

Contalmaison 2011

Many who pass through the Haymarket junction and perhaps note the continued absence of the familiar old clock may not be aware that the famous landmark was not placed there simply to mark the time of day but to commemorate the sacrifice made by the brave men of Heart of Midlothian Football Club who served in the 16th Battalion of the Royal Scots in World War 1.

Under the charismatic leadership of Sir George McCrae the men of HMFC were joined by players and supporters of other teams to become what was known as the "Sporting Battalion". On the awful first day of the Somme offensive on 1st July 1916 they penetrated further into enemy lines than any other British Army unit and actually briefly held their objective – the tiny hamlet of Contalmaison.

Their story was in danger of being lost to us all until a young Edinburgh author, Jack Alexander, decided to commit it to print and I would strongly recommend his book "McCrae's battalion" to you all.

Jack did not stop at this but became a leading figure in the campaign to have the men's sacrifice properly commemorated in the fields where they fell and in 2006 on the 90th anniversary of the start of the Somme offensive a Scottish cairn with informative bronze plaques was unveiled in the shadow of the church in the re-built village of Contalmaison. Every year since then a coach has left Waterloo Place for a 5 day "pilgrimage" to the Somme for a Service of Remembrance on the 1st July in the village.

Anyone who knows my husband, Jim, will know of his affection for the Hearts and so it was that this year he showed me the itinerary provided by Jack Alexander and asked if I would be interested in joining the coach party. I was happy to agree to his proposal though I really wasn't sure what to expect and feared that I might be somewhat isolated amongst a bus load of football fans.

This notion was quickly dispelled when we boarded the coach and I discovered that our party included a Colour Party and piper from the Royal Scots, four young soldiers recovering from injuries received in Afghanistan, four schoolgirls (with teachers) who were doing projects about WW1, several people of my own generation who had relatives that served in the Royal Scots, a past captain of Hearts, representatives from Falkirk F.C. and Raith Rovers F.C. and a number of Hearts fans (some of whom Jim knew).

After a pleasant crossing from Hull to Zeebrugge we headed south to our base in the beautiful city of Amiens stopping for refreshment at Arras. On the way south we also stopped in a small village and walked a few hundred yards down a farm track to a point where Jack graphically described the heroic rescue of a wounded British officer by Lance Corporal William Angus. The bravery displayed by Willie was awe inspiring and we were delighted to learn that he not only survived the incident but was awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry. The only disappointment is that the site of his deed is not marked in any way.

Our hotel in Amiens was very comfortable and only a short distance from the very imposing Gothic Cathedrale Notre-Dame and the main shopping and eating quarter of the city.

An early rise saw us head for Contalmaison and the ceremony at the cairn. Under glorious skies Reverend David Sutherland, minister of the Scottish Kirk in Albert, led us in singing Psalm 46 and “The Lord’s My Shepherd” followed by a short prayer and a reading from Matthew’s Gospel.

This was followed by the laying of wreaths, the reading of some very moving lines of verse, the singing (by the composer) of a song about the Hearts lads who never came back to Tynecastle, the sounding of the last post and a final benediction. All in all a very emotional but by no means sombre ceremony.

Thereafter it was into the village hall for a superb buffet meal and a few speeches where the French attempted some English and some of our party aired their schoolboy French – with varying degrees of success. After a return to our hotel to freshen up we headed to a “Sound and Light” show in the village of Pozieres which saw a re-enactment of the raising of McCrae’s Battalion amongst other stories from WW1. This was a hugely impressive effort by the locals spoiled only by Baltic weather conditions.

The following day we visited a number of small Commonwealth Grave sites as well as the hugely impressive Thiepval Memorial and the South African Memorial. Stiff upper lips were maintained throughout but at the last stop on our way back north one of our company, Antony (who had travelled from Canada to be with us), stood behind a grave and told the amusing but ultimately tragic story of Alex Cunningham. Just before laying his wreath Antony told us that Alex was his uncle. For some reason everyone caught their breath and our piper struggled to play his lament. I don’t know if it was just the release of pent up emotion resulting from what we had seen and heard over the previous days but there was not a dry eye amongst the company and not a word was spoken for a good few minutes.

Our last stop before the ferry was the beautiful town of Ypres where we visited the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing (amongst them Jim’s great uncle Tom) and the very impressive WW1 museum in the old Cloth Hall.

Amongst all this history there was one thing that impressed me about the here and now – the spirit of the four young soldiers who shared our experiences. Of the four only one was going to return to active service but there was no bitterness in the other three. Despite one having had the left side of his face rebuilt after a bomb blast (minus an eye) and one spending much of the journey flat on the floor of the bus due to a broken back they were all positive about their futures and were a credit to themselves, their generation and their families.

I could say so much more about how I enjoyed the trip but perhaps the simplest way is to tell you that I have suggested to Jim that we go back again next year and, if we are spared, on the 2016 trip which will, of course, mark the centenary of the Somme offensive.

