
THE WIPERS TIMES

Newsletter of The Royal British Legion Brussels Branch



In an interview with Newsletter coordinator Michael Whitburn, **Count Henri d'Oultremont** spoke of his father and grandfather – two prominent figures in a 'family of warriors'.

Count Henri's grandfather, Major Henri d'Oultremont, died a heroic death at **Tervaete**, on the River Yser, near Diksmuide, on 22 October 1914, in what has been described as nothing less than a suicide mission.

We revisit the **Battle of the Yser** and recount how the battle ended with the flooding of the low-lying plain.

At the west end of the Nave of Westminster Abbey is the **Tomb of the Unknown Warrior**. We explain how the Unknown Warrior was selected and brought back to England on 11 November 1920.

The autobiographical account of **George Beeston's war years** was recently **published as a free e-book by the RBL Brussels Branch**. We report on the presentation of the book by Branch Chair Dennis Abbott at a launch event organised by the Belgium Battles and Books Club.

More than 55,000 troops fought the **Battle of the Bulge** and there are **666 burials at the Commonwealth War Cemetery at Hotton**. We report on the **annual RBL commemorations at Hotton and nearby La Roche-en-Ardenne**.

Branch member **Alain Brogniez** has contributed an illustrated article about **Second World War British Army badged belts**. **Ann Morley** recounts her visit to **the Longest Yarn**.

Finally, we focus on the **6th Bermondsey Battalion** whose representative for Belgium attended the commemorations at Hotton & La Roche.

We would like to thank all Committee and Branch members who helped us put together this issue of the Newsletter. We hope all of you will enjoy reading it and look forward, as ever, to your reactions and suggestions.

Michael Whitburn & Scott Wilson, Newsletter coordinators

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Contributions

If you wish to make a suggestion or propose an article for the next ***Wipers Times***, please send an email to Michael Whitburn (michael.whitburn@vub.be).

Website and social media

 Bookmark our **website**: <https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/>

 Join us on **Facebook** [Royal British Legion Brussels](#)

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 See our photographs on **Instagram** [royalbritishlegion.bxl](#)

Back issues

Back issues of the ***Wipers Times*** filled with news and stories relevant to our branch can be downloaded from the website.

A word from the Chair



Dear friends,

As the number of surviving Second World War “Golden Generation” veterans sadly dwindles, I’m sometimes asked whether this means the Royal British Legion still matters.

A lot of people think the RBL is all about commemorating the past – and this is certainly an important aspect of our role.

At our recent ceremony in Hotton, close to the 81st anniversary of VE Day, we remembered in particular the oft-overlooked British troops who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Battle of the Bulge.



The RBL delegation in Hotton: (from left to right): Andrée, Freddy, Laura, Yvon, Olivier, Colonel Nick Thom, Alain, Dennis, Melvyn, Bruce

One speaker highlighted the importance of “passeurs de memoire”, that is the keepers of memory, who take responsibility for sharing the stories of the past with today’s generations.

For me, this matters more than ever when we witness present-day conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and elsewhere. It sometimes appears that a few of today’s leaders have forgotten the lessons of history. Or at least need reminding occasionally.

This was very much the message of Philippe Courard, the Mayor of Hotton, in his unexpectedly political speech at the memorial outside the church.

It may have raised a fair few eyebrows, but he certainly made a point worth making.

The RBL also embodies this duty of remembrance and it is one that we must never become complacent about.

It's vital that, as branches, we do more to communicate that the RBL is not only here to remember the veterans of the First and Second World Wars.

Funds raised through the Poppy Appeal and our subscriptions also provide financial and emotional support for veterans suffering from the consequences of their service in more recent conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan. This might, for example, be due to PTSD, physical injuries or self-medicating.

It always pains me to see veterans who are homeless or struggling. The Legion helps wherever it can, often working in coordination with other agencies. We can never do enough for these veterans and their families. It's also worth stressing that serving personnel can also receive support from the RBL.

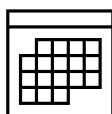
Long may this continue.

I was shocked to learn of a spate of recent thefts from Belgian war cemeteries. Plaques on graves have been removed en masse, most likely because they contain copper which is prized for its resale value. The perpetrators are beyond words.

I have been busy updating and editing our Brussels branch history, with new content and photographs. The work is still ongoing but it's always satisfying when I discover something new. For example, I found out that one of our illustrious post-war committee members, Vice-Chair Lieutenant Colonel Edward N. Ackroyd MC, was the father of the founder of The Bulletin magazine, Monique Ackroyd. Her son John sent me a picture of his grandfather and told me more about Edward's secret role in intelligence. If you have a story or photo that you feel we should include, please get in touch. The plan is to publish the branch history as a free e-book later this year.

Dennis, Brussels.Chair@rbl.community

Dates for the diary



Check the calendar on the website for new and changed events.

<https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/calendar/>

June

5 June	First Friday of the Month, social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren
13-14 June	Battlefield visit: Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, France
20 June	Annual branch commemoration at Evere/Brussels CWGC cemetery, with the Military Wives Choir. Please arrive by 11.15am
30 June	Battle of the Somme 110th anniversary. Gala dinner (30 June), Royal Picardie Hotel, reservations via Somme Branch SommeBR3530@hotmail.com.

July

1 July	Thiepval commemoration (1 July, 11.45am) in the presence of HRH the Princess Royal, Ambassador Sir Thomas Drew KCMG and RBL National President Vice Admiral Paul Bennett CB OBE
3 July	First Friday of the Month, social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren

August

7 August	First Friday of the Month, social, from 6.30pm. The Foyer, De Warandepoort, Markt 7b, 3080 Tervuren
22 August	Liberty walk: Heuvelland

Situations vacant

Web Coordinator and Poppy Appeal Organiser

Our **web coordinator** Scott Wilson, who puts together this excellent newsletter with Michael Whitburn, will step down from this issue. If you would like to volunteer to take over from Scott, please get in touch.

And, just a reminder, we are also looking for a **Poppy Appeal Organiser** to take up the reins from David Bizley.

Scott and David have both done a wonderful job and their contribution will be greatly missed. If you would like to find out more about what the roles entail, please drop Dennis a line at Brussels.Chair@rbl.community.

Une Famille de Guerriers

Author: Michael Whitburn in interview with Count Henri d'Oultremont

The following article is largely based on an interview of Count Henri d'Oultremont.

Newsletter coordinators Michael Whitburn and Scott Wilson wish to express their sincerest gratitude to Henri d'Oultremont on behalf of the members of the Brussels branch of the Royal British Legion.

Henri d'Oultremont (who turns 101 in May) is a life member of the Brussels branch. He joined in 2002.

He was interviewed for the Brussels branch once before, by Chair Dennis Abbott ([Spotlight on Count Henri d'Oultremont](#)).

This more recent interview was conducted in French, over coffee and biscuits, by Michael Whitburn at Henri d'Oultremont's home in Woluwé-Saint-Lambert (Brussels), on 10 February 2026.

The exchange was translated into English by Michael Whitburn.

Henri d'Oultremont's father

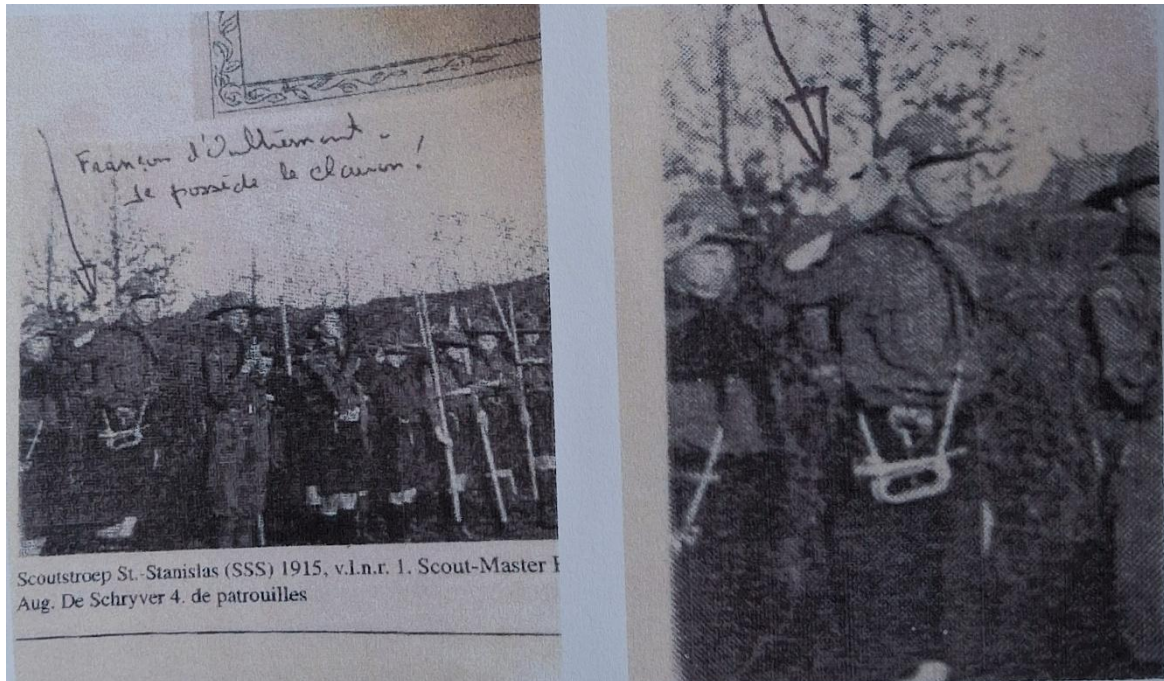
My father, Count François d'Oultremont, was born in 1901, the son of Major Count Henri François d'Oultremont, who died at Tervaete on the Yser River on 22 October 1914, while leading his men of the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Grenadier Regiment into battle.

When my grandfather was killed in action, my widowed grandmother left the country with her two children: her son François (my father) and her daughter Alice. I believe they all moved to Switzerland.

Soon after they arrived, my grandmother heard that Belgian Jesuits had founded a school in England, at St Leonards-on-Sea, a town and seaside resort near Hastings. The school welcomed young Belgian students who wished to complete their studies.

My father left his family for St Leonards, where he would remain until he enlisted and returned to Belgium; *"et la dernière année de la guerre, il était au front, dans un régiment d'Artillerie"*.

At St Leonards, there was a scout troop associated with the school, and my father was their bugler.



François d'Oultremont on parade with his bugle (left) & close up

The bugle has remained in the family and now belongs to my son (Count Juan d'Oultremont). We also have my father's leather belt that was later worn by myself, my children and my grandchildren.



Bugle & leather belt

My father was a soldier all his life. When he married in 1925, he was an Artillery Lieutenant and my parents lived in Liège.

In 1940, when the war broke out, he commanded half a regiment of recalled reservists.

After the 18-day campaign (aka the Battle of Belgium that resulted in the Army's surrender on 28 May 1940), my father was taken prisoner. He remained a prisoner in Germany for the duration of the war.

When he was finally able to return to Belgium, he took an active part in reorganising his regiment and served as Commanding Officer during the occupation of Germany by the Allied Powers.

The only person I knew who was also at St Leonards was Auguste De Schryver, who became one of Belgium's most influential post-war politicians. He was also in the scouts at St Leonards together with François d'Oultremont.

Henri d'Oultremont's grandfather

The suicide mission of Major Count Henri d'Oultremont and his Grenadiers

Unlike in France, Belgian soldiers were seldom ordered to launch an attack if it was doomed before it even started. There were however many painful occasions when sparing soldiers' lives was certainly not a priority.

In October 1914, Major Henri d'Oultremont, then aged 48, was at Tervaete, a strategic position on the River Yser.

He was in command of the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Grenadier Regiment who were deployed along the Yser.

The Tervaete corner had been shelled for two days.

Protected by this bombardment, three German battalions supported by a company of 12 machine-guns managed to cross the Yser via an emergency bridge and occupy the entire bend of the river at Tervaete.

On 22 October, Lieutenant-Colonel Lefebure ordered my grandfather to lead a counter-offensive and push the enemy back beyond the Yser.

The following exchange is then said to have taken place between the two men:

Col. Lefebure: "Major, you will attack the enemy with your Grenadiers."

Major d'Oultremont: "Very well, Colonel, but may I remind you that there have already been three assaults by the infantry, all of which were unsuccessful. The enemy position is too well defended, by too many machine guns. Another assault would be suicidal."

Colonel: "I say, d'Oultremont, you wouldn't by any chance be afraid, would you?"

Major: "I was not thinking of myself, Colonel. I was referring to my men. Do you intend to maintain the order, Colonel?"

Colonel: "An order is an order, Major", whereupon my grandfather famously replied:

"Colonel, then you are about to see how a d'Oultremont can die."



Major Henri d'Oultremont

The battle began at 3pm and the final assault took place at 6.15pm, 250 metres from the Yser.

The grenadiers followed their commander and bravely marched towards the enemy. When Major d'Oultremont was shot in the knee, he struggled to get back on his feet. A second shot brought him down, but he continued to wave his baton above his head to encourage his troops.



Major Henri d'Oultremont leads the charge

Two grenadiers rushed over to protect and support him, thereby risking their own lives. One of them was shot and was immediately replaced. A bullet to the head left Major d'Oultremont lying motionless. Several of his men died while trying to carry their commander back to safety.

Heavy fighting continued throughout the night.

When the retreat was finally sounded, three hundred Grenadiers had lost their lives and the counter-offensive had failed.

Not only had the enemy not been pushed back; they had actually gained ground and reinforced their position.



The painting representing Major Henri d'Oultremont leading the charge at Tervaele is displayed in the former Officers' Mess at the Club Prince Albert in Brussels



Hand-to-hand combat before the retreat was sounded

It was the deliberate flooding of the Yser plain that would finally drive the enemy back across the river.



Monument at Tervaete

A monument at Tervaete honours the memory of Henri d'Oultremont and the men under his command who died in the heroic counter-offensive during the Battle of the Yser.

Henri d'Oultremont's account of his grandfather's heroic death at Tervaete ended with a smile as he concluded:

"C'est vrai: nous sommes une famille de guerriers." (It's true, we are a family of warriors).

For more see:

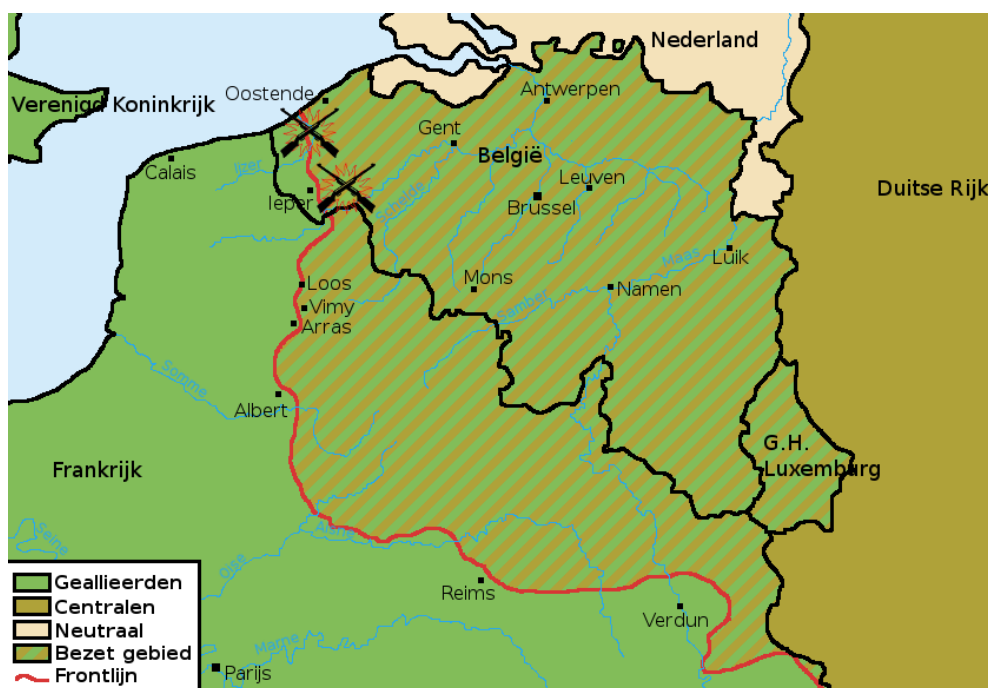
<http://www.wo1.be/nl/geschiedenis/slagen-in-de-westhoek/het-ijzerfront/22-oktober-1914>

http://1914-1918.be/major_doultremont.php

The Battle of the Yser

The Belgian Defensive Line at the Yser River

From 14 October 1914 the Belgian troops began to dig in along a defensive line in the Yser River sector. The French Fusiliers Marins brigade dug in at Diksmuide. The line stretched for 35km from the sea at Nieuwpoort to the village of Zuyschoote about 13km north of Ieper (Ypres). Two French territorial divisions (87th and 89th) arrived in the area and moved into position between Diksmuide and Boezinge, where the Ieper Canal joins the Yser Canal.



Map of the Battle of the Yser

Most of this defensive line from Nieuwpoort to Dixmuide was on a polder, i.e. reclaimed land from the sea and much of it below sea level. The polder was criss-crossed by ditches and water courses, and the water table was only a few feet below the topsoil. The defensive line was established using 'high ground' comprising two sets of embankments rising some 6-10 feet above the flat reclaimed plain. There were three crossings over the Yser Canal and river at Steenstraat, Drie Grachten and Nieuwpoort.

The British Royal Navy provided artillery support from the sea to assist the Belgian left flank.

The flooding of the Yser Plain

The German IVth Army advanced to the Yser River having captured Brugge (Bruges) on 14 October.

Ostend and Zeebrugge were captured on 15 October as the German Army made its way towards the port of Dunkirk. The Battle of the Yser, the name given to the battle between the Belgian and German forces, formed the final phase of the so-called 'Race to the Sea'.

After several days of fierce fighting both sides were exhausted. The Belgian defenders made a decision to open the sluice gates at Nieuwpoort to allow the tidal seawater to enter the flat reclaimed land between the banks of the Yser River and the Nieuwpoort-Diksmuide railway line.

By deliberately flooding this land it was hoped that German plans for a breakthrough would be stopped.

At high water on the evening of 28 October, and after an unsuccessful attempt the previous night, the Belgian engineers and lock-keeper Hendrik Geeraert opened the gates of the old Veurne lock at Nieuwpoort. This allowed the sea to inundate the land between the western bank of the Yser and the embankment of the Diksmuide-Nieuwpoort railway.



Despite rising water levels, the Germans continued to make attacks on the Belgian line but by 31 October 1914 the Battle of the Yser was over, and the possibility of any further German advances had been stopped.

King Albert moved his headquarters to De Panne where they were to remain for the duration of the war.

The German Army subsequently held occupied territory along the Belgian coast from Zeebrugge to Nieuwpoort for exactly four years from October 1914 to October 1918.

For more see:

<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/battles/yser/yser-battle.htm>

https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2014/10/23/inundatie_van_oktober1914ijzervlakteonderwater-1-2127408/

<https://wo1.at-site.be/welkom.php>

First World War casualties and the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey

The First World War resulted in an estimated 15 to 22 million deaths (military and civilian) and over 21 million wounded. A tragic feature of the conflict was the sheer number of casualties who were never identified or whose bodies were never recovered, leaving hundreds of thousands 'missing' or buried as 'unknowns'.

In Belgium alone, 102,497 Commonwealth war dead have a known grave while 102,336 are listed as missing. The Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres commemorates 54,896 Commonwealth soldiers whose bodies were never identified or found.

Even today, remains are still found in Belgium and France during construction work or archaeological digs, and rededication ceremonies are held to replace 'unknown' headstones with named ones.

See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties

The Unknown Warrior was buried at Westminster Abbey in 1920, representing all service personnel who were killed in war and had no known grave.

At the west end of the Nave is the grave of the Unknown Warrior, whose body was brought from France to be buried in the Abbey on 11 November 1920.

The grave, which also contains soil from France, is covered by a slab of black Belgian marble from a quarry near Namur. It bears the following inscription:

BENEATH THIS STONE RESTS THE BODY
OF A BRITISH WARRIOR
UNKNOWN BY NAME OR RANK
BROUGHT FROM FRANCE TO LIE AMONG
THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS OF THE LAND
AND BURIED HERE ON ARMISTICE DAY
11 NOV 1920, IN THE PRESENCE OF
HIS MAJESTY KING GEORGE V



Grave Unknown Warrior, Westminster Abbey

https://www.nam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-11/abbeyknave_half.jpg

How was the Unknown Warrior selected?

The body was chosen from unknown British servicemen exhumed from four battle areas in the Aisne, the Somme, Arras and Ypres.

The remains were brought to the chapel at St. Pol-sur-Ternoise, near Arras, on the night of 7 November 1920. The General Officer in charge of troops in France and Flanders, Brigadier

General Louis John Wyatt, together with Colonel Edward Gell, entered the chapel, where the bodies on stretchers were covered by Union Flags.

Brigadier Wyatt selected one and the two officers placed it in a plain coffin and sealed it.

In the morning, the body was escorted to Boulogne. The next day the coffin was placed inside another which had been sent over specially from England. It was made of two-inch thick oak from a tree that had grown in Hampton Court Palace Garden, lined with zinc. It was covered with a flag that had been used as an altar cloth during the War.

The coffin plate bore the inscription 'A British Warrior who fell in the Great War 1914-1918 for King and Country'.

The destroyer HMS Verdun, whose ship's bell was presented to the Abbey and now hangs near the tomb, transported the coffin to Dover. It was then taken by train to Victoria Station in London where it rested overnight.

For more see:

<https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/unknown-warrior-mystery-solved>

<https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/unknown-warrior>



*Soldiers exhume body on the Western Front, 1919
(National Army Museum <https://collection.nam.ac.uk>)*



The coffin is carried onto HMS Verdun, Boulogne, 10 November 1920 (National Army Museum <https://collection.nam.ac.uk>)

The Bed by Poet Laureate Simon Armitage (excerpt):

Among drowsing poets and dozing saints
the tall white candles are vigilant sentries
presenting arms with stiff yellow flames;
so nobody treads on the counterpane,
but tiptoeing royal brides in satin slippers
will dress and crown you with luminous flowers.

All this for a soul
without name or rank or age or home, because you
are the son we lost, and your rest is ours.

Simon Robert Armitage (born 26 May 1963) is an English poet, playwright, musician and novelist. He was appointed Poet Laureate on 10 May 2019. He is professor of poetry at the University of Leeds.

See: <https://thesomme.blog/2020/11/11/two-wonderful-poet-laureate-poems/>

100th Anniversary of the Last Post in 2028

Article suggested for inclusion in the Newsletter by branch member Martin Banks

A highly symbolic First World War milestone is approaching.

The date is 2 July 2028, which will mark the 100th anniversary of the first time The Last Post was sounded at the Menin Gate at Ieper (Ypres) in Flanders.

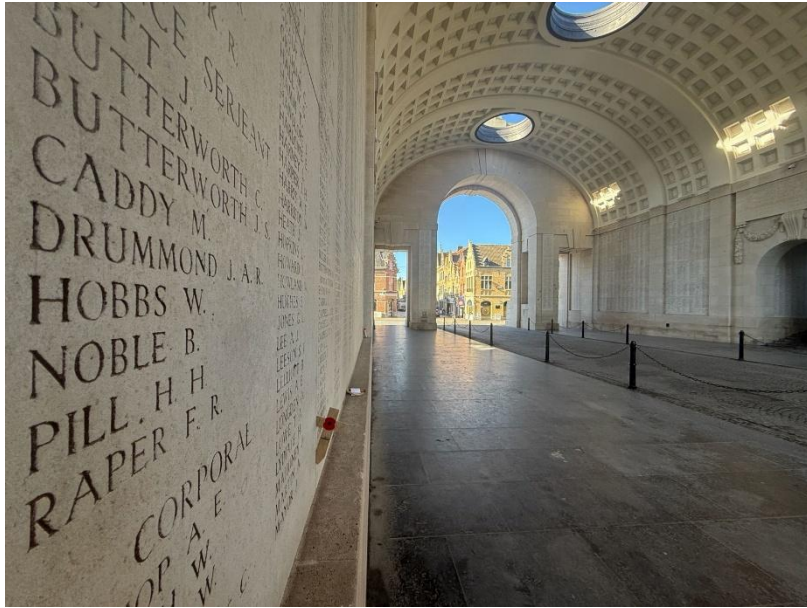
The event is over two years away, but plans are already well underway for an unusual commemoration.

To honour the 54,896 Commonwealth soldiers whose names are inscribed on 60 panels of Portland stone within the Hall of Memory, each name will be read out.

Come rain or shine, the reading out of names will proceed without interruption, day and night, for an estimated three days; and everyone will be given the opportunity to read out one of the names.



Menin Gate, Ypres



Hall of Memory, Menin Gate



Panels of Portland stone, Menin Gate

During the First World War, Ypres was at the centre of the Western Front and the Ypres Salient bulge in the Allied lines. The area around Ypres was the scene of major battles including the devastating, mud-soaked Battle of Passchendaele in 1917, with a total of over one million casualties. It was also at Ypres on 22 April 1915 that lethal gas was used for the first time in the war.

The Last Post is a historic British Army bugle call, dating from the 1790s, that originally signalled the end of the day's tasks and the security of camp. It evolved into a poignant funeral tribute, representing a final farewell and the end of a soldier's earthly labours.

It is featured in Remembrance Sunday, Anzac Day and other military funerals worldwide.

Since 1928, The Last Post has been sounded every evening at 8pm in Ypres by volunteer buglers from the Last Post Association and was only interrupted during the second German occupation of Belgium from 1940 to 1944, when the ceremony was continued at Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, England.



Last post buglers

Benoît Mottrie, chair of the Last Post Association, said, "The 100-year anniversary of the Last Post falls on a Sunday so we are turning it into a special commemorative weekend."

"On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, we are organising numerous activities, events and ceremonies. Everyone will be welcome at this centenary celebration: the Association's members from around the world, various dignitaries, but above all the people of Ieper themselves."

The historic milestone will be celebrated internationally by Ypres, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and the Last Post Association.

Mottrie says it is important to give everyone the opportunity to read out a name, adding: "To this end, we're appealing to residents of Ypres, schools, people from abroad, and family members of the names on the gate."

"The reading will be continuous, so the names will also resound throughout the night. Everything will be strictly timed. People from all over the world will be able to follow the entire process via livestreaming. *Westtoer* and the city of Ypres will also be involved; we will make it something special."

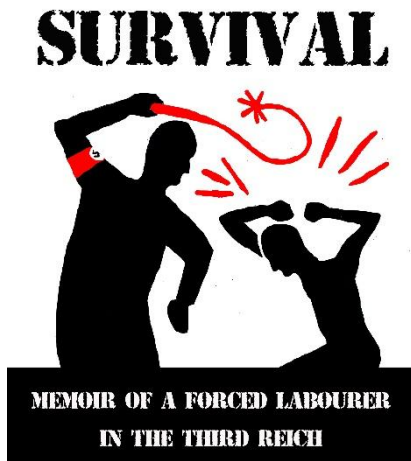
Special activities are planned throughout the weekend in the centre of Ypres, a city that was all but obliterated by constant shelling during the First World War.

On Friday and Saturday, there will be parades and events at the Grote Markt, followed by a traditional Last Post in the evening. The ceremony for Sunday afternoon is planned to commemorate the centennial.

Details will follow soon. In collaboration with the In Flanders Fields Museum, there will be an exhibition to celebrate the centenary of the Last Post Association.

Source: Westtoer - <https://www.westtoer.be>

Publication of *Survival* by George Beeston



GEORGE BEESTON

As previewed in the January issue of the Newsletter, *Survival: Memoir of a Forced Labourer in the Third Reich*, an autobiographical account by the late George Beeston, was recently published as a free e-book by Brussels branch.

After the Second World War, George joined the British Army, serving for many years in the Royal Engineers.

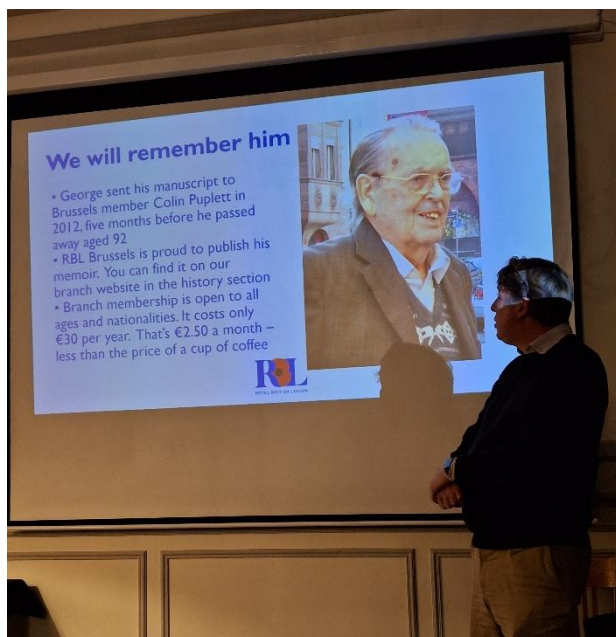
He offered the manuscript to the branch five months before he passed away on 4 June 2012, aged 92.

Unfortunately, contact with his family was lost and the publication was shelved until Chair Dennis Abbott managed to track down George's son John, who gave the branch permission to release his father's memoir.

On 13 March 2026, Dennis gave a presentation of the book at a launch event organised by the Belgium Battles and Books Club at the *Fraternelle des Agents Parachutistes* in Brussels.



Dennis with retired US Army Colonel William Bache, founder of the Belgium Battles and Books Club



“It is an account like no other,” said Dennis.

“That George survived his ordeal at the hands of the Nazis owed much to his never-say-die pluck and, on more than one occasion, miraculous luck. For the RBL, this publication is an honour and a duty.”

The book has since been the subject of articles in EU Today and The Bulletin.

Memoir of a Forced Labourer in the Third Reich, <https://eutoday.net> and

The story of how one brave Belgian survived the horrors of WW2 forced labour, <https://thebulletin.be>).

Forced labour in Germany during the Second World War

During the Second World War, there was a severe shortage of labour in both Germany and Britain as millions of men were mobilised into the armed forces, leaving a void in industry and agriculture.

The occupied countries, including Belgium, were seen as a reservoir of free labour by Germany, which introduced compulsory labour in October 1942.

It was the infamous Fritz Sauckel who was assigned the task of solving the labour shortage problem.

Fritz Sauckel was the General Plenipotentiary for Labour Deployment from March 1942 until the end of the War. He was responsible for the forced deportation and enslavement of millions of foreign workers for the German war effort. He was known for his fanatical dedication to Nazi ideology and for implementing brutal methods to secure labour from occupied territories, particularly in the East.

He was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity at the Nuremberg trials and was executed by hanging on 16 October 1946.

The presiding judge at his trial described Sauckel as the “biggest and most cruel slaveholder since the time of the Pharaohs”.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz_Sauckel

In 1943, the recruitment of forced labourers became systematic. Anyone could be mobilised for work in Germany. Many tried to evade this obligation by going into hiding or joining resistance groups.

It is hard to say exactly how many Belgian civilians were subject to compulsory labour in Germany. The peak of their presence (310,000) was reached in July 1943.

Forced labourers mobilised to support the war economy were detained in labour camps where living conditions were extremely harsh. The luckiest among them were those who worked and lived on a farm.

Source: 6 October 1942. Travail obligatoire, deuxième phase

Auteur: Luyten Dirk (Institution: CegeSoma/Archives de l'État) /belgique-en-guerre/articles/6-octobre-1942-travail-obligatoire-deuxieme-phase.html

(Translated from French by Michael Whitburn)

Download the book at: <https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/history/survival-george-john-beeston/>

Commemorations: 'British Day' at Hotton and La Roche-en-Ardenne, 3 May 2026

Author: Michael Whitburn

Hotton

Surprisingly, at least for those among you who claim 'it never rains at Hotton', this year's commemorations were not blessed with the usual good weather.

Participants were treated to grey skies, light rain and drizzle, and generally gloomy conditions.

It took more, however, than a drop of rain to deter members and friends from attending the events, and many turned up for the Mass at Hotton Church, the Royal British Legion commemoration at the Hotton Commonwealth War Cemetery, and the RBL tribute at the 51st (Highland) Division memorial at La Roche-en-Ardenne.

After morning coffee at the Café Le Jacquemart, opposite the Hotton Church, participants attended the bilingual (and at times trilingual) Mass led by **Père Herman Kusola and Reverend Canon John Wilkinson**, Chaplain of the Royal British Legion Brussels Branch. The Mass was enhanced by the brilliant and moving performance of the Hotton choir.



(above left) Flag bearers including Freddy Roiseux for the branch

(above right) Burgomaster Philippe Courard

(right) Father Herman Kusola and Reverend John Wilkinson



There were readings by **Colonel Nick Thom**, the new UK Defence Attaché for Belgium & Luxembourg, and by branch members **Andrée Ferrant** and **Jean-Pierre Pedé**.

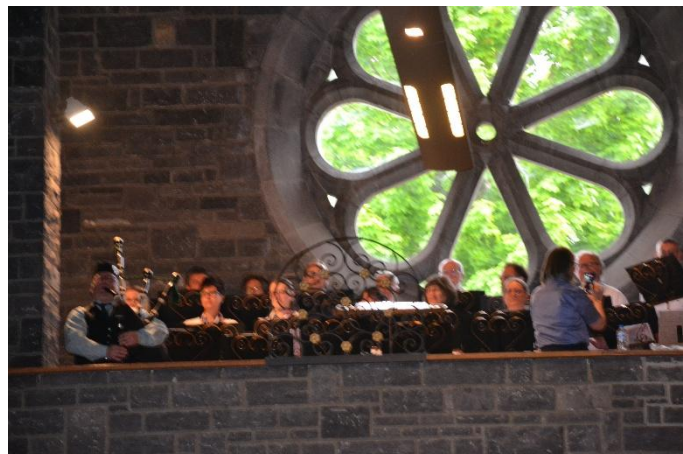


(left) DA Colonel Nick Thom

(below left) Andrée Ferrant

(below right) Jean-Pierre Pedé

(bottom) Hotton choir



Wreaths were laid outside the church, and speeches were delivered including by **Chair Dennis Abbott and DA Colonel Nick Thom**.



Branch Chair Dennis Abbott; DA Colonel Nick Thom

In his address, **Burgomaster Philippe Courard** spoke of the dangerous and divided world we live in and urged all of us to continue to pay tribute to the men and women who lost their lives defending our common values of freedom and democracy, not only in and around Hotton, and the Battle of the Bulge, but in all the battlefields of the Second World War.

Also present this year at Hotton and La Roche was **Nadine Lenssens** (right), who represents the 6th Queens of Bermondsey in Belgium, the Netherlands and France (see further for more details).



Participants formed a procession and proceeded up the hill to the sound of music by *La Fanfare Royale des Joyeux Travailleurs* for the commemoration at the Commonwealth War Cemetery.



More than 55,000 Commonwealth troops fought in the Battle of the Bulge. **The Commonwealth War Cemetery at Hotton contains 666 burials, 21 of them unidentified.**

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has published an excellent article about the battle and the units involved:

<https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/blog/legacy-of-liberation-commonwealth-troops-at-the-battle-of-the-bulge/>



With a little help from wife Laura, Chair Dennis Abbott welcomed the attendees who included Burgomaster Philippe Courard & local dignitaries, a military guard-of-honour, the *Fanfare des Joyeux Travailleurs*, and the *Porte-Drapeaux* including RBL branch Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux.



Nick Thom, Laura and Dennis Abbott

There was a reflection by **DA Colonel Nick Thom**, a reading by young **Barnaby Southworth**, and branch Vice-Chair **Jean-Pierre Pedé** read out (a selection of) the names of the Fallen

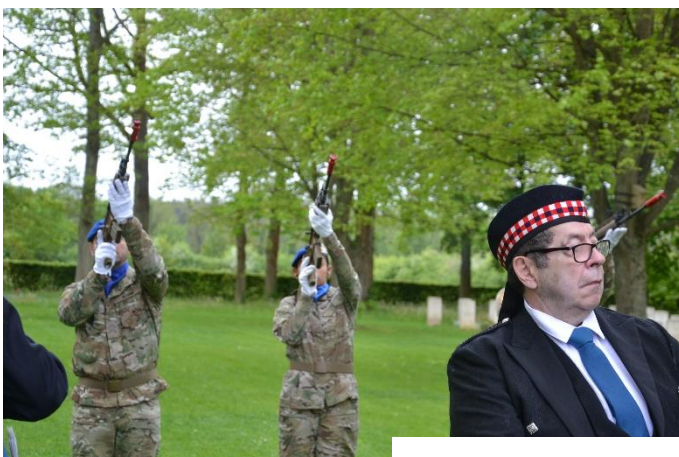


DA Colonel Nick Thom; Barnaby Southworth



Branch member Jean-Pierre Pedé

This was followed by a Rifle Salute, the Last Post, the One-Minute's Silence and Reveille, before wreaths were laid at the foot of the Cross of Sacrifice.



Cemetery rifle salute; Cemetery town band



(above) A most appropriate umbrella

(above right) Burgomaster Philippe Courard and local dignitary on behalf of the town of Hotton

(middle) DA Colonel Nick Thom on behalf of the Embassy

(right) Andrée Ferrant on behalf of the branch

(bottom) Xavier Puppinck, Area Director Central and Southern Europe, Commonwealth War Graves Commission



*(right) Reverend Canon John Wilkinson,
Chaplain RBL Brussels Branch*

(below) Freddy Roiseux lowers the flag



*(below) Branch member Alain Brogniez distributes RBL
crosses*



The commemoration ended with the Commonwealth and Belgian national anthems followed by the distribution of RBL crosses to be placed at the head of the burials.



Hotton Tank Monument



After a hot buffet lunch, a small group of participants travelled the short distance to **La Roche-en-Ardenne** for a commemoration at the **51st Highland Division Memorial**.

Before leaving, Chair Dennis Abbott laid a wreath at the **Hotton Tank Monument** 'in tribute to the gallant soldiers of the 53rd (Welsh) infantry Division and their attached armoured regiments who liberated our towns and villages in January 45 during the Ardennes Offensive'.



La Roche-en-Ardenne

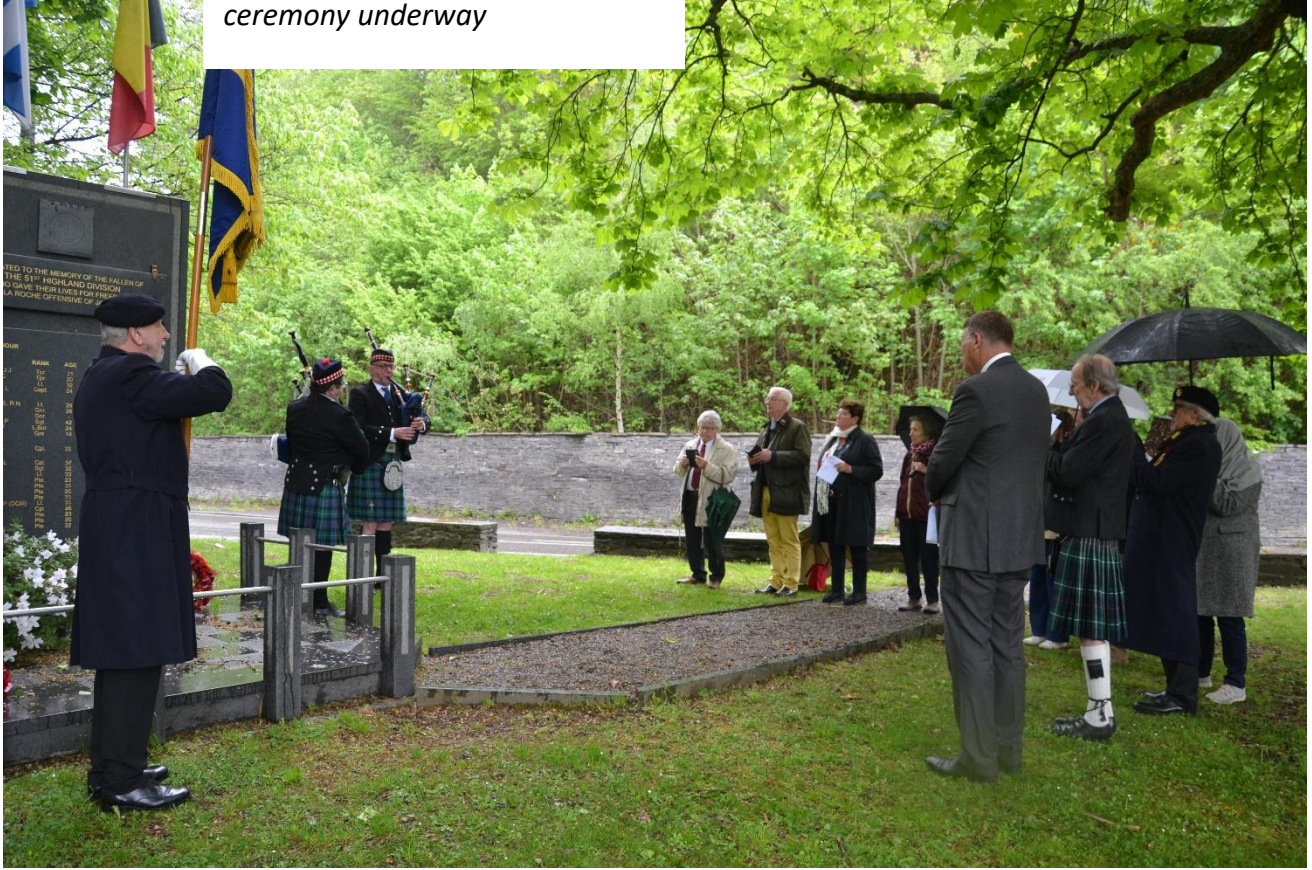
The **memorial above the town of La Roche** commemorates 54 men of the 51st (Highland) Division who lost their lives during the Ardennes Offensive. The 1st Black Watch, supported by the Derbyshire Yeomanry, liberated the town on 11 January 1945.



Standard Bearer Freddy Roiseux with pipers Melvyn Morrison and Bruce Hardie (image: Laura Houlgatte Abbott)



Clockwise: Freddy Roiseux holds the Standard, Alan Puplett and Alisdair Harrison, pipers Melvyn Morrison and Bruce Hardie, the ceremony underway



The Achilles

The Achilles was the British variant of the American M10 Tank Destroyer which saw the 3-inch gun replaced by a more powerful 17 pounder and entered service from mid-1944



The Battle of the Bulge

The 'forgotten' British contribution

In the early hours of 16 December 1944 more than 1,600 German guns opened fire on the American positions in the Belgian Ardennes. This was considered a 'quiet' sector and was defended largely by American troops that had limited combat experience. Suddenly they found themselves under attack from shell-fire, then tanks and then masses of German infantry, including some of the best German troops available in the West.

Operation *Wacht Am Rhein*, later known as 'Autumn Mist', had begun. It was Hitler's bold plan to break through the American positions, push them back from the German border, and re-take the port of Antwerp, stopping vital supplies from coming in.

The German onslaught took the Americans completely by surprise, and in most sectors their lines were overrun, resulting in heavy losses including many prisoners. Some German SS units murdered American prisoners, most notably at Malmedy, and several cases of battlefield atrocities against Belgian civilians also happened at this time. Soon the town of Bastogne was surrounded, where the 82nd and 101st Airborne gallantly held out.

As the situation was critical, British troops from 21st Army Group were sent to support their American allies. Tankers from the 7th Armoured Division, the Desert Rats, who were out on rest suddenly found themselves travelling to the snowbound Ardennes where they took on German tanks.

Paratroopers from 6th Airborne, who had fought on D-Day, were sent in as infantry, and men from the 53rd (Welsh) Division were among many British units that fought here – something that many are unaware of, as The Bulge is often seen as an 'American battle'.



*Men from 1st SS Panzer Division
at the crossroads between St Vith
and Malmedy on 18 December
1944,*

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205195400>

The Battle of the Bulge remains a testament to the collaborative efforts of Allied forces, including the significant contributions made by British and Commonwealth soldiers.

For more see: <https://www.forcesnews.com/promotion/forgotten-british-contribution-battle-bulge>

Second World War British Army badged belts

Author: Alain Brogniez

It was customary for regular soldiers in the British Army to collect badges from different units they had come across during their careers and display them on a trouser belt. Here are three examples:

The first is a khaki money belt privately purchased from a shop or canteen and decorated with Army cap badges and shoulder titles.



The second is a Royal Navy-blue money belt; a common acquisition as most personnel arrived on a theatre of operations by ship, wearing different Army and Air Force cap badges and an Auxiliary Territorial Service (a women's volunteer unit) shoulder title.



The last item is very unusual: it is a Belgian fireman's belt that was given as a souvenir to a British liberator.



6th Bermondsey Battalion (TA)

How I came to represent the 6th Queens of Bermondsey
in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France

Author: Nadine Lenssens

Few people know that *the 6th Queens of Bermondsey* also took part in the Liberation of Ghent in September 1944 along with Polish and Canadian troops.

Originally the 10th (Bermondsey) and 23rd (Rotherhithe) Rifle Volunteer Corps and then the 6th Corps, Surrey Rifle Volunteers, the corps became part of the Queen's in 1882 and was renamed the 3rd Volunteer Battalion in 1883. In 1908, with the creation of the Territorial Force, it was redesignated the 22nd (County of London) Battalion, the London Regiment (The Queen's).

Between 1915 and 1920, it was known as the 1/22nd due to the creation of a second unit known as the 2/22nd. From 1922, it was known as the 22nd London Regiment (The Queen's) and from 1937 as the 6th (Bermondsey) Battalion of The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey).

Between 1939 and 1947, it became the 1/6th Battalion, as a 2/6th Battalion had been created, forming part of 131 Brigade which served in France, North Africa, Italy and Northern Europe. In 1961, it was amalgamated with the 4th and 5th Battalions to form a new 3rd Battalion.

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/baefcc0a-fcfc-444b-b01a-70795c18aad1>

The 131 Brigade, assigned to the 44th (Home Counties) Division, saw extensive service in France at the start of the Second World War, and was later evacuated at Dunkirk in 1940. It later saw service in the North African Campaign in late 1942 at El Alamein and Tunisia, Salerno in Italy, both in late 1943, and the invasion of Normandy and throughout North-west Europe from June 1944 until May 1945.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/131st_Infantry_Brigade_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/131st_Infantry_Brigade_(United_Kingdom))

My father completed military service in 1938 and was called up in 1939. After the 18-day campaign and the surrender of Belgium to Nazi Germany, he spent the war in captivity in the *Sudetenland* (Czechoslovakia).

My mother was forced to work in a biscuit factory, but throughout the war years she passed on useful information to the British.

My grandparents also did what they could to relieve the sufferings of fellow citizens.

After the Liberation of Ghent my family remained in close touch with the British soldiers they had known during the war.

The nine soldiers of the 6th Queens of Bermondsey who died during the Liberation of Ghent are buried in the Canadian cemetery of Adegem, and my husband and I are the graves' patrons.

I felt very honoured when I was asked to become the official representative of the 6th Queens of Bermondsey in Belgium. For me it was a way of continuing what my parents and grandparents had achieved 80 years before.

I have since also become the representative of the 6th Queens of Bermondsey for the Netherlands and France.

Every year, I take part in many ceremonies in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and of course England.



Nadine Lenssens (centre) at the unveiling in Ghent of a restored plaque commemorating the 6th Queens of Bermondsey

The Longest Yarn

Author: Ann Morley

Located circa 30 minutes from the British Memorial at Ver-sur-Mer in Normandy, The Longest Yarn now has its permanent home in the Eglise Saint-Hilaire at Saint-Hilaire-Petitville near Carentan. It has toured the UK and USA and been viewed by more than half a million people already.

Even the tulips in the tub at the church entrance are created from wool. Beautiful!

Eighty one-metre long display cases, originally created for the 80th anniversary of D-Day, each capture a moment from the Battle of Normandy, from the preparation and the storming of the beaches (*below*) to the liberation of Paris, all recreated in knitted or crocheted elements.



French and English language title cards explain the scenes depicted.

The work by the creators is truly excellent and we highly recommend a visit. The ingenuity (e.g., dog hair for smoke) is amazing, and human emotions can certainly be seen on the brave faces.



Many hugely talented people are now working on new creations:



1. A replica jeep.
2. For areas within the church grounds, an English Garden with many beautiful and colourful flowers and hanging baskets.

A second exhibition has been created entitled Britain at War, exploring the social history of the Second World War – how people coped, endured and adapted. This is currently touring the UK at various locations until the end of 2027. Its remaining calendar is as follows:

2026

- 3 June - 4 July - Peterborough Cathedral, Peterborough
- July - Nothe Fort , Weymouth
- August - Gosport Museum and Art Gallery
- September - Welshpool Town Hall
- October - Wrexham
- November - Chorley
- December - Brecon Beacons

2027

- January - Plymouth
- February - Tewkesbury Abbey
- March - TBA
- April - Windsor

- May- Abergavenny
- June - Sheffield Cathedral
- July & August - Battle of Britain Bunker, Uxbridge
- September - Moffat
- October & November - Oxfordshire Soldiers' Museum
- December - TBA

A thoroughly enjoyable visit. A team of very enthusiastic volunteers are hugely welcoming and very knowledgeable regarding the background stories of the teams involved in the making of the scenes.



My personal favourite depicts the ships heading for the Normandy coast (*left*). There is certainly a sense of movement felt by the bow waves in grey.

As of 11 May 2026, the church is open Monday to Saturday from 11am, with the last entry at 4pm. Closed on Sundays.

For more information, please see the website at www.thelongestyarn.com and the Facebook page at [Facebook](#) where the Garden Party for 4 June has just been announced.

THE LONGEST YARN®

Garden Party – 4 Juin

À partir de 11h00

Une petite touche d'Angleterre... en Normandie

Vous êtes chaleureusement invités, en tant que précieux soutiens de The Longest Yarn®, à nous rejoindre pour une journée spéciale marquant le nouveau chapitre de ce projet international, désormais installé fièrement dans sa maison permanente à Carentan.

18h00 – Cérémonie d'Hommage

Un moment simple et émouvant pour honorer les vétérans dont le courage est au cœur de tout ce que nous faisons.

Nous attendons l'arrivée de représentants de la 101st Airborne, ainsi que de vétérans britanniques venant de tout le Royaume-Uni grâce à Taxi Charity for Military Veterans — les célèbres taxis noirs londoniens — aux côtés de vétérans américains, sous réserve de leur santé et de leur voyage.



The Longest Yarn®
Eglise de Saint-Hilaire-Petitville (près de Leclerc),
Carentan-les-Marais, Normandie
www.thelongestyarn.com

Digest



Yves-Gomezée pays tribute to Lancaster Heroes April 19, 2026

This article was taken from our Facebook feed (<https://www.facebook.com/RBLBrussels>).

Written by Jacques Ganty, our committee member Jean-François Husson was present.

Yesterday, we gathered in beautiful sunshine in the Rosette Wood at Yves-Gomezée (Walcourt, Namur) to honour the memory of Duncan, Bates, Smellie, Payne, Barnes, Berry, Speirs, the seven RAF Sergeants who died when their Lancaster plane was shot down on April 17, 1943.

As Chair of the Lancaster Committee, I had the great privilege of presiding over the ceremony along with Ms. Cindy Docq, Chief of the Walcourt Patriotic Associations before a

gathering of 72 guests and 11 flag bearers.

Ms. Docq delivered the official speech about peace and how to achieve it daily.

M. Husson read the names of the Fallen and a poem to commemorate the Fallen. Kim Suurman of SHAPE represented the RAF.

Wreaths were laid by Ms. Christine Poulin, Mayor of Walcourt, M. Husson, on behalf of the Royal British Legion, Major Piette, representing the Military Command of the Province of Namur, M. Scheppers, representing CEACM Brabant Regional, Ms. Docq and M. Husson, on behalf of the Lancaster Committee.

The moment of reflection was accompanied by the Last Post performed by M. Latour, of the fanfare of Yves-Gomezée.

The ceremony ended with the presentation of decorations to MM. Robert Querriau and Sebastian Mouny.

Many thanks to all the associations present, including the delegation St Aubinoise of René Lebrun, and many thanks also to the flag-bearers.

Pease note that the next commemoration will be on Saturday, 17 April 2027.

Your Brussels Branch committee

Branch President		
President	Zoe White	zoezoew@hotmail.com
Branch Officers		
Chair	Dennis Abbott	Brussels.Chair@rbl.community
Vice-Chair	Jean-Pierre Pede	brussels.treasurer@rbl.community
Joint Secretary	Andrée Ferrant	andree.ferrant@hotmail.com
Joint Secretary	Mireille Picron	mireillepicron-lad@hotmail.com
Treasurer	Jean-Pierre Pede	brussels.treasurer@rbl.community
Branch Committee members		
Branch Community Support Representative	Mika-John Southworth	mj@southworth.me
Membership Secretary	Yvon Gilles	Brussels.MemSecretary@rbl.community
Poppy Appeal Organiser	David Bizley	rblbrusselspoppyappeal@gmail.com
Events Coordinator	Mika-John Southworth	mj@southworth.me
Facebook Coordinator	Alain Brogniez	broal.redcoats@skynet.be
Web Coordinator	Scott Wilson	scofranwil@hotmail.com
Newsletter Coordinator	Michael Whitburn	michael.whitburn@vub.be
Committee Member (Namur)	Jean-François Husson	jfr.husson@gmail.com
Youth Officer	Irina Nock Krishnan	irina.krishnan@outlook.com
Branch Chaplain	Rev. Canon John Wilkinson	john.wilkinson@holyltrinity.be
Standard Bearer	Freddy Roiseux	calimerofreddy@hotmail.com

About The Royal British Legion

Patron: His Majesty King Charles III

National President: Vice Admiral (Rtd) Paul Bennett CB OBE.

The Royal British Legion formed on 15 May 1921 bringing together four organisations of the Armed Forces that had established themselves after the First World War.

By 1921, the tradition of a Two Minute Silence had been established. The first Poppy Appeal was held that year, raising over £106,000 to help First World War veterans with employment and housing.

The Legion was established to care for those who suffered as a result of service during the First World War. It has been helping the Armed Forces community and their families ever since.