

## **The Western Front WWI David Hedges**

For our June meeting we had a very interesting and well attended talk by David Hedges who told us about his work in northern France with the Durand Group on the battlefields of WW1. David explained that for thirty years he had been a member of the Durand Group whose prime mission was to find and neutralise massive unexploded still viable mine charges in tunnels stretching across no man's land in northern France. The Durand Group volunteers are made up of former military personnel, tunnelling engineers, bomb disposal operators and archaeologists who are restoring the subway system and giving valuable insight into underground warfare. Whilst the general public perception of WW1 was that soldiers stood in trenches during their tour of duty on the front line in fact with artillery accounting for 70% to 80% of casualties, most soldiers after the dawn roll call went underground for safety, either in bunkers or deeper in tunnels and caves. Whilst underground they wrote their names and messages on the walls and whilst locating the explosives the team also find a wealth of graffiti that has not been seen since the end of the war.

Each year around 25 tonnes of UXBs is still recovered with 18m artillery shells and 10m grenades. Once found the ordinance is collected and disposed of by the French demineurs and over the years 630 have been killed showing the continued dangers. Local farmers often unearth the shells whilst ploughing and each year around 10 civilians are also killed, mostly farmers, and David also told us of the particularly dangerous gas shells.

During WW1 three types of caves and tunnels at different levels were dug into the chalk, the subways used to move about, the deeper sheltering caves, some of which were reused from the 1700s and the deepest fighting tunnels that held the mines. The soldiers also spent time in the tunnels listening for the enemy digging out across no man's land.

David explained that the Durand Group had worked to clear the public area around the Thiepval Memorial although the nearby wooded area had not been cleared and still contained live ordinance. During the search for the mines and the clearing of the tunnels the team had found over 2000 items of graffiti, whilst some of the messages and pictures were somewhat crude David said that none of the items they had discovered were against the war. Where the graffiti included the names of the soldiers the group had sometimes been able to locate living relatives and 8 families from Canada had visited the tunnels to view the graffiti left by their ancestors and David shared photographs of family members viewing the graffiti.

David was thanked for attending to provide such an interesting and informative talk and answered questions from the audience.

Lorna Fraser

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