

BURGUNDY AND THE WESTERN FRONT

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BURGUNDY

The name Burgundy conjures up visions of wine, Dijon mustard, beef burgundy and perhaps rich and rapacious Dukes. True, but Burgundy is much much more - coq au vin, cheeses, cassis (blackcurrants) and snails! (escargots). Lush rolling countryside, rivers and canals, art treasures, historic cities, honey stone villages, ancient abbeys and monasteries and lovely woodland and forest.

Burgundy was one of the great historic regions of France, and in the Middle Ages the Dukedom rivalled the Kingdom of France in power and prestige -

“ Who’ll Bow Down to Burgundy?”

At its height in the fifteenth century the Dukedom covered much of central Europe, half of modern day Switzerland and much of the Low Countries, until the late that century, and the death of Charles the Bold.

Today Burgundy is made up of four Departments - Yonne, Nièvre and the two we will visit - Cote - d’Or and Saone et Loire. **Cote- d’Or**, of which Dijon is the capital, is hilly to the north and west, and flat to the south east, whilst **Saone et Loire** is largely flat and intersected by the beautiful Saone River. Great for bike riding! The Saone joins the Rhone at Lyon.

The historic and modern capital of Burgundy is **Dijon**, a city of 150,000 and about an hour and a half from Paris by TGV. The city’s historic centre (a UNESCO World Heritage site) has narrow streets and houses built in the local honey coloured stone. Standout attractions are the Palace of the Dukes of Burgundy, the Musee des Beaux-Arts and the gothic Cathedral of St Benigne. The Les Halles, the famous market, is an ironwork framed building designed by a local lad made good - Gustave Eiffel, who also built a tower elsewhere in France.

To the South West of Dijon is **Beaune**. A walled town of about 21,000, it is the centre of the Burgundy winemaking region. It is surrounded by the Cote d’Or vineyards and is the hub of the region’s wine business. It is on the *Route des Grands Crus wine* trail. It is a walled city with about half the battlements, ramparts and moat still surviving. The standout feature of Beaune is the Hotel Dieu, or Hospices de Beaune, a series of buildings noted for the colourful geometric-patterned tile roof. UNESCO World Heritage, of course. A highlight is the Flemish artist Roger Van der Weyden’s altar piece, “The Last Judgement”. The Hospices were founded in 1442 by Nicolas Rolin, (Chancellor to the Duke of Burgundy), and his wife. Since its inception the hospices have been a charity running hospitals and other services for the sick and needy. They own significant vineyards through Burgundy.

To the South east of Dijon is **Auxonne**, a small town of 6,000, highlighted by huge defensive structures built by Vauban. Vauban was a military engineer who served Louis XIV, and is considered one of the greatest of all military engineers. The town was home to an Artillery School where a certain Corsican - N. Bonaparte served!

The Valois Dukes of Burgundy

During the Hundred Years War, in 1363, King John 2nd of France gave the Duchy of Burgundy to his son Philip who became Philip 2nd of Burgundy, and was known as **Philip the Bold**. Thus began over a century of domination by the Valois Dukes of Burgundy. The Duchy became a major rival to the French Crown, and the Court in Dijon outshone the French Court both economically and culturally. The Holy Roman Empire seemed at times insignificant in comparison to the Dukes.

Burgundy was often in conflict with France and nearly everyone else, and often sided with the English.

There were 4 Valois Dukes in total:

Philip the Bold
John the Fearless
Philip the Good
Charles the Bold

Charles (Bold, but not bright) was killed at the Battle of Nancy in 1477 and the Duchy was annexed by France and eventually became a province. Charles had one daughter, Mary, who married Maximilian of Austria, and the Valois territories in the Low Countries became part of the Habsburg Empire.

Abbeys

The medieval era was the golden age of Burgundy. The Valois Dukes dazzled their contemporaries with a sumptuous court, promotion of the arts and development of great wines. The great Burgundian Abbeys of Cluny and Citeaux radiated into the Christian west. Here the Cluny Order and the Cistercian Orders were born. (The Cistercians were a breakaway from the Benedictines whom they felt were too frivolous)

Cluny was founded in 910, Fontenay in 1118, Citeaux in 1098 and Tournus in 1019. These communities owned vast areas of vineyards until the French Revolution. After the Revolution Church property reverted to the State.

And now to WINE!

To really understand Burgundian wines and classifications is well nigh impossible for most Australian visitors! Just enjoy them!! None of this \$5.99 CabSav/Merlot/Shiraz blend from Dan Murphy. Oh merde! (Although there are cheap Burgundian wines, nonetheless)

Burgundy produces some of the most prestigious wines in the world, with the top wines mostly produced in a narrow strip of land running south from Dijon, in the Cotes de Nuits and Cotes de Beaune. Also known as The Route De Grand Vins. The area is known for both red and white wines, principally made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Other varieties that are found in Burgundy include Gamay, Aligote (used to make Kir), Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Blanc.

The region is divided into 5:

Cote d'Or - the most expensive and prized wines come from here and are Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Cote d'Or means Golden Slope and comprises Cote-de-Nuits and Cote-de-Beaune. The areas produce 15% of Burgundy wines. Famous villages include Nuits-St-Georges and Gevrey-Chambertin

Beaujolais

Chablis

Macon

Cote Chalonnaise

Some of the top vineyards (known as Clos) can be quite small and are protected behind stone walls and iron gates, so valuable are the wines they produce. Unlike **Bordeaux** where wine is classified by producer, **Burgundian** wine classification is geographically driven. A specific vineyard or region will bear a given classification, regardless of the wine's producer. This focus is reflected on the wine's label.

The main levels of Burgundy classification in descending order of classification are:

Grand Cru: Specific single vineyards of the highest classification. These wines will only have the name of the vineyard on the label, plus the Grand Cru term. Generally need ageing minimum of 5 years.

Premier Cru: From specific single vineyards that are still considered to be of high quality. Best aged from 3 to 5 years or more.

Village: From a specific sub-region (within the boundaries of one of 42 villages) Village wines will have the name of the village on the label, and sometimes the vineyard, if there is something special. Best from 2 to 4 years (The village of Gevrey- Chambertin is of about 440 hectares)

Bourgogne: From anywhere in Burgundy. Drink now!

In all of the above the name of the grape variety will not appear - it will be either Pinot Noir or Chardonnay. Outside of Cote d'Or some wines may note the grape variety eg "Gamay"

So much for Burgundy. Time to travel north to:

THE WESTERN FRONT

Most Australians know of Gallipoli in 1915, but fewer know a great deal about the Western Front which was, in fact, a much bigger story. Australians fought here for two and a half years. 80% of Australian casualties for the whole war happened on the **Western Front**, in France and Belgium, between mid July 1916 and October 1918.

The Australians fought in a few relatively small areas of Picardy and Nord (France) and Flanders (Belgium) and generally in three regions:

Southern

Poiziers
Villers - Brettoneux
(Le) Hamel
Mont St Quentin and Peronne

Central

Fromelles
Bullecourt

Northern

Ypres, the Menin Road and Passchendale
Polygon Wood
Messines

By timeline the **major** Western Front battles in which Australians were involved follows:

July 1916

Fromelles

July- August -September 1916

Poizieres, the Windmill and Mouquet Farm

April - May 1917

First and Second Bullecourt - Battle of Arras.

June 1917

Messines

September 1917

Menin Road and Polygon Wood - Beginning of participation in 3rd Battle of Ypres

October - November 1917
Passchendale (Third Ypres)

April 1918
25th - ANZAC DAY - Villers - Bretonneux,

July 1918
4th - A Monash masterpiece at Hamel

August 1918
8th - Amiens - "The Black Day of the German Army"

August - September 1918
Mont Saint Quentin and Peronne.

CENTRAL REGION

FROMELLES

On **19 and 20 July 1916** newly arrived Australians attacked a German strongpoint known as the 'Sugarloaf' on open ground near the village of Fromelles. It was the first major attack by Australians on the Western Front and proved to be catastrophic. There were over 5500 Australian casualties (plus 1500 British) The attack was an ill-conceived feint to "relieve" pressure on the Somme battlefield to the south. No significant ground was gained.

Australian bodies lay on the ground for 2 years . Most were buried at VC Corner Cemetery, but none of the remains could be identified.

After the battle the Germans buried 250 Australian and British soldiers in a mass grave at nearby Pheasant Wood. In 2009, due to the efforts of Lambos Englizos, an Australian school teacher, the mass graves were found. DNA samples were taken and the bodies reinterred in a new Cemetery - Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery.

BULLECOURT

South of Fromelles, but still in the Central Region lies the small village of Bullecourt. This name is less well known than some other Australian battle sites. The casualties in two battles in **April and May 1917** were horrendous, and those who fought at Bullecourt would never forget the shattering experience. Tanks failed miserably and many Australians lost all faith in British commanders, already fragile after Fromelles and Poiziers. The two battles were a disaster from start to finish, with poor planning, no artillery support and tank failures. The first battle lasted one day, and Australian forces had 3,300 casualties. The second brutal battle lasted two weeks with 7,400 casualties. Most objectives were taken but were of little strategic value.

ARRAS

A jewel of Northern France, Arras is a delightful city with about 120,000 inhabitants. In April 1917 the Second Battle of Arras was fought, involving British, Canadian and New Zealand troops. There was minor involvement of Australians, to the south. The battle was successful in that German lines were pushed back, but stalemate resumed. The feature of the battle was the taking of Vimy Ridge by the Canadians but at horrendous cost.

Arras itself features two magnificent squares- Grand Place and Place des Heros. In the 16th Century King Philip 2nd decreed that buildings could only be of stone and brick. The result was a beautiful facade of 155 houses in Flemish Baroque style. Arras is also noted for a series of caves, named Les Boves dating from the 10th Century. Just outside the city are the Wellington tunnels built by New Zealanders in 1916 and capable housing 24,000 troops at a time. The Saturday Arras market is tremendous and justly famous.

NORTHERN REGION

The Northern Region is centred on the beautiful medieval city of Ieper (known during the war as **Ypres** and Wipers to the British) The city was directly in the path of the opposing armies, and whilst not occupied by the Germans it was always in the firing line. The city was almost obliterated, including the famous Cloth Hall, and some of the most brutal and costly battles of the war were fought nearby. The city has been rebuilt in its original form.

A notable site is the **Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing**. It commemorates 54,500 British and Commonwealth soldiers who died before 16 August 1917, who have no known grave. It is the scene of the Last Post Ceremony performed here every night by 3 buglers since 1928, (Except during WW2) This is followed by laying of wreaths, a minutes silence ,then "Reveille". A moving ceremony!

POLYGON WOOD

Incessant rain from August 1917 turned the low lying fields around Ypres into a quagmire. By September Australian (and British) troops had fought their way east to Zonnebeke, and were ordered to take Polygon Wood, by now denuded of trees. The attack was finally successful but once again with significant losses. The 4th Division suffered 1,700 casualties, and the 5th Division more than 4,000. The 5th Division Memorial sits at the eastern end of Polygon Wood by the New Buttes Cemetery.

(The Cemetery contains 5 gravestones that stand separately. In the small village of Westhoek, in October 2007 close by Polygon Wood a gas mains worker uncovered 5 bodies in two graves. It was noted that one of the bodies was carefully wrapped in a blanket (by his brother as it transpired) and the others were also wrapped but not as carefully. A Johan Vanderwalle, owner of the nearby Anzac Restaurant and fanatical WW1 historian, intervened and 3 of the 5 bodies were identified from uniform badges etc. DNA samples were taken and relatives of two - Sgt Calder and Pte Hunter, were able to attend a full burial ceremony in 2008.)

TYNE COT

Tyne Cot is both a cemetery and former battlefield. A barn here was surrounded by 5 pill boxes. On 4 October 1917, four Australian Divisions plus New Zealander and British troops attacked the strong point. Despite murderous fire the final pill box was taken but once again at tremendous cost - 6,500 casualties. Charles Bean the official Australian historian wrote: *This victory was an overwhelming blow that drove the Germans from one of the most important positions on the Western Front.*

The Cemetery is now the largest Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in the world. 1,369 Australians are buried here of which 791 are unknown. There are 11,900 graves whilst the walls of the Memorial contain the names of 35,000 men with no known grave.

MESSINES

Messines Ridge was an integral part of the 3rd Battle of Ypres and a key to a planned advance to Passchendale Ridge to the north. At Hill 60 at 3am on 7 June 1917 two huge underground mines were detonated by 1st Australian Underground Tunnelling Company (made up of Queensland miners who were skilled at tunnelling) - part of 19 detonated over a period of 20 seconds. Thus began the Battle of Messines, and the event ranks as the largest and loudest non nuclear explosion of all time. 10,000 Germans were killed.

SOUTHERN REGION

THE SOMME

The first Australian troops arrived in France in March 1916, to the Western Front, a line of trenches stretching 600 km from the Belgian Coast to Switzerland. The area was in stalemate. 5 all volunteer Australian Divisions eventually came to fight on the Western Front

AMIENS

A pleasant city at the gateway to the Somme battlefields. Many Australians came through here on their way to the Front. The city remained in Allied hands for the duration of the war. The city is dominated by the magnificent Notre-Dame Cathedral, begun in 1220. It is the largest gothic building in France and twice the size of Notre Dame in Paris. It survived two world wars and the French Revolution.

POZIERS

One of the most significant Australian sites on the Western Front. More Australians died here than on any other battlefield in France. By mid July 1916 the small town of Poziers had been virtually obliterated by shelling. All that remained were a few buildings, a blockhouse (known as Gibraltar) and the remains of an ancient windmill north of the town, by which stood a blockhouse. The Windmill stood at a high point on a ridge. It was strategically important. On 23 July the 1st Division took the town but not the Windmill. Then followed 3 weeks of relentless battle, with the 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions involved. The Windmill was taken but at a cost of 23,000 casualties, including 6,700 dead. Mouquet Farm, further along the ridge was not taken. The 1st Division Memorial stands by Gibraltar Bunker.

THIEPVAL MEMORIAL

Clearly visible from The Windmill and Mouquet Farm is The British Memorial to the Missing. It accommodates the names of 72, 243 British and Empire soldiers missing after the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 - no known grave or identifiable body. The average age is 25.

BEAUMONT- HAMEL

Nearby is one of the saddest and most tragic places on the Western Front (and there are plenty) - Newfoundland Park at Beaumont Hamel. On the first day of the Somme Battle - 1 July 1916 more than 800 men of the Newfoundland Regiment went into action. By the next morning 68 were left standing and attended roll call.

VILLERS - BRETONNEUX

Probably the best known of all places where Australians fought in France/Belgium. It was a major turning point of the War. In March 1918 the German Spring Offensive regained most of the ground north of the Somme gained since July 1916. The small and undistinguished town of Villers-Bretonneux stood strategically between the Germans and the vital rail/road hub of Amiens. (You can clearly see Amiens Cathedral from V-B) The Germans briefly took the town on 24 April. With a counter attack the Australians (Principally the 13th and 15th Brigades) retook the town in one night with bitter hand to hand fighting.

The German advance was stopped and thereafter there were Australian victories - Hamel, Mont Saint Quentin and Peronne and others.

The 5,000 inhabitants of V- B vowed not to forget Australia and the Australian National Memorial sits on Hill 104 just north of the town. The number of the Hill relates to the height above sea level. There is a Dawn Service here each ANZAC Day, whilst the new Sir John Monash Centre is located here.

The local primary school, Ecole Victoria, was rebuilt between 1923 and 1927 with money donated by Victorian school children. The playground carries the message "DO NOT FORGET AUSTRALIA". The message is repeated in French in every classroom - "NOUBLIONS JAMAIS L'AUSTRALIE" In 2010 V- B children raised money for a new playground at the Strathewen school, destroyed in Black Saturday fires.

(LE) HAMEL

A Sir John Monash masterpiece. Monash wrote later "A perfected model battle plan is like nothing so much as a score for an orchestral composition, where the various arms and units are the instruments and the tasks they perform their respective musical phrases"

Hamel as it was then known, a small village about 6km from Villers-Bretonneux, was taken by the Germans on 4 April 1918. Recapture would provide key high ground. Monash was able to coordinate infantry, aircraft, reliable tanks and artillery so that each arm supported the others. The battle took place on 4 July 1918, and the Australians were joined by 800 US troops. The German troops were considered mediocre but the defences were not. **Monash planned for the battle to last 90 minutes. It did NOT. It lasted 93 minutes!!** Even so there were 1,200 Australian casualties. Monash's planning was an object lesson and whilst a minor battle Hamel paved the way for continued success. The Australian Corps Memorial is on the top of the hill on the site of the German Command Post. The French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau visited the Australians after Hamel and said: *When the Australian Army came to France, the French people expected a great deal of you. We knew you would fight a real fight, but we did not know that from the beginning you would astonish the whole continent. I shall go back tomorrow morning and say to my countrymen - "I have seen the Australians, I have looked into their faces. I know that these men will fight alongside us again until the cause for which we are all fighting is safe for us and our children"*

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL MEMORIAL AND THE SIR JOHN MONASH CENTRE

The Australian National Memorial sits high on a hill surrounded by a serene scene of a patchwork of fields of wheat. It was opened in 1938 and the approach is through a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery which contains 2,144 graves of which 779 are Australian. On the walls of the Memorial are the names more than 10,700 Australians killed in France and Belgium who have no known grave.

Sir John Monash wrote - *"There is no spot on the whole of the tortured soil of France which is more associated with Australian history and the triumph of Australian soldiers than Villers-Bretonneux."*

Beneath, and at the rear of the Memorial is the relatively new Sir John Monash Centre. It tells the moving and harrowing story of Australians on the Western Front, of life before the War, and the Home front. The Museum is dug into the hill below the Memorial whilst the roof is sown with local grasses to blend with the surrounding countryside.

PERONNE AND MONT SAINT-QUENTIN

During autumn 1918 Australians took part in a series of decisive victories along the Somme River, east of Amiens. Under John Monash the Australian Divisions fought alongside each other with increasing confidence and indeed audacity. Over 4 days from 29th August the Australians took Peronne and Mont Saint-Quentin but at heavy cost - 3,000 casualties. Eight Australians won the Victoria Cross. The British General Sir Henry Rawlinson said to Monash - *"You have altered the whole course of the war"*

Peronne: Had been held by the Germans since 1914 and at its centre stands a large medieval fortress, whilst the town had been virtually razed by allied shelling

Mont Saint-Quentin: Is about 1.5 km north of Peronne and whilst only about 100 metres high and occupied a commanding position overlooking the Somme. It was defended by a crack Prussian Guard Division, but taken after bitter fighting.

END GAME

By October the Australians had breached outposts of the Hindenburg Line. The 4th Division has its remote Memorial at the hamlet of **Bellenglise**, where it fought its last battle, 7 weeks before the Armistice. The final engagement of the Australians, from the 2nd Division, was fought from 3 October at **Montebrehain**. There was no further Australian engagement.

WAR GRAVES.

The whole of the Western Front is dotted with War Cemeteries - of all sizes, but all haunting and sad.

During battles men were sometimes buried where they died, or in a small temporary cemetery just behind the lines. Others were left unburied in the field, often for years as at Fromelles. Those who died of wounds were often buried near where they were treated, often a casualty clearing station.

British Cemeteries are under the auspices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, but all tell a different story. VC Corner near Fromelles contains 410 graves but no headstones, as no bodies could be identified. Names are inscribed on a wall. Gravestones placed hard up against each other indicate men were buried side by side at the same time and not in an individual grave. Graves in no discernible order indicate a front line cemetery. Virtually every cemetery has a Register giving some history and name and location of a grave. Victoria Cross winners are suitably recognised.

Most cemeteries have a Cross of Sacrifice in recognition that most (but not all of course) who fought were of Christian faith. Some have the Star of David instead if they were of Jewish faith. Larger cemeteries may have a Stone of Remembrance.

SOME READING

Too many books about the War, and Australia's role to even begin to mention, and new ones appear every year.

Suggest: The Great War by Les Carlyon
Pompey Elliott by Ross McMullin
Somme Mud by E.P.F. Lynch

and Monash by Roland Perry or
John Monash by Geoffrey Serle (weighty and heavy going!)