

## Kate's Story – The Battlefields of World War 1

*We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.*

In 2015, at the age of 13, I had the honour to represent Wigan schools on a visit to the battlefields of WW1. It was to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the start of the war. I was part of a group from 15 Greater Manchester schools. Our journey started on a cold February morning at Manchester coach station. I was accompanied by my friend Tizzie Gough and Miss Mapson my history teacher.

I was given this opportunity as a result of writing a short piece about WW1. My thoughts were that it had been a massive waste of human life. It was a war caused and orchestrated by rulers at the expense of their people. I believe it is important not to glorify war but it remains important to remember the ordinary people who lost their lives, often without any real gain on either side. WW1 was meant to be the war to end all wars. This obviously did not prove to be the case. The humiliation felt by Germany following defeat became a breeding ground for resentment. This became fertile territory for Hitler's toxic brand of nationalism which led to an even greater conflict and the Holocaust.

I reflected that I was personally grateful that my great-grandfather, James Meehan, had survived fighting in WW1, otherwise I would not be here.



*Our group at the Thiepval Memorial*

I also had a personal family interest in the Belgian Battlefields. My great-great-uncle Dan was killed at the battle of the Somme. My Dad provided me with research he

had done about Dan. I had a quest to find his name on the Thiepval Memorial and to bridge a gap of one hundred years and four generations of my family.

Thiepval is the memorial to 72,000 people who were killed during the Battle of The Somme, but who have no burial place. Their remains disappeared into the mud which was churned by relentless heavy artillery fire. Some were simply vaporised as massive shells exploded close by.

Thiepval featured prominently in the 2016 Somme Centenary commemorations. It was the backdrop for memorial services attended by Prince William and Prince Harry. Unfortunately it is not the only battlefield memorial. There are cemeteries and memorials dotted along hundreds of miles of now peaceful countryside, emphasising the scale of the conflict.

We first visited Tyne Cot cemetery near Ypres. The most striking thing here was the scale of the place; row upon row of grave stones as far as the eye could see.

We also visited the Menin Gate and attended a moving ceremony at which the Last Post was sounded. This happens every day “at the going down of the sun”. Local people have kept up the tradition as a sign of gratitude to the soldiers that liberated them.



*Ceremony we attended at the Menin Gate – “at the going down of the sun”*

Whenever you get a group of young people together they quickly make friends and socialise. We were no exception. We met some great people who we had a lot in common with. We found time to talk and enjoy ourselves in between the more sombre commemorative moments.

As well as our teachers we had support from professional guides and serving soldiers. Their input was particularly useful to illustrate the reality of warfare. Some had recently served in Afghanistan and they explained that the fear and anxiety they experienced was balanced by the camaraderie and deep friendships they developed. We also visited preserved trenches which brought home the reality of how soldiers existed at the front.

We then reached Thiepval. It is an impressive and imposing memorial designed by Lutyens and standing 43 metres high. There are sixteen huge pillars crammed on each of their four sides with the names of the fallen. I was determined to find Uncle Dan's name.

Dan was my Great Grandmother's brother so shared her maiden name which was Jones! I was looking for a needle in a haystack. My Dad's research had provided me with an idea of the area where his name might be. I spotted a heading for the South Lancashire Regiment. That was Dan's regiment. I was on the right track. I found a long column of names beginning with J. My eyes scrolled down and there it was Jones D – private 16115. I had found him. His name cut clearly into the Portland stone. I took a moment to reflect then Miss Mapson took some photos to show my family. We placed a small wooden cross, which Tizzie and I had bought, at the foot of the pillar.



I thought how Dan couldn't possibly have imagined, when he signed up in Liverpool in 1914, that over one hundred years later, Kate Meehan his great-great-niece, would remember him here in Belgium at the site of his death. This brought home to me the importance and power of history. The importance of remembering and recording what has happened and why. The importance of looking back to understand the past and learn lessons for the future.

The preservation of the WW1 cemeteries and memorials allows people to have physical contact with the past. There is no substitute for actually travelling to the battlefields and becoming immersed in the historical experience.

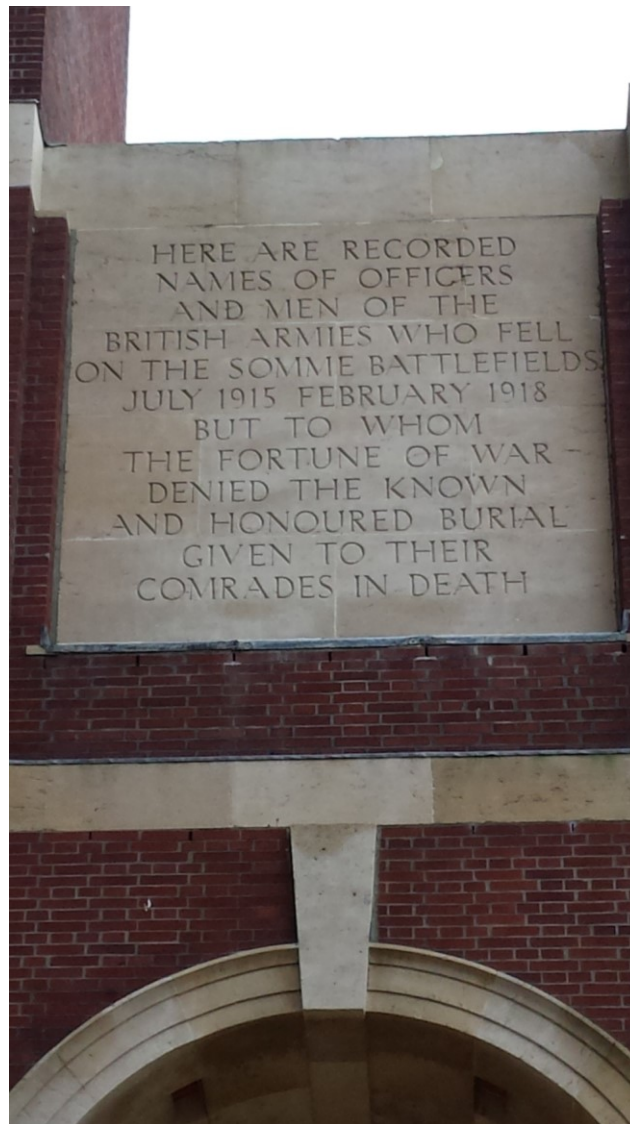
As we travelled back on the coach we were tired but gained energy from each other and from our experiences. When we got to Manchester there were lots of hugs as we parted. Although we were from across the North West distance is no longer a barrier to keeping in touch.

This had been a great opportunity for me and Tizzie. We learned a lot about WW1 and the importance of commemorating what happened. We made new friends. We are really grateful to Miss Mapson for her help and support. The trip solidified my beliefs about war and my ongoing interest in history.

Most importantly the trip allowed me to reach out across time to my uncle Dan who was killed in action at the Somme during the advance on Ovillers on 15 July 1916.

Rest in peace Dan – we will remember you.





*Inscription on the Thiepval Memorial*

