

Then and Now

a camera on the Western Front

Peter Burness

One of the fascinations of touring the battlefields of the Western Front is to see places that have remained relatively unchanged since the First World War. These are not the villages which stood on the front line: Fromelles, Pozières, Bullecourt, Passchendaele – they were all swept away in the fighting and every building which stands there today was erected after the war. Soldiers knew those places as dangerous and desolate spots, sometimes marked only by stumps, mounds, and scattered rubble.

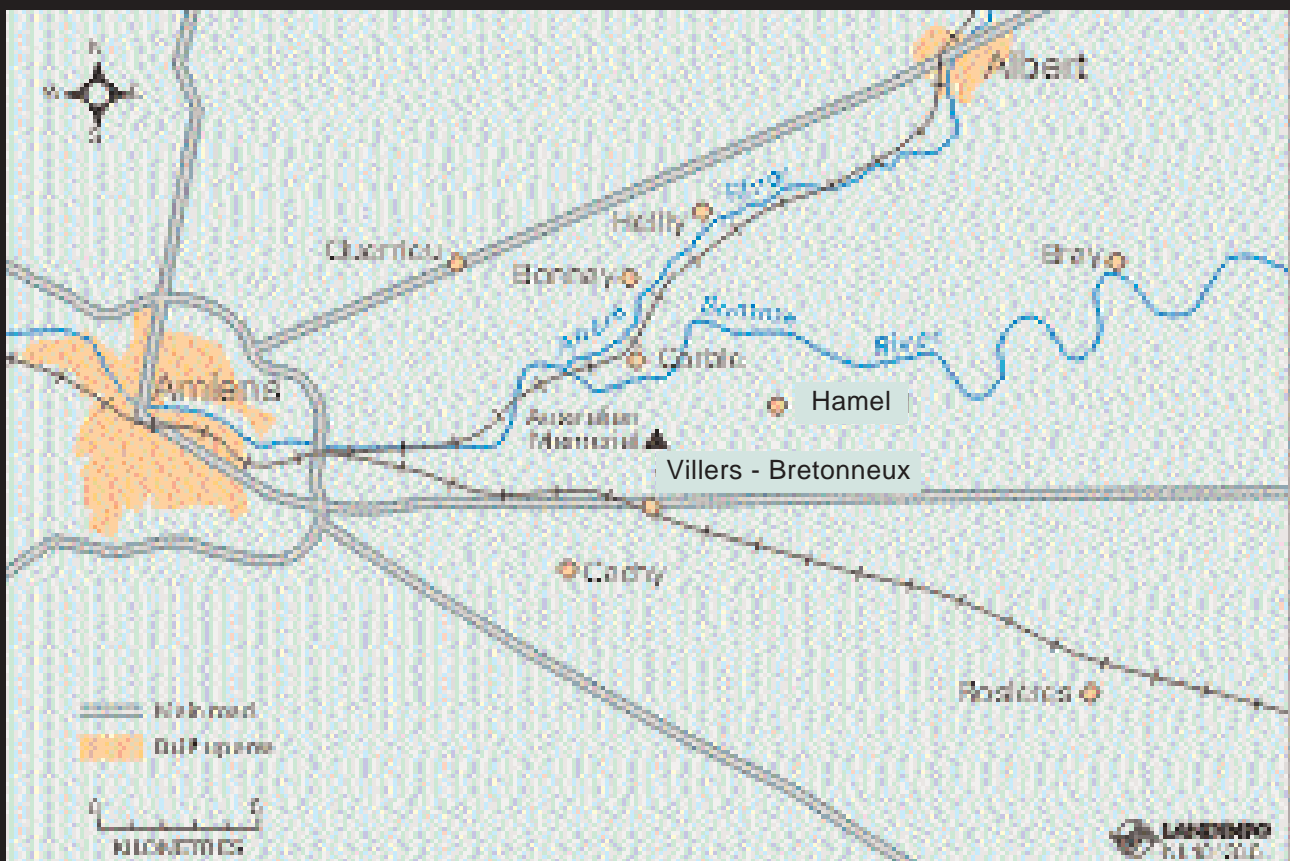
But the small rural French villages behind the front lines were the ones the soldiers knew best, and these are often changed so little that the men would still recognize them today. Members of the Australian War Memorial's annual battlefield tours are always provided with photographs from the Memorial's extensive archives so that they can enjoy comparing the wartime sites with the same places today. Sometimes the comparisons are easy, and in others investigation is required. This essay presents a few examples, from the Somme area.

In April 1918 the Australians helped stop the German advance in front of the city of Amiens,

and established a line from Dernancourt to Villers-Bretonneux. Immediately behind this line is a string of villages which, despite being within range of shelling or bombing, were all but completely taken over by soldiers while the British built up their strength for a counter-offensive. Places such as Buire, Ribemont, Heilly, and Bonnay all stand behind the river Ancre which meets the Somme river at Corbie. The Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux is only a few kilometres away.

In 1918 these villages were crowded with Australian troops. The barns were the soldiers' billets, the courtyards their kitchens, the fields their parade-grounds, and the cafés and estaminets their gathering places. Headquarters occupied chateaux, the tents of casualty clearing stations filled the fields nearby, and further forward in the valleys were the horse-lines of the artillery batteries.

Travelling through the region today, it needs only a little imagination to see these farms, barns, and green pastures just as the soldiers knew them. Many of the villages along the old front-line



contain buildings that have stood for centuries. The old barns, with their ochre wattle-and-daub walls, heavy oak beams, and tiled roofs, are the same ones the soldiers used. In the Official History, C.E.W. Bean describes troops training out of the line, gathered at lunchtime in a farmyard near Querrieu:

There is an interval of ease – the walls of the buildings around the yard are lined with men leaning their backs against them. A “two-up” school has started in a corner. It gradually attracts a dozen men including the man who never has any money – the Irishman, the hard case of the battalion – who is always broke. The sergeants from the yard call their platoons out:

“Right-o Number 4!” Out come the [men], off across the yard; parade in the road; out across the meadows.

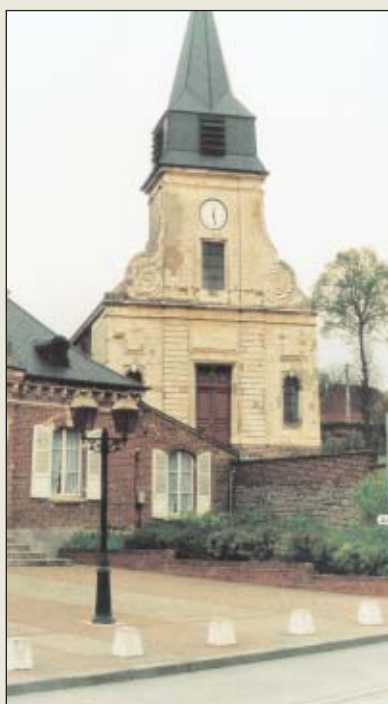
To those with an interest in Australia’s war history it is as important to see these places as it is to visit the proud memorials, the fields of battle, and the sombre cemeteries – to get a sense of the lives of the soldiers while retracing the course of madness that consumed them.

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HEILLY



AWM E02218



The Australian commander, John Monash, wrote that watching the men of the 3rd Division leave Heilly and cross the Ancre to enter the battle on 27 March 1918 was “one of the most inspiring sights of the whole war.”

Two photographs in the Memorial’s collection taken in Heilly were worth investigating. One shows a young Australian digger with a similarly youthful German prisoner, standing outside the village church (furthest left). It was easy to locate the site, next to the present town hall. Although the young soldiers have long gone, the church still stands, with only its old iron rail fence missing.

The other photograph, of German prisoners gathered outside a house in Heilly on 9 May 1918 (below left), at first looked to be a far greater challenge. But identification proved easier than expected when it turned out that the two pictures were taken from almost the same spot, probably on the same day. The house, which stands across the intersection from the town hall, has only been modified slightly since it was occupied by the Australian YMCA in 1918. The distinctive pediment above the door and windows confirms that this is the right place.



AWM E02308



BONNAY

AWM E02159



Bonnay was heavily shelled by the Germans on 24 April 1918, when they were attempting to capture Villers-Bretonneux, a few kilometres away. As the shelling was mainly with gas, the buildings remained standing. The photograph from April 1918 (above left) shows camouflage strips hung across the street to screen the movement of troops from enemy observation. Today, using the church as a reference point, it is possible to take an almost identical photo, looking down the road to Corbie.

BRAY

AWM E03111



Further east, across the Ancre, Bray was occupied by the Germans until its recapture by the Australians in late August. Although the town stood in the path of advancing armies, they were moving fast and it avoided being totally destroyed. The scene in the first photograph (left), looking towards the church on the Corbie road, is almost unchanged. Today, to the left and rear of where the photographer stood on 24 August 1918, there is a small German war cemetery.

In the final months of the war, the Australians got to know Bray well, as it became an important rear area. On 8 October 1918 a photographer caught the moment when General Birdwood addressed Australian soldiers who had been withdrawn from the fighting to return to Australia on leave (below left). These were the veterans who had served since 1914; for them the war was over. Birdwood was no longer commander of the Australian Corps, but he had come to Bray to farewell these men who had fought under him for so long. Although the town square is often crowded with cars today, the old Bray town hall, its war damage repaired, looks much as it did when the "Anzac Leave" diggers received their farewell from "old Birdie".

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