

REMEMBERING THE SOMME

Recreating life in the

The Somme Association has spent the past few years excavating a segment of the frontline trenches occupied by the Ulster troops. **LESLEY WALSH** looks at what they have achieved and its historical significance

BY LESLEY WALSH

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BLACKENED 'hardtack' biscuits preserved beneath French soil reveal the harsh story of life in the trenches for the men who fought and fell in the battle fields of France.

Accompanied by tins of another staple, bully beef, these unpalatable 90-year-old vestiges of war are among hundreds of artefacts carefully extracted from the earth in the Thiepval area of France – the land of the bloody Battle of the Somme.

From this weekend such items of standard army issue miscellany will be on view to the public alongside personal items which create a poignant canvas of life for men cramped in earthy ditches during the world's Great War, from 1914-18.

Their excavation from Thiepval Wood was a major part of an ambitious project by the Somme Association which will allow the public a closer look at life in the trenches.

The Association has opened up the original trenches manned 90 years ago today by the soldiers of the 36th (Ulster) Division.

They have excavated the trenches, with the assistance of a team of experts, reinstating them for this and future generations to view in wonder and awe.

Untouched since they were filled in with the backfill originally removed during their creation, the re-opening of the Somme trenches turns back the clock on history.

Located close to the Ulster Memorial Tower, built as a tribute to the men of Ulster who fought and served in the Great War, the Thiepval Wood was purchased from the Hanicoote family by the Association with the help of a grant from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Following painstaking archaeological investigations, segments of the Battle of the Somme front line trench, second line trench, and the interconnecting communication channel have now been revealed.

The Battle of the Somme has a special significance for the people of the Province because of the sacrifice of the Ulstermen of the 36th Division on July 1, 1916.

Some of the items lost or discarded in the trenches have been recovered intact and now will be on view for visitors during guided tours of the Thiepval Wood and at the tower.

Items recovered during a series of digs included ammunition, foodstuffs and personal effects.

Carol Walker, manager of the Somme Heritage Centre in Conlig, who organised the team which unearthed them says: "One of the best finds was found in the front line trench.

"A Lee Enfield rifle was found lying right at the bottom of the front line trench in really good order. Its wooden part was still there and the oil kit still in the butt of the rifle and its leather strap was well preserved. "It's now on show in the Ulster Tower along with many of the other things found," she added.

Other pieces now on display include a piece of bone cutlery, revealing a soldier's hankering for a little taste of a luxury from home.

A shaving brush with its bristles untouched by the ravages of time belies another's efforts to maintain a modicum of decorum even in the mayhem of war.



PROUD: Carol Walker, manager of the Somme Heritage Centre, Conlig, holds a picture of her grandfather who fought in the Somme

It was those personal items which also brought home the true story of the war to the men of the Royal Irish Regiment who did the "unskilled labour" as Captain Barry Armstrong put it.

The part-time Royal Irish soldier said the experience fired great enthusiasm and passion among his colleagues who initially assisted with the archaeological digs before eventually getting their spades out in earnest.

"I found it very interesting. For two years now I have been involved and I've developed a great passion for it and an empathy for the people who were there in

1916.

"It was the same for the three home services (of the Royal Irish) who were involved. Most of those who were went out the first time had never any involvement with it at all but it was very telling that they all wanted to go back the second time round.

"There are regular battlefield tours elsewhere but I think it was the combination of the physical work on these trenches with the tours of the monuments and the graves around the Thiepval area that they gained a real understanding and enthusiasm for it.

"Having completed the work on the trenches they were able to stand back and think, we are the first people to do this in 90 years," he said.

A number of the Royal Irish volunteers who helped out on the digs went to see the graves of ancestors who had fought and died at the Somme.

"Many were either able to find a grave or see the records of their going missing in action," said Capt Armstrong.

"There was another one who's grandfather and his three brothers, four from the same family who had all fought in the area and had survived and made it home."