

THE MUSEUM OF THE GREAT WAR, MEAUX

David Royle (text and photographs) <https://www.museedelagrandeguerre.eu/en.html>



The Sawbridgeworth Town Twinning Association visited the museum in September 2018, as part of a biannual visit to our twin town of Bry-sur-Marne, and, of course to mark the 100 years since the end of the Great War. I am indebted to *Le Livre du Musée* for the core text, which I have adapted. Naturally enough, it provides an interesting perspective from the French point of view.

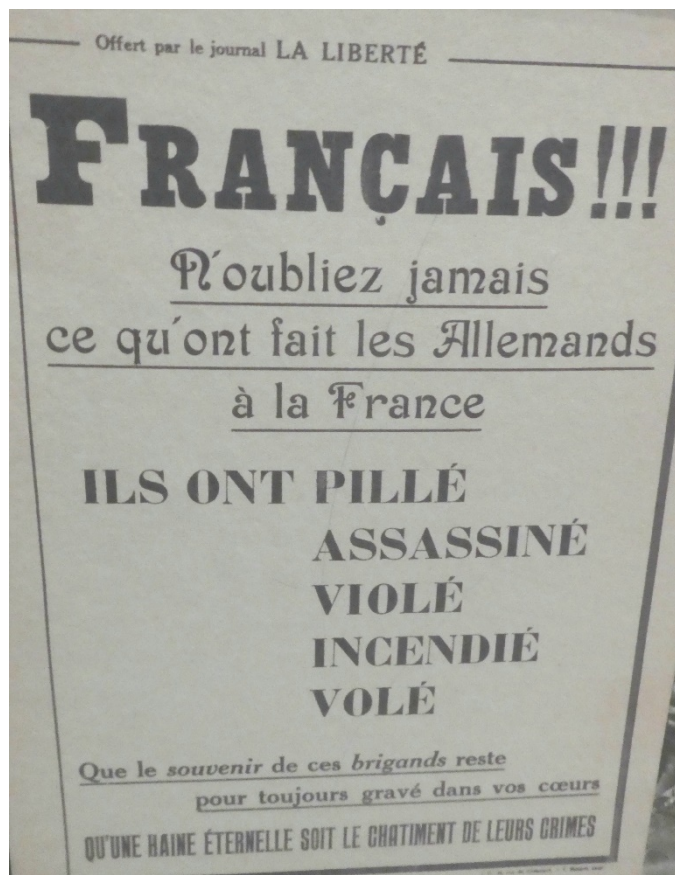
The origins of the museum lie in the collection of one man, Jean-Pierre Verney, a passionate historian, who, over a period of 50 years, collected objects and documents to tell the story of the First World War. In 2005, the town of Meaux bought the collection of over 50,000 items and decided to build a museum to house them. There are now more than 65,000 items.



We entered the compound to the sound of gunfire, and, under the overhang saw many individual stories/personal histories of men and women from different countries, who were involved in the War (see above).

The 'tour' starts with the lead-up to the War, then moves on to the weaponry, mobilisation, the role of women, everyday life and then tactics and strategy year-by-year. It then moves on to casualties, refugees and prisoners, the global war, impact on French colonies, the entry of the USA, the manpower crisis in 1918, progress towards victory in 1918, the armistice and the post-War 'illusions' of victory. Finally, it deals with war veterans, the consequences of the 'war to end all wars' ('La Der des Ders') and the memorials and remaining 'archaeology' of the Great War.

Following the treaty of Frankfurt in 1871, France 'lost' Alsace and Moselle to Germany and had to build a new line of defence on its Eastern and Northern borders and round Paris, over six years, organised by General Sere de Rivières. The idea of revenge was strongly felt and promoted, the army reorganised and in 1905 two-year military service became compulsory, from the age of 20. Schools instilled patriotism into their pupils and prepared them to defend their birth right, focusing on the French language, history and geography. Military-style training was introduced, with school 'battalions' from age 12 (replaced by fencing and shooting in 1892) and gymnastics was made compulsory from 1880.



In 1879, Bismarck instigated a Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy. France joined forces with Russia in 1892 and set up military agreements, in the event of war with Germany. In 1904, France and the UK settled their colonial differences and spheres of influence under the Entente Cordiale (see cartoon below). In 1907, that became a Triple Entente, when Russia and the UK signed an agreement settling their own differences over Central Asia. The Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance divided Europe into two opposing blocs.



The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in June 1914 was followed by large public demonstrations in France and the murder of the young socialist leader, Jean Jaures, which made it easier to rally the left and workers to the cause. Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia set off a chain of events and general mobilisation, with the UK entering the War in August, following the invasion of Belgium. The museum records the defeat in Lorraine and the Belgian Ardennes in August (the 'Battle of the Borders') at the same time as the British retreated to Mons. General Joffre ordered a general retreat to south of the River Marne. Paris came under threat in September, but in the battles of the Ourcq and Marne, German forces had to retreat.



At the beginning of November 1914, the opposing armies dug themselves in along a 750km front, from the North Sea to Switzerland: the 'war of the trenches' for the next four years.

With the field and factories emptied of men between 18 and 45, women and children were called on to maintain everyday life, with children taught to see their fathers as role models in their games and play. The museum book refers to longer working hours, the widespread introduction of Taylorism, using women in armaments factories, and 'militarising' the economy. I'm unfamiliar with the term, 'Taylorism' but it was, Google reveals, "shop management", "process management" or "scientific management", aimed at productivity increases, meaning fewer workers or working hours were needed to produce the same amount of goods.

As in Britain, so in France, the War effort required the mobilisation of all resources, controlled prices, rationing, exchanging gold, plus controlled information and propaganda, supported by developments in photography and cinematography.



In addition to references to the use of human resources from Western colonies, there is a large and impressive section in the museum devoted to the crucial roles of women: in the fields, in munitions factories, as resistance fighters and spies, as nurses (especially from religious orders, the so-called 'White Angels'), as well as provide moral support for soldiers through their letters and dealing with rationing and queuing outside shops. In Serbia and Russia (the 'women's Death Battalion'), women also served in fighting units. In 1917, Parisian seamstresses demonstrated against rising prices and low wages, gaining the support of both feminist and pacifist organisations. The museum also records the regulated brothels set up to stop the spread of venereal diseases.

The French Army Postal Service, set up in October 1914, sent 600,000 letters and 40,000 parcels a day that year, and ten times as many the following year, to all war fronts. Monitoring correspondence gave authorities a good idea of troop morale.

The museum book notes that trench art began to emerge in 1915, using the 'refuse of the battlefield'; it also details food and drink and hygiene issues, but highlights the pleasures for French soldiers of smoking the black tobacco called 'perlot' or 'Gros Q'. Trench slang and trench newspapers

flourished, and the latter were tolerated by the authorities, despite contradicting the official line, like our *Wipers Times* (see <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/wipers-times>).



The museum book talks about 1914 as the year of failed plans, the failure of the 'war of movement' and of 1915 as the 'war of position'; 1916 is the 'war of attrition' (Verdun, the Somme, Galicia, Isonzo); 1917 is characterised as the 'troubled year', with the growth of strikes and pacifism, revolt in the French army following the failure of the 'Chemin de Dames' offensive, which left the British on their own in Flanders, plus the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. In 1918, there is a return to the 'war of movement', the arrival of the Americans, Maréchal Foch becomes Supreme Allied Commander and the Balkans front collapses in September.

The museum covers in some detail the suffering at the front: the wounds, evacuation, field hospitals, the disabled, the traumatised, the return to religion, what it was like to be a refugee or a prisoner of war. There is also detailed coverage of the global nature of the war: Asia and the Pacific, the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Front, Dardanelles, Salonika, Italo-Austrian front, the near East and

LA PATRIE

La France est notre Patrie.
Le patriotisme est l'amour de la Patrie.

Tout bon citoyen doit être prêt à combattre pour sa défense et à mourir pour elle.

L'ARMÉE

L'armée est la sauvegarde et le cœur de la Patrie.
A l'extérieur, elle garantit sa sécurité et son indépendance.
A l'intérieur, elle assure l'exécution des lois et le maintien de l'ordre public.
Aujourd'hui tout le monde est soldat et l'armée est la grande école de patriotisme, de discipline et d'honneur.

THE SCRAP OF PAPER

Prussia's Perfidy—Britain's Bond.

The Treaty of 1839 (which the German Chancellor tore up, remarking that it was only "a scrap of paper") said:

"BELGIUM... SHALL FORM AN INDEPENDENT AND PERPETUALLY NEUTRAL STATE. IT SHALL BE BOUND TO OBSERVE SUCH NEUTRALITY TOWARDS ALL OTHER STATES."

Germany has trampled on the Treaty she signed.

CAN BRITONS STAND BY WHILE GERMANY CRUSHES AN INNOCENT PEOPLE?

ENLIST TO-DAY

These are the Signers and Signatories of the Six Nations who guaranteed Belgian Independence and Neutrality:
GREAT BRITAIN - Palmerston
BELGIUM - Sylvain Van De Weyer
AUSTRIA - Benetti
FRANCE - H. Sebastiani
GERMANY - Bismarck
RUSSIA - Pozzo Di Borgo

THERE IS STILL A PLACE IN THE LINE FOR YOU

THIS SPACE IS RESERVED FOR A FIT MAN

Will you fill it?

Africa.

France was weakened by the 1870 war and had to also face up to a declining birth rate. It turned to its colonies, some 41m people, and mobilised some 600,000 soldiers from Africa, the Antilles and Oceania, as well as 200,000 workers from the Maghreb, Indochina and Madagascar. 75,000 colonial troops died. In 1915 France also extended the call-up to ever younger conscripts to make up for its heavy losses; in 1918 they started recruiting from the age of 17. The arrival of the Americans in May/June 1918 helped restore the balance of forces.



'La main fraternelle: j'ai plus de mains, ils me les ont coupées. Est-ce qu'il faudra que je les embrasse?'

The museum tour ends with the battles, victories and treaties of 1918; however, Alsace and Lorraine were still officially German, and France was in ruins, with the North and East regions unfit for farming, 62,000km of roads, 2,000km of canals and 5,000km of railway track needing rebuilding. Not to mention the miles of trenches, the thousands of destroyed buildings, factories and flooded mines.

