

3 A Brief History of Great War Archaeology on the Western Front

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The Great War of 1914-1918 was a time of major upheaval and change throughout Europe and the world. The four year conflict left millions dead and changed parts of the landscape of France and Belgium forever. The scars of battle are still prevalent today in the form of trenches, craters and damage to buildings; it is these scars the modern day battlefield archaeologist hopes to explore and further understand. This article intends to give a rough guide to the history of archaeological practices carried out on the Western Front.

A massive amount of data is available for the study of the Great War in a historical sense. Data from the Official Histories down to the letters and diaries of private soldiers exists for study and are readily available. The problem that lies within this data set is that it is subjective in that it only records army movements (as in the Official Histories) or how a particular person was feeling about a certain situation (as in the diaries). What this data rarely covers is the minutiae of every day life of the soldiers and the daily routine of trench life. This is where Great War archaeology bridges the gap in an attempt to understand the Great War from another perspective.

Great War archaeology had been in existence since the very outbreak of the war with the creation of the longest section faces ever known with the digging of the trenches by the opposing armies. These resulted in archaeological trenches running some 500 miles from the Belgian coast to the border of France and Switzerland and in doing so uncovered more archaeological remains than ever seen before or since. Obviously the very nature of the recording of these discoveries varied through the need for soldiers to get under cover as soon as possible. Having said that, there were instances where archaeological discoveries were treated in a manner respecting their importance to the understanding of antiquity. One of the more outstanding examples is that of Bucy-le-Long, where German soldiers excavating communication trenches in February 1915 happened upon a 'Gaulish' cemetery. The local commander realised the importance of this discovery and set a volunteer to work on excavating and recording the remains. In total, thirty two tombs of the La Tne period were recorded. The site was investigated again in the 1970s and the total number of excavated tombs was brought to around three hundred and fifty. The thirty two tombs excavated in 1915 were a small part of the cemetery that was actually destroyed by quarrying that led to the site's 'rediscovery' in the 1970s.

There was a period immediately after the war (1919) that ran all the way up to the 1990s, in which there was no academic approach to the archaeology of the Great War, so to speak. Immediately after the war the old battlefields were reconstructed as people started to make their way back to their former lives and properties. As this went on, the precursor to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (the Imperial War Graves Commission) scoured the battlefields in search parties in an attempt to locate and rebury the missing soldiers. This is now described as forensic archaeology, but at the time it was an official duty to respect the remains of the fallen.



Figure 1 – Author discovering wooden trench boarding, Ypres 2010 (Image Copyright – Alex Sotheran)

Another development during this time was the burgeoning collector's field. Military objects taken from the old battlefields quickly became collector items and were surreptitiously gathered to feed this growing demand. Human remains that would be uncovered were quickly reburied with no ceremony or attempt to rename. In France and Belgium the local archaeological authorities did not recognise the battlefields as worthy of archaeological investigation except in very rare cases, such as the TGV line that ran across the Great War battlefields to Paris. By the 1980s local French and Belgian enthusiasts along with a few British counterparts began amateur attempts at archaeological excavations on the Western Front. These groups took their work seriously, even if it had little academic merit, as can be seen by the publication of *Battlefield Archaeology* by John Laffin in 1987.

Within the 1990s a new approach had been developed within the field of this amateur battlefield archaeology. The loose knit groups of amateurs began banding together and the amount of excavations quickened in pace. In France archaeological excavations were mainly carried out by professional archaeologists as part of other archaeological works when Great War remains were encountered. This shift happened differently in Belgium where amateur groups tended to be more historical based rather than archaeological based. The largest group of amateurs in Belgium, known as the Diggers, carried out excavations under the license of the archaeological authorities in Flanders. These were strictly amateur excavations and a documentary called *Battlefield Scavengers* brought their activities to a wider audience. It also scandalised their activities in the British press and calls for a parliamentary enquiry were heard.

In France, however, the approach remained pragmatic and during this time professionally led excavations were carried out under the responsibility of the

Direction Regionale des Affaires Culturelles (DRAC). DRAC has a responsibility to control a region's total archaeological heritage, much in the same way as the British County Archaeologists operate. In 1991, excavations at Saint-Rmy-la-Calonne recovered twenty one French soldiers, one of whom was the novelist Alain-Fournier. Other sites of interest excavated by the French archaeologists at this time include the twenty four Royal Fusiliers recovered at Monchy-Le-Preux, German remains from near Gavrelle and the Grimsby Chums at Le Point du Jour.

By the end of the 1990s, Belgian battlefield archaeology had stalled with the negative publicity of the Diggers' activities in the British press. A solution was needed and in 2003 the Department of First World War Archaeology was inaugurated as part of the wider Institute of Archaeological Heritage (IAP). This development went hand in hand with the A19 project, a proposed road scheme that ran across old battlefields outside Ypres. This scheme was subsequently stopped due to the sensitive nature of the ground which the road ran over, and was only possible through the work of the Department.



*Figure 2 – '08 webbing with cartridges attached, discovered by author, Ypres 2010
(Image Copyright – Alex Sotheran)*

Back in France, the early 2000s saw the development of what became known as 'No Man's Land' (NML): a collection of professional archaeologists, historians and other interested parties. Working primarily at Auchonvillers tea rooms to excavate and reconstruct a communication trench and to discover if the cellar of the original building had been used as a dressing station, this team went from strength to strength. Work with the BBC at Serre showed an attempt to discover Wilfred Owen's dugout. Instead they recovered three sets of remains (one British, two German), leading to further television work. Two series of *Finding the Fallen* were commissioned by a Canadian production company

(YAP Films) and a one off special. During this time the team excavated no less than twelve battlefield sites: namely; Serre, Loos, Beaumont, Bixschoote and Forward Cottage (near Ypres), Hill 70 (near Loos), Moreuil Wood, Courcellette, Gheluvelt and Bournal Wood, Hanon Wood and Monchy Le Preux. The team were also asked to help excavations in a cross community project from Northern Ireland headed by the Somme Association of Belfast. This involved bringing volunteers from Northern Ireland and using the expertise of NML members to excavate the frontline trench system that the 36th (Ulster) Division had fought from during the battle of the Somme. The premise of this ongoing excavation was education and interpretation, with the excavations being reconstructed using period techniques to give the visiting public a chance to see how the trenches would have appeared. NML are also involved in on going excavations at Plug Street near Messines in Belgium.

Alongside NML there exist smaller groups who also operate in Belgium and France. One of the older groups is the Durand Group whose main interest is in exploring the underground tunnel systems of the Great War. A labyrinth of tunnels was created during 1914 and 1918 to carry soldiers to the front but were also used as explosive mine shafts. Many of these still exist and occasionally 'sink holes' appear without warning in farmers' fields (sometimes under houses!). The Durand Group use their combined experiences to map and record these subterranean features. GUARD based in Glasgow University have also run excavations on the Western Front, along with the historian Peter Barton, one of which has been the feature of a Time Team Special. Oxford Archaeology also carried out excavations at the mass grave of Fromelles which in turn led to the creation of the newest Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemetery. These excavations involved the taking and tracing of DNA to identify the fallen soldiers to their modern Australian descendents.

Hopefully this piece will have demonstrated that there is a lot of archaeological activity that is ongoing on the Western Front in France and Belgium, some of this beginning during the war itself. This is only a taster of the archaeological work that has been carried out and it is suggested that anyone interested in following up this article use the suggested reading list that follows. The approach to Great War archaeology began, at best, as an amateur endeavour of collectors but has grown beyond these as a discipline in its own right. Taking modern archaeological techniques and applying them to the battlefields of the Western Front, archaeologists can hope to gain hitherto unseen and unexplored knowledge of the conduct of the war.

Suggested further reading and resources

- Brown, M. & Osgood, R. (2009). *Digging up Plugstreet*. Yeovil: Haynes
- De Meyer, M. & Pype, P. (2004). *The A19 Project: Archaeological Research at Cross Roads*. Flanders: AWA Publications.
- Desfosses, Y. Jacques, A. & Prilaux, G. (2009). *Great War Archaeology*. Rennes: Editions Ouest-France.
- Discovery Communications, Inc. (2005). *Finding the Fallen*. [DVD]
- Robertshaw, A. & Kenyon, D. (2008). *Digging the Trenches: the archaeology of the Western Front*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military.

- Saunders, N.J. (2007). *Killing Time: Archaeology and the First World War*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing.
- Summers, J., et al. (2010). *Remembering Fromelles: A New Cemetery for a New Century*. Maidenhead: CWGC Publishing.
- Association for World War Archaeology Website: www.a-w-a.be/ (<http://www.a-w-a.be/>)
- The Durand Group Website: www.durandgroup.org.uk/ (<http://tinyurl.com/coxgr5s>)
- Great War Archaeology Group Website: www.gwag.org/ (<http://www.gwag.org/>)
- No Man's Land Website: www.no-mans-land.info/ (<http://tinyurl.com/cxx95vn>)
- Plugstreet Blog: plugstreet.blogspot.com/ (<http://tinyurl.com/kksu43>)
- The Sergeant Alvin C. York Project Website: www.sergeantyorkproject.com/ (<http://tinyurl.com/cm9udsu>)

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