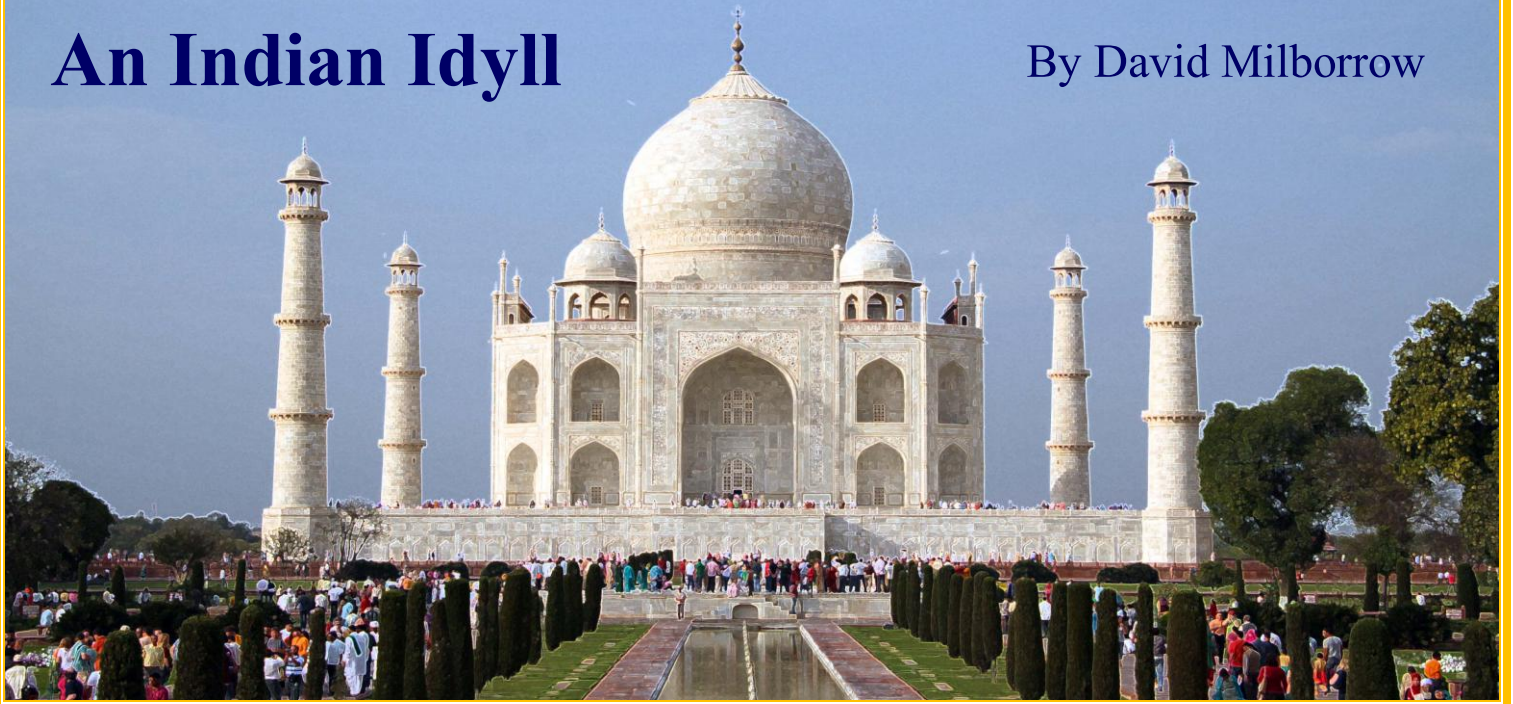


An Indian Idyll

By David Milborrow



A Tour of Indian War and Cantonment cemeteries

Day 1

Dawn at one of Bombay CST, one of the city's main stations; the front is a World Heritage Site; the rear, where the action is, is a sea of humanity - sitting, dozing, sleeping wrapped head to toe looking like corpses prepared for burial, a contrast to the city streets which are just beginning to show signs of life as taxis are washed, and kiosks opening, ready for a long day's trade. Noises, smells, tides of humanity, all remind one that home is far away.



We had flown out from a very quiet London Heathrow on a Jumbo with plenty of empty seats - space was plentiful, just sleep was lacking. We hit the ground running - just hours after landing we had checked into our home for the next 2 days - the YMCA - and I was standing in **St. Thomas Cathedral**, grateful for the respite from Bombay's heat and full-on humidity, thinking I was in a mini St. Pauls as I marvelled at how the British had left such an indelible impression on another country. A five minute visit to find one memorial to 5 sailors lost at sea in WW1 extended considerably as I found a church seemingly where every bit of wall space - ground level to ceiling - was covered by memorials to the British who hadn't made it home; and as most were military - albeit mostly nineteenth century - I knew I was off to a good start.

Then onto the Indian Sailors Home, which contained more than a thousand merchant seamen between contracts and also two impressive memorials - to the missing of the Indian Navy and Merchant Navy of the two Wars. A warm welcome preceded, and the ubiquitous cup of tea concluded, a hot, humid but successful visit, with some 8,500 additional names completed for the Project. My signature in their visitors' book follows many of the great and good of the Commission.

Visits to 2 little churches, one successful, one tba on Thursday, concluded the day's work. An excellent selection of curries on buffet at the YMCA was most welcome; how one feels about curry after 3 weeks remains to be seen.

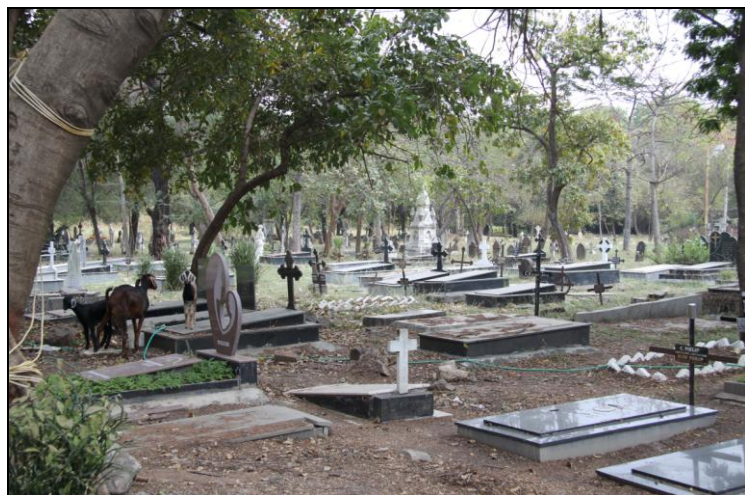
The purpose of today's early morning train to Pune is to visit the CWGC Cemetery at Kirkee (the similarity of this town's name to that of the colour of British military is, I believe, no coincidence), and explore any of the old British cemeteries in Kirkee and Pune that I can locate in the hours I have.

My travelling companions are all young Indian professionals, all so helpful and happy to talk. The accommodation is a sleeping car - not the most comfortable place to sit. The mouse in our carriage provided amusement; I didn't discover his intended destination, or whether he made it.

Day 2

An eventful and successful day. First traffic accident (motor bike drove into the rear of our taxi, but no harm done except to our bumper), and first vehicle breakdown (car battery failed halfway through the day's itinerary, so required bump starting after each subsequent stop).

Kirkee War Cemetery, as always, a haven of peaceful lawns and colourful plants, and as I only had the 2 Memorials to do (Catherine having already taken all the graves) it felt slightly fraudulent - such an easy visit. A warm welcome and kind hospitality from the CWGC Manager as always. How do they always manage to appoint such gentle folk?



After the War Cemetery I was lent one of the staff to guide us to the **'New' Cemetery** where there are a number of WW1 graves (not yet listed as being in that Cemetery), as well as some nineteenth century casualties. (Ironically, we had already visited the 'Old' Cemetery, where they were just refilling the grave for a burial earlier that day.) We were also directed to St. Sepulcher Cemetery, one not on my itinerary but a vast site, much of which was overgrown and impenetrable, which also contained 3 separate plots of WW1 graves (listed elsewhere, and many marked as removed for CWGC renovation), as well as the by now usual proliferation of late 19th Century Regimental Monuments (did they each have to erect one at the conclusion of their tour of duty?) and the gravestones recording the losses of family members and Civil Service employees. The site was vast, probably 95% inaccessible with grave tops just poking through the undergrowth in places, and took well over a baking hot hour to cover 3 tiny portions which the CWGC keep cleared. Abortive visits to other potential sites concluded the day, and then it was back to the station for the 4 hour ride back to Mumbai. The catering excelled - a constant stream of vendors with hot snacks and drinks, sweets and even English paperbacks.



Day 3

Curry flavoured everything for breakfast? Different, but we are in India. And I did understand the cautions I received before travelling – this is India, do not expect everything to go according to plan. And of course it doesn't. Travelling for the second time to Emmanuel Church ('come any day between 10 and 12 because the workers are here then,') we find that the sexton is out of the city and he is the only one with the key – really?? Next to Christ Church, Byculla, except that the driver takes me to a nearby R C church. Finally I convince the driver of his error, and we arrive at another church stuffed with 19th century military memorials. Then to Sewri, the Christian burial ground for the European population of Bombay for many decades. Within 10 minutes I'm being threatened that my camera will be confiscated because I haven't permission to take photographs.

which being interpreted means I haven't gone to the office and negotiated the amount of the bribe needed to keep the other four men sitting around the table (excluding the cemetery manager, of course, who issued the threat in the first place) from reporting to the Burial Ground Committee of my activities. But I still have my pictures of the only CWGC grave here, which no-one could prevent me photographing. Thelma was a WACI who died in 1945, and was for some reason the only grave left there when all the other WW2 graves were moved in the 50's to Kirkee War Cemetery. When my daughter joined me at Sewri later in the day we visited Thelma again, just 21 when she died.

Much searching produced P & O seamen who fell into the holds of their ships, or overboard into Bombay Harbour, and Civil Servants aplenty, but just only a few military graves. The search for an MOD listed burial from 1948 revealed that the grave had been reused in 1973 – no memorial for this British army signaller remains.

However the peace and goodwill previously purchased in the Cemetery Office produced offers of the unlimited use of the 'cloakroom' facilities – 'if you have a towel' – was a welcome relief after a warm 34 degree afternoon in a dusty cemetery – especially as a 23 hour train journey was the next item on the itinerary.

The evening became a long wait on the station platform for the 20.30 train to Chennai (Madras), and **an extensive series of sellers of snacks**, evening meal, and liquid refreshments meant we were fully sustained for the night.

Day 4

To state the possibly obvious, a 23 hour train journey is pretty long. The facilities are all reasonable, and the service constant. It's a little strange settling down in bed to sleep in a semi-open compartment with two perfect strangers, but it's all no more than expected. The railway track can be seen through the hole in the bathroom floor, but enough said there! Each of the main stops en route give us some minutes to leave the train, walk the platform, and watch the hawkers offer their wares to our fellow passengers. Eventually the journey ends in Chennai, and we are disgorged into a darkened city.



Day 5

An early departure is needed for the flight to New Delhi, the timing of which had changed three times, and the airline once, during the past 24 hours. Saturday was a whirl of sites, starting with Madras War Cemetery. The dew was thick on the grass, strange birds were squawking in the trees, behind me the traffic roared and hooted. The gardeners hosed down the shady side of the 1914-18 Memorial for me – Steve must judge if it's an improvement! After breakfast (curried vegetable sandwich) with the Cemetery Manager we dived with death to cross the dual carriageway and go several stories up the steeply narrow steps of an overlooking building to take some great views of the Cemetery.



After a couple of abortive cemetery visits, seeing the Chennai War Memorial (the military using the conveniently placed stones to dry their washing) and a highly successful Garrison church stuffed full of military memorial plaques, we arrived at a group of several cemeteries – Armenian, Catholic, Anglican etc. Access to them was down a street where each pavement had been converted into homes served by the occasional water standpipe at which children were showered, teeth cleaned, washing up done and water jugs filled. Lunch was being prepared at the kerbsides; people spilled everywhere, yet waves and happy smiles greeted this stranger taking photos of their domestic activities.

Taking off down different alleyways lead to separate little cemeteries. Many of the **larger stones had been pressed into use as clothes dryers, and the children playing around the stones seemed to have kept the undergrowth down**. It was here that the Commission gardener was invaluable; the graves cared for by the Commission were marked by unfamiliar stones, and which cemetery we were in at any time was otherwise a mystery. A group of graves of Boer pow's was unusual; a chapel attached had been extended into the cemetery area and was in use as a Saturday school and canteen serving lunch to many.

The largest of the cemeteries –St Mary's – was full of anomalies. The rear entrance, which we had to use, and the nearby plots, was apparently used for as a 'cloakroom' by all the neighbourhood dogs – their numbers are obviously considerable. The cemetery was rambling and extensive, with rubbish piles and spoil heaps from neighbouring developments encroaching at the edges. But it was the all-pervading creeper which prevented access to the vast majority of graves. Small areas had been burnt back, but this hadn't improved the condition of the adjacent Commission stones, which were dotted about down winding paths through the undergrowth.

Here again my friend from the Commission proved his worth. This cemetery was under his personal care; it is unlikely I would have found all these single and pairs of stones (of various styles) without his help. Then we arrived at two larger and recognisably Commission plots, securely fenced off, gated and locked. As far as I understood, it was only within the past 8 years that the Commission had begun to rescue the WW1 graves, maybe including the WW1 plot and replacing the stones there with Commission style ones; my friend was pleased to tell me that he had built the 2 little buildings on the larger plot, and that the plumbed water was clean. Fighting back the undergrowth from the paths and single stones, and cleaning away what the dogs had left, must be a constant battle. A few older graves were visible through the undergrowth, and so a small collection of pre WW1 stones was made, including a splendid edifice to a surgeon serving the 34th Regiment of Foot who died in 1805.



The remainder of the day was spent in the Scottish Kirk – more revs than lieutenants there – and **St. George's Cathedral**, again full of nineteenth military memorials. Somewhere I found just one memorial plaque and one memorial on a gravestone to a WW1 casualty on the Western front; they seemed a little out of place so far away here.

And today's in-flight breakfast? A sandwich somewhere between yesterday's curried veg and the 'sandwich spread' of one's childhood.

Day 6

A leisurely 9am start given the success of yesterday's visits. Hit the ground running (once the plane had landed) and went straight out to Delhi War Cemetery – one of those accumulated sites where graves were concentrated in the years following Indian Independence. At 28 degrees or so it felt very comfortable after Chennai. As it was a Sunday there were no Commission staff apart from the guard/watchman. 1,100 graves, a small WW1 memorial and my other 'target' locked away. Eventually my driver managed to persuade the guard to unlock the pavilion containing the WW2 memorial – no names, but in memory of over 25,000 Indian dead, missing in WW2. A small structure for so many casualties. Then the local 'Delboy' appeared. Pete claimed to be ex CWGC, and in charge of the older cantonment cemetery, situated at the rear of the War Cemetery. He took me to the Old Cantonment Cemetery, but was then told by the resident caretaker that photos were not allowed. Once again local intervention had a wholly negative effect, since the caretaker spoke no English, and I would not have understood his sign language!

But a phone call to the man in charge, requiring (a) each of us to speak to him twice and (b) a long, formal letter from me to the Chairman grovellingly either requesting permission or thanking him – I'm not sure which, probably because Pete didn't know - did the trick. And there were a number of pre and post WW1 graves there, and also a few dated 1917 and 1918, in the course of being recovered by the CWGC. And the caretaker came in useful – many of the stones I wanted were too encrusted with splashed mud to be legible, and he willingly brushed them off. I say willingly – he was attentively close by when I left; he had his tip, but poor Pete did not!

Then onto the Jewish Cemetery – the caretaker of the synagogue next door took me to the 'war grave', except it was from the 1968 Indo-Pakistan War; I pointed out to him 'my' grave, and came away with both. Prithvi Raj Cemetery ended the day. Just the occasional military grave, and then I figured out the blackened shape of an MOD stone. It was on my list as being in York Road Cemetery, until I realised that York Road, where we were going next, was the alternative name for this site, so 2 in 1 here.



The YMCA where we are staying is very basic indeed, but the food is home cooking – almost the best so far. Even cold milk for the cornflakes, porridge, fried eggs, croissants – such a welcome change for breakfast from curry! Then on to some great sites – first the high tower which is the 1857 Indian Mutiny Memorial; lots of statistics about the Mutiny's history and the casualties, but only about 50 names listed on the tower. Why? More work needed!

Then onto the Nicholson Cemetery – in wonderful condition having been fairly recently restored, and with several hundred military casualties, mainly 1870 onwards; again not a CWGC site, yet with a few of the stones – some upright, and a little area with around 10 lying flat, being World War.

Lastly, Skinner's Church, otherwise St. James, the building erected by Col. Skinner in gratitude for surviving a battle in 1805. At some time he formed the Skinner's Horse, which appears to be still in existence, but one for the military historian to explain. Apparently erecting this edifice, and it is beautiful (as well as being full of memorials), entitled his family to a private, railed off, cemetery. I noted ashes being interred here from a cremation in Scotland less than a century ago.

Day 7



An amazing day, and one where I'm told I saw the biggest grave in the world (See Front page header). A 5am start for the train – **packed solid** given our destination - on which the complimentary breakfast was, not surprisingly, deep-fried curry croquettes and tea. Free newspaper. Detained to a shouting mass of taxi-driver/touts at Agra. With no CWGC sites, we started with some fairly abortive visits, including one cemetery which had been taken over due to boundary problems, now full of shacks, cows and rubbish, with the odd stone visible through the undergrowth. However, the Roman Catholic Cemetery, a stunning mixture of traditional graves and monuments in an Indian style, included the Red Taj, a massive edifice and the grave of John Hessian, modelled on the Taj Mahal. Also there is the grave of John Mildenhall (1614), an envoy of Elizabeth the First who arrived here in 1603 and met the Mogul Emperor. The courage of such men beggars belief.

Then on to the **Cantonment Cemetery** – within the Indian Army base which was effectively reusing one of the largest British military bases in the country. Excessive bureaucracy meant a number of trips between the barrier on the cemetery road and Military HQ in attempts to persuade the Brigadier to give us a letter which he didn't need to give, for the guard at the road barrier who said he did! An hour later, during which both guide and driver wanted us to abandon the attempt and take coffee, we finally squeezed the appointed soldier into our car and took him to the barrier to sort out the guard. These are situations which Milborrow thrives on, and will not be beaten; in fact, gaining actual access was almost better than the cemetery, almost half of which was given over to graves of members of the military and their dependents from about 1850 to around 1930.

Again a number of WW1 graves, being renovated by the CWGC. Much of the rest of the cemetery contained even older military graves, but the undergrowth was too thick, the heat too great, and the time too short. Energy was flagging, too, after capturing some 300 plus graves and memorial inscriptions. The cemetery keeper would assist by clearing away the undergrowth from in front of 2 or 3 graves, and then disappear for 10 minutes, leaving yours truly to clear away dead scrub amid choking clouds of dust. But a most worthwhile visit – let's hope Steve will think so too!



The Havelock Memorial Church produced a few monumental plaques, and , since it was only mid afternoon, and our train didn't leave until 23.30, the obligatory visit to the Taj Mahal was inevitable – and one of the trip's highlights, being as spectacular as its reputation, if not more so. Unlike many famous sites, this one exceeded all descriptions, and is indeed magnificently spectacular and beautiful.

Refuge in a hotel was a relief for the hours after dark and before the train....

Day 8

...which did begin as something of a fiasco! Piled into a crowded carriage; found our bunks – sadly in the corridor rather than a compartment. Then a party of 20 French ladies arrived, with loads of luggage and no idea where their bunks were. The corridor is not wide enough for a suitcase sideways on. As they nearly all spoke English, my Western Front patois was redundant, and the conversation soon turned as to whether they or we had the vin rouge; sadly neither; they were quite interested in the purpose of the trip, but maybe didn't understand. But they really did have great senses of humour – 'incredible India', they said, as they realised they had not received their allocations of bedding. Since it was now past midnight, and we were due to leave the train before 6am, we went to our beds and dozed off to the sound of assorted snores – no compartment doors, only curtains. The loos contained small cockroaches, and there were very impressively sized ants crawling out from under my bed, which had to contain small pieces of luggage as well as me. But it had been a tiring day. We 'arrived' 10 minutes early, and then found this stop wasn't our destination and we were nearly 2 hours late – bliss, back to bed for a while.



Tipping out around 8 am was a great relief, and our guide took us to the best hotel in town for breakfast. Unwashed, and having slept in our clothes, we felt very scruffy, but the plan to abstain from curry for a day for the sake of our digestion was facilitated by the offer of freshly squeezed juice, muesli and eggs on toast.

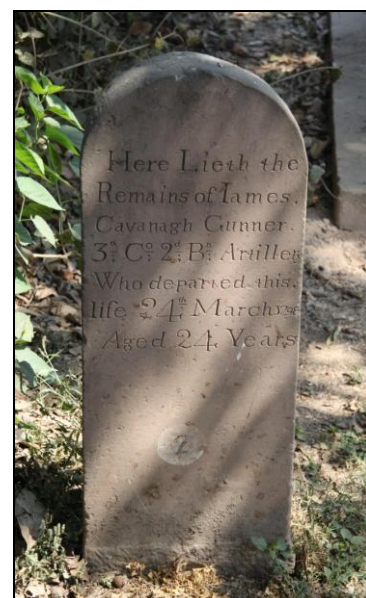
Then out to the **Cantonment Cemetery**; not a CWGC site, but reputed to contain military graves. One never knows beforehand if there will be 10 or 100, but in the end 500 pictures, including some of Regimental memorials with up to maybe 50 names, should satisfy Steve's request for me to keep my eyes open! The caretaker was an essential part of this procedure, stamping down mint plants which had become bushes, if not trees. At least the mint provided a fragrant smell – for a change. In the heat of the noon sun and the dust of arid ground and hacking away dead vegetation, it was a relief to finish.

Off to the Residency, scene of carnage as 2,000 British were besieged and mostly killed by 'rebels' (now martyrs), the remaining defendants 'rescued' by Havelock's force who were then themselves surrounded, needing rescuing by a further force some weeks later. Now a most attractive set of ruins, which with artillery damage and cannon shot holes still visible from inside one or two of the buildings, surrounded in a grassy park, it's a worthwhile visit, and I found a number of tombs and memorials from that period in what had been a churchyard until the church was destroyed in the siege.

A further cemetery visit – fruitless; then en route to a Pizza Hut to stock up for the evening train ride to Allahabad, we passed a once-Anglican church fortuitously open. As it had a couple of dozen memorials inside, including one from the siege with 100 or so names, as well as a VC, it became a highly successful end to the day's work.

Day 9

Perhaps the Indian hotel grading system refers to the bathroom design. They attempt to replicate wet-rooms, but unfortunately no-one seems to have told the builders. So the floors slope away from the shower drain, and all the water washes across the floor, past the loo and ending up in the far corner of the room. Next time one uses the bathroom ...remember to remove socks first. A few hours in a hotel bed worked wonders before another day searching out mainly non World War graves in a number of Allahabad cemeteries. Their quality varied immensely. One had a couple of hundred clearly marked graves, another had 6, and was approached through a small farmyard, as locals gradually effected a land grab. A third kept bees as well as cows, calves, cow dung drying compounds (less than fragrant fuel?) and the last a massive collection of over-restored obelisks and other massive structures, most with the inscriptions removed. The highlights – the grave of Major G Bromhead VC (Michael Caine to most of us) and that of **Gunner James Cavanagh**, who 'departed this life 24th March 1798', and whose stone is as clearly marked as the day it was engraved.



Then another overnight train – armed again with pizza and beer – to Calcutta, and our halfway point.

Day 10

Thankfully the downpour of rain and hail did not arrive until the afternoon, slightly relieving the 35 degree heat with maximum humidity. The hustle and dirt of Calcutta came as a surprise, but not as a shock after previous travels. It's always the spilling out of a main station into what appears to be a complete chaos of buses, taxis, market stalls, touts and beggars which confuses the system after minimal sleep on the train.

The War Cemetery was mainly completed in cloud, so hopefully the images are OK. The CWGC Manager's brief extends to our next destination – Darjeeling, and he was happy to tell me he hadn't been there for more than 2 years, because the unstable political situation meant that he might be turned back half way, or, even worse, might get there and then the routes blockaded, so that he could not leave. Given our tight timetable, I wondered why on earth we were going there; obstinacy I suppose, or 'because it's there.'

A variety of churches and cemeteries during the rest of the shortened day produced a satisfying couple of hundred non war military graves and memorials. As our stay here, sadly only one night, is in a 'hark back to the Raj' hotel, with traditional furnishings and impeccable service – breakfast and afternoon tea included in the tariff, rest and refreshment is assured.

Day 11



An early start is required, which is a shame given the accumulated shortage of sleep and the peace and quiet of this little hotel. Checkout of the hotel at 7am, minus breakfast. An hour's drive – how do Indian drivers keep missing each other? – takes us to **Barrackpore**, past the beginning of people's days – washing themselves and their children, cleaning teeth, shaking the mats, washing up, all done on the pavement where they reside. No words can describe the fumes, noise, smells, traffic noise and incessant hooting of car horns. Much redigging of the ditches alongside the road would indicate blockages and floods after last night's storms. The cemetery is once again in the military area, which assures greenery, less rubbish, and little noise. Back to the hotel to squat with our luggage in the reception area until our 10pm train

Day 12

Our wild, slightly wacky day. A night spent with 4 Indian gentlemen, all the way on the Darjeeling Mail to the end of the line – New Jalpaijuri, of course, not Darjeeling. In theory we then catch **the 2 foot gauge tiny train** which climbs around 6,000 feet to Darjeeling. But this is India, and a landslide wrecked the track and one of the access roads some months ago. So we need to get ourselves to Kurseong, only 50 kilometres away, but 5 hours by train or 2 by road. We are quoted R1200 for a taxi, then R900 (same taxi), so we opt for a shared car – R150. This involves 10 peoples' luggage being roped on the roof, and 4 squeezed onto the middle of 3 rows of seats of a very old 4x4. Cosy, I suppose. And very satisfying when we arrive at Kurseong well ahead of the pair of our sleeping companions, making the same journey in a more exclusive taxi. England 1, India 0; unlike the cricket, we hear.

Brunch with as much coffee as we can drink costs us £3.50 for two; then a couple of entertaining hours watching the down train arrive from Darjeeling, disgorge its few passengers, and then shunt carriages around in an apparently random manner until we find our carriage awaits us. We dispute with an Indian family who has taken our reserved seats – to the apparent embarrassment of the other English in the carriage. The conductor offers us a choice of any seats in the faded splendour of the upmarket carriage behind – we accept.

The journey took more than 2½ hours for 30 kilometres; it was a slow and noisy journey as the (very loud) hooter was sounded the whole way.



Possibly partly justifiable, as the train track is effectively the pavement on one or other side of the street, criss-crossing at will and causing many little traffic jams as up vehicles face down vehicles bumper to bumper; hideously noisy. There is so little space between track and buildings that leaning out for photographs can lead to decapitation, or at least the loss of a hand and the camera. Of course this means one is virtually inside the shops – self-service could take on a new meaning. The poor people of the villages through which we pass hold their hands over their ears as we pass, yet are still patient enough to smile and wave. Many of the hoardings proclaim their wish for an independent Gorkahland, indicating how close we are to Nepal. The distant views are blotted out - today is very hazy, tomorrow is another day.



Eventually we arrive in Darjeeling, a rambling place sprawling down hillsides and with a vaguely hippy air. **Our hotel** reception is 66 steps above street level, our rooms 32 more above that. Bad enough after our evening meal (partaken at street level, and under £3 for 2), but on first arriving with a full compliment of luggage, rather challenging. We blame the altitude. Being up a mountain should mean spectacular views, however. Rushed out straightway for warm clothing – the chilly hills are freezing after the Indian plains; £3 for a warm fleece.

The hotel is Chinese run, and a little chaotic – men rushing hither and thither, and speaking very fast, so all a bit odd. Hot water bottles distributed in lieu of central heating. A challenge to discover how yet another variety of hot water heater will deliver the goods. I bring a cold with me, and find everyone else sneezing and spluttering too. Free wifi for the first time, but after so little sleep am too tired to care. First day without a single grave, but we did pass a Gurkha Memorial on the way up in the train....

Day 13

Single digit temperatures after the mid thirties do come as a shock to the system! But porridge and eggs – no curry in sight – is going to help. Set off after breakfast for the Old Cemetery; the distance is a little farther than I realised, but reach it eventually, only to find a series of steep terraces and I'm below the bottom one! Slowly make my way to the top, but even then the graves have only reached about 1900, and I need 1941! 'There's another cemetery up the road.', but this one's the Old Cemetery. Then discover there are more graves spilling down the hillside the other side of the road, and there, sure enough, poorly whitewashed and relatively surrounded by rubbish, is the object of my mission. Since I can hardly tell Steve on my return that I only managed one grave all day, after the obligatory visit to the zoo I take a taxi back to the Gurkha Memorial. Entrance fee 7p, and I then find the Memorial is roped off with prominent No Entry signs displayed. A visiting group realise my plight and chat the gardener into allowing me a couple of minutes 'very quick, very quick.' Sorry if some of the images are below par, but it's another 150 or so names in the bag.

Tibetan food is the menu this evening – this is a real border type of town; there's a Tibetan monastery, shops – and presumably nationalities – selling wares from Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and of course India, and we met a couple yesterday who were taking a taxi from here to Kathmandu – visa to be purchased at the border. Has Nepal been completed for the Project yet? We shall be sorry to leave this ethnic ragbag and descend to the pressure, dust and heat which represent most of India.

Day 14

A full night's sleep (8pm bed) saw us ready to leave this memorable and unique place. The town of many gods and religions still tried to bless us in different ways. Tibetan monks came down from the monastery during breakfast, installed themselves in one of the bedrooms, and started to sing, drum and blow.



The single grave in Darjeeling

'Don't worry, madam' the proprietress told the guests in the next door room, 'they will be finished by 4pm.' Apparently we had caught their one of their 6 monthly visits to bless the hotel and its guests. The proprietress presented us both with a Tibetan silk scarf, to bring us good luck on our journey. Most of her guests went west on leaving her; she was impressed that we were hoping to go east.

Waiting on the station platform for the train, we then had the amazing sight of the clouds lifting and seeing the Himalayas. Our taxi driver told us they had been hidden for 10 days; yet there they were – the snow-covered twin peaks of Kanchendzonga, India's highest mountain at 8,598m, less than 300 metres lower than Everest, deep in the Himalayan range. It was an amazing sight.

We boarded the train, but then something broke in the engine, and we had to wait while running repairs were carried out and the engine tested.



Our good fortune dwindled further some half hour into our train journey – a road tarring machine was parked on the road but too close to the track on a curve, and we got ourselves **well and truly wedged against it**. Much shouting; in the end two little men with crowbars, watched by 20 spectators who knew better, freed us and off we went. By now a good hour late, but this is India.

Our journey to the mainline train station continued by shared taxi (4WD); we were the first to buy tickets for this car, so we had to sit and wait until others travelling in the same direction took the rest - 4 in the back, we 2 in the middle with our luggage and, to our horror, 4 in the front. There probably wasn't much gear changing. Descending several thousand feet down a single track road comprising multiple hairpin bends with no roadside barrier or kerb on the downhill side was bad enough, but of course it wasn't really a single track at all, and large vehicles would vie with us as to who would take the edge.

At the end of that ride we still had to get to the station in the next town, so took a tuk-tuk – motorised rickshaw. But the two-stroke engine was older than most, and first we would stall every time we had to wait to filter right, and then the flyover out of town was just too steep for the thing, or we and our luggage too heavy... We eventually made the station, and alighted to be surrounded by offers of all sorts of help – except for the chap who insisted on videoing us on his mobile phone. We find our carriage for the night, which is repeatedly sprayed with mosquito repellent

Day 15

Another day of adventure! It may have begun at the tail end of yesterday. Having gone to bed early, given the prospect of a pre-dawn arrival, it was a bit alarming to awaken a bit later and find the opposite bottom bunk empty. It had contained a business man due to alight at 12.30am. I dozed off again, a bit worried about the vulnerability of our luggage on the floor, and awoke again, this time to find two heavily armed police, in full uniform and automatic weaponry at the ready, sitting side by side on that bottom bunk. One gave me a cheerful wave, and I turned over much happier, wondering when I had last slept with quite that much artillery. Sadly that state of affairs didn't last.



Next time awake was because a whole family seemed to want that same bottom bunk, and the police, who by then had wrapped themselves in a sheet each and were fast asleep like two ultra-thin corpses in shrouds, were unceremoniously ejected. Sleep after that, given constant family interchange between our and the next compartment, was minimal, and we staggered off the train at 4.30am, probably much the worse for wear. We waited outside the station entrance for an hour as dawn came, unlike our driver. After much borrowing of mobile phones to make fruitless calls, we found our own tuk-tuk, jet-propelled compared with yesterday's, for the bracing (no windows except the front screen) half hour trip to the airport where, in due course and some hours later, we caught our £17 a seat **helicopter to Shillong**, another hill station.

Met at the other end - Shillong Air Force Base - by our hostess, we were escorted to the Residence, an authentic relic of the Raj, complete with bungalows, abundant staff, green lawns, and breakfast under a shady umbrella. Thus fortified, we set off to discover Shillong Memorial, deep in the Assam Rifles base. Then to All Saints Church, lined with brass memorials, and the Anglican Cemetery - a beautifully kept garden with graves from the last 150 years or so.

Day 16

Twelve hours sleep was followed by a slightly muddled breakfast, as new staff tried to serve the English breakfast without supervision. A hair-raising downhill dash back to Guwahati followed, our driver trying to make up time lost in traffic jams by overtaking on blind bends, of which there were many on this steep mountain road, and then driving down the wrong side of the central reservation of a dual carriageway; facing large trucks bearing down on us side by side (one graciously stopped for us each time this happened), after a while even he realised this was just a bit too risky, and when we came to a break in the reservation our taxi retreated into our own traffic flow and we breathed again.

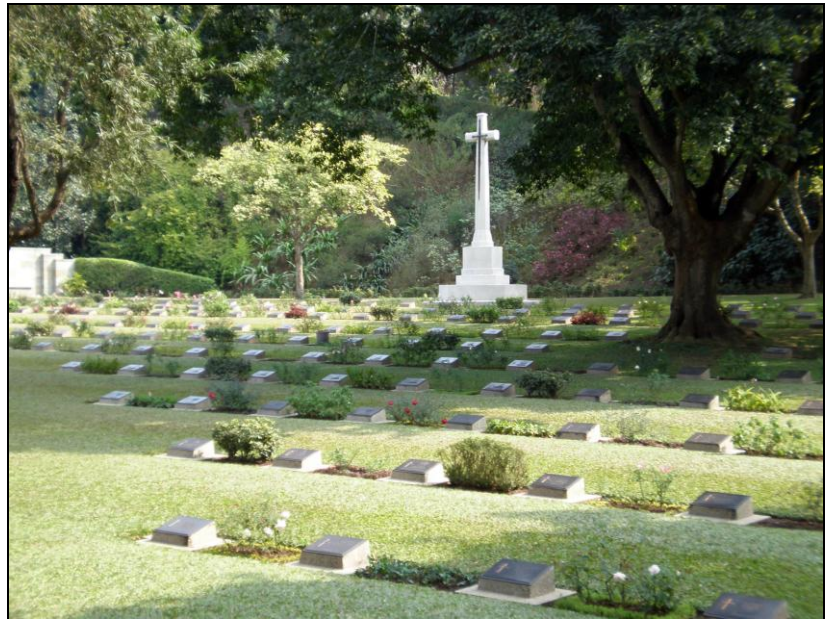
Passing through a valley of smelting works, fuelled by coal, even the few remaining trees still living no longer bore green leaves, and the grime covering people's homes can't be described. We had seen for the first time the effects of industrial pollution of an emerging industrial nation.

Our driver's skills gave us time for an hour in **Gauhati War Cemetery**, some 500 graves marked by dark metal plinths, many of which were washed off for me before photographing. Then to the station, to leave Assam and venture into Nagaland and Manipur. It's hard to believe that the famous WW2 battles around Kohima (Nagaland) and Imphal (Manipur) actually took place in and near an area where naked cannibals still lived (and some say still do!), where some 90% of the population are Christian, yet (I was told yesterday) all the deaths recorded on the Assam Rifles Memorial in the last couple of years at least were committed in counter-insurgency operations Nagaland. The British successfully used the skills of the Nagas against the Japanese in WW2, no small contribution in this being made by an English society lady, Ursula Graham Bower, who was decorated after the war for her work.

Day 17

Last night was spent in a private home - palatial by comparison by anything else we have seen in India. We were met as we stepped down from the train - such a change from having to battle our way out of a station and then search in vain for a car and driver who seems to take delight in hiding away rather than making himself known to the only whites in town. It was of course pitch dark, and we negotiate our way around sleeping forms on the platform as we make our way to the police office to register our presence in Nagaland.

Then 'home' for food and chat late into the night. Awake before dawn to the cockerel and assorted other animal sounds - our host keeps a variety of them, and appears pretty self-sufficient food-wise.



This morning saw us on the road to Kohima - a long uphill traffic-clogged road, with many evidences of wet season landslides amid beautiful landscapes and towering forested hills. Kohima is a busy hilltop town, and the cemetery pretty central, rising in terraces above the traffic because of the way it was built up around the renowned tennis courts. Though not what I was expecting at all, it contains a much greater number of moving epitaphs on its stones than usually found. It wasn't easy to imagine the awful slaughter and great heroism that had taken place at this renowned place. The Visitors' Book contains evidence of many others also reaching this remote spot in the last few weeks.

Day 18

Just 10 of us wandered across Dimapur's runway for the Imphal plane. Check-in had opened 5 minutes after it was due to close, the coach bringing the airport staff having turned up just 10 minutes previously. But given the procedures and restrictions which had applied to foreigners trying to reach Manipur until this January, I was really grateful to be en route.

Last night's rice beer at our homestay - spoon out half a glass of rotting rice from a jar in the fridge, add a little water and mash well, then eat the rice and drink the liquid - seemed to have had no ill effects, though our hostess after her second glass confessed to feeling a little light headed. Perhaps she mashed better than I did. The night was punctuated by downpours of rain, which continued as we drove to the airport, and our flight was delayed a few minutes while they waited for the weather at Imphal to clear a bit - not the best way to start potentially the busiest day's photography.

But we landed in a cloudy but dry Imphal, and once the staff at the foreigner's registration desk had retrieved all their foreigner forms from the cupboards, and summoned from town the only guy who was allowed to use their rubber stamp on my papers, I was clear; the taxi was there, and soon was able to retake the two WW2 cemeteries and be the first to capture the Cremation Memorial for the project. A VC in the Indian Army Cemetery was, I guess, fairly unusual. Then to the hotel to while away the rest of the day before my return flight to Dimapur in the morning.

Day 19

Another early flight returned me from Imphal to Dimapur, once again 75% empty; the remainder of the day was waiting time, prior to the late evening train to Tinsukia. It was filled in a variety of ways; morning service in a Naga church, an afternoon meeting with a former Indian MP, now a member of the Nagaland State Assembly, and much explanation about the Nagas - 16 tribes all with their own customs, traditions and heritage, and how Nagaland became the Indian State which it is today.

Last day

We had left Dibrugarh more than 3 hours late; our hostess had come with us to the station, and a strategic 'tip' to the acting station supervisor, who had apparently been imbibing considerable quantities of something stronger than tea, secured us the VIP waiting room in which to wait; reasonable sofas, but the 'facilities' were as bad as any we had seen (and been forced to use).

The train failed to live up to predictions that it would make up its delay during the night, but of course one doesn't know that unless one wakes at the timetabled time, and then keeps a tight watch (no announcements are made on Indian trains). We therefore met our driver with a significant sleep deficit, and having watched pouring rain for the last 2 hours, and seen flooded fields and tracks from the train window since first light.

An hour's drive took us to our final destination, Digboi War Cemetery. This small town, sandwiched between is probably the most remote spot I have ever visited for the Project. Just 200 graves, again plinth style; what was it like here in 1943-45? Yet even here there were a succession of almost daily entries in the Visitors' Book. Yet where were we? Less than 100 miles from the border with what used to be Burma, maybe only 300 miles from China. We had been warned by our Naga hosts that we faced the possibility of landmines in this area, as guerrilla activity was rife in the lead-up to Assam elections. To reach the cemetery we had needed to follow the signs to the Pengaree Tea Estates; it was only after we left the cemetery that our driver chose to inform us that Pengaree was at the heart of this local 'protesting'; for once it was comforting not to be wise until after the event!

A couple of hours drive took us to the nearest airport, and by early evening we were back in Delhi for our flight home the following day. We had travelled over 15,000 in three weeks, more than 6,000 of them within India itself.

Once again I want to record my sincere and grateful thanks; to members of the Commission staff, both in the UK and India, who among other things kindly provided letters of recommendation for me to carry and use; some have had to endure a succession of questions from me over recent weeks, which they have done with patience, providing me with additional information, personal contact details, and more; to CWGC cemetery staff, who welcomed me with kind hospitality, and in some cases essential additional assistance; to the many members of BACSA, who gave me so much advice and detailed information, not just about the many cemeteries and churches where I might find other military and inscriptions, including detailed maps, notes etc, but advice borne of much experience about travel - and survival - in India; and of course to Steve, who succumbed again to my badgering and permitted me to accomplish this assignment on behalf of the Project and initially opened windows of opportunity to receive much of the help detailed above.

'Incredible India' provided me with an unforgettable experience.

David Milborrow