Cemetery (107 burials) and Queens Cemetery (311 burials), originally V Corps Cemeteries Nos 3 and 4.

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Concentration cemeteries

The great concentration cemeteries of the Somme began to grow after the Armistice when Army Graves Concentration Units started their intensive and methodical sweeps of the battlefield. Ranging in size from substantial, with a few hundred graves, to vast, with several thousands, the regular plots and rows give the impression of soldiers on parade. Some were built around existing cemeteries, others on entirely new sites. The percentage of unknowns is invariably high.

Beaumont-Hamel was where the Newfoundland Regiment suffered so badly on 1 July and where the Newfoundland Memorial Park was created after the war. Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery No 1 (V Corps Cemetery No 9) just to the north of the park contains 153 graves, mostly of 1 July, so closely spaced that many of the headstones carry more than one name. Hawthorn Ridge No 2 (another 1 July cemetery with 214 graves) and Y Ravine Cemeteries (428 graves) lie within the park. South of Beaumont-Hamel, Ancre British Cemetery (V Corps Cemetery No 26, with 2,540 graves) was enlarged from the surrounding battlefields after the war. This cemetery marks an opening out of the battlefield as dead from a 3 September attack begin to appear among those of July and November.

A small area to the north-east of Beaumont-Hamel saw the last actions of the 1916 fighting when men of the 16th Battalion Highland Light Infantry became isolated in Frankfurt trench where they held out for a week before surrendering on 25 November. Four closely grouped cemeteries made by V Corps mark these actions; Munich Trench, New Munich Trench, Waggon Road and Frankfurt Trench British Cemeteries. The entrance gate to the latter still bears its original name, V Corps Cemetery No 11. Ten Tree Alley Cemetery (V Corps Cemetery No 24) marks the limit of the November advance in this section of the line.
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A few concentration cemeteries retain a distinct local identity but many lie in the most fought over areas of the battlefield and the stories they tell are confused. Graves brought in from the local area can represent several weeks of fighting and in the last cemeteries to be completed there are bodies gathered in from all over the battlefield.

Just after the battle began **Blighty Valley Cemetery** (1,027 burials) was started between the villages of Authuile and Aveluy, 4 km north-east of Albert, about 1 km behind the front line. The original cemetery of 212 burials, the long rows of Plot 1, was increased when almost 800 graves, mostly 8th Division dead of 1 July, were brought in after the war from the battlefield to the east.
At Thiepval, 8 km north of Albert, Mill Road Cemetery (1,304 burials) was built up around a V Corps cemetery of 260 graves, the headstones of which are laid flat because the underlying German trench system makes the ground unstable. Most of the graves here and in nearby Connaught Cemetery (1,286 burials, begun in the autumn of 1916) were from the local battlefield and include the graves of many Ulstermen that tell of the 36th (Ulster) Division’s startling but temporary success here on 1 July.

Just north of the Bapaume road, Ovillers Military Cemetery was begun before the capture of the village on 17 July as a battlefield cemetery behind a dressing station, the original 143 graves forming the long continuous rows of Plot I. More than 70% of the 3,439 Commonwealth burials it now contains are unidentified. Pozieres British Cemetery, on the Bapaume road 6 km from Albert, began as a battlefield cemetery – the original 270 burials form the long and uneven rows of Plot 2 – but was increased to more than 2,750 graves after the war from the immediate battlefields. The fighting of July and August in and around Pozieres cost the Australians some 8,000 dead; more than 700 of them lie in this cemetery. The memorial that forms the walls of the cemetery relates to the Somme’s missing of 1918.

Guillemont (12 km east of Albert) was captured on 3 September after failed attempts on 30 July, 8 and 18 August. Guillemont Road Cemetery (2,263 burials) was begun shortly afterwards by field ambulances and fighting units, mainly of the Guards Division. When it was closed in March 1917 the uneven rows of Plot 1 contained 121 burials. Later, more than 2,000 graves, almost all of July-September 1916, were brought in from the battlefields immediately surrounding the village.

On 15 September, the village of Flers was entered by the New Zealand and 41st Divisions with the help of tanks. Bulls Road Cemetery (776 burials), on the outskirts of the village, was begun four days later and used until the following March by fighting units, mainly Australian, who made the 154 burials now forming Plot 1. After the Armistice graves were brought in from the fields between Flers and Longueval. A.I.F Burial Ground, 2 km north of the village, was begun in November 1916 by Australian medical units posted nearby who made the 32 graves that are now Plot 1, Rows A and B. It was hugely enlarged after the war with Commonwealth and French graves, mostly from the autumn of 1916, brought in from all over the Somme battlefields and beyond. Plots 1 to 6 were the first new plots to be made, but a second wave of concentrations in the late 1920s made Plots 7 to 16. Now containing 3,475 Commonwealth and 170 French burials, the cemetery has an unusual and irregular shape as the later additions extended it beyond its original planned area.
At Thiepval, 8 km north of Albert, Mill Road Cemetery (1,304 burials) was built up around a V Corps cemetery of 260 graves, the headstones of which are laid flat because the underlying German trench system makes the ground unstable. Most of the graves here and in nearby Connaught Cemetery (1,286 burials, begun in the autumn of 1916) were from the local battlefield and include the graves of many Ulstermen that tell of the 36th (Ulster) Division’s startling but temporary success here on 1 July.

Just north of the Bapaume road, Ovillers Military Cemetery was begun before the capture of the village on 17 July as a battlefield cemetery behind a dressing station, the original 143 graves forming the long continuous rows of Plot 1. More than 70% of the 3,439 Commonwealth burials it now contains are unidentified. Pozieres British Cemetery, on the Bapaume road 6 km from Albert, began as a battlefield cemetery – the original 270 burials form the long and uneven rows of Plot 2 – but was increased to more than 2,750 graves after the war from the immediate battlefields. The fighting of July and August in and around Pozieres cost the Australians some 8,000 dead; more than 700 of them lie in this cemetery. The memorial that forms the walls of the cemetery relates to the Somme’s missing of 1918.

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The area around Courcelette also saw very heavy fighting in September 1916, the village itself being taken on the 15th by the 2nd Canadian Division. Courcelette British Cemetery was begun in November and greatly enlarged around the original 74 burials (now parts of Plot 1, Rows A to F) with almost 2,000 graves brought in from Courcelette and Pozières, the majority Australian and Canadian.

Regina Trench Cemetery, (2,279 burials, 1.5 km north-west of Courcelette), was named after a German earthwork that held out against repeated Canadian attacks during October 1916 until finally cleared on 11 November. The original burials made in the winter of 1916 – four rows at the back of Plot 2 – mark the position of the trench. The rest, most of them dating from October 1916 to February 1917, were brought in after the war from the battlefields of Courcelette, Grandcourt and Miraumont. More than 1,000 Canadian graves, many of them from the Courcelette battlefield, were among those gathered into Adanac Military Cemetery, (3,186 burials, 3 km south of Miraumont), after the war. The cemetery was made around a single existing grave of August 1918, now Plot 4, Row D, Grave 30.

The South African Brigade suffered its greatest losses on the Somme at Delville Wood, where six days of continuous fighting in July cost it more than 2,300 casualties. The wood was later chosen as the site for the South African National Memorial and Delville Wood Cemetery, a new cemetery created after the Armistice, contains more than 150 of their dead. The cemetery is the third largest on the Somme with more than 5,500 graves.

The largest cemetery on the Somme, the fourth largest in France, is in the northern battlefields. Begun by V Corps in the spring of 1917 but not completed until 1934, Serre Road Cemetery No 2 now contains 41 plots, 7,127 burials, gathered in from all over the battlefield. Almost 5,000 of the burials are unidentified, yet this is not the cemetery with the highest percentage of unknowns.

London Cemetery at High Wood, Longueval, was begun when 47 men of the 47th (London) Division were buried in a large shell hole in September 1916. By the Armistice it contained 101 graves. An Extension to the little cemetery was begun when bodies continued to be found after the closure of the massive cemetery at Serre, and burials continued here for many years. The cemetery and extension now contain 3,872 First World War burials brought in from a wide area. Of these, 3,113 – more than 80% - are unidentified.
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DANTZIG ALLEY BRITISH CEMETERY, MAMETZ

A Small Piece of History

Dantzig Alley is a typical concentration cemetery built up around a battlefield burial ground after the war. Named from a German trench near Mametz which saw hard fighting on 1 July 1916, the cemetery was begun later that month and used by fighting units and field ambulances until November, with a few graves added in 1918. The original 183 burials now form the long continuous rows of Plot 1.

Graves brought in after the Armistice from the battlefields north and east of Mametz are almost all of 1916 and include many of 1 July from the 7th Division who attacked here, and the 18th (Eastern) and 30th Divisions who went forward on their right to take objectives around Montauban. Some of the more substantial battlefield cemeteries brought into Dantzig Alley include Aeroplane Cemetery, Fricourt (20 men of the 20th Manchesters killed 1 July); Bulgar Alley Cemetery, Mametz; (23 men of the 22nd Manchesters killed 1 July); Hare Lane Cemetery, Fricourt (54 men killed 1 and 2 July); and 49 of them 10th West Yorkshires); Mansel Copse and Mansel Copse West Cemeteries, Mametz; (51 men of the 2nd Border Regiment killed 1 July). The cemetery now contains 2,053 burials and commemorations. Of the burials, 518 are unidentified, but ranged along the back boundary are 17 special memorials to men known to be buried among them.

There are also special memorial headstones to 70 men whose known graves in two other concentrated battlefield cemeteries were destroyed by shell fire later in the battle: 55 from Vernon Street Cemetery (110 graves), made at ‘Squeak Forward Position’ in the valley between Carnoy and Maricourt, and 15 from Bottom Wood Cemetery, a field ambulance cemetery of 104 graves, between Mametz and Fricourt Woods. These two groups are each fronted by a memorial carrying an explanatory inscription known as a Duhallow Block, so called because the first were erected in Duhallow A.D.S. Cemetery near Ypres in Belgium. The Montauban Communal Cemetery memorial, which is shown on the cemetery plan published with the first register of burials, commemorated an officer whose grave was later discovered in London Cemetery and Extension at Longueval and the memorial has since been removed. The cemetery is large enough for both a Cross of Sacrifice (seen in all Commission cemeteries with 40 burials or more) and a Stone of Remembrance (more than 1,000 burials). More unusual is the memorial seat set into the back wall, a gift of the 14th Royal Welsh Fusiliers, placed in the cemetery in 1929.
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The Thiepval Memorial

The Thiepval Memorial, the largest built by the Commission, commemorates more than 72,000 men who died in the Somme sector up to 23 March 1918, more than 90% of them from the 1916 battle.

The 45 metre high memorial stands on an open ridge just south of Thiepval village and can be seen on the skyline from many parts of the battlefield. The design by Sir Edwin Lutyens, one of the Commission’s First World War architects, is a massive stepped arrangement of intersecting arches that culminate in a towering central arch 24 metres high. Clad in brick, the memorial’s 16 piers are faced with Portland stone on which the names of the dead are engraved.

The Missing of the Somme

Of the Commonwealth dead lost during the 1916 Battle of the Somme, almost 77,000 were denied the honour of a known grave. The national memorials at Vimy and Villers-Bretonneux commemorate more than 4,500 Canadians and 5,000 Australians who died between July and November 1916. The fierce fighting of September and October alone cost the New Zealand Division more than 1,500 men of whom a staggering 1,200 have no known grave. They are commemorated on a memorial at Caterpillar Valley Cemetery, the second largest cemetery on the Somme, at the heart of the battlefield where they lost their lives. The Royal Newfoundland Regiment’s close links with the battlefield at Beaumont-Hamel led to the creation of the memorial park there after the war and the memorial to the missing of Newfoundland, surmounted by a great Caribou, lists 200 lost on the Somme. But by far the majority of the Somme’s missing, the 840 South African and 65,000 British who died during the months of battle and have no known grave, are commemorated on the mighty memorial at Thiepval.

The New Zealand Memorial at Caterpillar Valley
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The New Zealand Memorial at Caterpillar Valley
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Commonwealth War Graves Commission
France Area Office
Rue Angèle Richard
62217 Beaurains
France
Tel: +33 (0) 3 21 21 77 00
Fax: +33 (0) 3 21 21 77 10
E-mail: france.area@cwgc.org

Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Head Office
2 Marlow Road
Maidenhead
Berkshire
SL6 7DX
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0) 1628 507200
Fax: +44 (0) 1628 771208
E-mail: casualty.enq@cwgc.org

The Somme’s Commonwealth cemeteries and memorials are included in Cemeteries and Memorials in Belgium and Northern France, a specially overprinted Michelin road atlas available from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. To order a copy contact either of the offices on this page.

Visitors with a mobility impairment may have difficulty with access to some cemeteries. For more information contact the Commission’s Head Office.

For more information about the area visit the web site of The Comité du Tourisme de la Somme at www.somme-battlefields.com

The memorial takes shape, April 1931

The Thiepval Memorial is both memorial to the missing and battle memorial commemorating the joint Commonwealth-French offensive of 1916 and a cemetery with equal numbers of Commonwealth and French graves, gathered together from all over the battlefield, is laid out in front.

Since its dedication by the Prince of Wales in 1932 the memorial has received countless visitors and hundreds still attend the ceremony, held there every year on 1 July, to remember the thousands of lives claimed by the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

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Head Office
2 Marlow Road
Maidenhead
Berkshire
SL6 7DX
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0) 1628 507200
Fax: +44 (0) 1628 771208
E-mail: casualty.enq@cwgc.org

Commonwealth War Graves Commission
France Area Office
Rue Angèle Richard
62217 Beaurepaire
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Tel: +33 (0) 3 21 21 77 00
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