



The Plugstreet Project 2007

Martin Brown and Richard Osgood

At the end of July 2007, the team from 'No-Man's-Land' (NML) Archaeology carried out its first year of excavations in the St Yvon area. NML have begun what they are calling the Plugstreet Project to explore the rich Great War heritage of this area. Working in partnership with local people, the Comines-Warneton historical society and the DOVO, the group has begun to examine the battlefields of the First World War in Wallonia.

During their 2007 season, 30 archaeologists from Britain, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium and the United States excavated sections of the former German front line at the southern end of the June 1917 Messines battlefield. The site was located by the huge mine craters known by the British as 'Factory Farm' and 'Ultimo' craters. Results revealed information not only about the conflict but also about the impact of war on the civilian population of the area. The archaeological results showed the devastating effects of the large mines dug under the German trenches – in one area the trench had filled with soil and debris from the explosion, including personal equipment, to such an extent that the Australian troops who captured the position could not reuse the trenches and had to dig completely new lines. This situation was alluded to in the diaries of the attacking Battalion and its Pioneer Corps. It was possible to see how the Australians had turned round one of the mine craters, 'Ultimo', into a fortress – digging short, corrugated iron-lined, trenches from the safety of the crater to create machine gun posts on its lip, overlooking the enemy positions.



Images:

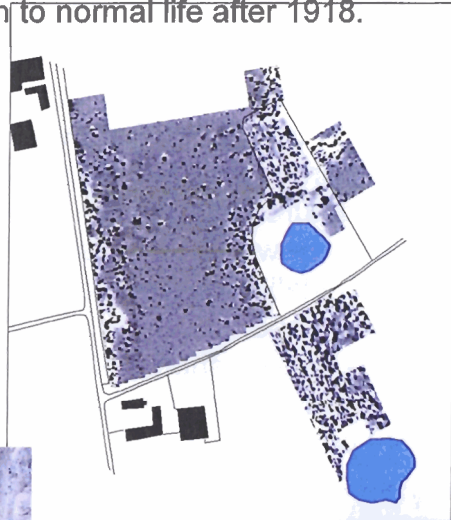
Above – German Machine gun round from Factory Farm.

Below (left) British shell fuse from Ultimo, (right) Ultimo crater



Project co-director Richard Osgood said 'we could not only see how the men had defended their position but also how they had lived in it: rusted food tins, including a can of sardines, and a bottle of HP sauce gave an insight into the soldiers' diet as did the bottle for indigestion tablets'.

It was not just the lives of soldiers that were revealed: the disruption of the war visible in the archaeological record. At 'Factory Farm', investigation of the area around the mine crater revealed brickwork and domestic artifacts, such as china from the dinner service and wine glasses, all of which gave a glimpse of domestic life before the arrival of the soldiers. The owners of the farm fled as the Germans advanced, leaving their home and most possessions behind them. These remained and were used by the Germans until the farm, which had been fortified, was destroyed by the mine on 7 June 1917. The loss of the family farm must have been a bitter blow to the family. However, archaeology also showed the attempts made to recover from the conflict in the 1920s and 1930s. Excavation of a concrete blockhouse in the German front line, a structure not mentioned by any of the Regimental diaries not visible in any aerial photographs, showed how the structure had been systematically demolished, not by military action but by civilians seeking to restore the battlefields to profitable agricultural use. In addition to helping interpret the battle, these sites showed the impact of war on the Belgian population and how they sought to return to normal life after 1918.



Images:

Above – the geophysical survey of the site

Left – the remains of 'Factory Farm'

Right – Factory Farm crater





The archaeology did not happen on these sites by chance. At the outset the team sought to research trenches used by the 3rd Australian Division whose first major action was fought at St Yvon in 1917. Before coming to Belgium, they had undergone a period of training on Salisbury Plain in Britain, on land still used by the British Army. Their training involved digging lines of trenches, exploding mines, fortifying the resultant craters, and preparing for the actualities of war. The archaeologists wanted to see if their training had worked – thus following a unit from training into theatre – a ‘first’ in archaeological terms. They were directed to St Yvon by military historians from the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and then helped by British and Belgian cartographic and aerial photographic experts to focus on one area of the battlefield. Once at the site, geophysical survey was used to identify sites of interest where useful information and interesting remains might be found. This survey revealed elements of trench systems shown on British maps and also others for which there was scant previous documentation.



Images:

Top – the excavated German bunker

Above – excavation of an Australian trench on the edge of Ultimo crater

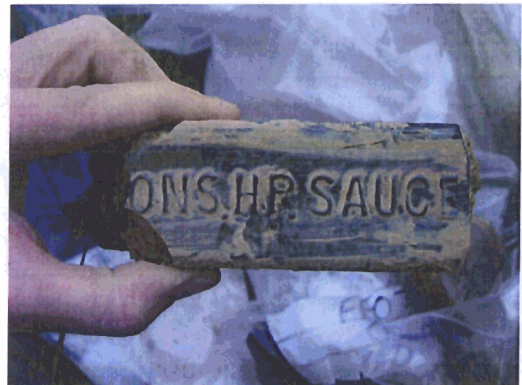
Right – pocket knife found in the Australian re-cut of the German lines

One surprise was that the excavations found no human remains. Perhaps this reflects efficient clearance of the battlefield but in some cases it may be that the force of the mine explosions left no identifiable traces. Although no bones were found, the individual soldiers were much in evidence through their equipment and personal possessions, which included gas masks, a cigarette lighter, a pocket knife, a harmonica and the stem of a pipe with indentations on it made by the teeth of its owner.

Although some aspects such as digging through obliterated front line trenches to form a new front line must have been a very new experience, the training on Salisbury Plain had certainly been effective. Men knew their roles and were able to perform a textbook turning-round of a captured enemy front line including the fortification of 'Ultimo' crater. Such attention to detail was an important part of ensuring that the battle of Messines was such a huge success. Furthermore it highlights the fact that commanding officers could learn the lessons of previous, unsuccessful, campaigns and that the allied forces were not simply 'lions led by donkeys'



Lyons (above) and HP Sauce (below) bottles from an Australian trench



Above – pipe stem from the Australian trench
Right – remains of a German gas mask

