

And This Was Ypres – 1927 Visit

WEDNESDAY, THE DAILY EXPRESS, JULY 20, 1927.

AND THIS WAS YPRES.

ROAD MANY THOUSANDS
WILL REMEMBER.

VLAMERTINGHE.

By HENRY WILLIAMSON.

This is the first of a series of articles by an ex-soldier, in which he describes a tour of the battlefields.

HUNDREDS of thousands of men remember the road from Poperinghe to Ypres. Its straightness begins between two long lines of houses, with tram rails laid in the right side of the road. Where the houses end the pavé ends also, and straight-boled elm trees grow at the grassy edges, above the ditches on either side.



Mr. H. Williamson. The road lies on a raised causeway, above meadows and fields of flax, corn, and hops, stretching away on either side. Past the station the archery target, with its fluted pavilion, still stands on the left of the

road, a tall green stalk like a grasshopper's leg and many-clawed foot.

Twenty-five minutes' march out of Poperinghe we saw Kemmel Hill, blue in the distance. It was captured by the enemy during his last great northern drive in April 1918, and thereafter invisible to our troops on the road. To-day you can see the rusty wires which supported the wire nets strung with coloured camouflage rags still dangling from the elms.

This country road was the main traffic artery to the Salient, and a perilous way when the enemy sat up on Kemmel Hill with his telescopes and telephones connected with his long-range batteries. It was more crowded at night than is the Strand to-day during the "rush hours"—marching men, guns, strings of pack mules, wagons, motor-cars, lorries—all congested in the darkness.

Whenever a lorry engine stopped, and failed to restart after half a dozen swings of the handle, it was pushed by scores of hands, and tipped over into the ditch. Shell-holes in the road were filled with the ruins of shattered wagons, and perhaps pieces of horse and mule, and hastily covered with earth. Then on again, thousands of tons of material, animate and inanimate, bumping, tramping, jolting forward towards the Salient. To-day every tall elm by the roadside bears its traffic scars, axle-high, from the hubs of lurching lorry and wagon.

Little trees as thick as a man's wrist grow in the gaps between the scorched forefathers of the wayside, and their roots push into the darkness of old, unnamed horse graves. The fields are beautiful with wind-stroked corn; and in the greener fields families of peasants on hands and knees crawl in line, picking out the weeds from among the ruffled flax.

Larks sing in the sky, as they have sung during all the years, and now we may share in their joyous song of freedom. Their nests are in the tussocks of meadow grass, in the slight hollows that make most of the visible ground uneven and undulating, where once shells fell—and men among them.

We walked on, alert for signs of war. We came to a red village; red brick walls, red tiled roofs, all new. At the beginning of the village stood an old, grey cement tower, like the stump of an inferior lighthouse. "Four Toes," my companion, leaned on his stick opposite this old mill-house, and said, "That was a casualty clearing station in '17. I had my arm dressed there when the splinter of an anti-tank bullet had given me a 'Blighly' one."

He stared at the mill-house, and said: "I remember So-and-so, a distinguished politician, coming up and giving the walking wounded gold-tipped cigarettes as we stood outside in the drizzle."

"He asked me how the war was going. Being out of it, with visions of going home, we said, 'Fine.' Were we keen to get back, and finish the job? 'Yes, sir.' I remember reading in the papers, a few days afterwards, his eulogy on the optimism and enthusiasm of the soldiers in the Passchendaele battles."

"Four Toes" laughed quietly. "For the good of his soul, for he was an idealist, with a wide popular appeal with words, I should have liked that politician to have come with us when 'Jerry' was crumping the tanks going up to the jumping-off point the night before the battle for Poelcapelle."

"He would have heard authentic expressions of the wounded then. The leading tank was ditched in a shell-crater, the second was on fire. Salvoes of five-nines were bursting all around. The road was a foot deep in thin watery mud, and strewn with shattered wagons and horses, drowned men, and wounded who had led to death, covered with a hundredweight of sticking clay."

"We tried to go back the way we had come, down the road to St. Julien again, but the last tank of the column was ditched also. The ground on either side of the road was churned and re churned six feet deep with shell holes. My tank had a direct hit, but I managed to get out with one of the crew."

"Outside, it was like standing in the middle of the flame of an immense Primus stove. Wounded infantry, going up to the tape-lines for the attack at dawn on the morrow, were crawling round the tanks, at their last gasp, seeking cover."

One small bit of Vlamertinghe remains as it was. By the first bend of the road inside the village, just before the church, stands an iron Calvary out of a grassy mound. The figure of Jesus rusts in the sunlight, the left foot broken off, the right ankle fractured. A few yards away stands the village war memorial, the figures of a soldier and a nurse cast in concrete. The memorial is already falling apart, owing to faulty erection, and is held together by iron wire.

In the churchyard tall iron crosses, factory-made, have been put up on the graves of the ancient dead, some of them more than a century old. Inside the church, one sees the same lifeless spirit of materialism. The walls are decorated with stencilled patterns, hundreds repeated in each long line, the hammers and pincers, the crown of thorns and nails. The wall sculptures of Biblical scenes, cast out of a mould, are without inspiration and gaudily coloured.

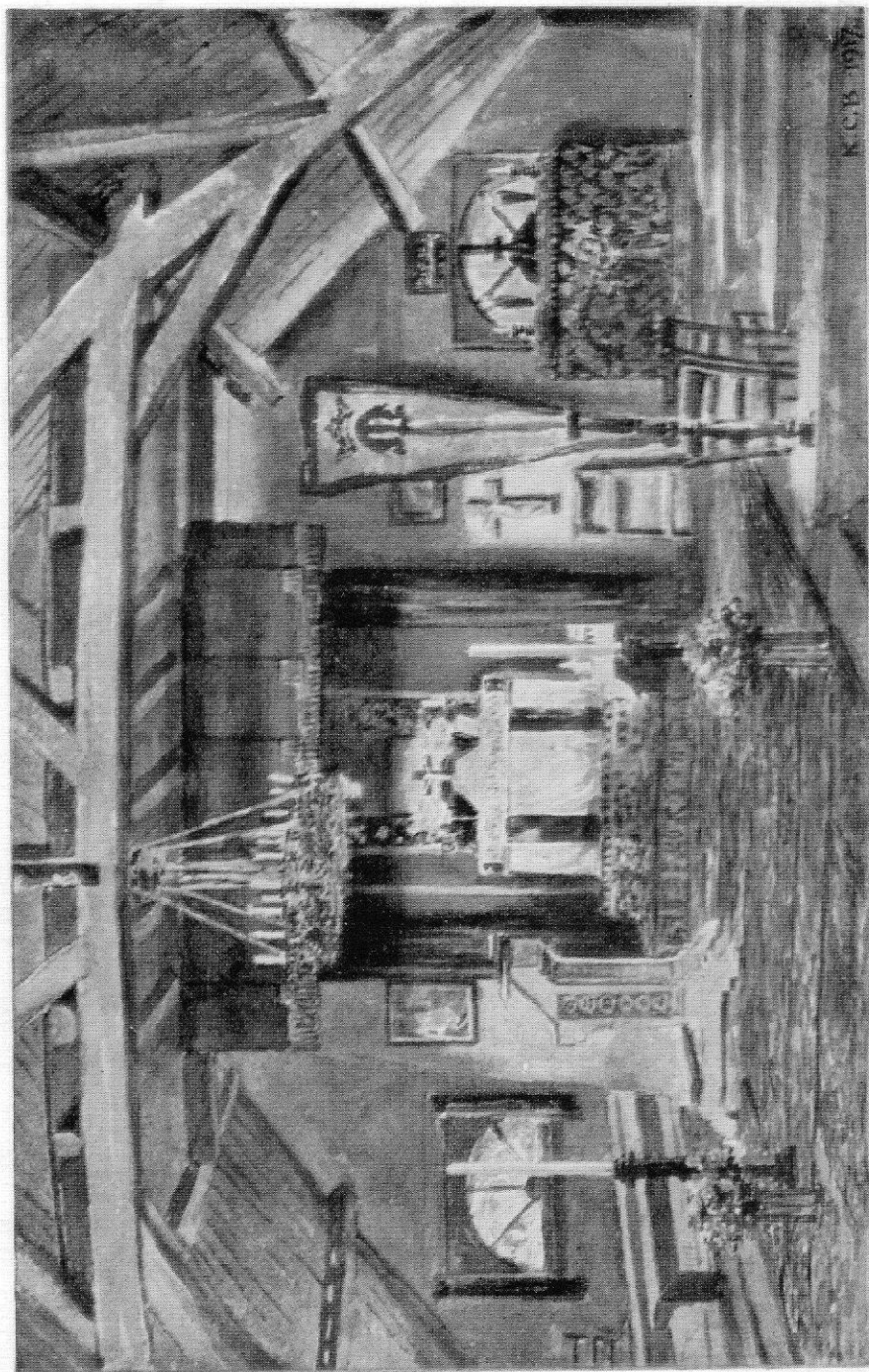
In Vlamertinghe was a sad sight—a little chaffinch in a tiny wooden cage, set with a few bars in a space about two inches square. It was hopping up, hopping down, hopping up, hopping down, as quickly as you read it. They had blinded its eyes with a needle—to make it sing better.

I, who am free, know what that tiny brother was feeling, but I did not know what to do about it.

We walked on, out of Vlamertinghe.



A remarkable photograph, taken in 1918, of St. Pierre Church, Ypres, its crucifix untouched by shell-fire.



*The Toc H Talbot House Chapel at Poperinghe, originally a hop-loft. (Postcard in Henry Williamson's archive reproduced with the kind permission of Toc H.)
The original postcard is in colour, showing dark red mantle and backcloth, with deep green curtain drapes.*

THE DAILY EXPRESS.

—AND THIS WAS V
YPRES.—II.

"GOLDFISH" CHATEAU
MYSTERY.

CLEAN, NEW CITY.

By HENRY WILLIAMSON.

This is the second of a series of articles by an ex-soldier, describing a tour of the battlefields.

THE road leading out of Vlamertinghe towards Ypres makes a long but slight S bend. It is in full view of the Wytschaete ridge, which lies forward on the right. Old rusty camouflage-support wires are still to be seen dangling on the elms at the bend. Very soon there are no trees left, all having been topped, splintered, felled, and finally thrown, by gunfire.

"Whitesheet" ridge is six miles distant as the airplane flies; but officer-eyesight, aided by powerful telescopes, directed through ground-level slits in certain concrete "pill-boxes," could see the dust raised by wheels and feet.

Guttural words into the telephone: a few seconds, and the dull thuds of guns behind the ridge: a few more seconds, and the bursts of shells observed on the distant road. No wonder it was necessary to take Whitesheet ridge before the great attacks of '17 could be prepared.

There used to stand an upturned gas-cylinder by the railway level-crossing between Vlamertinghe and Ypres. There was also a policeman there, night and day. "Box respirators at the alert!" You felt you were done for after passing that place.

"I shan't come back this time," one or another of the boys used to say. "Garn, don't get the — wind up, chum," said others. "Ah, I shall be pushing up daisies soon." "What you think Wipers is, a — park with flower gardens? There ain't no — daisies left to push up."

DIVISIONAL H.Q.

A hundred yards to the left of the road just before the level-crossing, stands "Goldfish" chateau. Why was it never knocked down by shell-fire? It was a divisional headquarters throughout the war, and advanced G.H.Q. during the First Ypres.

It was said by German prisoners that General von Bissing, who lived in the place for three days during the German sweep forward in '14, liked it so much that he decided to take it after the war as part of his "blood money." Anyhow, it was hardly touched, even by shrapnel, although some of the goldfish in the horseshoe-shaped pond around it were occasionally seen floating on their sides.

Peace came. The Vlamertinghe road was rematerialled; the village cleared of its grass-grown brickheaps, and old foundation sites marked out anew; the shell-holed fields were levelled by the shovels of Flemish, Poles, and Italians. A vast pile of "dud" shells and shell cases arose near "Goldfish" chateau.

The city of Ypres is clean and new and hybrid-English, its vast Grand Place holding enough air and sunlight to give a feeling of freedom and space.

The rectangular ruined fragment of the Cloth Hall is still contained in its scaffold box. Grass and wild flowers on the tops of the walls make the ruin beautiful. Jackdaws feed their young in the nests within the masonry gaps on high.

The less unobservant American visitors notice the four-way trumpets of the siren on the top of the ruin, and ask their guides if it is "the old original gas-horns of the British."

Alas, there is no historical thrill about that siren! It is a modern instrument, fixed there by the local fire brigade.

During the daytime the Grand Place is the parking-place for motor-cars and charabancs. A handbill may be put into your hand by a Belgian, an amusing document with its quaint spelling, "First-class cars for hire. Competition impossible." Well, there is nothing like downright statements for impressing the ignorant.

"Carefull (sic) drivers. Highly recommended and very popular with visitors' tours to Belgium, the prices quoted are for first-class car, including an experienced guide explaining all places of interest, visited or passed, and are inclusive, absolutely nothing extra."

You may go to Schrapnell (sic) corner, or Tyne cote (sic) cemetery ("absolutely largest in the district, about 12,000 graves"), or the "highly recommended and most interesting point of view, Trip No. 7," which includes "St. Julien, Fod. capelle, and the famous Houthulst forest (sic), Deat (sic) trench, kept up in the state as it was during the war and can be visited for the small entrance fee of one franc."

DEATH TRENCH.

Death Trench, kept up in the same state as during the war, for three half-pence!

Don't you believe it, madam. You'll see nothing. If you could see it as it was (and it was an ideal home for a lounge-lizard compared with the Salient proper in '17) you would blench with pity and terror, and feel a hopeless misery when next you heard children in the front rows of cinemas booing the "cowardly villains" in a war film and cheering the "brave heroes." For the seeds of war are in every one of us; and only a broad, universal outlook can make war obsolete, like the burning of "witches."

Then there is Trip No. 9 . . . "after lunch a most extensive visit to Bruges (often referred to as the Venice of the North), including amongst others the Bloodchappel with the casket containing a drop of the Blood of Christ, brought back from Palestine by one of the Crusaders, with its famous paintings, recommended to all desiring a real pleasant and interesting day . . . £2 10s."

I know a woman, a person's wife in a village in England, who went specially to see the Bloodchappel. The same woman solemnly declared to me, on an occasion when my remarks had affronted her ideals, that her best friend had "lost her husband in the war because she had loved him more than she had loved God," i.e., she had not gone to church on Sunday, but stayed at home or gone for walks with him.

Now let us seek a parallel in the annals of the highly-important, to wit, the "War Memories" of General von Ludendorff, where he writes of the battle of Tannenberg:—

The enemy losses in killed and wounded, too, were extremely heavy. One of the most brilliant battles in the history of the world had been fought. To the training of our army in peace time alone did we owe this feat . . . (Then four paragraphs further on he says): In the Protestant church at Allenstein General von Hindenburg and I rendered thanks to Almighty God for this victory.

Both sincere patriots, this important general and the unimportant wife of a parson; both with minds of dead tissue (white sepulchres, to use another's metaphor).

Multiply this type of mind one hundred million times, with its every thought and action on the same level, and you get your wars between nations, each declaring its belief in its national righteousness under heaven.

TELEPHONE 322

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- Trip. No 1. — **Round about Ypres** : Visit to all places of interest in the town. Ruins of Cloth-Hall, £ - S - D
Town hall, Cathedral, Irish fusiliers monument, ramparts, cemetery, Lille Gate, Menin Gate, Old Harbour,
Ruins of the old pumping station, and return to Grand' Place 0 - 5 - 0
- Trip. No 2. — **Battle-field tour North of Ypres** : Leave from Ypres by the Dixmude-road and passing
by White house cemetery, St. Jean, crossing the German first lines at Whiltchire, St. Julien, Canadian
monument, Zonnebeke, St. Charles French cemetery, Sanctuary wood, Hill 62, Hellfire corner, Zillebeke,
Hill 60, Railway dugouts, Schrapnell corner, and return to Ypres by Lille Gate 0 - 12 - 6
- Trip. No 3. — **Extended battle-field tour North** : Leave Ypres the same way as in trip No 2, continuing from
St. Julien to Poelcappelle, visiting the monument of the famous French airman Guynemer brought down by
the Germans near Poelcappelle, West-Roosebeke, Passchendaele ridge, Tyne cote cemetery, (largest in
the district about 12.000 graves), Gheluvelt, Menin-road, Clapham Junction, Hooghe, Hill 62, Hellfire
corner, Zillebeke, Hill 60, Railway dugouts, Schrapnell corner and return to Ypres by Lille Gate 1 - 0 - 0
- Trip. No 4. — **Battle-field tour South of Ypres** : Leave Ypres by Lille Gate, passing by Bedford House, St. Eloi,
Wytshaete, with its famous minecrater, Kemmel, visiting the famous but from which is seen the most
wonderfull panorama of the Salient, return to Ypres by La Clytte, Hallebast, Dickebusch, Kruisstraat,
railway station, Grand' Place 0 - 12 - 6
- Trip. No 5. — **Extended Battle-field tour South** : Leave Ypres same way as trip. No 4, proceeding from
Wytshaete to Messines, Ploegsteert, Armentiers, Nieppe, Le Seau, Neuve-Eglise, Lindehoek, Kemmel,
Vierstraat, Kruisstraathoek and Lille Gate to Grand' Place, £ 1 - 0 - 0, plus cost of crossing French
borders. This trip may be cut across from Ploegsteert by Romarin direct to Neuve-Eglise, which saves the
expenche incurred going over the French border, entirely left to the choise of the customers.
- Trip. No 6. — **Lille** : A magnificent afternoon-drive of about 50 miles, passing by Menin, Halluin, Tourcoing and
Roubaix, visits to the principal and most interesting parts of the Capital of the North of France 1 - 10 - 0
Plus fee for crossing the border.
- Trip. No 7. — **Dixmude** : A most interesting drive of about 45 miles, through the German and the British lines all the
way. Passing by St. Julien, Poelcappelle and the famous Houthulst forrest, Houthulst, Clercken, Dixmude,
visits to all interesting points as the Minottery, Deat-trench kept up in the same state as during the war and
can be visited for the small entrance-fee of one franc, returning to Ypres by Woumen, Boesinghe making a
short halt at the Irish farm cemetery and dressing Station. This is a very popular trip by visitors to Ypres
and from interesting point of view Highly recommended 1 - 5 - 0
- Trip. No 8. — **Courtrai** : A charming afternoon drive of about 40 miles on the best road round about Ypres, to one
of the biggest spinning centres in Belgium 1 - 5 - 0

ALL DAY TRIPS. -- Leave Ypres about 8.30 p. m.

- Trip. No 9. — **Bruges** : A most glorious drive of 80 miles, including the Battle-field and visit to the most interesting
town in Belgium with its Canals and old building of 7 and 800 years of age. Leave from Ypres by Poelcap-
pelle, Houthulst forrest, Clercken, Dixmude, Cockelaere, Leugenboom, where a halt is made, to visit the
Big Canon (Lange Max) with which the Germans bombarded Dunkerque, and than proceeding to Bruges via
Ghistelles, passing trough a most beautifull Avenue, about 18 miles long and the best motoring road in
Belgium. After lunch a most extensive visit of Bruges (often referred to as the Venice of the North)
including amongst other the Bloodchappel with the cashet containing a drop of the Blood of Christ, brought
back from Palestine by one of the Crusaders, the Townhall, with its famous paintings, the Gruit Huis, a
trip on the old canals by motor boat, Memlings Museum, Cathedral, Beguinage, afternoon-tea and return to
Ypres by Thourout, Hoogdele, West-Roosebeke, St. Julien. This is a trip par excellence and Highly
recommended to all desiring a real pleasant and interesting day 2 - 10 - 0
- Trip. No 10. — a) **Ostende** : Direct to catch boat to Dover 2 - 5 - 0
b) **Ostende** : Visit all day including Battle-field, Big Canon, Trenches at Nieuport, flooded area, etc. 2 - 15 - 0
- Trip. No 11. — **Bruxelles** : Visit to Place where Nurse Cavell was shot, Avenue Louise and outer Boulevards, visit
to unknown Soldiers Tomb, Royal Palace, Botanic gardens. A delightfull drive of about 150 miles, passing
trough Gent and Alost 4 - 10 - 0
- Trip. No 12. — **Gent, St. Nicolas, Antwerp** : A charming drive right trough the two Flanders of about 170 miles,
passing trough Menin, Courtrai, Gent, Lokeren, St. Nicolas, crossing the river Escaut by ferry (with the
car), making a tour round Antwerp to visit principal and most interesting parts of the town and Docks,
Zoological gardens, etc. A very nice drive on very good roads 5 - 0 - 0

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THE DAILY EXPRESS.

JULY 22, 1927.

BE—AND THIS WAS
YPRES.—III.HOW TROOP TRAINS
ARRIVED AT "POP."

HOTEL SKINDLES.

By HENRY WILLIAMSON.

(This is the third of a series of articles by an ex-soldier describing a tour of the battlefields.)

THE troop trains arriving at Poperinghe by day used to behave peculiarly as they approached the station. Card parties squatting on the wooden floors of the trucks



were liable to be thrown forwards, jerked upright, and flung backwards.

Cling! clang! plonk! plonk! crank! ran from buffer to buffer along the grey length of the train. Then another jerk, the frantic puffing of an engine whose wheels were racing on the rails, and the train went on, faster and faster.

rattling through the station, and stopping half a mile past it. Then perhaps we might hear a noise filling the air as though the sky were a dome of solid glass, and an immense diamond were cutting a slow curve down it—a hard noise, as of gem-hard dust being ground away.

As it drew nearer it changed to a coarse vibration of steel, opening a furrow in the very heavens, droning, buzzing, hissing, dropping in scale to a deep bass and growing louder and louder, a noise enormous and terrifying; and then a geyser of black smoke and wooden sleepers and stones arose, a rattling metallic crash, a great deep smoking crater under rails twisted and blue-scaled with heat, the whining "zip" of hot splinters, and the thundering down of lumps of wood and earth. A seventeen-inch howitzer shell, fired from a dozen miles away, from behind one of those ridges the taking of which cost nearly half a million casualties in 1917.

We walked out of Poperinghe station, making our way to the Rue d'Hopital, to find Talbot House, the "Pop H" of history. It was identified by its position next to the chemist's shop, by its greyish-white painted front, three storeys high, and iron outer gates.

I called in at the chemist's shop to ask if it would be possible to see the chapel in the hop-loft, where many thousands of men had received the Blessed Sacrament before going up to the Passchendaele battles. The chemist did not remember me, of course; but I recollected that face, slightly like the photographs of Hindenburg. He was very angry when in 1917 I remarked the likeness during the purchase of plaster for blistered feet.

The chemist said that the owner of "Too H" would welcome our visit. I said, "Thank you, monsieur. Do you remember my telling you ten years ago that you were like a famous—pardon a notorious enemy general?"

I could see that his ideas had not changed.

THE MENIN GATE
PRAYER.

The following prayer, drawn up by the Archbishop of Canterbury, will be used on Sunday, at the opening of the Menin Gate Memorial to the 55,000 British soldiers who lost their lives at the Ypres Salient, and who have no known graves:—

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father, God of the spirits of all flesh, Who by Thy Blessed Son has taught us to know the wishes of Thy Love, we remember before Thee, to Whom the unknown are yet well known, the great company of our brothers who laid down their lives for their country, but whose earthly resting place no man knoweth.

In thankfulness and hope we commend their souls to Thy gracious keeping, and we beseech Thee to grant that, as we raise their memorial, so we may walk worthy of their fellowship, through Him Who was dead and is alive, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chairs were piled on the long table inside, on which lay a soiled and worn American cloth.

We waited half an hour. The room was dreary and lifeless. Should we walk out? It looked, perhaps, too cheap a place. But no; we might disappoint the young woman with the Mona Lisa smile.

We waited. A smell of burning stole into the room. Still, it might be only the eggshells. Then came the young woman, with the same fixed and pleasant expression, bearing a yellow and black omelette. She put it before us, with slices of bread. We asked for butter. Butter? Yes, butter. *Tout de suite.*

We scraped off the unburned part of the omelette, washing it down with a bottle of ordinary cheap white wine. Ah, well, it didn't pay always to be too economical.

Outside, we looked at the name of the place, "Le Trustfulness." We laughed, and for some kilometres along the road to Ypres were withering the parson, or his detachable wrath accompanying us, with ironical speeches.

CANCELLED SHOW LOSS.

£3,000 ESTIMATE NOT COVERED BY INSURANCE.

"Daily Express" Correspondent.

LUNBRIDGE WELLS, Thursday.

The loss caused by the cancellation of the Lunbridge Wells and South-Eastern Counties Agricultural Show—which was not insured—may be £3,000, according to Sir George Courthope, chairman of the council, who said today that it was too soon to go into the figures.

Many horses left by permission overnight, and the poultry and rabbit section is practically cleared. It is expected that the cattle, sheep, pigs, and goats will remain isolated for a few days pending further orders from the Ministry of Agriculture.

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We rang the bell of the tall grey house. Almost at once the inner door opened, and a young girl appeared. She opened the gates, and drew back with a movement quiet and charming, bidding us enter. Our nailed shoes clattered on the tiled floor.

"To see the chapel, messieurs?" She led the way up the bare, white, enamelled stairs, into a room austere, furnished, up another flight, and then to a door, which she held open for us before leaving with a slight movement of her head, neither bow nor nod, but a gesture of sensibility and understanding.

Up the last flight, very steep, of poplar wood, unpainted and thin—worn by 40,000 nailed boots clumping up and clumping down. We sat on the bench at the far end, where the altar—an old carpenter's bench—used to stand. Silence filled the wooden hollow of the loft, with its whitewashed rafters stained brown where rain had dripped through tiles, and its smooth bare floorboards showing the holes gouged by the goat-moth caterpillar in the living trees.

Twenty thousand souls, bearing names bestowed upon them with pride and tenderness by twenty thousand mothers, clumping up the steep and narrow way, borne there by Hope, and seeking solace at the very verge of Darkness!

The sun came out of a cloud, and light shone whiter through the five semi-circular windows. Sparrows could be heard chirping on the roof, and the slow rattle of wheels on the pavé of the road below. Far away there was a dull report. They were blowing up the artillery concrete "pillboxes" in the fields near Brandhoek.

After our rest and silent communion we clumped down the narrow stairs for the second, and maybe the last, time, and went on our way, bearing a fresh layer in memory, of youthful charm, grave and impersonal, waiting on two unknown English pilgrims.

In June 1916 an officer in the Rifle Brigade, enjoying eggs and chips and a bottle of wine in a certain estaminet in "Pop," declared to his friends that it was as good a pub, as Skindies at Maidenhead. The estaminet had already a longish name painted on its front—Hotel de la Bourse du Houbion something or other—but no one took any notice of that.

The British officers began to call it Skindies, and very soon the three rooms on the ground floor were crowded with tables, and the tables with bottles; and around the bottles for the water of the country was condemned for drinking purposes) sat the British officers, smoking, laughing, eating, or wanting to eat, and shouting the name of Zoe, which was the name of the daughter of the "Mother of the Soldiers," as madame was called.

The officer of the Rifle Brigade was killed on the Somme a few weeks later, as were many of his friends; and now, eleven years after, his memory is still fresh in the minds of Zoe and the "Mother of the Soldiers." The "original" Skindies in "Pop" has returned to its former easy comfort and prices.

The Hotel Skindies, we thought, might possibly be too expensive for our meagre wad of notes, and so we clumped along the Rue d'Hopital until we found what looked like a cheap place. We were met by a young and comely woman with a reserved and pleasant smile on her countenance. We asked for an omelette. *Tout de suite!*



HOTEL SKINDLES

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