

Great War trenches



SOMME DIG: volunteers put finishing touches to Thiepval Wood trenches



RELICS: remains of a British rifle found during the excavation

No Man's Land holds many buried treasures

A CHANCE to unearth First World War relics was too tempting a prospect for a special group of 'investigators' to resist.

The team of archaeologists, pathologists, anthropologists that make up 'No Man's Land' (NML) "jumped at the chance" to excavate the Thiepval Wood trenches, according to Carol Walker of the Somme Heritage Centre in Newtownards.

The museum manager said that when the Somme Association asked them to assist their excavation of the Somme trenches, they could barely contain their enthusiasm.

With a team of 18 NML members, hailing from England and Belgium, and 12 members of the Somme Association from Northern Ireland, the first dig began in October 2004.

Members of the three home battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment were instrumental throughout the digs, which was also assisted by members of the 1st battalion, who are based outside Northern Ireland.

The local volunteers also brought with them to the dig their own expertise from their 'day jobs' including knowledge in forestry, agriculture and accountancy, which were all utilised for the project.

Following a great deal of preparation using military archives and frequent visits back and forth to France, the time finally came to commence the first of four archaeological digs.

"The wood had been left untouched for the last 90 years and there's been no work done to the trenches since the soldiers who first dug them, filled them in again," Carol revealed.

"Using first World War maps was enough to find the trenches because they were exactly the same as back then.

"You could actually see them in the structure of the earth and their appearance changed with the seasons. In the autumn it was easier to see them because of the change in the foliage compared to spring when the wood was covered with a carpet of mint," she said.

"We didn't use any heavy machinery. It was all done by hand with careful digging to preserve them intact." She added that there was also the great possibility of unearthing human remains, which though not the objective of the project, had to be born in mind and dealt with care.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is ready to advise the team should a body be found in the future.

"We wanted to find a way to create an entrance to the trenches and actually gained access from the same way the soldiers did."

Carol's own great-grandfather, Charles Grundy, was one of those soldiers so for her the experience has held a special significance.

She also wanted to stress the importance that admittance to the newly restored trenches must be by guided tours only, for issues of conservation and personal safety. Traditional husbandry continues and live ammunition, even bombs, can still be found in the former war zone which remains a private wood protected by French law.

One of the digs even unearthed large and potentially lethal gas canisters which had to be dealt with by experts.