

Battlefield tourism on the coast after WWI

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In West Flanders, the First World War and battlefield tourism are mostly associated with the Yser and Ypres area. By contrast, the coast reminds us more of holidays, sun, sea and the Belle Époque period. Yet a considerable part of the coast was occupied by German troops and defended against a possible Allied invasion from 1914 to 1918, as was the greater part of Belgium. The German *Marinekorps Flandern* constructed an impressive line of defence consisting of 34 heavy and medium batteries along the Belgian coast. When the Allies approached in October 1918, all artillery pieces were put out of action in great haste. After the termination of hostilities, the batteries and defences were left virtually untouched. At that moment, no-one foresaw that these remnants had tourism potential and would come to the attention again a hundred years later on the occasion of the centenary of the Great War.

Royal visit

On 28 October 1918, prior to the armistice, King Albert I of Belgium already paid a visit to the Aachen battery, built on his property in Raversijde. All pre-war buildings on this site had either disappeared or had been irreparably damaged due to the construction of said battery in 1915. In the company of French President Poincaré, Prince Leopold (future King Leopold III of Belgium) and several senior French officers, the King revisited Raversijde on 9 November 1918. An armistice was already a prospect then. Shortly afterwards, the royal family also visited the Tirpitz and Pommern batteries (in Mariakerke and Leugenboom respectively). On 10 December 1918 British King George V visited the Belgian coast together with the Prince of Wales. Particular attention was paid to the Mole of Zeebrugge, where the remains of the Zeebrugge Raid of 22-23 April 1918 could be viewed. But they visited the Leugenboom gun in Koekelare as well. On 11 May 1922 King George V paid a second visit to the Mole and to the British war graves

in Zeebrugge as part of his tour of several military cemeteries in West Flanders and northern France. The King was accompanied by Field Marshal Douglas Haig and Major General Sir Fabian Ware; Frank Fox described this trip in “The King’s Pilgrimage” in 1922.

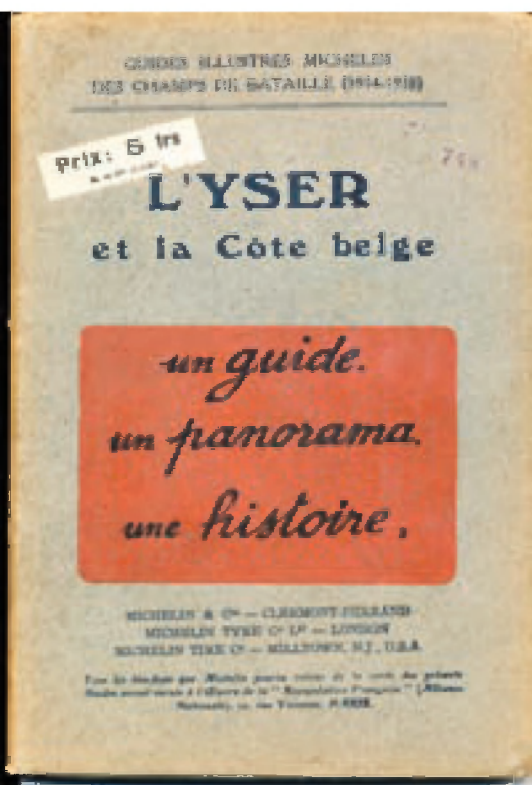
The Michelin battlefield guide and the like

The French initially wished to preserve a number of sectors along the western front as “sacred ground”, e.g. the region of Verdun. The British also played with the idea of leaving the ruins of devastated Ypres untouched and building a new city beside it. *“I should like to acquire the whole of the ruins of Ypres... a more sacred place for the British race does not exist in the world”*, Winston Churchill stated. This plan was eventually abandoned under pressure from the Belgian government and the former residents of Ypres, and the city was rebuilt stone by stone.

More pressing problems presented



A brief lunch during the visit of British King George V and King Albert I of Belgium to the Mole at Zeebrugge on 10 December 1918 (Imperial War Museums)

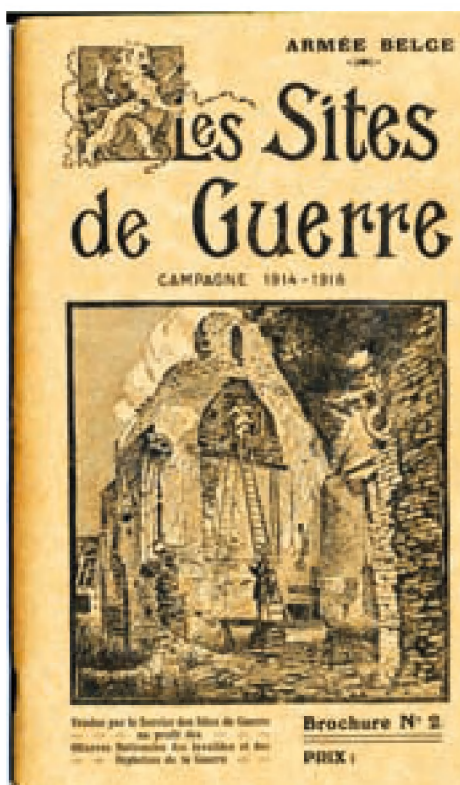


■ Cover of the Michelin guide “L’Yser et la côte belge” (Private collection)

themselves on the coast. Many people were eager to see the beach and promenade opened up again for tourism so as to revive the region’s economy. Some seaside resorts had been largely destroyed, and many hotels had sustained very heavy damage. The original owners re-claimed their former properties and started to reconstruct them (sometimes hurriedly). As a result, there turned out to be little enthusiasm to preserve the relics of the German occupation.

The coastal batteries were first brought to the public’s attention when they were included in the Michelin battlefield guide *L’Yser et la Côte belge*, published in 1920, as “tourist sights”. This guide was part of a whole series of publications encompassing the entire Western Front. The Michelin guides were characterised by their reliability and their interesting illustrations. At that time, most batteries were still in a relatively good condition. The heavy batteries such as Deutschland and Pommern and particularly the British raid on Zeebrugge in 1918 were highlighted.

The Belgian army also published a brochure entitled *De Oorlogsoorden – Les Sites de Guerre* (The War Sites), but only in 1924, so rather late. It included a kind of official list of war relics that had to be protected. For the coastal area these were the Lübeck, Pommern, Wilhelm II and Deutschland batteries, *Abri de l’Amirauté* in Middelkerke, the large Redan in Nieuwpoort and the Karnak battery in Oostduinkerke. Of course, the Pommern (Leugenboom) battery was also included in the list. But when this list was published, certain “sights” had already disappeared...



■ The brochure “Les sites de Guerre” appeared in 1924 (Private collection)

Improvised conservation

The Ministry of War realised as early as 1919 that measures had to be taken to conserve part of the coastal defences and prevent further disrepair. At that time, the military’s main objective was to preserve the extensive coastal defences and to rearm them if need be. After all, the peace treaty had not been signed yet and a resumption of hostilities could therefore not be ruled out completely. The simplest course of action was to offer one or several batteries to each coastal municipality.



■ For the traditional photograph this boy climbed into the barrel of the Leugenboom gun in Koekelare (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage – Brussels)

The commander of the coast suggested to the Minister on 7 April 1919: “I intend to request the coastal municipalities to conserve and maintain certain defences that have to be preserved either from a military perspective or for the sake of commemoration and documentation.” The commander of the coast did not object to certain elements being used by the local authorities for decorative purposes. Of course, each municipality would have to foot the bill: “the municipalities shall be responsible for the maintenance and monitoring of the equipment and installations entrusted to them. All alterations (fences, access roads etc.) to be carried out beforehand so that the aforesaid structures can be visited by tourists have to be performed by the municipal administrations.”

Preservation of the batteries

When it turned out that this improvised conservation policy was unsuccessful – most municipalities showed little or no interest in these remains – the deterioration continued. Some constructions obstructed redevelopment, others had to make way to reinforce the seawall. The Hamburg battery was demolished out of necessity “because of encroachment by the sea on the seawall”.



■ War museum of the Wilhelm II battery in Knokke (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage – Brussels)



■ Remains of the Lübeck battery at the beginning of the mole in Zeebrugge (Private collection)



■ Shortly before the Gneisenau battery near the Ostend Palace Hotel (located on the promenade between Kapucijnenstraat and Louisastraat) disappeared, this tourist from Ghent posed on one of the guns (Private collection)

Most of the still present metal from the coastal defences was scrapped after a public auction in Bruges, organised by the administration of the Domains on 3 May 1923 (so before the publication of the “War Sites”). The catalogue of the auction shows that, within just five years, several guns had already disappeared or been sold and that many others were buried in sand or had been knocked over. Only the most impressive batteries such as Deutschland (Bredene), Wilhelm II (Knokke) and Pommern (Leugenboom in Koekelare) were eventually conserved. The necessary steps to exploit the remains as tourist sites were chiefly taken by a few semi-official organisations such as *Dienst der Oorlogsoorden* (War Sites Service). The proceeds were donated to a charity for war invalids and orphans.

The Deutschland battery with its four imposing 38cm guns had the least visitors. The battery was not converted into a real museum; at first the army used it to store ammunition that had to be destroyed. Only two guns could be visited by guided tour with war invalid Leopold Degreeef as a guide. The two other guns were scrapped in November 1928. The rest followed in 1938.

The admission for a visit to the well-preserved Wilhelm II battery in Knokke was half a Belgian franc (0.0125 EUR in today’s money). Initially, only the imposing 30.5cm guns in their emplacements were on display. Later on, the greater part of the local arms museum was transferred to the battery. So a lot of additional war materials that had nothing to do with the battery but came from the Yser front were displayed there. Dioramas were even constructed in the former ammunition bunkers.

The Lübeck battery with its two guns on both sides of the access road to the old Zeebrugge mole was left untouched. Zeebrugge therefore exerted a great attraction on British visitors. The guns formed the ideal background for amateur photographers and visitors to the mole.

The Pommern battery with its 38cm gun, popularly called *Langer Max*, was probably the most successful attraction. Who knows how many battlefield tourists had their picture taken after they had climbed into the gun’s barrel... The heavy iron trolley for the 38cm shells and the large ammunition bunkers attracted a great deal of interest as well. One German publication even appealed to national pride: “*The gun greatly advertises German industry!*”

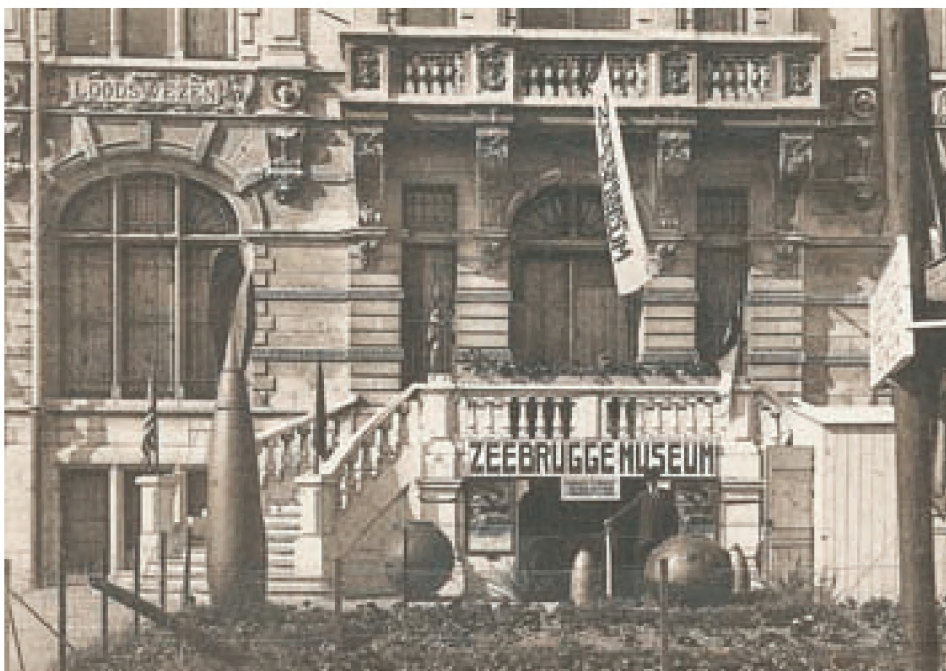
Museums as poles of attraction

Museums were often established next to the batteries so as to promote tourism. Honorary colonel Gustave Stinglhamber played a crucial part in this development. He served in the Belgian Congo from 1914 to 1916, returned to Belgium ill but was made commander of an artillery regiment on the front at his own request in 1917. Having been promoted to honorary colonel after the war, he saw opportunities in the emerging battlefield tourism industry, not just along the Yser front and in the Ypres Salient, but also in the coastal area.

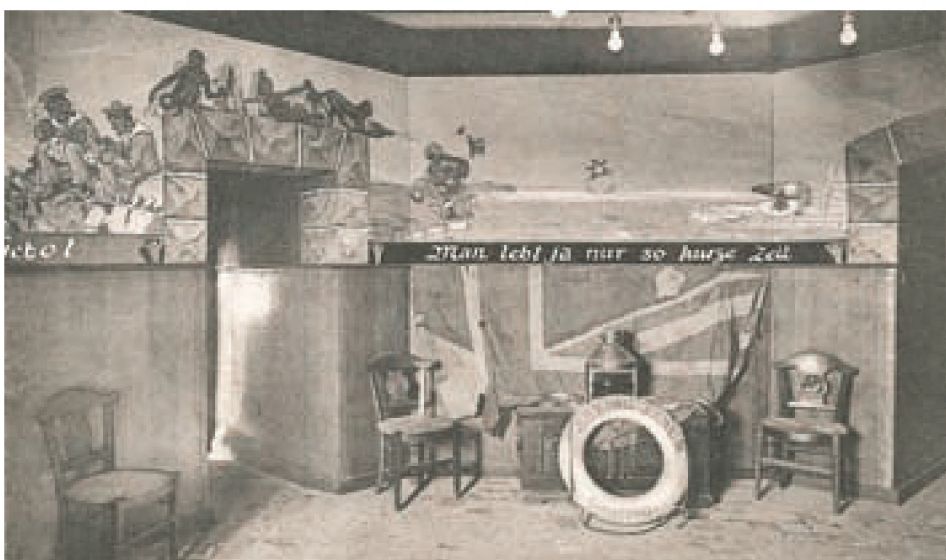
Zeebrugge

Mr Stinglhamber was the key figure in the creation of the Zeebrugge war museum. This museum, established in 1923, was clearly aimed at the tourist impact of the Zeebrugge raid of 1918. At first, Mr Stinglhamber had ambitious plans for “his” museum. It was to be a huge building which would not only house a museum but also numerous commercial facilities. The ground floor would include several cafés and restaurants, shops, garages and houses, as well as the lower part of the museum. This museum, situated in the centre of the building, was designed as a circular Memorial Hall with a line-up of tanks, large guns and other war materials as its focal point. Behind this there would be a spacious cinema. The first floor would contain a hotel, a dancing hall and flats. Above the circular Memorial Hall there would be a panoramic painting representing the Zeebrugge raid of 1918, and behind this the balcony of the cinema. The second floor would consist entirely of flats.

This ambitious plan would never be implemented, however. Mr Stinglhamber had to content himself with a simpler setting in the basement of the State Building (demolished in the 1980s). The interior consisted of two sections: on the one hand, the German presence along the coast was illustrated, and on the other there was an evocation of the Zeebrugge raid (and to a lesser degree of the Ostend raids). The first part mainly consisted of the reconstruction of a “German navy casino”, built with original furniture and reproductions of German murals from various buildings that had been occupied by the Imperial Navy: the Flak (*Flugzeugabwehrkanone* or anti-aircraft guns) command centre in St.-Andries (Bruges), the casino of the U-boat officers located in the Catulle mansion at Fort Lapin (Bruges), the “De 3 Koningen” café in Lissewege and *Hindenburg-Keller* in Fort Napoleon at Ostend. The reproductions on canvas were made by painter Maurice Sieron. Several souvenirs of the German occupation were also on display: the album “*Unsere Gäste*” of commander of *Marinekorps Flandern* Admiral von Schröder (with 800 signatures from all kinds of invitees) as well as the imperial flag that flew on the Bruges belfry during the war. In addition, all sorts



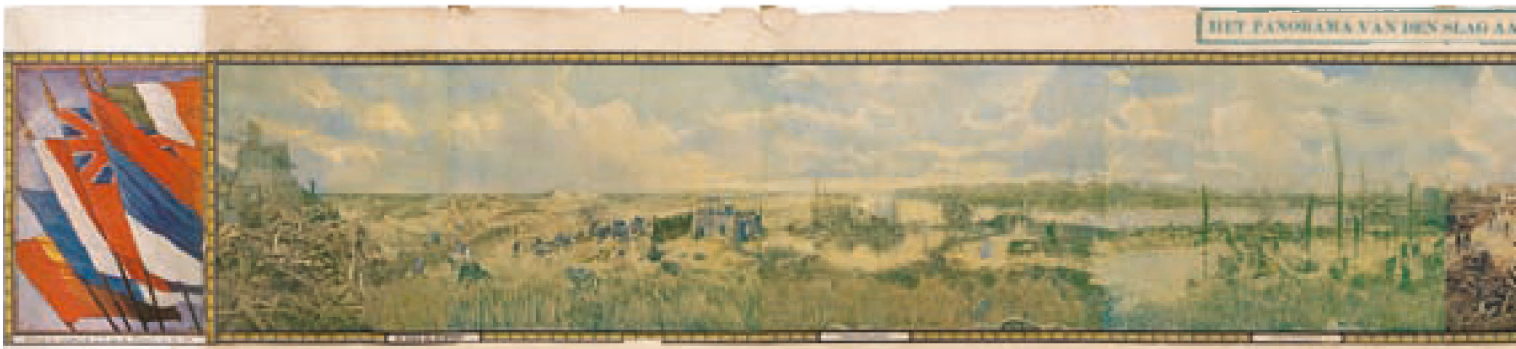
■ Entrance of the Zeebrugge War Museum (Private collection)



■ Reconstruction of a German officers' casino in the Zeebrugge War Museum (Private collection)

of patriotic souvenirs were displayed: the German medal struck to commemorate the sinking of RMS *Lusitania* and many pieces of glassware and chinaware from the collection of Raoul Van Trappen from Ghent. The large collection of German Vivat ribbons was also worth mentioning. These were silk ribbons with a printed symbolic representation of German victories. They were very popular in Germany and were sold to raise money for a good cause. In addition, the museum displayed a large collection of German photographs that had been copied in secret by Bruges photographer Arthur Brusselle while processing the negatives handed in by German soldiers. Captain Charles Fryatt, who had been executed by a German firing squad near Kruisvest in Bruges in 1916 (see preface in this issue), was also commemorated, and an evocation was shown of the electric fence along the Belgian-Dutch border.

The other part of the museum was dedicated to the Zeebrugge raid of 1918 and comprised several relics recuperated during the salvage of the blockships. In addition to pictures of the protagonists, there were many personal maps, photographs and souvenirs donated by the British war veterans who had participated in the raid. Attention was also paid to the Belgian army in the First World War, the military cemeteries in West Flanders, those who had been executed and the spy networks. On the third floor of the tower, a panorama was displayed representing the raid with attacking ships painted on the windows. Outside the museum there was a small giftshop surrounded by war materials that sold postcards, picture stamps, books, war newspapers and all sorts of knickknacks.



■ The Yser panorama, painted by Alfred Bastien (Sophie Muylaert)



■ The Knokke War Museum displayed a wide range of weapons and other war materials (Private collection)

The museum entrance featured the text *“Qui a vu cette guerre cherchera toujours la paix – Die den oorlog heeft gezien zal altijd naar vrede trachten – To know war is to value peace”*.

Knokke

Knokke also had its Arms Museum. This was no coincidence, as the director of the War Site Service had his seat in the Knokke lighthouse building. Initially, the museum was established in the lighthouse building itself, but later on it was transferred to a larger space on Zoutelaan. It featured an impressive collection of weapons, equipment and even aircraft, displayed according to the then prevailing principles: a showcase containing sabres, a collection of bayonets and of helmets etc. Many pieces did not even have a link to the Knokke area but came from the Yser front or France. Apparently, the Knokke arms museum was not very successful, since the collected pieces were moved to the Wilhelm II battery later on, which provided



■ The Hindenburg-Keller mural in Fort Napoleon. Its name refers to Field Marshal Hindenburg (Private collection)

very little information about the battery’s history. It appears that the museum counted on paid guides to convey the message. The former ammunition bunkers housed several dioramas that represented the environment of the Belgian soldiers stationed along the river Yser: a piece of trench with a Belgian sentry post, an underground shelter, a dressing station...

Oostende

In 1932, Fort Napoleon in Ostend was turned into a local history museum on the initiative of municipal archivist and librarian Carlo Loontjens. During the war it boasted the *Hindenburg-Keller*, a mess for the officers of the Hindenburg battery, named after the German field marshal. The new museum, which strongly focused on the figure of Napoleon – who had the Fort built – and on local history, integrated the original fireplace mantel with a wall painting entitled *“der Barbar”* (the Barbarian). Visitors could also see a mural depicting the German eagle, the



Turkish crescent and the Austrian double-headed eagle that looked down on the Gallic rooster, the Russian bear, the British bulldog, the Italian serpent, the Japanese dog and... the Belgian louse (page 86). When the museum was created, the frescoes in the fort, which had suffered greatly from vandalism after the end of the war, were completely repainted.

Ostend also boasted the Yser panorama by Alfred Bastien from 1926 onwards. This huge painting had no connection with Ostend, as it showed the front area between Nieuwpoort-Bad and Ypres. It was put up on the occasion of the sale of the panorama building in Brussels, where it had been on display since 1921. The reason for selecting Ostend as its new location was purely commercial. It was reasoned that the boom of battlefield tourism at that time would benefit Ostend as well, as most British tourists travelled to the Flanders Battlefields via Ostend. There, tour operators awaited them with special busses that covered large parts of the former front. The Yser panorama could be considered the ideal start for this tour. Besides the traditional visits to the Ypres Salient, an afternoon trip to Zeebrugge, Knokke and Bruges was organised as well, with visits to several German batteries.

Middelkerke

In Middelkerke an imposing bunker was turned into a war museum in the 1930s. The bunker, constructed on land of Baron de Crombrugghe and locally known as *Château des Dunes*, was called *Abri de l'Amirauté*. The story goes that Admiral von Schröder once stayed here, but this is highly unlikely as he had his headquarters in centrally located Bruges. After the war, the large family of Camiel Boydens first moved into this bunker. Then a charity for war invalids turned it into a museum in 1933. The museum did not provide a great deal of information. It mainly featured photo collections regarding the First World War (including images taken by photographers Maurice and Robert Antony), supplemented with the usual incoherent collection of weapons, helmets, sabres and shells.

Nieuwpoort and Koksijde

The Allied sector of the Belgian coast could be visited as well, although it boasted far fewer imposing relics. In Nieuwpoort



■ *Abri de l'Amirauté in Middelkerke (Private collection)*

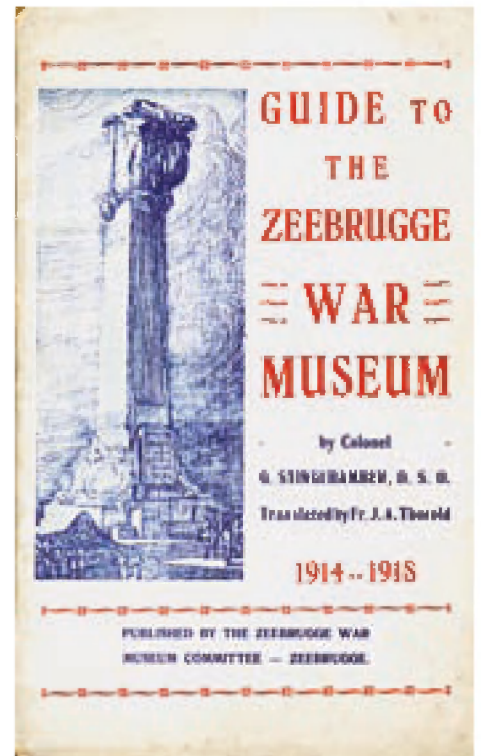


■ *The Belgian positions of the Redan in Nieuwpoort in their original state (1919) (Private collection)*

the Grand Redan was opened to the public. Dating from Vauban's time, this fortification was "restored" by Belgian engineers in the same style as the *Boyau de la Mort* (Trench of Death) in Diksmuide after the war: new timbers, steel plates and cement bags replaced the authentic remains. The tunnels dug under the city by the Australian Tunnelling Companies in 1917 were initially an attraction for many tourists. After a while they were considered too unsafe, however, and they were filled in when new streets were constructed. The impressive bunkers of the Karnak battery in Koksijde were located too far from the front to rouse any interest. Moreover, the sectors of the Yser front and the Ypres Salient were much more important to tourists.



■ The Redan in Nieuwpoort in the "restored" version. Nothing is left of the original relics (Private collection)



■ The cover of the museum guide depicts the original design of the St George's memorial in Zeebrugge (Private collection)

Other memorials

The First World War sights along the coast, managed for the benefit of a charity for war invalids, was fairly successful at first. Booklets with postcards sold like hotcakes, and whole busloads visited the batteries accompanied by a guide (usually a war invalid themselves). The monuments also played an important part as crowd pullers. *Beluik der Gefusilleerden* (the Courtyard of the Executed) was inaugurated near the Kruispoort gate in Bruges on 7 May 1922. This memorial commemorates 13 people who were brought before a firing squad by the court-martial of the German Marine Corps at this location. One of the victims was British master mariner Charles Fryatt, captain of SS Brussels, who was sentenced to death in 1916 after trying to ram a German submarine.

The Zeebrugge memorial in commemoration of the British raid of 1918 was inaugurated on 23 April 1925. This monument, designed by architect Jos Smolderen, stood eleven metres tall and was topped with a figure of St George and the dragon, sculpted by Josué Dupon. King Albert I dedicated the monument in the presence of Queen Elisabeth, the British ambassador, Lord Roger Keyes and many survivors of the operation.

The mole itself also served as a monument. The German air defence battery remained in place for some time. On 27 June 1926 a memorial plaque designed by Armand Bonnetain was unveiled on the site where HMS *Vindictive* landed. The ceremony was organised by Colonel Gustave Stinglhamber and was attended by Belgian Prince Charles, who wore his British Royal Navy uniform for the occasion, as he had trained as a cadet in

the British Royal Navy during the war.

The following year, on 28 August 1927, Colonel Stinglhamber had the honour of unveiling a memorial plaque in memory of Lieutenant Sandford and the crew of HMS C3. During the raid, they had destroyed the viaduct connecting the mole to the shore by blowing up their submarine. Lt. Sandford was awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest British military decoration. The unveiling of the memorial plaque was again attended by a large group of survivors of the raid.

In 1920 the Royal Navy Salvage Section commanded by Commodore Young began to clear the remains of the blockships in order to improve the safety of the harbour entrances at Zeebrugge and Ostend. Some elements ended up in the Zeebrugge museum. The bow section of HMS *Vindictive* was moved to Ostend, where it has served as a memorial since 1925.

Waning interest

All sorts of travel guides and brochures aimed at foreign tourists paid special attention to the Great War. They advertised museums as well as photographers who sold war pictures. Besides Arthur Brusselle from Bruges, who capitalised on pictures taken by German U-boat crews, we also encountered Stephen Cribb from Southsea, who offered "*Snapshots of salvage operations at Zeebrugge and Ostend 1919-1922*". Of course, the travel guides included several hotels and guesthouses whose name referred directly to the Great War.



■ The bow section of HMS Vindictive is set up as a monument in Ostend (Private collection)

Zeebrugge even featured “Chalet Fryatt”, a “café-restaurant, speciality raisin bread and waffles” where objects such as “late Capt. Fryatt’s chair from S.S. Brussels and other famous souvenirs” were on display.

However, the interest in the war sites was waning in the 1930s. The batteries and museums closed their doors one by one; only the Zeebrugge museum continued to exist. And then a new war broke out in May 1940...

Coastal tourism linked to WWI in decline

After the Campaign of WWII, when the violence in Flanders had subsided, the German occupying forces went on excursions to the battlefields of the First World War. The oldest among them had fought there before; the younger soldiers wanted to see the sites where their fathers had fought or lay buried. Outings were organised to Ypres, the Somme or Verdun. It goes without saying that the museums and war sites along the Belgian coast could be visited too. In the ammunition stores of the battery Aachen at Raversijde you can still see graffiti left by visitors from the interwar period as well as by German soldiers in 1940. This did not last long, however, since museums closed their doors and the remaining batteries were dismantled or brought into service again. The German army appropriated the museums in Zeebrugge and Fort Napoleon in Ostend, as a result of which a lot of their contents were lost. The Germans also removed the Leugenboom gun in the spring of 1941, as they collected all steel they could find so that it could be turned into arms. The imposing memorial in Zeebrugge was demolished by

the German *Trophäenbrigade* on 21 April 1942. This unit was also responsible for blowing up the memorial to the first gas attack in Steenstrate and for effacing the texts on the World War I demarcation stones in West Flanders. Old bunkers from WWI were integrated into the new coastal defences which developed into the *Atlantikwall* later on. And the construction of this *Atlantikwall* finally put an end to the battlefield tourism along the Belgian coast. The coastal area became *Sperrgebiet* (prohibited area) and was therefore off limits to anyone who did not have an *Ausweis* (pass).

After the liberation in September 1944, there appeared to be little interest in preserving the remains of the *Atlantikwall*. The memory of all suffering and personal grief was much stronger than after the First World War. The demolition of the *Atlantikwall* wiped out all traces of the coastal defences from the First World War as well. The museums and even some monuments had disappeared in the meantime. Only the Zeebrugge museum reopened its doors in 1947. It was even expanded with a sizable section about the Second World War. Unfortunately, this museum also had to close its doors in 1980 due to the harbour extension. Nowadays, only the well-preserved positions of the Aachen battery at the Provincial Domain of Raversijde, a few bunkers at the Halvemaan site on the east side of the Ostend harbour and the bow section of HMS *Vindictive* on the eastern mole in Ostend remind us of the First World War on the Belgian coast. The bunkers and positions of the Aachen battery owe their preservation to “royal protection”. They are located on a royal domain and were left untouched after WWI. After WWII, Prince

Charles expressly opposed any form of demolition on his domain. The opening of the Domain of Raversijde to the public in 1993 ushered in a new, modest wave of battlefield tourism. Hopefully, the centenary of the First World War will give local tourism a boost as more people visit the remains of one of the deadliest military conflicts in history.

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