

ERHENFRIEDHOF N° 191

SAINT-SYMPHORIEN-SPIENNES

Jan Vancoillie

The military cemetery of Saint-Symphorien near Mons is generally considered as one of the most beautiful military cemeteries of the Western Front. The fact that the cemetery was originally built by the Germans is known by most people, but this is where knowledge of the story of its development usually ends. This article delves more deeply into the first years in the history of this cemetery, which will undoubtedly still be in the news and much visited during this commemoration year 2014.

The military graves in the vicinity of Saint-Symphorien (1914-1917)

After the fighting on 23 and 24 August 1914 many deceased, Germans as well as British, remained on the battlefield. Many were buried on the spot in hastily dug field graves, a number were given a grave in a local cemetery and several smaller cemeteries were also built.

As the war progressed, it became clear that the care of these scattered graves was impossible in the long run. This is why the German military authorities decided, probably in the course of 1916, to bring these scattered graves around Mons together, but also in the rest of the General Governorate of Belgium, in new collective cemeteries. The official order was given by the General Governor in Belgium, which was issued for the province of Hainaut by Lieutenant-General Bothe. The graves in the lines of communication area were the responsibility of the Zivilkommissar. ¹

It is said that a German officer set out in the spring of 1916 in the vicinity of Saint-Symphorien to find a suitable area for a military cemetery. This German spotted an area that was, however, still important for later prospect mining, to which Jean Houzeau de Lehaie, a world renowned biologist and large landowner, offered a counterproposal. To prevent the area that may be interesting for mining from being seized by the Germans, Jean Houzeau de Lehaie suggested donating a suitable area of land himself on the border of Spiennes and Saint-Symphorien. Jean Houzeau de Lehaie insisted that a stone chiselled with a text referring to the donation would be placed at the entrance. ²

Origin of the cemetery (1916-1917)

In the course of 1916 and 1917 the scattered graves were dug up by soldiers of Landsturm-Infanterie-Bataillone, in whose territory the graves were situated, and

taken to the new collective cemetery. The German as well as British deceased were buried in the new last resting place under the motto: "Im Leben ein Feind, im Tode vereint" [enemies in life but united in death], a practice that was very common during World War One. The tracing out of the floor plan and the architectural development were provided by Hauptmann Bäumer, assisted by Landsturm-Gefreiter Pieper. They developed a concept based on the *Friedhofsreform* [cemetery reform], which was strongly present in Germany at the time, where special attention was paid to general simplicity and therefore a certain uniformity within the different plots in a calming woodsy environment. The plants for the cemetery were donated by the town of Bielefeld (Westfalen).³

The graves were positioned in groups according to unit, where each person killed in action of a certain unit was given a similar gravestone, which was carved from a locally extracted type of stone (bluestone or *petit granit*), which was also an important aspect of the *Friedhofsreform*. Officers, however, had the right to a larger tombstone in order to clarify the distinction of rank. The memorials were funded by the garrison towns of the units in question. The Senate of Bremen discussed the question on whether to pay for the 50 gravestones for the deceased of Infantry-Regiment 75 at the end of August 1917. The cost price was estimated at 35 Marks each. On 22 August 1917 the Senate agreed to take on the costs of 1,750 Marks.⁴ All the British were buried individually, grouped per unit as much as possible. A communal grave marking was put on a number of these British plots, which referred to the unit of the deceased. This was the case for the current plots II, III, IV and VI. Individual grave markings were not put on these plots by the Germans. These communal grave markings have been preserved on plots II, III and VI. The Germans had placed three small stone commemorative plates on plot IV, which are now no longer present. There were small wooden crosses on the graves of plot I. Plot V was a lot more limited at the time than now. Here the Germans had buried the deceased British officers, separated from the troops. It is not known which grave markings were on the British officer graves.⁵

A central memorial was positioned at the highest point near the entrance, a classic obelisk in bluestone. The obelisk reads: "Zum Gedächtnis der am 23. und 24. August 1914 in den Kämpfen bei Mons gefallenen deutschen und englischen Soldaten". This monument was developed by Freiherr von Schmidt. The land has many artificial differences in height which came from the dumping of earth as part of the exploitation of phosphate in the area. These differences in height are integrated in the original plan. The German architects laid 13 plots in the cemetery. The presence of young trees and later of extra planted conifers ensured that these plots were always separated. The British relaying as of approx. 1930 has given the cemetery a much more open character.

Inauguration (6 September 1917)

The inauguration ceremony was prepared in great detail and took place on 6 September 1917. Many other cemeteries in Wallonia were solemnly inaugurated around this date.⁶

The official ceremony began at 11.30 a.m. with the hymn “Die Himmel rühmen”. After this, Lieutenant-general Ritter von Gyssling, Etappen Inspekteur of the 6. Armee, greeted those present. The prominent people present included:

Grand duke Friedrich Franz IV von Mecklenburg(-Schwerin), monarch of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, which was part of the IX. Armeekorps, General der Infanterie von Quast, in 1917 commander of the 6. Armee and in 1914 commander of the IX. Armeekorps, and Lieutenant-general von Kuhl, in 1917 chief of staff of the Heeresgruppe Rupprecht von Bayern and in 1914 chief of staff of the 1. Armee.

The first speech was held by catholic chaplain Hilgner, Gouvernementspfarrer in Charleroi at the time. He talked about the love of the deceased for their comrades and their fatherland, the love of the nearest and dearest who thank those who died for the dedication and the conciliatory love after death, where Germans as well as the British were given a grave in the cemetery.

The song “Wir treten zum Beten” was followed by a sermon by protestant chaplain Boergen of the Etappen-Kommandantur Mons. He spoke about bible verse Genesis 1, 3: “And God said: ‘let there be light!’ And there was light.” The sermon was followed by the song “Großer Gott wir loben Dich”.

Lieutenant-general Bothe, Military Governor of the province Hainaut, came next. He described the battles of the IX. Armeekorps in the vicinity of Mons.

Finally, Lieutenant-general Ritter von Gyssling again took the floor. He spoke about the cemetery’s origin and also mentioned those who helped develop it. The ceremony ended with the singing of the German national anthem.

To conclude, there was a visit to the cemetery at around 12.30 p.m. and wreaths were laid. By 2 p.m. the company was back in Mons for a (late) breakfast.

The ceremony was attended by delegates of all units of the IX. Armeekorps. Infantry-Regiment Bremen (1. Hanseatisches) N° 75 sent a delegation of 50 men led by Oberleutnant Kaegler after the inauguration. ⁷

The cemetery shortly after World War One (1918–1933)

At the end of the war, the cemetery officially had 245 German and 188 British graves. In the ‘20s and early ‘30s a number of British and German graves from the vicinity were moved to Saint-Symphorien. The German graves came from municipal cemetery Spiennes (five dead), municipal cemetery Saint-Symphorien and field graves in the vicinity of Frameries. Because of this, 284 German and 230 British ⁸ war victims now lay at the military cemetery of Saint Symphorien.

From 1 June 1921 a supervisor was appointed by the Commission des Sépultures Militaires. The task of Arthur Mercier from Saint-Symphorien was to keep up the official 254 German graves for 1.91 francs a year, for a total of 485.52 Francs. ⁹

The Germans could, after all, not manage their own cemeteries abroad in execution of the Treaty of Versailles. In Belgium, most graves came under the management of the Belgian Commission des Sépultures Militaires. In 1926 there was a secret agreement between Belgium and Germany, after which the Amtliche Deutsche Gräberdienst, dependent on the German embassy in Belgium, gradually became responsible for German graves and cemeteries. ¹⁰

The cemetery is in fact situated in the territory of Spiennes, but because this lies near the village centre of Saint-Symphorien, the cemetery was officially indicated by the Germans as Ehrenfriedhof Saint-Symphorien-Spiennes. Number 191 refers to the order of German cemeteries in a Belgian list from after the end of World War

One. This is where the full name "Ehrenfriedhof Nr. 191 Saint-Symphorien-Spiennes" comes from.

The British grave commission took care of the British graves at the cemetery, while the German graves gradually became overgrown with ivy and started to subside. ¹¹

On 13 October 1930 there was a meeting at the Belgian Ministry of Defence in Brussels between representatives of the Deutsche Amtliche Gräberdienst, the Belgian Commission des Sépultures Militaires and the Imperial War Graves Commission. The main point was the situation of the mixed British-German cemeteries, which had been built by the Germans during the war and which had a majority of German graves. This was mainly the case in Hainaut, among others, Saint-Symphorien cemetery.

Not long before this time, the British had started relaying these cemeteries and had, without consulting with the Germans, put typical British tombstones on the British graves. The Germans had hoped that there would first be a meeting to be able to keep the German character of the last resting places during the relaying. There was not much discussion about the Saint-Symphorien cemetery. The Germans agreed to provide missing tombstones for a number of unidentified graves. Several nearby German graves were also moved here. The British grave commission would immediately take on the care of the cemetery. ¹²

British architect William Harrison Cowlshaw redesigned the cemetery. A number of British graves and tombstones were added (in plots I and V and the special memorials), but the main thing was the conversion from a *Waldfriedhof* [woodland cemetery] to a more open British style cemetery. Most trees were chopped down, especially in the south-eastern corner. Grass was sown here, but the original rows of graves and plots were preserved. This has led to the original German division coming across as confusing today. The north-eastern half has kept more characteristics of a *Waldfriedhof*, although many trees have been pruned, because of which there is still a certain view through the various plots.

The original German tombstones were kept (and several new ones were added for the transferred graves). One German lies between the British in plot V under a tombstone that is typical of the Germans at British cemeteries in Belgium.

The main change is, however, that the British probably constructed an extra artificial elevation in the middle of the cemetery. The Cross of Sacrifice was placed on this hill. The German general monument (which was placed for the German and British dead) was kept in the original position, but the British architect probably found it unacceptable that the British Cross of Sacrifice would be lower than the German monument, so an extra artificial hill was created.

On 4 February 1933 Fritz Schult, chief of the Amtliche Deutsche Gräberdienst in Belgium, wrote a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin about Saint-Symphorien cemetery. In this he describes how the British took full control of the cemetery in spite of the fact that there are more German than British graves. He does regret the construction of the British Cross of Sacrifice and the conversion of the cemetery into a more British character, but does mention at the end that the British maintain the German graves without charging the expenses to Germany, which saves them 900 to 1,000 Reichsmarks annually. Fritz Schult therefore concludes with the hope that the British would also take over a number of other cemeteries such as Marcinelle and Hautrage in the same way. ¹³

The German graves

Almost all of the completely identified German dead (244 in total) were part of the units of the IX. Armeekorps and died in 1914. Two dead soldiers from 1918 were identified. One of them was part of Feldartillerie-Regiment 500. This unit was a Heeresfeldartillerie-Regiment and was part of the 17. Armee until the end of the war. The other identified soldier who died in 1918 was in Pionier-Bataillon 19, also a unit that was part of the 17. Armee. There are a total of 273 graves for 284 German deceased, 40 remained nameless, about half of these were graves were transferred to Saint-Symphorien in 1930.

In Plot G1 row R grave 6, lies Fusilier Oskar Niemeyer, 8/Inf.Regt. 84. He came from Hildesheim and was a gardener. Oskar had joined Inf.Regt. 84 as a recruit in the autumn of 1913. On 23 August 1914 Inf.Regt. 84 met with heavy opposition by the canal of Nimy. The railway bridge was fiercely defended by the British (4/Royal Fusiliers) and 8/Inf. Regt. 84 tried to extend its positions into the east just before noon. While doing this, a swing bridge was discovered over the canal that was turned away on the other side of the water. Without batting an eyelid, Niemeyer jumped into the water and returned to the northern bank in a small boat. A number of Germans led by Sergeant Röver then crossed the canal in this boat. Once they had got to the other side the Germans took up position in a house and managed to open fire on the British from there.

Meanwhile, Niemeyer closed the bridge. As soon as this had happened, the Germans crossed the bridge on their own or in pairs and met up south of the canal. Following this, they stormed the British positions and the village centre of Nimy at around 5 p.m. This forced the British to withdraw. Oskar Niemeyer did not live to experience the further attack. He died shortly after having opened the bridge. He was buried in the immediate vicinity and transferred to St. Symphorien around 1916–1917. ¹⁴

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- 1 HStAM, Etappenformationen, Bd. 17. Ansprachen gehalten bei der Einweihung des Ehren-Friedhofes St. Simphorien bei Mons am 6. September 1917.
- 2 Jean Houzeau de Lehaie. (2014, février 4). Wikipédia, l'encyclopédie libre. Page consulted on 7 March 2014 via http://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jean_Houzeau_de_Lehaie&oldid=10091464
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- 3 HStAM, Etappenformationen, Bd. 17. Ansprachen gehalten bei der Einweihung des Ehren-Friedhofes St. Simphorien bei Mons am 6. September 1917.
- 4 Kameradschaftsbund der 75er. 7. Jahrgang, Nr. 2. Der Ehrenfriedhof St. Symphorien, 23–24.
- 5 Some time ago, an album with several photos of the Saint-Symphorien cemetery from the 1920s were offered at an online auction. On the basis of the images of this auction, an image could be formed of what the British graves at the cemetery looked like.
- 6 HStAM, Etappenformationen, Bd. 17. Ansprachen gehalten bei der Einweihung des Ehren-Friedhofes St. Simphorien bei Mons am 6. September 1917.
- 7 Zipfel und Albrecht, Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 75, 301.
- 8 <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/90801/ST.%20SYMPHORIEN%20MILITARY%20CEMETERY> consulted on 12 March 2014.
- 9 VDK, R1-31, 804.
- 10 More information about this can be found in Vancoillie, German military cemetery Menen Wald, 31–49.
- 11 The Times, 18/08/1931, British and German Graves at Mons – A Joint Cemetery.
- 12 VDK, R1-39, 15455.
- 13 VDK, R1-42, 2002.
- 14 von Hülsemann, Erinnerungsblätter der ehemaliger Mansteiner, 75–76.

Bildunterschriften:

S. 192: A commemoration at a small cemetery in Nimy, probably in August 1915 or 1916. This small cemetery disappeared later and the graves were taken to Saint-Symphorien.

S. 193 kleines Bild oben: The central German memorial with the wreaths that were placed there during the inauguration in 1917.

S. 193 Bild unten: Graves of Infantry-Regiment 75 during the inauguration in 1917.

S. 194 Bild oben: Map of military cemetery Saint-Symphorien from 1917

S. 194 unten: The inaugural ceremony on 6 September 1917 was well-attended. We see four generals in the front, behind them a number of officers and in the background a band and the troops. There are also civilians on the right (surviving relatives of the deceased).

S.195: Welcoming the prominent people on 6 September 1917.

S.196 oben: Circular plot III with in the middle the memorial to the Middlesex regiment, which was placed by the Germans. Around 1930 the British also placed individual tombstones.

S.196 unten: Map of St. Symphorien Military Cemetery (British part) after the relaying by the British grave commission.

S.197: Oskar Niemeyer's tombstone.