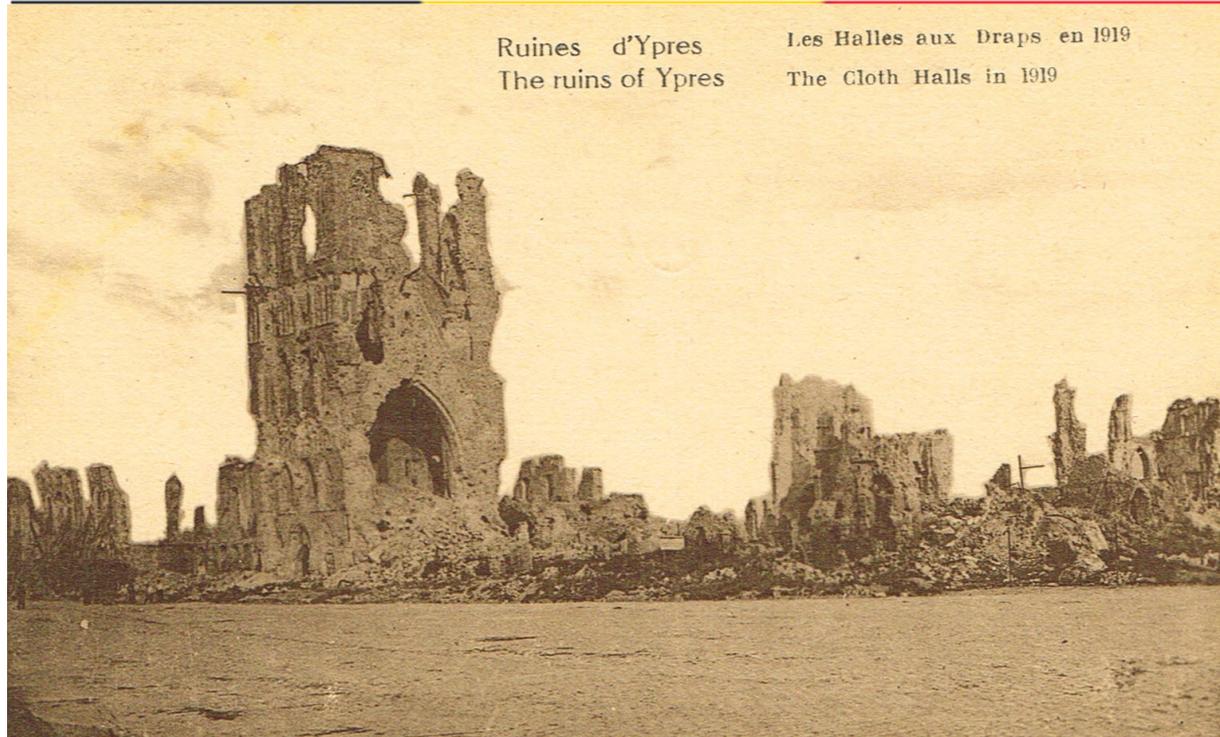


## The Westhoek: the grounds of World War I



The Westhoek is dominated by two things: farmland and the First World War (or “The Great War”). Most of the towns here suffered greatly during the War, some of them were completely annihilated. Although it’s been almost a century since the Great War, this region remembers it very vividly and the remains of the trenches and scars in the landscape make this war very tangible. Bunkers, war museums and well-kept war cemeteries seem to be everywhere in the Westhoek.

I present a personal selection of interesting places. The best time to see them is on a rainy and cold day when nobody is around.

### Information about WW I on the internet

If you are looking for more places to see and things to read, any tourist office will gladly provide you with free booklets with information about every memorial and cemetery there is to be found, or you can download some of the brochures on <http://www.toerismewesthoek.be/> (in English as well). The most complete overview of war relicts on the web is <http://inventaris.vioe.be/woi>, where every bit of WWI concrete, every plaque, every bunker and every remaining bit of trench has been indexed. It’s in Dutch only. You can search by city or type of relict and see photographs. The website <http://www.wo1.be> is also very informative.

I’ve added quite extensive information about the war at the end of this chapter.

If you prefer some visuals, there’s the magnificent series “In Europa”. It’s based on the book by Geert Mak, a Dutch author who spent an entire year travelling around Europe tracing its history from the last century. The two episodes about the first World War are available with English subtitles. See <http://weblogs.vpro.nl/ineuropa/2010/01/22/6-episodes-with-english-subtitles/> and enjoy a these very interesting documentaries.

## The short story

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If you prefer the short explanation, without much detail or nuance, here it is in my own words.

By 1914, the bigger countries of Europe had formed two blocks: the triple entente (the UK, France and Russia) and the triple alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy). All of them had large armies – partly because of previous wars, partly because industrialisation made it possible. Most of the aforementioned countries tried to expand their empires, both on mainland Europe and overseas. This of course led to tensions.

When the heir to emperor Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary, Franz-Ferdinand, was shot by Gavrilo Prinzip, the powder keg was lit – or so it says in the history books. Prinzip killed Franz-Ferdinand because he wanted to protest against the way Serbia was annexed by Austria-Hungary. Contrary to popular belief, the war didn't start immediately – Serbia was given an ultimatum by Austria-Hungary first. Most of the demands were met but a research commission wasn't allowed on Serbian territory. After a couple of weeks, mobilisations started: Austria-Hungary wanted to invade Serbia. Germany promised their support. Serbia got the support from Russia. From then on, the alliances were used – sometimes as an excuse to regain lost grounds from previous wars or to try to expand their own empire.

Russia had received an ultimatum not to mobilise from Germany but they did anyway. France mobilised because of their alliance with Russia and because of the German threat. Because of that mobilisation, Germany wanted to invade France. They demanded passage through Belgium but king Albert I refused. Belgium was invaded in August. The British backed the Belgian independence, and came to help by the end of the month. The king, who had fled to Antwerp first, had to abandon that city and the armies retreated towards the west. The Yzer river was the last natural barrier behind which the Belgian army could retreat if they wanted to keep the North Sea ports in allied hands.

By the end of October, the flood gates of the Yzer river were opened several times to

inundate the plains and create an impenetrable barrier for the German army. Both armies started to dig in, and from then on the years of trench warfare took lots of lives and destroyed the cities around the Yzer and Marne rivers. The Ypres region suffered heavily, because the city and the hills surrounding were strategically important. The hills around Kemmel – they're called "mountains", but that's a bit optimistic – were the sites of heavy fighting as well because they were strategic observation posts.



In 1917, the allies tried to decide the war with the so-called mines battle: 24 (some say 23) heavy loads of mines were placed in tunnels under German posts. Sometimes, the Germans found out and tried to dig tunnels towards the loads as well. These mines detonated more or less simultaneously on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1917. The explosion of 500 tonnes of ammunition could be felt on the other side of the Channel! One of the loads was discovered in time by the Germans, four were not detonated for strategic reasons – the Germans had retreated from that sector already. One of them exploded during a thunder storm in 1955 and apparently, three are still underground. This battle was more or less successful, the front line was straightened south of Ypres. Some of the craters can still be seen, they can be recognised as unnatural round pools with a diameter of about 100 meter!

During the war, some of the alliances changed (Italy joined the allies, to name just one) and there were fronts in the Middle East and of course on the Russian side.

By 1917, the Russian revolution broke out and Lenin made peace with Germany (probably because he had received a lot of financial backing for his plans). The Germans shifted those troops to the Western front and they made quite good progress, but the attacks came to a standstill after a while. The Allies – reinforced with some American troops, who unfortunately brought the Spanish flu with them – launched an attack from Greece. This, along with the war fatigue, led to the end of the war at November 11<sup>th</sup> 1918 when the armistice was signed. However, it has been argued that the severe punishments for Germany in the armistice led directly to the second world war, and that the German support for Lenin led to the strength of the communists in Russia and

indirectly to the foundation of the USSR. So, as Geert Mak argues in *In Europa*, the consequences of the first world war probably lingered on until the 1980s or even the 1990s



with the wars in the Balkans.

## A drive around Diksmuide

*Take exit 4 of the E40 towards Diksmuide. Follow the road towards Diksmuide and follow directions for Keiem as soon as you see them. Be careful, at one point the main road takes a left turn but you have to drive straight through. There's a Belgian cemetery in Keiem, where more than 600 Belgian soldiers are buried. They died during the 1914 retreat and the fights around the village. The grey Belgian stones look much more dated than the timeless white English tombstones.*

*Drive further into Keiem. Follow the directions for "Stuivekenskerke" – you'll have to take a right and then you cross the big road towards Diksmuide. The road becomes smaller and you ride along the Yzer river for a short while until you can cross it over a narrow bridge. On the other bank you continue in the same direction until you can take a right. A bit further there's the Viconia castle-farm (it's now a nice and relatively moderately priced hotel). It served as a German outpost during the war.*

*There's a nature preserve here too. Clay was dug up here after the world wars, to make bricks for the reconstruction. The pits have filled with water and attract a lot of birds. You can spot a variety of birds here if you have the time.*

*At the next intersection, turn left and continue straight through. Follow the road until you see*

*a (partly hidden) sign "O.L.-Vrouwenhoekje". The sat nav setting is Oud Stuivekens (that's the name of the street) in Diksmuide.*

This used to be the village of Stuivekenskerke. It is already mentioned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. You will pass an informative plaque about an archaeological site (an aerial view, for instance on Google Maps, makes this even clearer). The church, that dated from the 1600s, had dilapidated and by 1870 the decision was made to build a new church 2km north of the old one (that's the church you have passed a couple of minutes ago). The church was demolished except for the tower. In 1914, as the Germans progressed towards Stuivekenskerke, the tower was set on fire by Belgian officers, so it couldn't be used as an observation post by the Germans. It was further damaged by grenades on several occasions.

In Nieuwpoort, the flood gates were opened during the flood so the Yzer river rose and flooded the area surrounding it, thus blocking the German attacks. Oud-Stuivekenskerke was on the Belgian side and the remains of the church tower were used as an observation post. During the floodings the tower and the surrounding farms were on an island with excellent view of the German positions. This

was the Belgian outpost that penetrated the deepest into the German lines. The ruins were reinforced with concrete in 1916 and there were trenches, passages, two concrete shelters and barbed wire fences by 1917.

The officer who opened the observation post in 1914 and stayed there until 1916 became a monk after the war and he erected the memorial chapel in 1925. The tower was protected as an important war site and the Belgian Touring Club erected a small marble pillar indicating the furthest advance of the German army. There are more of these in the Westhoek. During the Second World War, the text on some of these pillars was removed by the Germans.

In the distance, you see the distinctive silhouette of the IJzertoren. You'll find out more about that monument further on.

*Turn back and take a left on the main road. Continue until you reach a T-intersection with the Dodengangstraat. Take a left and continue until you reach the Dodengang, the Trench of Death. You can't miss it, there's a new visitor's centre.*

Entrance to the Trench of Death is free of charge. Take into account that during winter it might not be open on weekends. You can walk alongside the trench on the dyke if you should happen to be there when it's closed. The museum through which you pass before entering the trench isn't really elaborate but it's very evocative and immediately seems to put you in the right mood.

The history of the Trench of Death is explained in detail in the leaflet you get at the beginning of the visit (it's available in English). Note that the sandbags were replaced with bags of cement in order to preserve the trench.

This trench wasn't dug but rather erected in order to advance towards a German observation post. As the post was very important, the trench was continually under fire and lots of men lost their lives here.

There's a German bunker left as well, but it's located outside the museum. If you want to see it, go on the dyke and walk past the Dodengang fence, continue about 100m. The bunker is in ruins. It gives you an idea of how close the enemies were to each other.

*After the visit, continue along the Dodengangstraat and cross the intersection with the traffic lights.*

Park your car at the IJzertoren or the visitor's



**The IJzertoren, with the PAX gate on the right**

centre. The IJzertoren is a well-known and mighty impressive monument, erected in the honour of the Flemish soldiers and the people who fought for a more humane treatment of the Flemish people. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch-speaking people of Flanders were often regarded as second-class citizens. Politicians, officers and anyone with any money spoke French. In the army, orders were given in French. Since the 1870s, there was a broadening movement in Flanders against this discrimination. During the war, Joe English – the son of an Irish immigrant – designed a tombstone for Flemish soldiers with the letters AVV-VVK (“Alles Voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen Voor Kristus”, “Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christ”). These tombstones were used only if requested and paid for by the family. Some of these tombstones were vandalised and in 1925 a and 500 of them were crushed and used as ballast for a railroad track. They were replaced by the standard tombstones.

Joe English is one of the people that are buried in the crypt of the IJzertoren. The original IJzertoren was inaugurated in 1930 and it was a symbol for the Flemish cry for more independence – or at least, less oppression. The original tower was dynamited in 1946. Several people were charged but none were brought to trial. It is, however,

generally accepted that the demining division of the army was involved. A new tower was erected a couple of years later and the debris of the old tower were used in the PAX-gate. Until 2012 there was a yearly pilgrimage called the IJzerbedevaart. This was more of a political meeting in fact, with a strong accent on Flemish independence and an enduring aversion for the Belgian state and the French-speaking population. The IJzerwake, a more separatistic and extremist twin brother continues to be held, and I find it ironic that this “peace monument” is also a place for separatist gatherings. Of course one must keep in mind that until the end of the 1960s, a

large part of the university in the Flemish city of Leuven was French-speaking, and that a lot of towns around Brussels are still areas of conflict, because they are Flemish towns but the French-speaking people that live there don't bother to speak Flemish (Dutch, actually). Some people feel very strongly about this.

The IJzertoren museum focuses on both the First World War and the Flemish struggle for respect and independence. The view on top of the tower alone is worth the money. You take an elevator up and then you descend through the museum floors.

By the time you have finished, it should be around noon. If you have some time left, you can take a 3km walk through Diksmuide. It is indicated with copper spikes in the road and there are informative plaques. A description of the walk in 4 languages can be downloaded at [http://toerisme.diksmuide.be/file\\_uploads/11601.pdf](http://toerisme.diksmuide.be/file_uploads/11601.pdf).

You can leave your car at the IJzertoren. Walk across the IJzer river and you should see one of the info signs. Start the walk there. Continue along the IJzerlaan, take the second street on the left (G.B.Jacquesstraat) and you arrive at the market place. The tourist office is here, and a folder with a map of the walk is available for free.

Don't be tempted by the terraces of the restaurants and cafés, there's more and better stuff ahead! Set the sat nav for Donkerstraat, West-Vleteren (it's about half an hour's drive) and expect to taste one of the best beers in the world. If it's not too late, set the sat nav for Houtlandstraat, Vladslo. There's a German cemetery with the remains of about 26000 German soldiers and statues by Käthe Kollwitz – her son is buried here. This is one of the four German graveyards to which the bodies of other cemeteries were brought in the 1950s. The others are in Langemark, Hooglede and Menen.

### In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.  
We are the dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow  
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

**The famous In Flanders Fields poem by John McCrae. It was written near Ieper in 1915 where John McCrae was a physician in a field hospital. He died in a field hospital of pneumonia and meningitis in 1918, aged 45.**

## West-Vleteren, a most exclusive beer

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A particularly important stop for people who appreciate the finer things in life is the West-Vleteren abbey. The trappist ale which is brewed in the abbey is very sought after. The “yellow” or “12” was referred to as Best Beer of the World for some time. The monks brew it in small quantities to provide for their own

needs, as they have no commercial goals. Put differently, you can't just buy the beer in a shop or a café. In the beginning you had to ring the abbey to hear when they would sell beer, but this led to traffic jams and long waiting lines on those days. Today they make use of a reservation system. The website of the abbey includes a calendar showing on which dates you can try to call in and make a reservation. If you get through, they give you a date and time and you give them the number of your car license plate. You can buy a maximum of two or three cases (of 24 bottles each). Money-grubbers sometimes try

to sell it on for large amounts of money, but the abbey does everything in its power to prevent this.

And now for the good news; right opposite the abbey you will find the only bar that is allowed to sell West-Vleteren. It's called “In de Vrede” (“in the Peace”) and apart from beer, they also sell delicious pâté and cheese. If you have always wanted to try beer-flavoured ice cream, this is your chance. Treat yourself to one or two beers and something to eat. A word of warning: this bar is always crowded.

After the refreshments, you could start with a walk through some typical landscapes. The “Sint-Sixtuswandelroute”, a walk of 7.1 km long starts at the abbey. It's indicated by hexagonal signs. You can buy a useful itinerary in the bar. It's ideal for walking off some of the alcohol. The walk passes by wonderful pastures, rural villages, hop fields (common hop, *humulus lupulus*, is one of the main ingredients for beer), and – inevitable in the Westhoek – a war cemetery of the Commonwealth.

As the walk will take about 2 hours, you probably won't have time to do this in winter.

## Around Ypres, and the famous last post

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Now, we head for Ieper (Ypres in English and French). You have two choices: either limit yourself to the city centre (especially if you're pressed for time) or take the short route I propose here first.

### Before Ypres...

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... you might consider this little drive. More details about these and other waypoints are in the “More points of interest” chapter.

First stop is the [Memorial Museum Passchendaele](#) in Zonnebeke (Ieperstraat 5). The visit will take about an hour and a half, and it's quite educational – quite unlike most of the privately owned museums that are just masses of material without much explanation. If you insist on visiting [Tyne Cot cemetery](#), you're quite near and it's clearly indicated at

the next intersection. The masses of visitors sometimes make it look like a tourist attraction. On your way there you pass the [Zonnebeke cemetery](#) with the [crypt](#).

Then, on your way to Ieper, drive up the parking of hotel/restaurant [Hof 't Hooghe](#) (Meenseweg 481, Zillebeke). Visit the quiet, well-kept trench. Even on weekends it's often very calm here and the atmosphere is just right. Make sure to cross the road and look at the immense cemetery. Then, go to Ieper.

## Ypres city centre

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During the war, Ieper was completely destroyed, as were many of the surrounding villages. It was rebuilt in the 1920s after some debate whether to leave it in ruins as a remembrance for the cruelty of the war, or to rebuild it as to say “nothing can bring us down”. The houses may look ancient, but none of them are older than a century. Ieper is the heart of “WWI tourism”. You’ll find shops with war publications, dug up items like guns, bullets, pipes, and shoes, and so on. The city gets quite crowded, and sometimes you’ll see elderly British gentlemen with medals walking in the streets – although the last soldier from WWI has died a couple of years ago.

If you want Ieper in a nutshell, you should have a look around the market place (“Grote Markt”). The big building is the Lakenhalle – in the olden days Flemish linen was very sought after, and this region benefited greatly from this, so the guild could afford an expensive and exquisite building. It now houses the In Flanders Fields museum which is very comprehensive and tells you everything you need to know about The Great War. Enthusiasts should definitely visit the museum first, it closes at 6pm (5pm from November to March).

The tourist office is also in the Lakenhalle, and you can get free city maps and brochures with the ramparts walk and other walks through the city centre. There’s a shop with WWI publications and cds as well.

There’s very little free parking in Ieper city – parking fees are due until 6pm in the city centre, with a maximum of 2 hours. On a calm day, you can park just outside the Menin gate, the street is called Hoornwerk. Or if you don’t mind walking five minutes you can park along the Oudstrijderslaan near the train station.

Of course, if you arrive after 6pm, parking is free everywhere.



**The Menin gate and the Lakenhalle tower**

You might want to call it a day after the visit to the In Flanders Fields museum and visit some of the many taverns and restaurants in the market place, but if you still have some energy left, there are some more interesting things to see and do. You’ll have to make a selection for yourself, depending on the time you have left. Whatever you do, make sure you are back in Ieper for the daily ceremony at the Menin gate, at 8pm sharp. Try to be there at least 15 minutes in advance. In a short but very moving ceremony, traffic is stopped and The Last Post is blown by trumpeters. On special occasions, the ceremony is more elaborate.

## More points of interest

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I've listed some of the other possible points of interest below. I've tried to comment on them in such a way that you can decide for yourself what you'll find interesting and what not. Further on I've devised the best route if you want to see as much as possible.

### Within walking distance of leper city centre:

- The leper Ramparts Walk and the sights of leper. *Start at the market place, get a folder in the tourist office*. In the 1600s, Vauban designed improvements for the leper ramparts. A lot of the ramparts are left and a beautiful walk over them is very worthwhile, especially if you don't have a car at your disposal. You can get a free map of the walk at the tourist office, and they have folders with the most important attractions in leper as well.
- The leper Ramparts cemetery and Ramparts War Museum. *Near the Lille gate, Rijselstraat 208*. The Ramparts War Museum has a collection of guns, artefacts, uniforms and the like. It's part of a bar ("Klein Rijssel") where the peace beer ("Vredesbier") is served in stone mugs – to be honest, the beer isn't *that* good. There's a very beautiful house next to it as well, and on the ramparts, there's a very moving cemetery. These sites are also within walking distance of the city centre.
- Yorkshire Trench and Dug Out. *Bargiestraat, leper*. Not really worth the detour. This dug-out (an underground system of passages and rooms was discovered when a new industrial site was laid out. The underground part isn't accessible so you'll have to imagine it by the stone lay-out on the surface. The situation – right in the middle of an industrial estate – doesn't really help the experience.
- Saint-Eloy Crater. *Rijselseweg (near Eekhofstraat crossing), Voormezele*. This crater with a bunker next to it is the result of the largest depth mine that exploded during the war. You have to ring the Ypres tourism service at 0032 (0)57 239 220 to get the access code to the gate. That's why it's often very calm here.
- Palingbeek Domain. *Palingbeekstraat, leper*. Open from sunset till dawn. A sort of nature preserve with woods and pretty landscapes. Sometime in the 1800s, works started here to make a canal between the leperlee canal and Leie river but the banks kept collapsing due to the nature of the soil. The project was abandoned in 1913.

### Around leper

Further away (requires a car or some kind of transportation). Most of them are within a 10km radius around leper.

- John McCrae site and Essex Farm Cemetery. *On the Diksmuidseweg, at the intersection with the Noordhofweg, leper (follow the John McCrae path next to the cemetery)*. Admission free. John McCrae wrote his famous poem 'In Flanders Fields' near this site along the leperlee canal where he had a first aid post. The bunkers that were restored on the site weren't there at the time; they were erected in 1917. If you visit this site, do walk through the meadow towards the information plaque about emergency homes.



The Palingbeek domain

### In or around Zillebeke

- Hof 't Hooge. *Meenseweg 481, Zillebeke*. On the grounds of this hotel, a trench was rediscovered and excavated in the 1990s. You have to put €1 in the donation box. It gives a good idea of trench construction and it's generally quiet. You'll spend about 20-30 minutes there. The premises borders on the Bellewaerde amusement park. This is my favourite spot. Make sure to look at the cemetery on the other side of the road. It look small at first, but as you approach you see the immense depth of this cemetery.
- Hooge Crater Museum. *Meenseweg 467, Zillebeke*. Only a couple of meters from the aforementioned Hof 't Hooge. Advertises itself as "the best private WWI museum". There are a lot of artefacts in this old chapel but descriptions and information are minimal. You can buy bullets, badges and whatnot here. Entry is 4,5€.
- Menin Road Museum. *Meenseweg 470, Zillebeke*. Only a couple of meters away from the Hooge Crater museum, at the intersection with the Canadalaan to Hill 62. Again, uniforms, artefacts – maybe you can visit this one if there are busses parked at the Hooge Crater Museum. Entry is 3,5€.
- Hill 62 Sanctuary Wood museum. *Canadalaan 26, Zillebeke*. Probably the most expensive museum with an entry price of around 10€ – there's even a sign at the door that says "No nagging about the price" and "no free entrance to the trenches". There are well-kept trenches here – somewhat like the ones at Hof 't Hooge but more of them. Apparently, they were kept in good original condition by the grandfather of the current owner who reclaimed the land shortly after the war. In the museum, there are wooden boxes with black and white photos – 3d "view master" style. Take your time to check them out. The rest of the collection consists of helmets, badges, uniforms, ammo shells, the usual. Part of the collection is housed in a typical 1950s Flanders style house.
- Hill 62 monument. *at the end of the Canadalaan, Zillebeke*. The view from this once strategic "hill" is rather limited. Just a

couple of meters away from the Sanctuary Wood museum. There's a rather large cemetery on this road as well. Only worth the detour when combined with one of the museums nearby.

- Hill 60. *opposite Zwarteleenstraat 40, Zillebeke*. This "hill" is actually a heap of sand from the excavation of the railroad running right beside it, in the late 1800s. It was of strategic importance. Admission is free, there are some remains of bunkers and a couple of monuments. Lots of holes from the mines and some informative plaques. There's a museum/tavern opposite the site.
- Polygon Wood cemetery, Buttes New British cemetery and 5<sup>th</sup> Australian division memorial. *Lange Dreve, Ieper*. These cemeteries are right opposite each other. The Polygon Wood cemetery is a small, frontline cemetery that was started in 1917. The graves are laid out irregularly and there's one German grave as well. The New Buttes cemetery on the other side of the road is much bigger – more than 2000 soldiers are buried there. The view of the cemetery from the memorial is stunning.
- Tavern 'De Dreve'. *Lange Dreve 16, Zonnebeke*. This is not a museum, it's a tavern run by a WWI enthusiast. Documentaries are often shown on a big screen and the owner is always glad to have a chat about the war if the bar isn't too crowded. This is also an excellent stop for a snack, like pancakes or spaghetti. See their website at <http://www.dedreve.com>. When it's crowded (mostly on weekends) the atmosphere might be less wonderful – it just becomes a busy tavern.



One of many war cemeteries around Ieper

### In or near Zonnebeke

- Memorial Museum Passchendaele, Ieperstraat 5, Zonnebeke. This museum is located in a Normandy style manor on a domain next to the Zonnebeke church. The collection isn't all that large but there is more and clearer information about the things on display than in most privately owned museums. A dugout has been reconstructed, although it's a bit clean and not very life-like. Nevertheless, the informational value is higher than most privately owned museums. Entry is 5€, expect to spend about 1h30. You might want to visit the church as well, this doesn't take very long.
- The Zonnebeke Crypt. Roeselarestraat, Zonnebeke. The Zonnebeke cemetery is only a couple of hundreds of meters away from the church. It's not a very special cemetery, except for the crypt in the middle. There are 14 coffins on a rack, with dead soldiers from various wars, including WWI. A strange sensation.



The Zonnebeke crypt

- Tyne Cot Cemetery. Vijfwegenstraat, Passendale. The largest of all WWI cemeteries. It looks impressive, with those dark walls. A bunker around which many men left their lives is still on the cemetery grounds. Unfortunately, the cemetery has become something of a tourist attraction, with a visitor's centre and a parking lot for buses and cars. Therefore, this cemetery is best visited in the evening or during weekdays. It's only 3km from the Passchendaele museum so you might consider walking there\*\*\*.

### In Poperinge

- The Talbot House. Gasthuisstraat 43, Poperinge. Because Poperinge wasn't occupied and it was well behind the trenches, soldiers went there to relax. This soldiers' club stayed intact.
- The death cells and execution pole. City hall, Guido Gezellestraat, Poperinge. Soldiers suffering from shell-shock were often treated as deserters or cowards. After a court-martial some of them (about 1 in 9, to set an example) were executed. One of the places where this happened was in the Poperinge city hall. During opening hours, the pole and death cells can be visited. In some countries, soldiers that were executed for cowardice were later pardoned – sometimes it took almost a century.
- Military cemeteries. As everywhere in the Westhoek, there are a number of military cemeteries in Poperinge. Personally, I suggest you visit the Gwalia cemetery (Elverdingseweg 22, Poperinge). It's in the fields, between farms, and it's very quiet.

### Around Kemmel (village of Heuvelland)

- The Bayernwald museum. Voormezelestraat, Wijtschate. Part of the immense German stronghold on the height of the Bayernwald. After the war, the place was cleaned up. Bunkers were discovered by accident in the 1970s, and a museum was opened and random trenches dug between the bunkers. In 1998, the tourist service of Heuvelland took over the site, archaeological searches took place and a more faithful reconstruction was made. You must get your ticket and the access code at the Heuvelland tourist office, St-Laurentiusplein 1, Kemmel.
- The Lettenberg hideouts. Lokerstraat, Kemmel. Four concrete hideouts in the side of the Lettenberg ("mount" Letten, a small hill). Free visit from sunrise to sunset.
- French mass grave. Kemmelberg, Kemmel. The grave site of more than 5000 French soldiers who died in the battle of the Kemmelberg in april 1918.

- The Pool of Peace. *Kruisstraat, Wijtschate*. One of the mine craters from the mine battle of 1917. This one is probably the biggest, with a diameter of 129 meters and a depth of 12 meter. This hill was the site of a windmill, the Spanbroekmolen, that served as a German observation post. The detonation mechanism didn't work at first, it was only after the attack had begun that the charges detonated, with victims in both the allied and German camps. A 7km long walking route around this crater and the other relics can be downloaded at <http://www.zerohour.be/media/1162/kraters%20en%20mijnen%20infobord.pdf> – a more elaborate map is available at the tourist office. There are less war relics than one would expect but the views are often pretty nice.
- The Command bunker of Kemmel. *Kemmelberg, Kemmel*. This bunker, inside mount Kemmel (a hill, actually) was dug in the 1950s as a secret shelter in case of air strikes. It has nothing to do with the first world war but it's quite interesting if you're

into military heritage. On the surface, it looks like a couple of small sheds, but below is a massive bunker with a large meeting room, offices for air, ground and naval forces, telephone exchange, and so on. It was meant to serve as head quarters for international air defense in case of war. It was never used as such and from the 1970s on it served as command center for military exercises. It was only opened to the public a couple of years ago and it's in a very tidy state.

It can be visited on Saturdays and Tuesdays, but it's best to make reservations well in advance. Reserve your tickets at [toerisme@heuvelland.be](mailto:toerisme@heuvelland.be) and pick them up at the tourist office, St-Laurentiusplein 1, Kemmel. Only 49 people may enter each day. You have to get your tickets at the Kemmel tourist office and then you have to get to the Kemmel hill where the bunker is. Ask for the correct details when making reservations. There are guided visits at set times but if you ask politely you can visit it on your own.

### A route along the Zillebeke and Zonnebeke points of interest

This route will take you too long to do in an afternoon, but if you want to visit as many of the points of interest as possible, you might visit them in this order to prevent you from driving back and forth. This route starts from Ieper.

Leave Ieper via the N8 – Meenseweg. If you want to visit Hill 60, follow directions for Zillebeke at the roundabout and drive through the town. There are directions to Hill 60 from the village. After visiting it, return to the roundabout and take the N8 towards Menen again. A little further down the road is the Canadalaan on the right, with Hill 62 and the Sanctuary Wood Museum.

Not much further are the Hooze Crater Museum and Hof 't Hooze on the left side of

the road, and the Menin Road Museum is on the right hand side.

A little further, on the left, take the Oude Kortrijkstraat. Follow it until you pass over the A19 motorway and immediately turn left into the Lotegatstraat. At the intersection with the Lange Dreve is "De Dreve". Follow the Lange Dreve up to Polygon Wood and Buttes. Continue and turn left along the Lange Dreve which turns into the Citernestraat. At a T intersection with the rather large Ieperstraat, turn right. The Memorial Museum Passchendaele and the Zonnebeke church are on your right. You might choose to walk to the Tyne Cot Cemetery. If not, follow the Ieperstraat – you'll pass the cemetery with the crypt. On a roundabout a bit further, turn left to reach Tyne Cot Cemetery.

## The first World War – the story, the chronology and the places

The tourist offices in the Westhoek have written some very informative and interesting brochures with historical background and practical information. You can obtain them at most tourist offices, or download some of them at [www.toerismewesthoek.be](http://www.toerismewesthoek.be).

The following text is an excerpt from the brochure 'The Great War in the Flanders Fields Country'. It is reprinted with permission and copyrighted by Westtoer apb. Do not reprint this text without their written permission.

### Why war?

More than 90 years after the events, it is still difficult to give a clear and definite answer to this question. Was it simply a terrible combination of circumstances? How significant was France's desire for revenge following her defeat and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. To what extent was the expansion of the German fleet a real thorn in the side of the British? Did the possibility of a British blockade of German ports play a crucial role? Was the spiralling arms race a major factor? And what of the complex arrangement of secret alliances and treaties? Or was the all-consuming nationalist sentiment of the age the key influence? Perhaps, in the final analysis, the people of all lands simply thought that 'it will all sort itself out in the end'...

### Sarajevo

On 28 June 1914 the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, visited the province of Bosnia-Herzegovina. His arrival in Sarajevo was awaited by a young Bosnian student named Princip - who, together with a number of nationalist friends, was planning to kill him. A first attempt failed, but a strange twist of fate gave Princip a second chance. This time the bullets from his Belgian FN pistol killed both the archduke and his wife. This assassination lit a powder keg. Austria-Hungary issued an ultimatum to Serbia, since this country was believed to have supported the Bosnian action. Serbia agreed to all of Vienna's demands but one. They refused to allow an Austrian commission of enquiry on their territory. Nevertheless, Austria-Hungary used this as a pretext to declare war. This was quickly followed by other declarations, as the system of mutual alliances and counter-alliances was set in

motion. Nobody seemed willing or able to stop the inexorable slide into a European War. The so-called Central Powers were Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. They were opposed by the Allies, which included the British Empire, France, Russia and Belgium, joined later by Italy (1915) and the United States of America (1917).

By the end of 1918 thirty-three countries were formally at war with each other, with a combined population of 1.5 billion people. This represents 80% of the total world population at that time. Just 12 countries remained neutral, including Holland.

### The 'Schlieffen' plan

On 4 August 1914, the German army invaded Belgium. They demanded that King Albert grant them free passage through the country, so that they could attack the French from the rear and defeat them first. Afterwards, they would turn their attention on Russia. The king refused and the famous Schlieffen plan was launched to impose Germany's military will by force. It was a battle of David against Goliath.

### The forts of Liege

The city of Liege fell quickly into German hands. It was followed on 15 August by the surrender of the last of the 12 forts which guarded the city's perimeter. The heavy German howitzers (the 'Big Bertha's) had done their terrible destructive work. The British, who had guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium, quickly came to the aid of their smaller continental neighbour. Even so, the Germans continued to advance rapidly.

### The Battle of Halen

On 12 August 1914 at Halen (in the province of Limburg) Uhlans of the German cavalry attempted to charge a strong Belgian position with naked swords. They were stopped in

their tracks by the heavy fire of the defending Belgian infantry. The Germans repeated their attack no fewer than eight times, but always with the same terrible result. Afterwards, more than 400 dead horses were counted on the battlefield. It was proof, if any were needed, that dragoons, hussars, lancers, Uhlans and cuirassiers - with all their gaily coloured uniforms - now belonged to the past.

#### **Louvain...**

##### **'die Zivilisten haben geschossen'**

The German advance was now moving more slowly than they had hoped. At several places, the Germans believed that they were shot at by 'civilians'. In Belgium, the armed Civil Guard was an official paramilitary organisation. Their often incomplete uniforms sometimes made them hard to recognise as soldiers. Is this why the Germans confused them with civilians? The Germans were becoming increasingly nervous: they had not expected such strong Belgian resistance.

As a result, they sometimes shot at each other by mistake - but put the blame on the local Belgian population. In Dinant, Aarschot and Louvain large numbers of civilians were executed in retaliation. In Louvain (Leuven) 2,000 houses were also burnt to the ground, together with its fabulous university library. Its unique collection of incunabula, manuscripts and ancient books was lost for ever. The Germans were now portrayed by the Allies as barbarians. Volunteers to fight against them enlisted in their thousands, especially in Great Britain.

#### **The fall of Antwerp**

The fortress of Antwerp (Antwerpen) - which was believed to be impregnable - fell in October 1914. By now, an estimated 1.6 million Belgians had fled their homes. Almost 1 million of these refugees crossed the border into the Netherlands. They were joined by approximately 40,000 Belgian, 1,200 British and 170 German soldiers. In accordance with international law, all these soldiers were disarmed 'for the duration of hostilities' and were interned in special camps (Zeist, Hardewijk, etc.)

#### **Neutral Holland**

The Netherlands clung firmly to their neutrality - and with success. This had strategic advantages for both the British and the Germans. For the British, it was important that the Dutch harbours could not be used by the German navy (and their u-boats!). For the Germans, the same ports were an important source of materials and supplies for their war economy. Food was also imported into Germany via the Rhine, while Dutch neutrality also made an Allied 'attack from behind' impossible.

#### **Belgian camps in the Netherlands**

By the end of 1914, about 900,000 Belgian refugees had returned to their homes. A further 100,000 remained in the Netherlands for the rest of the war. Of these, about 20,000 were unable to support themselves and so they were cared for in special camps, set up throughout the country (Uden, Gouda, etc.). The Dutch government and the Dutch people made great efforts to ensure that all the refugees were treated as humanely as possible - although things did not always run smoothly.

#### **The Belgian Army behind the River Yzer**

After the fall of Antwerp, the tired troops of the weakened Belgian Army withdrew behind the line of the River Yzer. Here they took up positions on the west bank, the last natural barrier in Belgium before the French border. King Albert asked his soldiers to make a final stand, in a desperate effort to keep this last small piece of Belgian territory from falling into German hands.

#### **The Battle of the Yzer and the Battle of Diksmuide**

In the middle of October 1914 the River Yzer and the canal to Ieper formed the last Belgian line of defence against the advancing invaders. The Germans reached the Yzer on 18 October and heavy fighting immediately broke out. The villages of Keiem, Tervaele and Schoorbakke were at the centre of the storm. In a number of places, the Germans even succeeded in reaching the far bank of the river. Meanwhile, Belgian and French troops defended Diksmuide with great

determination. Continuous bombardments quickly reduced the town to rubble. It was finally captured by the Germans on 10 November 1914. But the Allied had achieved their goal. The German advance had been halted and the Schlieffen Plan had failed.

### **The power of water**

In October 1914, the possible flooding of the Yzer plain was discussed in Veurne town hall with Karel Cogge. Cogge was the superintendent of the Northern Waterways and knew the workings of the water system in this part of Belgium like the back of his hand. Even so, the first effort at flooding was only partially successful. However, when Hendrik Gheeraert, a ship's master from Nieuwpoort, succeeded in opening the lock, a huge mass of water flowed inland toward the low-lying plain. This old defensive tactic was highly effective and paralysed any further German movement in the Belgian sector of the front. On 30 October their attack ground to a halt. The German High Command had no idea what the Belgians were planning. Their army maps showed a German 'zero-metre waterline' which was 2.40 metres higher than the actual waterline. As a result of the flooding, this sector remained relatively quiet throughout the war. However, the Germans managed to hold on to a few isolated 'islands' on the west bank of the river until 1918. Here, in the open plain, the situation was always dangerous.

### **Trench warfare**

The front stabilised on the Yzer and later on the River Marne in France. Both sides started to dig in - four years of terrible trench warfare had begun. Barbed wire, artillery, machine guns, vermin, disease, cold and wet - not to mention poison gas, aeroplanes, flame-throwers and tanks - all conspired to make the front a living hell. By the end of 1914, the Western Front ran in an unbroken line of trenches from the North Sea coast at Nieuwpoort to the Franco-Swiss frontier.

The Belgian-Dutch border is electrified during the summer of 1915, the Germans built a high fence along the Belgian-Dutch border. This fence was permanently electrified with a current of 2,000 volts. The Germans were

particularly anxious to prevent deserters and to keep out refugees and spies.

The fence ran in a more or less straight line from the North Sea to the River Meuse - a distance of some 180 kilometres. There was a patrol path along the wire, with look-out towers every 100 metres, complete with searchlights, alarms, mines, etc. Cross-border traffic was restricted to the public roads. Many smugglers fell victim to this 'wire of death'.

### **On the Western Front**

#### 1914

The war was not over 'before the leaves have fallen' or 'by Christmas', as many had hoped - and expected.

#### 1915

The British and the French attempt to break through the German line. The Germans use flame-throwers for the first time on the French front. Near Ieper, asphyxiating gas is also used for the first time.

#### 1916

The Germans try to 'bleed the French dry' at Verdun. The battle lasts for 10 months and brings France to the verge of collapse. Both sides lose tens of thousands of soldiers.

To reduce the pressure on Verdun, a joint Anglo-French attack is launched on the Somme. Tanks are employed for the first time but the offensive is a fiasco. On the first day of the battle alone, the British lose 60,000 men, killed, wounded or missing. By the end of 1916, casualties on both sides are horrendous.

#### 1917

To cut the Allied lines of supply, Germany declares unrestricted submarine warfare. Even neutral shipping is torpedoed without warning. This eventually leads to the United States of America declaring war on Germany in April 1917. However, the first American troops only come into action in 1918.

The French Army suffers cruel and pointless losses during an offensive along the Chemin des Dames, also known as the Nivelle Offensive. The French troops decide to mutiny - or, rather, to go on strike. They are willing to defend their country, but not to take part in futile attacks.

In order to break the mutiny, the French High Command sentences 554 soldiers to death. 49 are actually shot. However, a number of the mutineers' demands are granted, including better food and leave.

At the beginning of June, the British force a breakthrough at Messines (Mesen), following the explosion of 19 mines under the German positions. The offensive is continued in August with the opening of the Third Battle of Ieper and the capture of the village of Passchendaele (Passendale). Losses on both sides are enormous, for a territorial gain of just 8 kilometres.

At Cambrai in France, 475 tanks attack the Germans on a 10 kilometre front with great - albeit temporary - success. War weariness begins to affect both the soldiers and the civilian populations of the warring nations. There are shortages of raw materials, fuel and food. Russia withdraws from the war after the October Revolution. This allows Germany to transfer almost 1 million troops from the Eastern to the Western Front.

### 1918

Germany starts a great Spring Offensive in the hope of winning the war before the Americans can arrive.

Ieper is evacuated by the British and the Germans capture Mount Kemmel. In July the German advance is brought to a halt and the tide turns against them.

Various Allied attacks are launched at Amiens, in the Argonne and along the Meuse, with the support of the Americans.

In September the final Allied breakthrough takes place in Flanders and on the French front. In Germany riots break out as a result of food shortages. The German people have had enough of the war. Mutinous sailors take over the naval base at Kiel. Civil disturbance spreads throughout the country.

Emperor William II flees to the Netherlands and seeks asylum in Amerongen. An armistice is agreed in a railway carriage near the French town of Compiègne: the guns will finally cease at 11 o'clock on 11 November.

### 1919

In 1919 the Treaty of Versailles is signed. The map of Europe is redrawn: the balance of

power is now very different than in 1914. Germany is forced to give up territory and to pay massive amounts of reparations to the Allies.

A certain A.H. will later conclude that Germany was never defeated in the field and that Versailles is an injustice which must be avenged. The seeds of the Second World War are already sown.

*A total of more than 60 million soldiers were mobilised during the war. In all, the conflict costs the lives of 10 million people, without taking into account the many millions who are wounded or mutilated.*

*In comparison with the Second World War, the civilian population escapes relatively lightly. Civilian casualties amount to just 5% of the total, in comparison with 48% in World War Two. The flower of European youth is decimated. For example, of the 700,000 British casualties, more than 71% are between 16 and 29 years of age!*

*And in 1918-1919 Spanish flu claims more victims than the war in its entirety. This devastating influenza epidemic is named from the country where it first broke out. Estimates of the number of dead worldwide range from 20 to 100 million, depending on the sources used.*

### **In the 'Westhoek', the Flanders Fields Country**

The Germans wanted to seize the crucial Channel ports in France. This meant that they had to capture Ieper first. The high ground around the once famous cloth city and in neighbouring Heuvelland was of great strategic importance. Whoever held these heights was in a strong position:

the hills overlooked the enemy, gave excellent observation for artillery and were easy to defend. As a result, the fight for these ridges and hills was bloody and hard. Early in the war the Ypres Salient was formed – a huge bulge in the British lines which jutted deep into the German-held territory. "Remember Belgium!" became a rallying cry which persuaded hundreds of thousands of British volunteers to fight in Flanders - in the small piece of Belgium

now known as the Westhoek. The British soldiers called the city 'Wipers' - a mispronunciation of 'Ypres' (the French name for the city, which was used on the military maps of the time). It was a name destined to become famous throughout the English-speaking world. The Belgian Army occupied the sector from the coast at Nieuwpoort, through Diksmuide and up to the canal at Ieper. The British then took over the line between Ieper and the French border. The French then held the rest of the front between Picardy and the Swiss border.

### **The Battles of Ieper (Ypres)**

#### First Battle

(19 October - 22 November 1914)

After the German advance through Belgium and Northern France was halted in September 1914, the centre of the fighting shifted to the Westhoek. The Belgian Army halted the German attacks by flooding the Yser plain (27-29 October 1914). To the south, the British and the French fought with great determination to prevent a German breakthrough at Ieper. This was the First Battle of Ieper, which raged from 22 October to 22 November 1914. When the battle was over, the Germans held the ring of high ground which overlooked the city.

Both armies dug in and the famous Ypres Salient was born.

#### Second Battle

(22 April - 25 May)

In the spring of 1915 the Germans made a new attempt to break through at Ieper. They captured Hill 60 and on 22 April 1915, between Steenstrate and Langemark, they used chlorine gas for the first time in modern warfare. 150 tons of chlorine gas were released from 6,000 cylinders directed against the French lines. The result was death, panic ... and total surprise. The Allies were forced to withdraw for several kilometres, but there was no breakthrough. In September it was the turn of the Germans to be surprised, when the British used gas in their attack at Loos. Until the end of the war in November 1918, both sides bombarded each other with millions of

gas shells. However, as a proportion of the total number of casualties, gas claimed relatively 'few' victims.

#### Third Battle

(31 July - 10 November 1917)

#### The Mine Battle at Messines (Mesen)-Wijtschate

Summer 1917

The great Mine Battle of 7 June to the south of Ieper – in the sector known to the British as Messines Ridge and to the Germans as the "Wijtschate Bogen" - quite literally made the world shake. 19 mines were detonated under the German lines, causing explosions which could be heard as far away as London. In the beginning, this British offensive was a success. This was the prelude to the ill-fated Third Battle of Ieper.

#### The Battle of Passendale

The success at Messines was followed up in August with a new offensive: the Battle of Passendale. This battle was a complete disaster. The shells and the rain reduced the battlefield to a muddy swamp, through which neither attackers nor defenders could move. In four months the British lost 400,000 killed, wounded and missing for the gain of just 8 kilometres of territory.

The Germans had built strong concrete bunkers, defended with nests of machine guns that were almost impregnable. Passendale was a hell of mud, blood and superhuman endurance. Little wonder that the British called the village "Passendale" - the valley of suffering. The year 1917 also saw the first use by the Germans of mustard gas or 'iperiet.' As an 'improvement' on chlorine and phosgene, mustard gas not only attacked the victim's airways, but also caused the skin to erupt in hideously painful blisters.

#### German Spring Offensive

(April 1918)

In the spring of 1918, the Germans were strengthened by the arrival of fresh divisions from the Eastern Front, where the October Revolution of 1917 had led to Russia's withdrawal from the war. The German offensive began in March, in the sector

between Arras and Laon. In April new attacks were launched near Ieper, where the Allied line was almost broken. During the Battle of Merkem (near Houthulst) on 17 April 1918, the Belgian Army had to withstand a severe attack by the Germans. 'De Kippe', a locality in Merkem, and a number of bunkers were initially lost. However, following fierce hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets and knives, the Germans were forced back to their original positions by nightfall. Losses on both sides were high: the Belgians suffered 155 dead and 354 wounded, against a German total of 254 dead and 1,211 wounded. 780 Germans were also taken prisoner. It was the first major Belgian victory since Halen in 1914. During the Battle of Mount Kemmel the French in particular were very hard pressed. On 25 April this strategically important hill was lost to the Germans and Ieper was almost captured.

#### The final offensive

(28 September - 11 November 1918)

By now, German reserves had been exhausted and the Americans were starting to arrive on the Western Front in huge numbers. In Germany itself, the home front began to disintegrate. From 28 September until the Armistice on 11 November, a series of Allied offensives pushed the Germans back to the River Scheldt.

#### The Battle of Houthulst Forest

Houthulst Forest was a key defensive position for the Germans throughout the war. The woods had been transformed into a veritable fortress, with its own narrow-gauge railway system, linked to the main railway network behind the lines. On Saturday, 28 September 1918 the Belgian Army attacked this formidable obstacle. Almost every Belgian unit was involved in the attack, which was supported by the British Second Army and a

number of French divisions. The forest had been reduced to little more than a mass of shell-torn tree trunks, but by the end of the first day the Belgians had succeeded in capturing the German lines on a front which was 18 kilometres wide and 6 kilometres deep.

#### The Armistice of 11 November 1918

At the beginning of November an armistice was signed in a railway carriage near the French town of Compiègne. The First World War finally came to an end at 11 o'clock on the morning of 11 November 1918.

#### The Reconstruction

(1919 - 1967)

After the war, the vast majority of the refugees returned home. A smaller number - particular Flemish farmers who had fled to France - remained in their adopted countries to build new lives there. In the area around the old front line, Ieper, Diksmuide and numerous villages had been completely destroyed. These 'Verwoeste Gewesten' (Devastated Lands) were given a special status by the post-war government. The first emergency homes were gradually replaced by wooden barracks. Ruins were cleared away and the battlefields were 'cleaned up.' Trenches, shell-holes and craters were filled in. Ammunition was collected and made safe. The old houses and monuments were gradually rebuilt, one by one. The Nieuwerck - an annex to the Cloth Hall in Ieper, now used as part of the town hall - was only completed in 1967. This marked the final end of the so-called Period of Reconstruction.

In 2007 a farmer was killed by the explosion of a 90 year-old shell. The war may have only lasted a single generation, but it will still be many generations before its fatal legacy is finally erased.