

Captain George Upton Robins: Pilgrimage and Battlefield Tourism in 1919

By Dianne Payne



George Upton Robins, the son of George and Flora Upton Robins of 'Delaport', Wheathampstead, left Magdalen College, Oxford to obtain a commission in the East Yorkshire Regiment during the Boer War and in 1901 went on service to South Africa attached to the Mounted Infantry. A year after his regiment returned to England he resigned his commission and soon became a partner of Brand & Co., export merchants. In 1905 he married Beryl Stevens, the daughter of Colonel Malcolm Wilkinson Stevens, and he and his wife went to Shanghai for two years, where he was employed on his firm's business. Returning to Wheathampstead, they lived at 'Lea House', The Folly.



Captain George Upton Robins

When Germany invaded Belgium in 1914, George Upton Robins was again in Shanghai in sole charge of his business so it was December before he was able to return home to serve his country. He was sent to the front with the East Yorkshire Regiment in late April 1915, just 13 days before his death on 7 May from the effects of gas poisoning received in action

two days earlier in the Battle of Hill 60, south of Ypres. He was 36 and was buried at the Railway Dugouts Burial Ground in Belgium.

In 1919 his sister, Olivia Upton Robins, visited his grave in Belgium and wrote the following letter to the editor of *The Times*:

Sir,

I have read lately in *The Times* a great many letters about the difficulty of getting to Flanders to visit the graves of those who have fallen. Having just returned from Ypres, I thought it might be of use and interest to your readers to know how very easily and cheaply the journey can be accomplished. We left Charing Cross at 8.45 am on Thursday and returned at 9.15 pm on Saturday. The whole journey, inclusive of hotel bills, tips, etc cost £7. We stayed two nights at Bruges, at the Hotel de Flandres, where we had the most comfortable rooms and excellent food. On Friday morning we left Bruges at 8.25, and arrived by train at Ypres at 10.55, the return fare, second class, being 9 francs. The journey from Thourout, where one changes, is all through the battlefields and is of great interest, although the utter desolation of the country is beyond description. At Ypres we received the greatest kindness and hospitality at the Church Army Hut and Mr Brooks, who was in charge, personally conducted us to find the grave of my brother, and on to Hill 60. It is not safe for women to go about outside the ruins of the town alone. We reached Bruges at 7.30 that night, and left for Ostend at 11 pm on Saturday. It is now possible to stay at Ypres itself, at the Hotel Splendid, which we were informed was very comfortable and quite reasonable. To anyone who wishes to see the battlefields as they were left, and to realize a little of the horrors of the war, this journey will furnish them with all they can desire. To those who have dear ones buried out there I would advise that they wait until the spring to visit the graves. There will be flowers out then, and the graves will look less lonely. If I can be of any use to any of your readers, in helping them to take this sad journey, I shall be only too glad to furnish them with any information in my power.

I remain yours faithfully,

Olivia Robins.

Delaport, Wheathampstead, Herts, 19 Oct 1919

This was the experience of a woman from an upper-class family able to afford to travel abroad at that time. For the majority of bereaved widows and families living in Wheathampstead and elsewhere in Britain such a pilgrimage would have been impossible. For many, just dealing with the formalities surrounding the death of a loved one was a protracted and painful process, involving countless enquiries about the exact circumstances of death, the place of burial and re-burial. Often there was no definitive answer and some widows were still receiving paper work and attending memorial services where a relative's name was honoured in 1925.

Thanks to the Saint Barnabas Society, over 7,000 members of poorer families from Britain were able to travel to the continent to visit the grave of a loved one or a Memorial to the Missing. The Society, a small organisation, founded in 1919 by Rev Matthew Mullineux, a former England rugby player and army chaplain, organized group pilgrimages costing less than an individual journey. Funds were raised and between 1919 and 1932, pilgrims were collected from their homes in England and Scotland, conveyed overseas and directed to the appropriate cemetery with as much gentleness and privacy as possible.



Rev Matthew Mullineux

Battlefield tourism developed simultaneously with person pilgrimage as soon as the Armistice was declared. In 1919 Thomas Cook started organizing trips to war cemeteries and burial grounds. Other companies were also created and that year 60,000 tourists visited the battlefields. This soon gave rise to tensions between pilgrims and the tourists, who continuously had to be reminded to show respect for the sites they were visiting.

One of the most powerful reasons for visiting battlefields is to remember the dead and visiting graves and memorials is a common ritual. Today the purpose of battlefield tours is also to understand what happened and why. This too can be an act of remembrance.



'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them'.

Sources:

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(Editor's note: For more about Captain Upton Robins, see *More than Just a Name* and *Details of the Fallen 1914-1918*, both by Terry and Margaret Pankhurst. Details are on the "Sources" page of this website.)