



Photo of Monument aux Morts des Armées de Champagne,
Ferme de Navarin © Gavin Stamp

WAR CEMETERIES IN CHAMPAGNE & ARGONNE

The first two tours examining the architectural consequences of the Great War of 1914-1918 are based on Arras and Ypres and look primarily at the work of the Imperial War Graves Commission along the line of the Western Front that was largely manned by British troops. This tour, based on Reims, looks further east, to Champagne and the Argonne and the section of the Western Front which was held by the French army for most of the war. It includes two notorious sectors: the Chemin des Dames and Verdun. Although we shall see a few British cemeteries and two of the smaller and less distinguished Memorials to the Missing, most of the cemeteries and memorials we will visit are French and American, as it was to this part of the Front that the first American troops were sent in after the United States declared war on Germany in 1917.

The areas we are visiting saw fighting from the beginning to the end of the war. the initial German invasion which swept through Belgium and France towards Paris in the Autumn of 1914 was halted by the First Battle of the Marne, well south of Reims. The Germans then retreated and, in a series of outflanking manoeuvres, both sides dug in, with the Germans usually creating defensive positions on higher ground. Unfortunately for the French, the front line ran just north of Soissons, Reims and Verdun, leaving the

two former cities subject to continual bombardment. In September 1915 a French offensive in Champagne coinciding with the British attack at Loos produced huge casualties but no gains and failed to end the entrenched stalemate on the Western Front. In February 1916 von Falkenhayn launched a massive assault on the fortress of Verdun. Intended to bleed France dry, it proved equally suicidal for the Germans as the French under Pétain resisted to the death. The Allied offensive on the Somme in July 1916 relieved the pressure on Verdun and by the end of the year counter-offensives regained most of the lost, devastated territory. General Nivelle's disastrous and costly offensives to the west and east of Reims in April 1917 eventually provoked mutinies in the French army, and it was the British further west who bore the brunt of the fighting for the rest of the year. In 1918 an increasingly exhausted Germany played its last card with Ludendorff's initially successful offensive against the British in March and April. In May 1918 the Germans attacked the British and French west of Reims and broke through, eventually penetrating as far as Chateau-Thierry on the Marne. But in July came the Second Battle of the Marne as the Allies – now reinforced with increasing numbers of fresh American troops – counter-attacked and the Germans were steadily driven back. In September the Americans under Pershing attacked at St Mihiel south-east of Verdun and broke through. Steady German retreat followed until the Armistice was agreed in November 1918.

Then followed the task of burying and honouring the dead. France had lost 1.4 million – dead – mostly on the Western Front; Germany 2 million; and the United States 117,000. The other fighting powers, partly out of necessity, adopted rather different solutions to those adopted by the British, under the influence of *Edwin Lutyens* (as discussed in the notes for the two earlier tours). The Imperial War Graves Commission's policy was to create cemeteries where the casualties were buried, resulting in almost a thousand war cemeteries along the line of the Western Front. The Commission also adopted a standard secular headstone, thus avoiding the unfortunate different treatment given to Jewish and Islamic graves in the French cemeteries. The French decided to concentrate burials into a series of large *nécropoles nationales*, often burying the huge number of unidentified bodies in ossuaries. These cemeteries, created by the Service des Sépultures de Guerre after 1919, are often huge, with no buildings or attempts at landscaping to temper the chilling bleakness of endless rows of concrete crosses with small tin labels attached. One supreme exception is the huge ossuary at Douaumont near Verdun, perhaps France's principal monument of the Great War – but that was the result of an independent initiative.

Under the Treaty of Versailles, the French gathered the equally large numbers of German dead in France into concentrated cemeteries and mass graves. The Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge was created in 1919 but only in 1926 was agreement reached with France to lay out permanent cemeteries, and in France these were subject to many restrictions (less so in Belgium). These cemeteries, with their dark stone walls

and grave markers and careful planting of oaks, were designed under the direction of *Robert Tischler*, but many of them were only “finished” well after the Second World War.

In terms of the ratio of cubic mass of stone to the number of casualties, the most extravagant and expensive cemeteries are those created by the American Battle Monuments Commission after it was established in 1923. All the large American cemeteries, laid out with white marble crosses, have chapels designed by distinguished American architects, usually Beaux-Arts trained (mostly recommended by *Paul Cret*). The United States also adopted the policy of erecting specific battlefield monuments (as the British had initially proposed, but these evolved into Memorials to the Missing). These, again, were designed by distinguished architects, notably *Paul Cret* and *John Russell Pope*, in an ambitious Classical manner, although they may well seem a little pedantic compared with the creative development of the Classical tradition pursued by Lutyens for Britain. The tour includes most of the principal American cemeteries and memorials, with the notable exception of those at St Mihiel and Montsec.

The French, though various initiatives – official and private, secular and religious – also erected battlefield monuments, and these – along the length of the Western Front we are visiting – are remarkable for the large-scale use of expressive sculpture. The tour unfortunately cannot encompass the most extraordinary of them all: the memorial to the First Battle of the Marne at Mondement south of Reims, which is a gigantic “menhir” of concrete and granite, 35.5 metres high, bearing a winged figure of Victory flying through clouds and lightning and embellished at ground level with an incised frieze depicting Marshal Joffre and his soldiers. But what is included is remarkable and poignant enough.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to information culled from the numerous and ever expanding web-sites devoted to the First World War, the following publications were particularly useful in compiling the notes: J.-M. de Busscher, *Les Folies de l'Industrie* (Bruxelles, 1981); [Alexandre Niess], *Cimetières militaires et monuments aux morts de la Grande Guerre: Marne* (Paris, 2005); Elizabeth G. Grossman, ‘Architecture for as Public Client: The Monuments and Chapels of the American Battle Monuments Commission’ in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, xlii, May 1984; Rose E.B. Coombs, *Before Endeavours Fade: A Guide to the Battlefields of the First World War*, 5th ed. (London, 1986); John Keegan, *The First World War* (London, 1998); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European cultural history* (Cambridge, 1995).

Day One

ST PANCRAS INTERNATIONAL to LILLE EUROPE arriving around 11am, then TGV to CHAMPAGNE-ARDENNE station, BÉZANNE.

The NÉCROPOLE NATIONALE, SILLERY-BELLEVUE, to the south-east of Reims close to the river Vesle, is a large and typical French military cemetery. Laid out in 1923-33, it contains the bodies of 11,259 French soldiers, of whom 5,548 are in an ossuary. What makes this cemetery distinctive is the CHAPEL-MAUSOLEUM, dedicated to the missing, sited towards the lower end of the central axis. Inaugurated in 1927, it is surmounted by a tall lantern intended to contain an eternal flame. This chapel is, unusually for structures in a nécropole nationale, an accomplished *Art Déco* design and it was, in fact, one of two structures exhibited by the city of Reims at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (the other being the Carnegie Library: see below). The architect was *Adolphe Prost* and the sculpture by *Édouard Sedley*, along with *Berton, Lacote* and *Pellue*; the stained glass was by *Jacques Simon*, the ironwork by *Marcel Decrion* and the concrete work was carried out by *Demay*. The landscaping around the chapel was laid out by *Édouard Redant*; the rest of the cemetery is, typically, treeless and rather bleak.

Further east, the RUSSIAN MILITARY CEMETERY & CHAPEL near ST-HILAIRE-LE-GRAND is one of several reminders that, on the Allied side much more than with the Central Powers, the First World War was indeed a world war. The cemetery contains the bodies of 915 Russian soldiers sent to the Western Front in 1916; after the October Revolution, some of the surviving officers would continue to serve in a Russian voluntary legion. The Great War casualties were later joined by Russians who died fighting for France in the Second World War. The Russian Orthodox chapel was designed by *Albert Benois* and built and decorated in 1936-37. On the other side of the road a commemorative COLUMN records the engagement of Russian troops in France.

Several French military cemeteries surround SOUAIN-PERTHES-LÈS-HURLUS. We will stop at the NÉCROPOLE NATIONALE DE LA CROUÉE, which is the largest military cemetery in the département de la Marne. This cemetery was created in 1919 and completed in 1924. It contains 30,734 burials, of whom only 9,050 are identified. 21,688 bodies were placed in eight mass graves or ossuaries.

Beyond the French cemetery is the DEUTCHER SOLDATEN FRIEDHOF SOUAIN. This German military cemetery contains the bodies of 13,786 men, of whom 10,720 are unidentified. The cemetery was created by the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* in 1928 but only in 1972 were the temporary wooden crosses replaced in stone. The principal monument in the cemetery is a large free-standing sandstone cross.

A few miles further north is the MONUMENT AUX MORTS DES ARMÉES DE CHAMPAGNE at FERME DE NAVARIN. This structure is both a mausoleum and a memorial. Designed by *Bauer & Perrin*, it has a pyramidal base which contains both a chapel and a crypt, the latter containing the unidentified remains of some ten thousand soldiers of various nationalities who fell in the Champagne battles. Above, on a plinth, is a monumental sculptured group carved in Vosges sandstone. This is the work of the sculptor *Maxime Réal del Sarte*, who had been mutilated in the war. The three soldiers

depicted are also portraits: in the centre is General Gouraud, who suggested the monument and who unveiled it in 1924; to his right is the sculptor's brother, who died at the Chemin des Dames, and to his left Quentin Roosevelt, the youngest and favourite son of President Theodore Roosevelt, who was shot down in July 1918 while serving in France as a fighter pilot with the United States Army Air Service. Gouraud, who commanded the IV^o Armée in the Champagne after 1916 was later, in 1946, at his request, buried in the crypt.

North of Sommepy-Tahure is the SOMMEPY AMERICAN MEMORIAL at BLANC MONT, a tower erected in 1930-37 to commemorate the 70,000 U.S. troops who served in this region in 1918. The architect was *Arthur Loomis Harmon* of New York, one of the architects used by the American Battle Monuments Commission. A former assistant with McKim, Mead & White, he designed several skyscrapers and later became a partner with Shreve & Lamb, architects of the Empire State Building, and was later responsible for the YMCA in Jerusalem. As at Ferme de Navarin, the Sommepy monument was left surrounded by the remains of trenches and the devastation of war.

Back west to REIMS – France's principal “Ville Martyre” of the Great War. The metropolitan see of France and an ancient fortified city dating back to Roman times, Reims was the scene of the coronation of most of the kings of France following the baptism of Clovis by St Remi, Bishop of Reims, in 496. The last to be crowned, in the great 13th century Cathedral, one of the glories of Europe, was Charles X in 1824. Reims was occupied by the German army on 4th September 1914 in its initial sweep through France and Belgium; the Crown Prince, “Little Willy”, commander of the Fifth Army, took up residence in the Grand Hotel. The Germans evacuated the city eight days later but, unfortunately, the front line became entrenched just north of Reims and the city was effectively besieged thereafter. For four years, Reims was in easy range of German shell fire and was the target for several strenuous offensives, the most serious of which was Ludendorff's *Friedensturm* in July 1918. This was followed by Allied counter-attacks and the city was finally disengaged and delivered early in October 1918. The civilian population of Reims was evacuated in 1917. The shelling of the city was almost continuous throughout the war. When it ended, fewer than a hundred houses were said to be intact and 80-90% of the city had been destroyed and its ancient monuments badly damaged. Unlike, say, Ypres, Reims was not rebuilt as it was and many of the replacement buildings of the 1920s are touched by the fashion for *Art Déco* and other modernistic styles. The most significant of these is the Carnegie Library (others may be found in the rue de Talleyrand, the place Drouet d'Erlon, the rue de Vesle, Cours Langlet, rue de Mars and rue du Temple). Reims was again occupied by the Germans during the Second World War but was not seriously damaged. After the German retreat in 1944, the city became General Eisenhower's headquarters and was the scene of General Jodl's final unconditional surrender on 7th May 1945.

Work had begun on the rebuilding of the CATHÉDRALE NOTRE-DAME in 1211. In 1913 wooden scaffolding was erected around the north-west tower to undertake repairs. On 19th September 1914 incendiary shells fired from the German lines set this on fire. The fire spread and destroyed the roof. It also damaged the interior and set fire to the Archbishop's Palace and surrounding buildings. The Germans claimed that one of the towers was being used as a military observation post, an accusation which the French strenuously denied. The shelling was a huge mistake in public relations terms as it provoked international outrage; Allied propaganda used the apparently deliberate

damage to Reims Cathedral as a case of Teutonic “Frightfulness”, endorsing the conflict as one of Civilization against Barbarism. What is certain is that the shelling of Reims was unrelenting and that this famous historic building sustained considerable damage.

Although the Mediaeval stained glass and some of the sculpture was removed to safety, and the lower parts were protected with sandbags, irreparable harm was done. By the end of the war the Cathedral stood roofless and battered, and part of the choir vaulting had collapsed.

Restoration began in 1919 under the direction of *Henri Deneux*, chief architect of the Commission des Monuments Historiques. The destroyed vaulting was renewed, partly in reinforced concrete. The Cathedral was reconsecrated in 1937. New stained glass by *Marc Chagall* was placed in the apse windows in 1974.

The BIBLIOTHÈQUE CARNEGIE in the Place Carnegie, a little to the south-east of the Cathedral, was built in 1921-27. The previous municipal library had been housed in the Hotel de Ville, which had been gutted by incendiary shells in 1917. A new, purpose-built library was made possible by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the international organisation established in Washington, D.C., in 1910 with a gift from the Scottish-American entrepreneur and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The building was designed by the architect *Max Sainsaulieu*, with some assistance from his son, *Louis Sainsaulieu*, who seems to have made it less conventionally Classical and more Déco in style. The sculpture on the façade was by *Édouard Sedley* and the mosaics by *Bret*; the wrought-iron gates were made by *Schwartz-Haumont*. Inside, the lobby is lit with a lantern by *Jacques Simon* of Reims and the walls enhanced with marble mosaic panels by *Henri Sauvage*. The reading room is lit from above through a glass ceiling made by *Jacques Gruber* of Nancy. The entrance porch was exhibited at the 1925 Paris Expo.

The Carnegie Library was restored in 2001-05.

Reims' MONUMENTS AUX MORTS was built on an open site to the north-west of the old city in the Place de la République close to the Mediaeval fortifications and the Roman Porte de Mars. It is a stripped-Classical hemicycle constructed of reinforced concrete. *Henri Royer* won a limited competition held in 1924 and the monument was inaugurated in 1930. The flanking relief groups and the central free-standing bronze figure – clearly inspired by Rodin's *Penseur* – was the work of the sculptor *Paul Lefèvre*. After the Second World War, a memorial to the Martyrs of the Resistance was placed axially with the Monument in the gardens framed by boulevards.

Nearby is the RAILWAY STATION with its impressive reinforced-concrete double train shed of 1933 by *Le Marec*.

Also nearby in the rue de Mars close to the Place du Boulegrin and its (1920s) markets is the BRASSERIE LE BOULENGRIN: Art Déco, 1925, with murals [recommended by Robert Drake: “wonderfully atmospheric”].

[Overnight stay in Reims]

Day Two

From Reims we go north-west, again travelling through what had been defined after 1918 as the ‘Zone Rouge’ – the area entirely destroyed by the fighting – across the river Aisne to the CHEMIN DES DAMES. This is the road originally constructed so that

Louis XV's daughters could travel between Compiègne and the Château de la Bôve and it runs along the ridge which lies east-west north of the Aisne. This high ground saw ferocious fighting throughout the war. British troops attempted to take it during the Battle of the Aisne in 1914; it was eventually taken by the French in 1917 during and after Nivelle's disastrous offensive but was lost during the Battle of the Aisne in May 1918 when the great German offensive pushed the Allies almost back to the Marne. The ridge was finally taken by the French in October 1918. This area is now covered with war cemeteries and many and diverse memorials.

At CERNY-EN-LAONNOIS is the CHEMIN DES DAMES MÉMORIAL, an ecumenical CHAPEL erected by private initiative in 1949-51 (architect?). In front is the tall LANTERNE DES MORTS.

On the opposite (south) side of the road is the CERNY-EN-LAONNOIS NÉCROPOLE NATIONALE, created in 1919-25 and containing 5,150 French and 54 Russian burials. Beyond this is the DEUTCHER SOLDATEN FRIEDHOF, first created by the French in 1919 and laid out by the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* in 1928. The wooden crosses were replaced with stone in 1972. This German cemetery contains 7,526 burials, half of which are unidentified.

It was here, at Cerny-en-Laonnois, in front of these graves, that Charles de Gaulle and Conrad Adenauer met in 1962 to encourage the process of reconciliation, hoping “que leur mort contribue au rapprochement des deux nations, la France et l'Allemagne, et rende impossible toute autre guerre entre elles pour tous les temps”.

In the village is a tall column which is the MEMORIAL OF THE 1ST BATTALION LOYAL NORTH LANCASHIRE REGIMENT.

A little further south is VENDRESSE BRITISH CEMETERY containing 667 burials which were gathered from nearby cemeteries and from the battlefield. The Principal Architect was *Sir Edwin Lutyens*, the Assistant Architect *John Reginald Blomfield*. It is worth pausing to contrast this typical Imperial War Graves Commission cemetery with those of the other fighting powers. It was the British policy to have many small war cemeteries rather than the huge concentrated burial grounds which the French favoured and the Germans adopted by necessity. And it was also the (controversial) British policy to have secular headstones rather than crosses to mark the graves. This cemetery also exemplifies the British emphasis on planting and landscaping which also characterises the German war cemeteries but which is almost entirely lacking in the French necropolises. As in the French and American cemeteries, the gravestones at Vendresse are white – which makes a strong contrast with the dark stone and granites used by the Germans, who were subject to severe restrictions imposed by the French in the designing of their cemeteries. As Alexandre Niess notes in the recent *Itinéraires du Patrimoine* guide to the war cemeteries and memorials of the Marne, it was “in this spirit that the graves of German soldiers were not surmounted by a white cross or headstone like those of the Allies. In effect, white, the colour of purity and peace, was refused to the defeated Germans, who were considered as aggressors and barbarians by the propaganda of the time”. On the other hand, it is worth recalling what Käthe Kollwitz wrote when installing her sculptures of ‘The Mourning Parents’ at Roggevelde in 1932: “The British and Belgian cemeteries seem brighter, in a certain sense more cheerful and cosy, more familiar than the German cemeteries. I prefer the German ones. The war

was not a pleasant affair; it isn't seemly to prettify with flowers the mass deaths of all these young men. A war cemetery ought to be sombre..."

Further south, in the valley of the Aisne, is SOUPIR where there are large French and German cemeteries. There is also, a little further west, the CIMITERO MILITARE ITALIANO. The 2nd Italian Army Corps was sent to the Western Front in April 1918 and Italian troops were involved in the fierce fighting here in September 1918 which finally pushed the Germans off the Chemin des Dames ridge. This cemetery contains 592 graves. At the far end is a sculpture by *Fernand Cian*, an Italian sculptor based in Paris, given by the women of Italy in memory of the Italians who died in France.

SOISSONS and its great 13th century Cathedral suffered severely in the Great War. Sited on a main route to Paris, the city has often been attacked and occupied by invaders. It was besieged and taken by the Prussians in 1870. It was occupied briefly in September 1914 by the Germans, who were then pushed back a little to the north, from which position they could bombard the city. Soissons was freed in October 1917 when the Germans were pushed back to the Oise-Aisne Canal. But in May 1918 the city was occupied again as a result of the last great German offensive. The city was liberated again in August, but then suffered a further severe bombardment. At the end of the war Soissons was largely in ruins.

SOISSONS CATHEDRAL was largely of the 13th century. Its 14th century west front was a diminutive version of the type of Amiens or Notre-Dame but with only one, south-west tower. The top stage of this tower was but a fragment in 1918 when the whole west front was almost detached as most of the nave had been destroyed. The eastern parts of the Cathedral, although badly damaged, survived better. After the war, the Cathedral was reconstructed under the direction of *Émile Brunet* of the Monuments Historiques.

Just to the east of the Cathedral, in the Place Centrale, is the MONUMENT AUX MORTS, with relief sculpture by *Raoul Lamourdedieu* and surmounted by a figure by *Albert Bartholomé*.

Beyond that is the British MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING erected by the Imperial War Graves Commission and unveiled in 1928. It commemorates 3,987 British soldiers who fought alongside the French in this area in July and August 1918 and who have no known grave. The architects of this rather unsubtle monument were *Gordon Herbert Holt* & *Verner Owen Rees*, who had won a limited competition for it in 1925; the curiously stiff figures of three soldiers were by *Eric Kennington*. It does not compare well either with the other Memorials to the Missing, nor with the large sculptural monuments erected by the French.

Further south, in the Place de La Republique, is the Monument Aux Morts of 1870. To the west of that is what remains of the ABBAYE DE ST JEAN DES VIGNES where Thomas à Becket once resided. Only the west front of the abbey church now stands, with its twin spires, but the rest of the building was not destroyed by German shells but taken down by order of Napoleon in 1805.

South of Soissons, a little to the east of the main road, is the BUTTE DE CHALMONT where is an extraordinary work of monumental sculpture, inaugurated by President Lebrun in 1935, which commemorates the thousands who died in the battles of 1918. The sculptor *Paul Landowski*, working with the architect *Jean Taillens*, was

chosen to create it in 1927. Close to the road is a single female figure, 8 metres high, holding a shield, who represents LA FRANCE. Beyond, above a flight of steps, is a group of eight figures: LES FANTOMES. Seven are portraits of named soldiers (one an airman); the eighth, rising into the sky, is a naked young man, symbolising the sacrifice of those called to defend France.

To the south-east, just beyond FÈRE-EN-TARDENOIS, is the OISE-AISNE AMERICAN CEMETERY. This, like the other American cemeteries, was laid out in 1922 – that is, before the creation of the American Battle Monuments Commission the following year – by Major *George Gibbs jr*, who had once worked for Frederick Law Olmsted's firm, in consultation with members of the Commission for Fine Arts: *Charles Moore, James Greenleaf and William Mitchell Kendall*. The cemetery, with its regular rows of white marble crosses, contains 6,012 burials. At the far end, on axis, is the CHAPEL and MAP-ROOM, connecting by a curved colonnade. Built in 1926-30, this was designed by *Ralph Adams Cram*, the Bostonian Anglophilic Gothicist, although this work is in a round-arched Romanesque style.

Further south-east, at DORMANS on the river Marne, are a French and a German war cemetery, but we go up the hill on the south bank to the MÉMORIAL DES BATAILLES DE LA MARNE. This dominating and elaborate building is ecclesiastical in both style and form and was built at the initiative of the Catholics of France in reaction to the secular, republican character of other memorials – the conflict between church and state in France having been particularly bitter in the years before 1914. The moving force was Madame de la Rochefoucauld, Duchesse d'Estissac, who convened a committee in 1919 consisting of Cardinal Luçon, Archbishop of Reims, cardinal Tissier, Bishop of Châlons, and Marshal Foch – who suggested the site, in the grounds of the château of Dormans, as being “le point synthétique des deux batailles de la Marne”.

Work began on the ‘Chapelle de la Reconnaissance’ in 1921 and it was completed ten years later. The original competition-winning design was by the architect *M. Marcel* but it was *Georges Alexandre Closson* who carried the project through. The main chapel is lit from above by a square lantern supporting a spire. There are stained glass windows by *Lorin* of Chartres and the whole building is rich in sculpture. Below is a crypt and ossuary containing the bones of some 1,500 unidentified soldiers of various nationalities.

Further down the valley of the Marne is CHATEAU-THIERRY and beyond, on the summit of Côte 204, is the huge AISNE-MARNE AMERICAN MONUMENT commissioned by the American Battle Monuments Commission in 1926 to mark the achievement of the counter-attack by U.S. troops against the German advance. This is a major work by the Franco-American architect *Paul Phillipe Cret* and is a powerful essay in the monumental stripped-Classicism which became the universal civic style between the world wars on both sides of the Atlantic. It consists of a double colonnade of square fluted piers raised above a podium and steps. The central, wider bay is solid and against it are placed – on the side facing east towards Chateau-Thierry – a stylised American eagle and - on the other side - two heroic figures representing the United States and France. The sculptor was French-American artist *Alfred Bottian*. The monument was inaugurated in the presence of General Persing in 1937.

To the north-west is BELLEAU and the AISNE-MARNE AMERICAN CEMETERY, with 2,289 burials. It was first laid out in 1922 but is now dominated by the CHAPEL, a building with a tall tower in a simplified Romanesque style. Built in 1926-32, this is again the work of *Ralph Adams Cram* (who had good military connections, having earlier designed the U.S. Military Academy at West Point).

Finally, further down the Marne valley, on the south side of LA-FERTÉ-SOUS-JOUARRE next to the bridge across the river (where in September 1914 the British Expeditionary Force constructed a floating bridge to replace the one blown up by the Germans) is another lesser and less well-known British MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING. Unveiled in 1928, this slightly grandiose but rather conventional Classical design, flanked by free-standing piers with urns, commemorates 3,888 missing from the campaigns of 1914. It is the work of *George Hartley Goldsmith*, who had worked for Lutyens before the war and who, as an Assistant Architect with the I.W.G.C., had been the executive architect for many of Lutyens's war cemeteries in France.

Return by the Autoroute to REIMS for overnight stay.

Day Three

Leave Reims by the Autoroute de l'Est, past Valmy – where two monuments commemorate the first victory of the French Revolutionary army, under Kellerman, over the invading Prussians in 1792 – to the Argonne region.

VARENNES-EN-ARGONNE (where the fleeing Louis XVI was arrested in 1791 and sent back to Paris) is dominated by the PENNSYLVANIA STATE MEMORIAL built on high ground in 1927. It was designed by *Paul Cret* with *Thomas H. Atherton*. Cret had gone to the United States in 1903 to teach at the University of Pennsylvania but served with the French army in the Great War. Like his memorial at Chateau-Thierry, this consists of stripped-Classical colonnades with square piers, but here two colonnades face each other across a paved open space overlooking the valley below.

Nearby, on the BUTTE DE VAUQUOIS, is the MONUMENT AUX COMBATTANTS ET AUX MORTS DE VAUQUOIS, a lantern tower, with a relief sculpture of a poilu at the base, sited where a village once stood. The architect was *Monestier* and the sculptor *Marius Rousset*. This hill was captured by the Germans in 1914 and partly retaken by the French the following year. For the next three years the front line ran through here while the ground underneath was extensively tunnelled as each of the two opposing armies tried to blow the other up.

Further north, near ROMAGNE-SOUS-MONTFAUCON, is the MEUSE-ARGONNE: AMERICAN CEMETERY – the largest American cemetery in Europe, with 14,240 burials – the consequence of the 1918 offensive that ended the war. It was laid out in 1922 with avenues of trees framing the usual regular pattern of white marble crosses. In 1926 the American Battle Monuments Commission asked *Louis Ayres* of the firm of *York & Sawyer* to design a chapel for a central, axial position on the highest part of the site. Ayres offered alternative designs, in both Romanesque and Classical. Romanesque was chosen, for a design with long flanking arcades and pavilions, but he feared "The building is so small in regard to the great expanse before it, that it will be well to raise it on a plinth or terrace to give it as much importance as possible". In the event, General Pershing recommended that the building be reduced in height and width.

In consequence, as Elizabeth Grossman has written, “The Meuse-Argonne chapel is too small to dominate the Meuse-Argonne cemetery. It is not even able to provide a climax to the mall, although the lines of trees that screen the graves provide perspective distancing. The chapel functions rather as a place of initial destination. Only after visitors reach the chapel and turn around can they appreciate the extent of the cemetery. From that vantage point the rows of crosses fill the view.”

To the south-east is the BUTTE DE MONTFAUCON where stands a colossal Greek Doric column rising above a vast flight of steps. On top of the column is a figure representing Liberty, the whole thing over 200 feet high. This is the MEUSE-ARGONNE MONUMENT commemorating the victory of the American offensive in the last months of the war. The monument was designed by *John Russell Pope*, architect of the National Gallery and Jefferson Memorial in Washington D.C. It was a difficult site as the French government had declared the ruined village *un vestige de la guerre*; that is, the ruins and the churned up landscape had to be left as a memorial. In 1926 Pope submitted three alternative schemes, of which the column design was chosen as the most imposing. The following year the A.M.B.C. asked Pope to make the column even bigger. The monument was inaugurated in the presence of the French President, Albert Lebrun, in 1937.

To the south-east is the aptly named Fôret de Mort-Homme, the scene of ferocious fighting during the defence of Verdun in 1916-17. On the top of a hill, much burrowed into by tunnelling as well as heavily shelled, is the extraordinary MONUMENT LE MORT-HOMME unveiled in 1922: a triumphant figure of Death rises above a base bearing the legend: “*Ils n’ont pas passé*”. The sculptor was *G. Froment-Meurice*.

VERDUN is an ancient fortress city with a long and violent history. It was besieged and heavily shelled in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War and held out for eleven weeks. The defences of Verdun and the forts built by Napoleon III were augmented in the 1880s by a further ring of forts. These were later strengthened with concrete and armour. Verdun was strategically important during the manoeuvres during the First Battle of the Marne in 1914 but was a comparatively quiet part of the front when the Germans launched a massive surprise attack in February 1916. Verdun was chosen by Erich von Falkenhayn, the German Chief of Staff, as part of his strategy for breaking the entrenched stalemate and winning the war. An offensive was necessary as “Germany and her allies could not hold out indefinitely” and it must be against the French rather than the British section of the Western Front. “The strain on France has reached breaking point – though it is certainly borne with the most remarkable devotion. If we succeed in opening the eyes of her people to the fact that in a military sense they have nothing more to hope for, that breaking point would be reached and England’s best sword knocked out of her hand.” The attack should be against a vital point that would “compel the French to throw in every man they have. If they do so the forces of France will bleed to death”.

They did – but so did those of the Germans. If Verdun became the “mincing machine” for the French, it was also “the slaughter-house of Germany”; for both it was hell: *l’Enfer* or *die Hölle* of Verdun. In the dreadful war of attrition which followed and which lasted about 300 days, some 26 million shells were fired and perhaps a quarter of a million men – French and German – died in the area around Verdun; the total casualties were some 700,000 – killed, missing or wounded. And when the fighting was over, the front line was roughly where it had been before February 1916.

Verdun was open to attack on three sides, and on the east side the German front line extended well south to St Mihiel. But the main attack came from the north, down the valley of the Meuse. At first the attack succeeded: Fort Vaux and Fort Douaumont were soon taken by the invader and Verdun seemed about to fall. But it did not. A heroic resistance to the death was organised by General Philippe Pétain: “*Ils ne passeront pas!*”. Verdun was supplied by a single road – “La Voie Sacrée” – from Bar-le-Duc in the south, which was paralleled by a single narrow-gauge railway (the other lines to the fortress having been cut). Fighting continued, with attack and counter-attack amidst constant shelling, reaching its crisis in June 1916. After that, the pressure was taken off by the launch of the British (and French) offensive on the Somme in July 1916 and by events on the Eastern Front. Later in 1916 (and into 1917) the French succeeded in retaking lost ground – Fort Douaumont was recaptured in October. But the final victory only came at the end of 1918 with the American offensive on the St Mihiel front.

John Keegan has written that, “Had [Verdun] fallen the results might have been beneficial to the French conduct of the war, for it was indeed a death trap, while the broken and wooded terrain to its rear was perfectly defensible at a cost in life much lower than the French were to suffer in and around the city in the months to come”. The industrialised slaughter around Verdun may well seem one of the most insane of struggles in the whole dreadful murderous history of the 20th century.

Despite shelling and aerial bombardment, the city of VERDUN with its CITADEL was less damaged during the war than Reims or Soissons. The CATHÉDRALE NOTRE-DAME – Romanesque and Gothic, but much remodelled after 1755 – was badly damaged in 1917 when the roof was destroyed and most of the vaults fell. There are many war memorials and monuments in the town, the most important of which are:

The MONUMENT DE LA VICTOIRE in the rue Mazel, to the north-east of the Cathedral, stands at the top of a monumental flight of 73 steps. Unveiled in 1929, it consists of a helmeted stone figure of Victory, with a sword, standing on the stepped top of a tall sloping pylon. The sculptor was *Jean Boucher*, the architect *L. Chesney*. The pylon is flanked by Russian cannons captured from the Germans, and it contains a crypt which can be visited. J.-M. de Busscher notes that this “Guerrier Gaulois” bears a strange resemblance to Hugo Lederer’s Bismarck monument in Hamburg of 1902.

Across the river, on the east bank of the Meuse, built into the remains of the city’s ramparts near the Port Chaussée, is the MONUMENT AUX ENFANTS DE VERDUN MORTS POUR LA FRANCE, inaugurated in 1928. In the centre are five large figures of soldiers, carved in stone, representing the different corps of the French army. The sculptor was *Claude Grange*, the architect *Forest*. Forts, villages, roads, railways in the terrain north of Verdun were completely pulverised in the fighting. It is here that the principal memorials are to be found – including the astonishing structure which is, arguably, France’s most significant monument generated by the Great War.

On the road north-east of Verdun near the Fort de Souville is the MONUMENT MAGINOT, erected to the memory of the politician and soldier André Maginot (1877-1932) and inaugurated in 1935. Maginot served in the French army during the Great War and was badly wounded near Verdun – an event depicted in the sculptured group placed in front of the central symbolic shield. Maginot served as Minister of War three times between 1922 and 1932 and he was the principal advocate of a new line of

impregnable defences against a future German invasion. These were completed after his death and bore his name. In the event, of course, the Germans bypassed the Maginot Line in 1940. The architects for the monument were *A. Jasson & N. Chappéy* and the sculptor *Gaston Broquet*.

Further on, on the site of the railway station for the vanished village of FLEURY-DEVANT-DOUAUMONT (which changed hands sixteen times in the struggle in 1916), is the MÉMORIAL DE VERDUN. Dedicated to the soldiers of both sides who fought and died here in response to the *rapprochement* between France and Germany and intended to explain what happened at Verdun to present and future generations, this memorial museum was proposed in 1960 and inaugurated in 1967. The architect was *Charles Legrange*.

Further on is the much battered FORT DOUAUMONT, for the possession of which thousands died. Before it are the two most visited of the Verdun monuments.

The TRANCHÉE DES BAÏONNETTES is an extraordinary site. On 10th June 1916 to companies of the 137th Régiment de l'Infanterie were buried alive in their front-line trench by shelling; according to legend only the tops of their rifles protruded above the ground and, after research, the site was discovered in 1919. It was decided that this poignant tomb must be preserved as a memorial and as a symbol of the unbreakable spirit of the defending French army. An American banker, George F. Rand (who was killed in an air crash shortly afterwards), donated the funds required to protect the site. A massive, rugged, almost Cubist structure of reinforced concrete, with echoes of frank Lloyd Wright, was placed above it, which was inaugurated in the presence of a host of dignitaries in 1920. The architect, *André Ventre*, wrote that "It is evident that nothing could typify the tragedy and heroism of the bayonet trench better than the trench itself... My design comprises a steel and concrete covering over the position, protecting the protruding rifle barrels and bayonets from the rain and snow and providing also a suitable tomb for the dead soldiers who, of course, remain in the trench. The structure will be heavily reinforced with steel and everything possible to ensure durability will be done. I guarantee the monument to last for at least 500 years".

However, common sense suggests that the ground and artefacts now protected cannot possibly be the original collapsed trench with its victims. As Jay Winter has written, "The Trench of the Bayonettes is a war memorial of a special kind: a tomb frozen in time and preserved not *by*, but *from* art... But there is one irony which must be recognised. The location chosen for commemoration was flat; the place where the bayonets were found was a series of shell craters some 30 metres away. The memorial is, therefore, on an *imaginary* site of heroism. It is at best adjacent to the place where the men of the 137th regiment died. Thus from the very outset the attempt to preserve the site of memory 'as it really was' entailed the creation of myth." And Rose Coombs noted in 1986 that "Today there are few bayonettes or rifles visible: in fact every time I visit the monument I see a difference. Only 17 unknown soldiers remain buried here, marked by the wooden crosses, the other 40 who were identified were reburied in Fleury Cemetery."

What dominates DOUAUMONT and is visible for miles around is the huge OSSUAIRE. This unprecedented and disconcerting structure contains the bones of some 130,000 unidentified men – inevitably German as well as French – who died in the struggle for Verdun. The project was promoted by a committee convened by the Bishop

of Verdun and was sponsored by non-governmental bodies and veterans' associations. The foundation stone was laid by Pétain in 1920 but official approval of the design was not granted until 1924. The bones were transferred from a temporary ossuary in 1927 and the memorial building was inaugurated by President Lebrun in 1932. It consists of two long barrel-vaulted wings flanked by a series of alcoves containing sarcophagi, expressed externally by gables, which contain the bones; the internal walls are lined with tablets bearing the names of those who disappeared. Projecting westwards from the centre is a chapel, with stained glass by Georges Desvallières and on an upper floor there is a museum. Above the central entrance rises a tall lantern tower. In this hangs a bell, the *Bourdon de la Victoire*, given by Mrs Anne Thorburn Van Buren in 1927. The lantern, which was designed to illuminate the surrounding battlefield at night, rises to 46 metres and the ossuary is 137 metres long. The architects were Léon Azéma, Max Edrei and Jacques Hardy. This partnership would win the competition of the Palais de Justice in Cairo in 1924 (along with Victor Erlanger) and Azéma was chosen in 1934 to be one of the architects of the Palais de Chaillot in Paris.

The architecture is certainly remarkable. With its curved roof and rounded ends, and the helmet-like top to the tower, the building has a military, fort- or gun-emplacement-like appearance. The style is hard to describe: a sort of stripped Classical-cum-Romanesque, with a *Déco* character as well as with hints of the sublimity of monuments of the Ancient World (typical of so much architecture of the 1920s), while the integration of the giant cross into the obelisk-tower has overtones of contemporary Expressionism. The ossuary has been largely ignored in the literature about C20 French architect and the design had and has its critics; J.-M. de Busscher has written of “Une architecture submersible dont le phare-périscope, aux formes phallo-balistiques, veille les 130,000 corps immergés sous lui... Sous sa responsabilité: celle de l’obus qui le symbolise.” Roderick Gradidge wrote that “the vast vaulted interior” of the chapel, “lit by standard lights shining onto the ceiling, is extraordinary and quite successful and rather moving, reminding one if anything of Franco’s under-mountain memorial to the Spanish Civil War. There is nothing of Lutyens or the other British architects of the War Graves Commission, cool but none the less deeply felt emotion, to us perhaps this seems too extreme and too unreal.” While Jonathan Meades considers that “the vast ossuary at Douaumont is a matter for shame. It is shockingly inappropriate. Léon Azéma, Max Edrei and Jacques Hardy were not architects of the first rank. And they adopted an idiom peculiar to French and Belgian sacred architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. In the hands of Paul Tournon... or Jacques Barge, this wilfully exotic, vaguely oriental art deco is charming; if you like your churches to resemble cinemas, it is just the ticket. But even had Azéma and his collaborators been less ham-fisted, the very style, which might derive from an illustration by Willy Pogany, could only be counted a frivolous mistake - a mistake exacerbated by its proportions... The architecture of pleasure, monstrously distended, is inimical to meditative remembrance. The designers seem not to have had the nerve to address the awful purpose of their monument, and shamefully made light of it - they effected a betrayal of the dead.” [New Statesman 17th July 2006]

On the other hand, the designers were faced with an unprecedented brief and responded in a way that both looked to the past and acknowledged contemporary influences. It is surely more original and more distinctive than the memorial structures in other contemporary French cemeteries (such as Notre-Dame de Lorette near Arras), which tend to the conventional and ecclesiastical in character. It is certainly very different from Lutyens's great memorial at Thiepval which was unveiled the same year (1932), and arguably rather less subtle and refined, but both, in their different ways, are highly original works of art which rise to the Sublime and express their terrible purpose

without sentimentality. And if the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme is the greatest British monument to emerge from the war, so the Douamont Ossuary is the most important as well as the most haunting war memorial in France.

In front of the Ossuary is the FLEURY-DEVANT-DOUAUMONT NÉCROPOLE NATIONALE, laid out in 1923-29 with some 15,000 graves, many brought from other cemeteries. 592 of these are Muslim. A memorial stone to these soldiers was also raised, which has since been incorporated into a larger MONUMENT À LA MÉMOIRE DES SOLDATS MUSULMANS commemorating the 72,000 French colonial Muslim troops who died for France in the Great War. Designed in a rather literal and pedantic Moorish style, this was inaugurated by President Chirac in 2006. Earlier, in 1938, LE MUR DES ISRAÉLITES was erected on the west side of the cemetery to honour the many Jewish soldiers who died at Verdun. At the far side of the cemetery, across the road, is the SOLDAT DU DROIT, a recumbent figure by *Alexandre Descatoire* which is the memorial to the politician André Thome, killed in March 1916.

Return to Verdun, then return by the Autoroute to REIMS.
CHAMPAGNE-ARDENNE station: to PARIS, GARE DE L'EST then
PARIS GARE DU NORD to ST PANCRAS INTERNATIONAL.

Gavin Stamp
September 2010; revised 27.9.2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These notes have been made available to the public thanks to a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, as part of a C20 project marking the centenary of World War One.

www.c20society.org.uk/war-memorials/