

REMEMBERING THE SOMME

Towering strength

The Ulster Tower is the focal point of remembrance for pilgrims and visitors from Northern Ireland. Custodians Teddy and Phoebe Colligan tell **STEVEN MOORE** what a privilege it has been to serve the many thousands who call at the tower every year

BY LESLEY WALSH

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IT is more than four years since Teddy and Phoebe Colligan agreed to come to France to help out at the Ulster Memorial Tower at Thiepval "for a couple of weeks," and they are not only still there but enjoying every minute of it.

Both had taken early retirement the best part of a decade before their daughter Carol, who manages the tower on behalf of the Northern Ireland-based Somme Association, made the call in 2001.

Teddy, a former firefighter and champion motorbike racer with three Irish and a Belgium title to his name, acts as guide and handyman, while Phoebe provides an "Ulster welcome" and cups of tea for the countless battlefield visitors.

"We adapted quickly to the way of life in France having holidayed on the continent most of our lives," recalls Teddy. "We made friends fast among the community here, both French and British."

The couple, who are originally from Belfast, have found it much cheaper to live in France and have been made very welcome by their neighbours.

"We are very involved in French life and the local community," said Phoebe, a former supervisor at a car components plant. "We get invited to local events and try to involve the local community in what we are doing."

"There have been times when the language has been a problem but we have some great friends in the area that will always help out. At the start we used to go out to a restaurant and sit in anticipation as to what we had ordered to eat but we are now old hands at it."

"At the beginning one of our French friends didn't speak any English and our French wasn't great so if we went out he would bring along an extremely large French/English dictionary. We used to get some strange looks. Now he speaks some English with an Ulster accent and we laugh about it."

The down side for Teddy and Phoebe is being away from their family, and particularly their grandchildren.

"They grow up so fast and we have missed a lot of this, like their first day at school or birthday parties – things you take for granted when you are at home," said Phoebe. "I also miss going out shopping on a Saturday with my daughter Carol and just going for a cup of coffee. We can spend the whole day out shopping and not come home until the shops are closed."

While the French don't understand, according to Teddy, why the British still want to remember something that happened over 90 years ago, for these custodians of a memorial tower, opened in 1921 as a place of pilgrimage, there are daily reminders of its importance.



CUSTODIANS: Teddy and Phoebe Colligan who look after the Ulster Tower at Thiepval

"The people we have met and the stories we have heard would fill a book," says Teddy. "We have been able to help so many people coming to the Somme to fill in a lot of the gaps in the information they had on their relatives who died or served in the Great War. There has been days when we have been in tears with people as they discover where their relation is buried or commemorated and we feel privileged to be part of that."

Phoebe's grandfather, who served in the 9th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, survived

the slaughter of the Battle of the Somme on July 1, 1916, but died less than three weeks before the war ended from Mustard Gas poisoning. She is a regular visitor to his grave in Etaples Military Cemetery.

"We get great satisfaction in keeping the Tower and Visitors Centre looking good for all those who make the pilgrimage to the Somme area," she said.

"The first thing a lot of people say is that it is lovely to hear an Ulster accent at the Ulster Tower. They are also surprised to hear we live in the Tower.

"We tell them we have a nice apartment suitable for two people with a lounge, kitchen, bathroom and two bedrooms. The only drawback is that the bathroom is two flights of cold, stone stairs down from the bedroom so you try to make very few trips in the night."

She added: "We will find it very hard to say goodbye to all the friends we have made when the time comes for us to say we have finished."

"It was easy to say we would come to France but it will be hard to say we are not coming back when the time comes."