

A VISIT TO WATERLOO – June 2017

I should have made this trip two years ago, when they celebrated the bicentenary of Waterloo – the battle that is, not the station. If I had gone then, I might have seen one or more re-enactments, which would have been more convincing than the so-called 'Virtual Reality' tour which is offered from the top of the Lion Mound, for 3 Euros. The latter may be relatively cheap; but it was not even convincing, let alone virtually real.

I spent all day with a battlefield tour guide, who drove me around the site – the battlefield is about 3 miles wide and a couple of miles deep, so much bigger than Agincourt, though nothing like the enormous Somme. It was a pleasant experience, driving around on roads which are mostly lanes, and often surfaced with that old French, or rather Belgian pavé, which makes life so interesting for the cyclists in the Paris-Roubaix each year.

I was shown the centre-piece, which is the Lion Mound. This is an enormous artificial hill, constructed by the Dutch soon after the battle with a lion on top, similar to those you see in Trafalgar Square. This gives a stupendous view of the entire battlefield, on a clear day; but its construction was and is controversial, because the Dutch took the top two metres off the Mont-Saint-Jean ridge to make it. This makes it difficult for the tourist to appreciate the tactics which Wellington employed, and impossible for archaeologists.

It is also worth visiting Wellington's HQ in Waterloo itself, and the church opposite, which contains many moving gravestones, including a very poignant one put there by a Franco-European group, who clearly hoped, until quite recently, that our common membership of the EU would see an end to all wars.

Perhaps the most important things to see are the farmhouses which lay South of the Allied lines, especially Hougomont, Papelotte, and La Belle Alliance.

Hougomont is essential (and I should have visited it first) because there was (almost) a separate battle for this place, which went on all day long, on 18 June 1815, parallel to the main battle between the Allies and the French. This tied down around 12,000 French, at the cost of around 2,000 Allies; and the French never took it. Hougomont is now a museum. Unfortunately, during the restoration undertaken in preparation for the bicentenary, they renovated the place, so a lot of the holes made by musket fire in the masonry have gone – though there are still some remarkable ones in the shattered trees to the East.

Papelotte was and is a working farm, the main building now used as a riding stable. It is an excellent example of the kind of fortified farmhouse which you don't find in peaceful England, but which was common in war-torn Belgium (though it is important to realise that in 1815, there was no such country, 'Belgium' being part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands between 1815 and 1830).

In 1815 La Belle Alliance was Napoleon's HQ and a field hospital, where they could have your leg off in 90 seconds. Nowadays, people get legless there by other means, since it is a nightclub. You can't go in during the day. There are signs up to keep you out, and doubtless other security measures. 200 years ago, Napoleon was also concerned about this security. Once he realised the battle was lost, this was where he got in his coach and set off for what he hoped would be a luxurious retirement in England. Instead, he was sent to St Helena, as every schoolboy once knew.

What did I learn about the battle? The importance of the Prussian Army, led by Blucher. Indeed, because historians like a controversy, Napoleon's indisputable defeat has sometimes been portrayed as a British victory, and sometimes as a Prussian. (The Germans even have a different name for the battle). However, the truth is rather mundane: the victory was won by both. As Wellington wrote in his despatch, published in *The Times* on 22 June 1815

"I should not do justice to my feelings or to Marshal Blucher and the Prussian Army, if I did not attribute the successful result of this arduous day, to the cordial and timely assistance I received from them."

As for reading, the Wikipedia entry is very good; but I would also recommend the relevant chapter in John Keegan's *Face of Battle*, and the books on Waterloo by Bernard Cornwell and Andrew Roberts.