

The Estaminet Times

Issue No 9 Spring 2025




HALIFAX
MILITARY HISTORY
SOCIETY

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Frontcover image: Bosworth Field reenactment, DM

The Magazine of the Halifax Military History Society

Editor's Notes

Welcome to the Spring edition of the Estaminet Times. So good to see the brighter longer days at last, although current developments in America and Eastern Europe are so volatile that it's impossible to avoid concern over what the year will bring.

On a happier note, could I introduce you to a new committee member, Steve Pedlar, who has agreed to develop a new website for the society which can be found at this link <https://halifax-military-history.net/>. Steve has been a member for some time and is probably familiar to those of you who attend our Thursday evening talks. The site is currently 'work in progress' but look out for developments as the year progresses. One of these is a feature which allows you to download past copies of this emagazine and the newsletters which preceded it. I'd like to express our thanks to Steve for doing this and look forward to seeing it develop into a useful arm of the Halifax Military History Society.

I'd like to emphasise again that this magazine is not a platform for just committee members. We welcome contributions from all members and if you have a particular passion or experience which could be the basis of an article then please do get in touch at the email below.

In the meantime, enjoy the current edition.

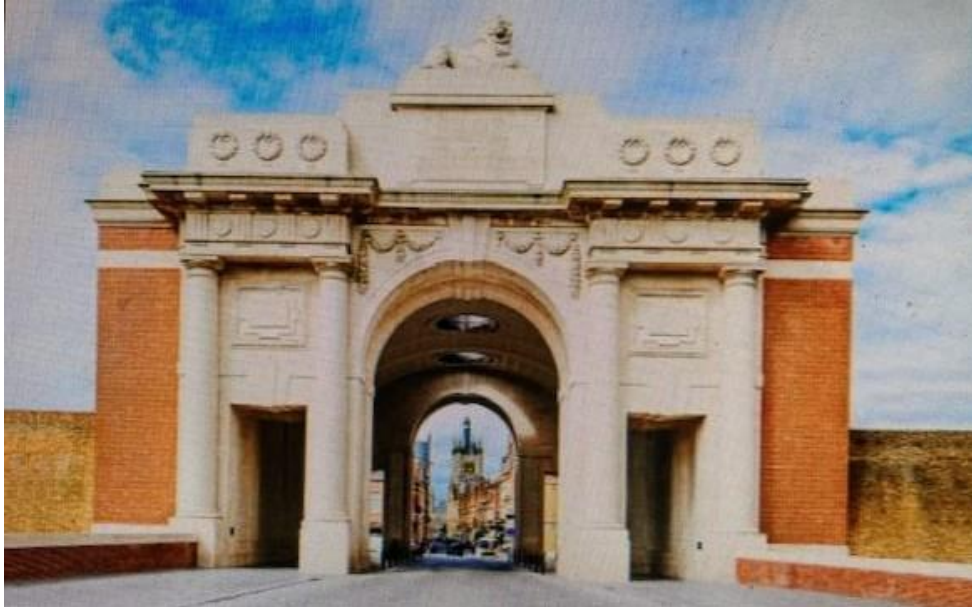
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Menin Gate

Ian Richardson

The Menin Gate or Menenpoort (in its native Flemish) is officially known as The Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing and is one of the most iconic memorials of the Great War. It is dedicated to those British and Commonwealth soldiers killed in the Ypres Salient during World War One who have no known grave. I have visited the memorial twice, as two of my family are commemorated there, and I have attended the "Last Post" ceremony.

Although the Thiepval Memorial in the Somme area of France commemorates a greater number of fallen troops, Menin Gate is arguably better-known and more visited. This might be because Ypres took on huge strategic and emotional significance for the British and Allied troops in the Great War, and three major battles took place in the area, as well as constant skirmishes and bombardment.



Menin Gate

Menin Gate

Ypres is rather strangely known to the British by its French name, but the locals know it as Ieper – and the British troops called it Wipers! It was a key road and rail centre which stood in the path of the German Army's planned advance to France and the Channel ports, as in the Schlieffen Plan. This was halted outside the city in the first battle of Ypres in Autumn 1914, but the Germans commanded the surrounding high ground and bombarded the city throughout the war. Further battles were fought in 1915, 1917 (known as Passchendaele) and 1918. Ypres/ Ieper became the last major Belgian town not under German control, but the medieval city was reduced to rubble, including its famous Cloth Hall and the Cathedral. Winston Churchill proposed that it be left in ruins as a mausoleum for British and Allied troops, but the Belgians thought otherwise and rebuilt the city and the Grand Place.

The British Government resolved in 1920 that a memorial be erected on the site of the Menin Gate, originally part of the fortification designed by the celebrated French military engineer Vauban in the late seventeenth century, where the Menin road crosses the moat, and through which many thousands of troops had marched to and from battle. Sir Reginald Blomfield designed in 1921 a triumphal arch with a barrel-vaulted passage for traffic, surmounted by a lion, with the Hall of Memory containing the names on stone panels of 54,395 British and Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Ieper Salient but whose bodies have not been found or identified. The memorial was unveiled on 24th July 1927 by Field Marshall Herbert Plumer, with the assistance of a widow and a mother of fallen British soldiers.

Menin Gate

Ieper had become a place of pilgrimage for many grieving British families from the 1920's, and the Memorial was a natural focus. Many appreciate the simple design, but some see it as bombastic. The war poet Siegfried Sassoon penned a short and bitter verse in 1927 "On Passing the New Menin Gate", which ends –

"Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime."

On the opening of the memorial Ieper's citizens resolved to mark their gratitude to the Allied troops by playing "The Last Post" nightly, and this began in 1928, under the auspices of The Last Post Association, a local voluntary organisation. It is a tradition that the buglers wear the uniform of the local volunteer Fire Brigade, of which they must become a member. The event has taken place at 8 p.m. every night since 2nd July 1928, apart from the period of occupation by the Germans from 1940 until liberation in 1944, during which time the ceremony was conducted at Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, England. On some nights there is a short service, and on others there may be wreath laying by military or other organisations, possibly focussing on a particular regiment.



Last Post ceremony at Menin Gate, Ypres

Menin Gate

There was not room for the names of all those killed around Ieper, and a cut-off point of 15/8/1917 was adopted, with those who died after that date commemorated at nearby Tyne Cot Cemetery. The remains of soldiers are still found in the area today, sometimes with their “dog tags” (ID), in which case the remains are buried in a war cemetery and their names are removed from the Menin Gate.

I first visited the memorial in 1991 and saw the names of two of my grandfather's brothers who were killed nearby attempting to hold the German advance up the Menen Road. The names are grouped by Regiment, and give rank, surname and initials. I visited Flanders again in 2013, and I attended the Last Post ceremony. This has become hugely popular and well-attended by an international audience; on my visit I was impressed by the respectful behaviour of a large number of teenaged British children in school parties, who seemed very well-informed on the history.



G L Richardson Inscription

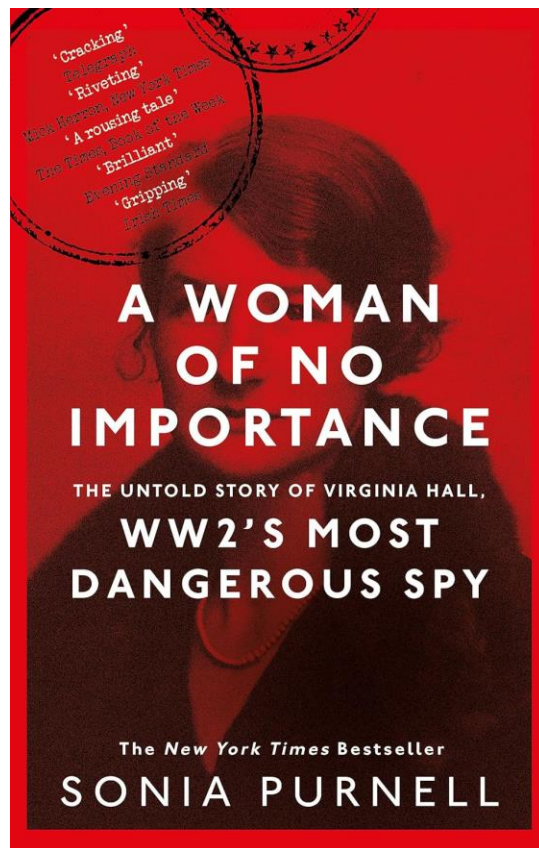
The Memorial is presently undergoing a major refurbishment for the centenary in 2027, although the Last Post ceremony is still conducted. Ieper/ Ypres is a must-visit for anyone interested in the history of the Great War, with the “In Flanders Field” museum in the rebuilt Cloth Hall, and numerous smaller visitor museums, plus excellent Belgian beer and food.

BOOKWORMING: THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Part Two

Peter Liddle

A Woman of No Importance by Sonia Purnell is a biography of American, Virginia Hall, whose exploits as an SOE agent were beyond exaggeration, just astounding. My only query here is that perhaps the record of others is diminished in Sonia's worthy theme. Does Sonia follow too slavishly the current focus not just on women but on their battle against officialdom especially when exercised by men? I don't know enough on the officialdom focussed upon here, but I felt uneasy by the steady stream of castigation.



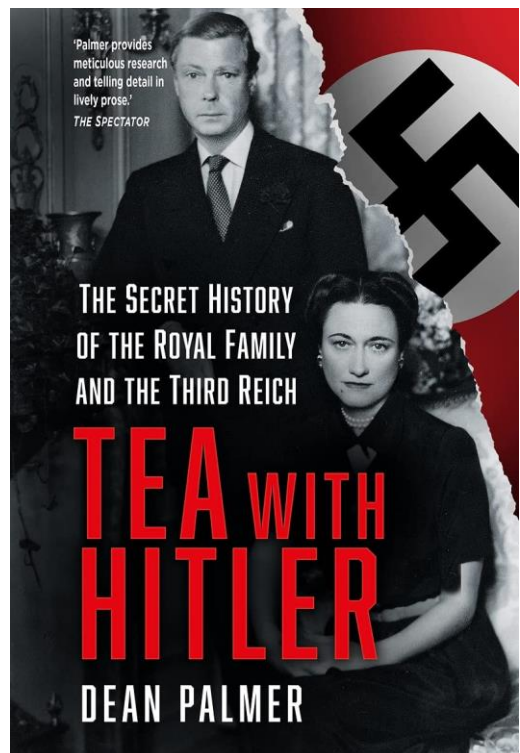
BOOKWORMING: THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Part Two

Peter Liddle

I also felt uneasy as Dean Palmer's *Tea with Hitler* increased my awareness of the descendants of Queen Victoria, - Dukes, Duchesses, Princes, Princesses, many long based in Germany, additionally 'germanised' by marriage, identified with the Nazi cause.

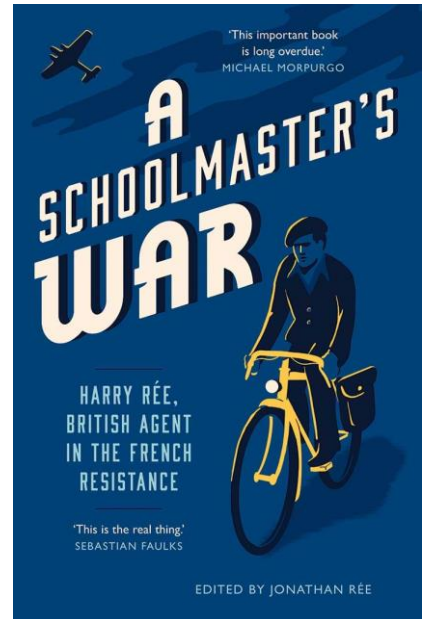
With regard to the German located descendants, I felt that while it might be regrettable, it was reasonable, though the close identification of one with racial policy administration too was as indefensible as all those so despicably involved. When Palmer draws in the Nazi sympathies of some based in England and in the case of the Duke of Windsor, in France and elsewhere, - and there were such individuals - then that is more difficult to swallow without embarrassment, indeed shame. We may want to use the excuse/reason, fear of communism. The retort quite reasonably will then be: 'Yes, simply self-preservation of their wealth, property and privilege'. To which there could be as reasonable a riposte: 'Were we not all so threatened in our way of life as was quickly evidenced in every country under the Soviet system?



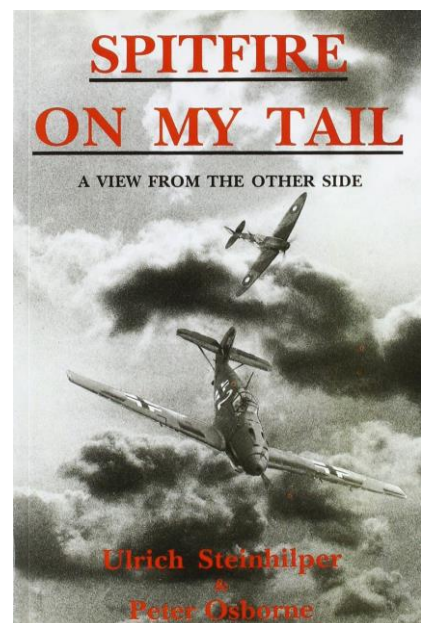
BOOKWORMING: THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Part Two

Palmer's book is 'slanted' but certainly thought-provoking. Now back to SOE and it seems clear that as a fairly timid person I have a yen for bravery in covert circumstance. Jonathan Ree has edited his grandfather's unpublished memoir as *A Schoolmaster's War: Harry Ree, British Agent with the French Resistance*. By definition it is interesting and the main impression it left on me was the heroism of the French families helping him effectively and loyally. Perhaps that obscures the impression I should be lauding, Ree's modesty over his own service achievement.



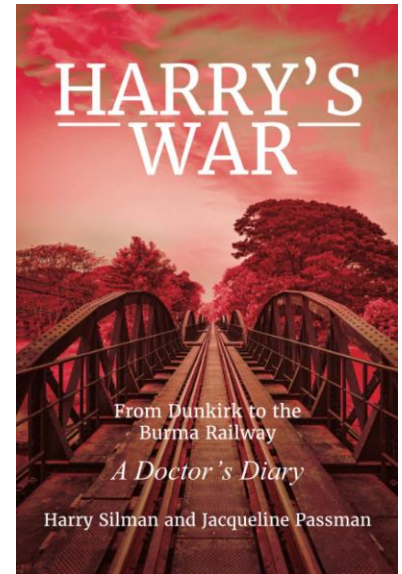
Taken to the skies in a German fighter plane, Ulrich Steinhilfer and Peter Osborne's *Spitfire on my Tail*, reminded me instantly of tape-recording a resoundingly successful German fighter/bomber pilot who retained in his old age totally unreconstructed Nazi views and there were kindred elements in this book of Steinhilfer's experience too with its original letters and photographs though the context was wartime and not retrospective. Specifically, it was about British and Churchillian inhumanity machine-gunning German air sea rescue of downed pilots.



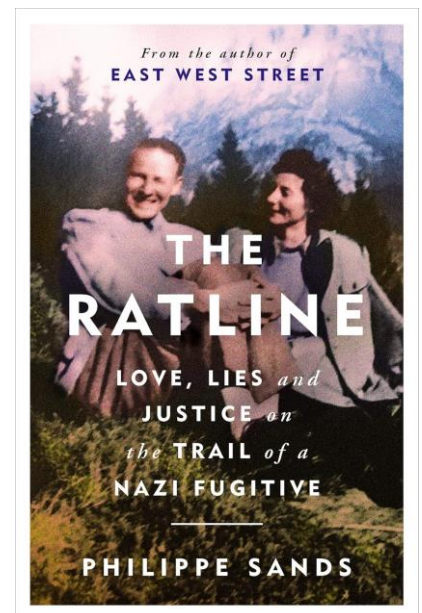
BOOKWORMING: THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Part Two

The suffering of those who underwent Japanese captivity was something assiduously I tried to record and one of my subjects was Leeds doctor, Harry Silman. His family have produced *Harry's War*, a marvellous account of a doctor's work in training, active service and captivity. Dr Silman comes out of this book deservedly as a delightful, generous, tolerant man. The inhumane brutality of his captors is, remarkably, not the over-riding impression gained from reading this book but the more positive human qualities ineffaceable even in such an extreme context.



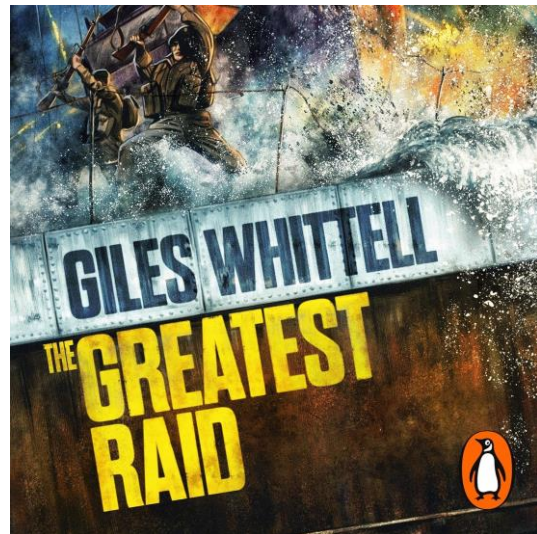
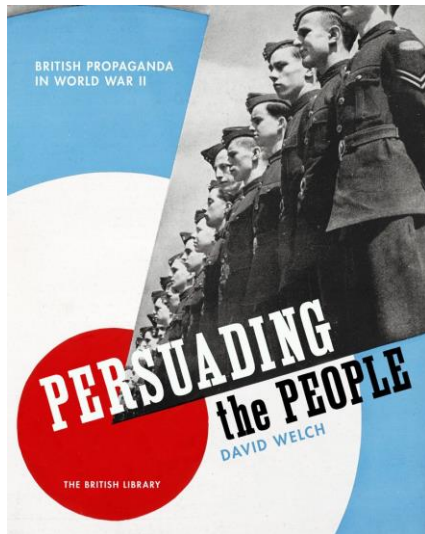
Extending my terms of reference in this section to the aftermath years, Philippe Sands' *The Ratline: Love, Lies, and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive*, is a gripping account about the escape, evasion and tracking down of an Austrian Nazi, named Wachter, formerly Governor of Galicia and guilty of countless murders of the Holocaust. Meticulous to the last degree, Sands traces Wachter's evasion till his death in Rome. The author is successful in maintaining a balance in the human story of a man with pitiless crimes on a colossal scale yet with redeeming qualities, however totally inadequate in relation to his record. There is too the story of those who loved him and strove to help him. Uncomfortable reading.



BOOKWORMING: THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Part Two

Persuading the People: Propaganda in World War II by David Welch is an important book, comprehensively illustrated and with an absolutely sound text. It offers more than just information, but food for thought, especially on the effectiveness of the work of propaganda.



At the moment, my last book in this section holds for me particular interest, it is Giles Whittall's *The Greatest Raid* and it is of course an account of the St Nazaire Raid. Why do I have a special feeling here? The answer is quite simple. I tape-recorded quite a handful of survivors, did them I hope thoroughly and was left marvelling at what is possible under conditions of hellish hazard, mind-numbing noise, blinding flashes of fire and explosion, severe wounds, and yet one has vital tasks to perform. The book is at one and the same time admirably readable but rather falls into the clear but avoidable pit of the description of the raid as it took place being doom-laden because we know of the severe losses in death, wounds and captivity. This would have been better at the conclusion rather than being emphasised as the story is told.

Where's that Battlefield?

David Millichope

I still find it amazing that I can pinpoint to within 100 yards where my great uncle Thomas Kirkman was killed in the Great War, now over a hundred years ago. This has been made possible, of course, by the sheer volume of documented data available to me. I can even make a reasonable construct of the events surrounding his death.

However, by the beginning of the 20th century we were well into the era of mass documentation, so I was well provided for in my research. Documentation is more of a problem as we go back through the centuries, and it becomes particularly acute before the 16th century. One of the problems was lower levels of literacy. During the 'Early Medieval' period (5th to 11th centuries), even the aristocracy in Britain was largely illiterate. Documentation relied primarily on the clergy. This improved in the 12th to the 15th centuries driven by reforms in education and practical administrative needs, but the real spread of literacy began from the 16th century onwards with the arrival of printing and encouragement of Bible reading.



A medieval scribe copies a document by hand.

Let's take a look at some of the key battles that have taken place on British soil since 410 and examine what we actually know about them, based on the available documented sources. It's a journey which will take us through
Mount Badon (circa 500),
Brunanburh (937),
Hastings (1066)
Bosworth Field (1485).

Where's that Battlefield?

The battle, or more probably the siege, of **Mount Badon** (circa 500), first appears in Gildas' ***De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*** (circa 540) where it is described as a significant victory of the native Britons over the Anglo-Saxons halting their expansion for about fifty years.

Gildas tells us that the British leader was Ambrosius Aurelianus (probably a Romano-British battle leader attempting, with others, to maintain the old 'Roman order' of things in Britain). The battle is repeated in at least three other major historical texts including Bede's ***Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*** (8th-century), albeit probably sourced from the earlier text.

Information was so sparse that even the location of a battlefield was problematical. The text of *De Excidio* gives us few clues except the battle name and the fact it was on a 'mount' or hill. This has led to a search for any hill fort with a 'sounds like' Badon name attached to it.



Badbury Rings, Dorset

These have included **Caer Badden** (an early Welsh/Brythonic name for **Bath**),

Badbury Rings in Dorset (where bury = fortified area),

Mynydd Baedan in South Wales (where mynydd, is Welsh for mountain or hill).

Where's that Battlefield?

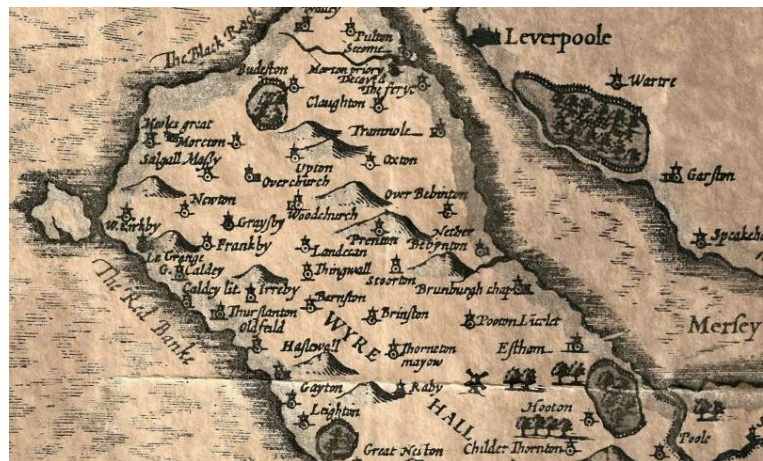
'**Brunanburh**', (937 CE), is considered a defining battle in which 'England' first emerged as a unified entity under the rule of a single Saxon king (Athelstan). He is said to have defeated a coalition of Viking, Scottish and Strathclyde armies. Despite a detailed description of this battle in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, it does not say where 'Brananburh' is.



Battle
of
Brunanburh

Evidence has linked it to several locations around Britain including Durham and Humberside, but Bromborough in Merseyside is currently emerging as a strong candidate. This theory is supported by 12th-century records indicating an earlier name of Brunburh (Bruna's Fort) and its strategic location near the River Mersey, a known route for Viking expeditions from Ireland. Recent archaeological efforts by the Wirral Archaeology group have uncovered artifacts in the vicinity that may be linked to the battle.

These findings include a significant collection of items suggestive of a 10th century military encampment. While these discoveries are promising, further research is necessary to conclusively determine the battle's location.



The Wirral, Cheshire: Merseyside on the right.

Where's that Battlefield?

We fare rather better with Britain's most iconic battle, **Hastings**. The 12th century **Chronicles of Battle Abbey** (*Chronicon de Bello*) claim it was William's wish for an abbey to be built on the site of the battle and to position its altar on the spot where Harold was killed.

In 1538, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Abbey was suppressed, and the church itself was destroyed, but a plaque still marks where the altar was.



Battle Abbey School constructed from some of the monastic buildings remaining after the dissolution of the monasteries.



Bayeux Tapestry thought to depict the death of Harold through an arrow in the eye and later by being cut down by a Norman cavalryman.

Where's that Battlefield?

The precise location of the **Battle of Bosworth Field**, in 1485, has been a subject of debate for centuries, although the battle was believed to have occurred near Ambion Hill, close to the town of Market Bosworth in Leicestershire. This belief was based on Hollingshed's historical interpretations (1577), where he wrote that King Richard III "pitched his field on a hill called Anne Beame [Ambion], refreshed his soldiers and took his rest." This reference seems to have established itself in local folklore and for that reason the Bosworth Battlefield Heritage Centre is located there.



Reenactments take place annually at the Bosworth Field Heritage Centre on Ambion Hill.



Where's that Battlefield?

However, this is not necessarily where the core fighting took place, although it is reasonable to assume it was close. A municipal memorandum from the city of York, dated shortly after the battle, refers to it as occurring "on the field of Redemore" a name which translates as 'reedy marsh'. The chronicler Jean Molinet also documented that during the Battle of Bosworth Field, King Richard III's horse became immobilized in marshy terrain. Accordingly, Peter Foss proposed in 1990 that the battle must have taken place in the low-lying ground around the old Roman road called Fenn Lanes west of the village of Daddlington. Between 2005 and 2009 an extensive Battlefields Trust survey deployed metal detecting and landscape analysis over 2.7 square miles of this area. They discovered 34 lead round shots of varying calibres indicating a considerable artillery presence.



Sketch map showing where it is now believed the main battle took place around Fenn Lanes Farm. Note the marshy area to the right. It is about one mile South West of the original site overlooked by Ambion Hill.

Where's that Battlefield?

Significantly a silver-gilt badge depicting a boar, Richard III's personal emblem, was discovered just within the marshy area that once existed there. Experts believe this high-status badge, likely worn by a member of Richard's close retinue, may even mark where Richard fell.



High status silver gilt badge depicting a boar, found on the battlefield. Was this where Richard was slain after his horse got stuck in the marshy area?

Battlefield details become less problematic after this period with more documentation and fewer centuries in which documentation could get lost. Since the mid 20th century, it has also been increasingly possible to apply forensic archaeological techniques to corroborate documentary evidence, hence the reason I can locate the place where my great uncle was killed and reconstruct a reasonable scenario for how this happened.

The Battle of the Bulge 1944-45

Rob Hamilton

The war news in January 1945 was dominated by the German offensive in the Ardennes which has become to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. The offensive began on 16th December with a surprise attack against the Americans in the Ardennes, a densely forested region spanning Belgium and Luxembourg. The Germans exploited poor weather, which grounded Allied air power, and achieved early success, creating a "bulge" in the Allied lines. Their ultimate goal was to seize Antwerp, splitting the Allies and forcing a negotiated peace.



German commanders plan the attack : Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-J28477

Initially, British forces were less exposed, but as the battle evolved, their strategic involvement became crucial. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and his 21st Army Group were assigned to defend the northern sector of the Allied front. Montgomery assumed command of American forces north of the German salient, including the U.S. First and Ninth Armies. This decision, sanctioned by Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower, proved controversial, as Montgomery's leadership style sometimes strained relations with American commanders. Nevertheless, Montgomery's emphasis on careful planning helped stabilize the Allies' northern flank.

The Battle of the Bulge 1944-45

On 3rd January Montgomery ordered a counteroffensive from the North involving both British and American forces which pressed the Germans back. By the 8th the Germans realised the game was up and began a withdrawal from the Ardennes.

The Royal Air Force (RAF) played a decisive role once the weather cleared in early January 1945. The RAF joined American air forces in launching relentless bombing campaigns against German supply lines, troop movements, and armoured divisions. These attacks disrupted the German offensive and weakened their ability to resist the Allies' counterattacks.

By the 25th the Allies had restored the front line to its pre-offensive positions. The attack had been launched on the express orders of Hitler and against the advice of his senior commanders who were proved to be right in every respect in their objections. The Germans had neither the troops, tanks and more importantly fuel to maintain any kind of major offensive. Many vehicles had to be abandoned due to lack of fuel and Germany's precious reserves of manpower and material had been squandered for no gain.



German soldier in the Ardennes :
Wiki Commons

The Battle of the Bulge 1944-45

From the British perspective, the Battle of the Bulge underscored the importance of Allied cooperation. Montgomery's steady leadership, while not without its critics, contributed to the successful containment of the German threat. By late January, the German forces were in retreat, their ambitions in the Ardennes shattered.

On the Home Front there was optimism that the end of the war was in sight. There were stern warnings in the Halifax Courier that no more Anderson air raid shelters which had been constructed by the authorities should be dismantled as only expert workmen could do the job properly. On 27th January however there was a reminder that there was a long way to go before things got back to normal when the electricity to Halifax was cut off for 40 minutes due to fuel shortages.



Anderson Shelter in garden



Wrecked Anderson shelter



Family crammed into shelter

Originally prepared for and published in the Halifax
Grapevine Magazine

The Magazine of the Halifax Military History Society

February 1945

Alan Rhodes

The Yalta Conference took place from 4–11 February 1945. Held in the Crimea to discuss the postwar reorganization of Germany and Europe, only three countries were represented. It was hosted by Joseph Stalin the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, with the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill attending.

The aim of the conference was to shape a postwar peace that represented not only collective security, but also a plan to give self-determination for the liberated peoples of Europe. It had been preceded by a conference in Moscow in October 1944, not attended by Roosevelt, in which Churchill and Stalin had spoken about Western and Soviet spheres of influence in Europe.

Intended mainly to discuss the re-establishment of the nations of war-torn Europe, within a few years, with the Cold War dividing the continent, the conference became a subject of intense controversy.



Yalta_Conference_(Churchill,_Roosevelt,_Stalin)

February 1945

Germany unconditionally surrendered on 8 May 1945 and by this time Franklin Delano Roosevelt (January 30, 1882 – April 12, 1945) had died. He was the 32nd President of the United States, serving from 1933 until his death. He is the longest-serving U.S. President, and the only one to have served more than two terms. His initial two terms were centred on dealing with the Great Depression (following the Wall Street Crash of 1929) whilst his third and fourth saw him shift his focus to America's involvement in World War II.

Churchill's first recorded use of the term "iron curtain" came in a 12 May 1945 telegram he sent to Roosevelt's successor U.S. President Harry S. Truman regarding his concern about Soviet actions, stating an "iron curtain is drawn down upon their front. We do not know what is going on behind".

He repeated it in another telegram to Truman on June 4, mentioning "...the descent of an iron curtain between us and everything to the eastward", and in a House of Commons speech on 16 August 1945, stating "it is not impossible that tragedy on a prodigious scale is unfolding itself behind the iron curtain which at the moment divides Europe in twain".



February 1945

In his biography of Churchill, Leo McKinstry wrote: "When Churchill arrived at Yalta on 4 February 1945, the first question that Stalin put to him was: 'Why haven't you bombed Dresden?' His enquiry reflected the importance that the Soviet Union attached to an attack on the city.

The bombing of Dresden was a joint British and American attack on the city of Dresden, the capital of the German state of Saxony. In four raids between 13 and 15 February 1945, 772 heavy bombers of the Royal Air Force and 527 of the United States Army Air Force dropped more than 3,900 tons of bombs and incendiaries on the city. The bombing and the resulting firestorm destroyed more than 1,600 acres of the city centre. Up to 25,000 people were killed.



The destruction of Dresden: Bundesarchiv_Bild_146-1994-041-07

February 1945

Postwar discussions about whether the attacks were justified made the event a moral cause celebre. Nazi Germany's desperate struggle to maintain resistance in the closing months of the war is understood today, but Allied intelligence assessments at the time painted a different and more serious picture.

An RAF memo issued to airmen on the night of the attack gave some reasoning for the raid:

Dresden, the seventh largest city in Germany and not much smaller than Manchester is also the largest unbombed built-up area the enemy has got. In the midst of winter with refugees pouring westward and troops to be rested, roofs are at a premium, not only to give shelter to workers, refugees, and troops alike, but to house the administrative services displaced from other areas. ... The intentions of the attack are to hit the enemy where he will feel it most, behind an already partially collapsed front, to prevent the use of the city in the way of further advance, and incidentally to show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do.