

Origin of the Name Ieper

The earliest record of the name of Ieper dates from 1066. At that time it was a settlement of two parts to the east of a small river. One part of the settlement was on a higher piece of ground with dwellings for people and farming. The other piece of land was between the the higher piece of ground and the river. It was low-lying and marshy and was essentially used for grazing animals. This original settlement of Ieper was located in the place near the Grote Markt (Grande Place) or market place and the St Martin's Cathedral are situated in the centre of the modern town.

The name Ieper derives from the name of a stream, which flowed from its source on the slopes of the Kemmelberg in a north-easterly direction towards the early settlement that gradually developed into today's city of Ieper. The Kemmelberg is one of a series of hills forming a high ridge to the south of the city. There was an Iron Age Celtic Fort on the Kemmelberg.

Along this small river there were numerous elm trees growing. The elm was a common native species in the region. It was called an "Iep" in the language of the Belgae people, considered to be derived from the Germanic Frisian language. The river was known as the "**Ipre**" or "**Iepere**" after the elms that grew along it and the settlement on this river was subsequently named **Ieper**.

The Roman invasion of the region in the first century B.C. resulted in their naming the town in its Latin derivation of **Ypra**. Cartographic representations of Ieper over the centuries vary in the ways that Ieper is spelt, including Ipre, Ipres, Iprae, Ipera, Iperen, Hypra, Hipra, and Ipretum and Ipresnsis.

In later times, French forces captured and took over the town more than once, and also the town was officially French-speaking as the official language of the new Belgian nation was French from 1830, the town was known by its French name of **Ypres**, again derived from its original name of Ieper.

River Iepere Adapted

In the 10th century the Iepere river was flowing from the Kemmelberg, via Ieper, Dixmuide, Ostende to Brugge and into the sea. However, from the 11th century the Iepere river flowing through Ieper was re-routed by the local people as part of defensive measures and to assist small trading boats to navigate into the centre of the town.

Diversions were put in the river to create two moated areas of high ground in the south and in the north of the town. There was also an additional diversion created from the southern moated sectors so that the river flowed from there through the centre of the town along an artificially channeled second parallel arm to join the northern moated sector. The word "leet" in the local Flemish language means "adapted", and as a result of the adaptations to the flow of the river at this time the river name of Iepere acquired the suffix of "leet", becoming known as the "**Ieperleet**". Later the "t" was dropped from the end of the name, and the river nowadays is known as the Ieperlee.

In the 14th century and the Burgundian period of occupation, one of the man-made adaptations to the river and its flow through the town as the adapted Ieperleet, was that a sluice gate was constructed under one of the round towers in the Rijselpoort (Lille Gate). This was to control the waterflow from the river into the town.

Hub of Trade Routes

Since the first century B.C., when the Belgae people were conquered by the Romans under **Julius Caesar** in about 54 B.C., the Flanders region had been invaded by successive armies and has suffered from the ravages of war. In spite of this, Ypres managed to establish itself as a financially and culturally rich city in the 12th century. By the 13th century Ypres had gained the status of an independent city-state.

Being only 40 miles inland from the Belgian coast, Ypres was the hub of many important trade routes consisting of roads, rivers and canals leading to the Netherlands, France, the English Channel and England.

Centre of the Wool and Cloth Trade

Postcard of the medieval Lakenhalle (Cloth Hall) taken in 1914 before the war broke out. The pre-war square-topped spire of the St. Martin's cathedral can be seen on the right of the picture. [\(1\)](#)



In the middle ages Ieper grew into an important market place for the region. Easy access to the coast meant that the the people of the city established links with the wool trade in England. The city became a very important centre for the cloth trade. Guilds and master guilds were founded.

The Lakenhalle (Cloth Hall) was begun in the centre of Ypres in 1200. It took 100 years to complete. In 1241 there was a fire in the city which destroyed many of the wooden buildings. By 1260 the population of the city had grown to 40,000.

Medieval Wealth

Ypres grew into a wealthy and powerful city. In medieval times it was the third largest city in the County of Flanders after Gent and Bruges. The County of Flanders (Graafschap Vlaanderen in Dutch, Comté de Flandre in French) was first created as a fief of the Kingdom of France from 862. It existed as a County under various ruling houses until the French monarchy was removed from power in 1795 by the French revolutionaries. At its peak of economic prosperity the County of Flanders was one of the wealthiest regions in the whole of Europe.

Iepere River Canalized

The lock at Het Sas on the Ieper-Ijzer (Ypres-Yser) canal near Boesinge.



To the north of Ieper the river called Iepere (and Ieperleet) flowed into the Ijzer (Yser) river at Drie Grachten. The Ijzer (Yser) river is the shortest of the three Belgian rivers (the Ijzer, the Maas and the Schelde) which flow into the sea and the only one of those three which flows into the sea on the Belgian coast.

Driven by the tremendous growth in the Ieper lace and cloth trade, the need for larger boats to be able to reach the centre of Ieper resulted in the digging of a canal to join with the River Ijzer (Yser) and so connect Ieper with the coast at Nieuwpoort via Diksmuiden. From Drie Grachten the Ieper-Ijzer (Ypres-Yser) canal was dug as far as a quay in the north of Ieper town. Thousands of boats and barges used the canal to ferry goods to and from Ypres to the coast.

The sluice gate at Het Sas near Boezinge dates from the late middle ages. The word "Sas" in Flemish means "sluice". The brewery "Het Sas" in Boezinge, near the Het Sas lock, is believed to be the oldest known brewery in Belgium.

Vismarkt in Ieper/Ypres.



The flow of water into the town enabled small barges and boats to travel from the Ieper-Ijzer (Ypres-Yser) canal as far as the centre of the town. Until 1686 boats from the Iper-Ijzer canal could connect with the Ieperleet river and travel into the town. Boats could make their way along the canalised Ieperleet from the main canal through what is now the Veemarkt. From here they could either take a section of river through the square that is now Vandenpeerboomplein past the west door of St. Martin's Cathedral and as far as a set of steps for unloading goods into the western end of the Cloth Hall warehouses. Or they could make their way to the fish market (Visserskai - Vismarkt) along a second arm of the Ieperleet river.

A Fortified City

Earthwork Defences

Up to the 9th century, the early settlement of Ieper was protected by simple earthworks. As the town grew more wealthy over the centuries the fortifications would be modified again and again. This was either to keep out prospective invaders or to defend possession of it as an "occupied treasure".

958: A Fortified Castle

In the 10th and 11th centuries the early settlement developed into a larger community based around a fortified castle. In 958 the Count of Flanders, **Count Baudoin III** (918-962), carried out work on a new castle based on the remains of an earlier structure, which had been damaged by invading Normans.

During the 13th century the County of Flanders was involved in conflicts with France and in 1213 the town was conquered by the French Army. The Countess of Flanders, **Joahanna van Constantinopel** (c. 1194 - 1244), paid a large ransom to the French to keep Ieper's independence.

1328: Stone Gates & Double Ditch

She Countess decided to build fortifications to strengthen the town's defences. The works consisted of a double moat with earthworks and stone gates. By 1328 there was an inner moat surrounding the main part of the town and an outer moat to enclose five parishes which had grown up on the outskirts of the town outside the inner wall and moat. This work was the foundation of the solid defensive structures built around the town and which were adapted, reconstructed and deconstructed over the following centuries.

From the late 1300s the city went into an economic decline. There was a great loss of life across Europe as a result of the Black Death in 1348.

In 1383 it was caught up in a bloody siege by an English bishop **Henry le Despenser**. The siege shattered the town, its inhabitants and its infrastructure, causing crucial damage to the town's ability to continue with its important lace-making economy.

The decline of the town lasted for the next two hundred years. The town's important role in the European cloth trade suffered from disruption to its trade with France and England during the **Hundred Years War** (1338-1453). Also, Flemish weavers who had left Flanders and settled in the east of England were developing a growing, competitive cloth trade from England.

1388: Burgundian Perimeter Wall

Following the siege of Ypres in 1383 the town lost its independent status and was under the French rule of the Duchy of Burgundy. The Burgundian **Duke Philip the Bold** (1342-1404) then carried out ten years' work on the town defences from 1388. This work was to strengthen the town's inner defensive moat and earthworks by adding a 4.5 meter high stone wall.

At this time there were nine gates into the town. They included the Boezingepoort, the Diksmuidepoort, the Torhoutspoort, the Hangwaertpoort, the Mesenpoort, the Tempelpoort, the Boterpoort, the Elverdingepoort and the Steendampoort.

One of the oldest parts of the constructed stone and brick ramparts still surviving today is the town gate known as the Mesenpoort at the time, later called the Rijselpoort (Lille

Gate). Although it has undergone numerous modifications over the centuries, the gate in its general form with its round towers dates from 1385.

1669: Spanish Citadel

The troubles for Ieper continued into the 16th century when it declared itself a protestant republic. In 1583 the Catholic Spanish **General Alexander Farnese** laid siege to the town for a year during the period of the **French Wars of Religion** (1562-98). Eventually the Spanish conquered the town and began building up the existing defences.

The Spanish added a pentagon-shaped citadel in 1669 on a piece of ground outside the town walls on the east side of Ieper. The citadel was built as an earthwork and intended to be a last point of defence for the defending garrison, should the town walls be breached. It was linked to the rest of the town by a covered tunnel. The Spanish also built some demi-lunes (half-moon shaped structures) on the west and east outside the town walls. These were constructed in front of the length of a curtain wall situated between a bastion at either end of the wall. A bastion is a structure that juts out from the corner or wall of a fort. The Spanish construction work on the defences also expanded the town's inner perimeter wall and fortified defences to include an outlying populated area north of the town.

1678: French Fortifications by Vauban

Engraving of the Siege of Ypre in 1678. King Louis XIV and the French Army besieged the Spanish-held city and captured it. The Spanish citadel is being bombarded on the far right of the image. Vauban then made major changes to the city's defences. [\(1\)](#)



In March 1678, the French **King Louis XIV** (1638-1715) invaded the Spanish Netherlands in a campaign against the Dutch. He first attacked Gent on 9th March, captured it and then attacked Ypres nine days later on the 18th. The townspeople and the Spanish occupying garrison of troops held out against French artillery for a week in the town and the newly constructed citadel. However, on the night of 24th-25th the French attacked again and the town, the citadel and the surviving Spanish troops were captured.

One of the military men directing the French siege operations was a senior military engineer by the name of **Sébastien Le Prestre, Seigneur de Vauban** (1633-1707). Once the town had fallen to the French he started work on amending the existing defences and fortifications outside the town's inner perimeter wall. He took the

Spaniards' earthwork citadel down and in its place built what was called a Hornwork or Corne. This is a structure extending out from the eastern walls with three sides (i.e. two flanks and a front wall with bastions on each of the two corners). It became known as a Hornwork or Corne because the structure jugged out from the perimeter defences like a horn. The Hornwork on the east side of the town was called the Corne d'Anvers (or Hornwork Antwerpen).

Two more Hornworks or Cornes were added to the western side of the town's fortifications, the Corne de' Elverdinge and the Corne d'Bailleul. On the north side of the town he built a fourth Hornwork or Corne called the Basse Ville (Lower Town).

Vauban also built sluice gates on the north and south sides of the town. These would be used to control water in order to flood deliberately the ditches outside the walls and also to fill specially designated areas with water (known as "inundations"). This would form part of the town's defences in case of an attack. The two inundations which were formed south of Ypres were the Inondation de Bailleul and the Inondation de Messine.

In 1682 Vauban returned to Ypres to continue his work. This time he focused on changes to the inner fortifications. He considered that the town walls needed strengthening in a major way on all sides, except for the south-western section. This was, in his opinion, already well protected by the marshy approach to it. He designed what is called a bastion trace around the town, meaning that the encircling town walls consisted of curtain walls and bastions, creating a shape known as a star fortification. He incorporated casemates and tunnels into the ramparts, and battery emplacements for cannons at the bastion locations.

Vauban's prolific work on town fortifications can still be seen in many cities and forts in France and Belgium, many of which are located in the French and Belgian border regions and the battlefields of the 1914-1918 Western Front.

Ieperleet River Vaulted

In the late 17th century the two arms of the Ieperlee river flowing through the centre of Ieper were again adapted by man. From 1686 the entire length of the water course through the centre of the city was vaulted from the Rijselpoort (the Lille Gate) in the south of the town to the Ieper-Ijzer (Ypres-Yser) canal quay in the north. Buildings were later built on top of the vaulted river and from then on it flowed, and still does, underneath the centre of the town.

1713: Austrians Dismantle the Defences

Map of Ypres fortifications dated approximately 1775 by the Austrian general and cartographer Joseph Jean François, Count de Ferraris. The Hornworks on the east and north-east of Ypres can be seen. ⁽²⁾



The Austrian Habsburg dynasty took over Ieper in 1713. The year of 1782-83 saw changes made to the fortifications by **Emperor Joseph II** (1741-1790). However, this time the ruler was unhappy about spending large amounts of money on the defences at Ieper and he gave orders to dismantle some of the structures built by Vauban, weakening the town's defences.

Ironically for Emperor Joseph the Austrians were driven out of Flanders and Ieper following an uprising by the people of the southern Netherlands, including Flanders, called the **Brabant Revolution** (1789 and 1790).

1794: French Capture Ieper

The town came under attack by the French Army in its campaign against Flanders in 1794. In June of that year the town's defences could not withstand the enemy attacks and it fell under French control once again.

1815: Dutch Interventions

The defeat of **Emperor Napoléon I** (1769-1821) in 1815 at the **Battle of Waterloo** meant that the annexation of Ieper to the French Empire was also over. Flanders subsequently joined with the Netherlands in a **United Kingdom of the Netherlands**.

In an attempt to strengthen the town defences again, as it lay in a strategically important location between the Dutch and the French borders, the Dutch spent fifteen years carrying out a major series of works on the fortifications and military complexes in the town. One of the major works they carried out was to build a new bombproof ammunition store with walls at a thickness of 2-3 metres. These works by the Dutch are known as the "**Dutch Interventions**".

1852: Military Garrison Leaves Ieper

In 1830 a revolution led to the founding of an independent Belgian nation in October of that year. On 26 June 1831 **Leopold I** (1790-1865) was declared the first King of Belgium. With the founding of the new Belgian nation the work to build up the defences of Ieper came to a halt. Also, the military garrison left the town in 1852.

The Statesman and Prime Minister **Jules Edouard Xavier Malou** (1810-1886) had been born in Ypres. He put forward a case to the Belgian government that Ieper should receive financial compensation for the great gap created in the town's economy as a result of the loss of the hundreds of military men. He made the specific point that the town's brewers had lost the majority of their customers! To the relief of many of the town's businesses a military presence did return to the town before the turn of the century.

There is still a garrison of Belgian Army troops at Ieper. The barracks is located in the southern outskirts of the town on the road to Mesen (Messines).

Ypres in 1914

Postcard of the medieval Lakenhalle (Cloth Hall) taken in 1914 before the war broke out. The pre-war square-topped spire of the St. Martin's cathedral can be seen on the right of the picture. [\[1\]](#)



In 1914 the official language of the city was French. The town was officially known by its French name of Ypres, as were most places in the locality.

Ypres was, once again, a prosperous place with a population of about 17-18,000. There was no heavy industry in the region, so the town and its surrounding landscape was rural. The main businesses of the inhabitants were the manufacturing of printed cotton, linen, ribbons, woollen goods, flax, Valenciennes lace and soap-making production. There were tanneries and dye works associated with the trade in cloth. There were many local people who were well-off and generally the local people of Ypres had a good lifestyle.

The city itself was still made up of very old buildings, guild houses, narrow streets, the largest market place in Belgium, and the fine Gothic Cloth Hall (Lakenhallen) and belfry.

There was the St. Maartenskerk (the cathedral), cloisters and the bishop's palace, and three churches: the St. Jakobskerk, the St. Pieterskerk, and the St. Niklaaskerk. A convent for the "Arme Klaren" was located in the cloisters of the cathedral. There were several schools, including a school of correction (École de Bienfaisance) on the road to Menin. There was a police station, a prison, health institutions, a laundry, waterworks, a slaughterhouse, theatre, post-office, shops, numerous hotels, pubs and cafés.

Transport and Travel Routes

Surrounded by fertile fields, small farms and a network of villages, Ypres in 1914 was once again a busy focal point for trade routes in the area of south-west Flanders. There were several good routes of transportation to and from the town.

Pavé (cobblestone) roads connected nearby towns: from the north in a clockwise direction there were the towns of Diksmude (Diksmuide), Kortemark, (Roulers) Roeslare, Izegem, (Courtrai) Kortrijk, Menin (Menen), Wervicq (Wervik), Comines-Warneton (Komen-Waasten), Armentières, Poperinghe (now Poperinge) and Furnes (Veurne).

Railway & Tram Routes

In 1914 there was a main-line railway station on the east side of Ypres. With the railway lines and stations constructed across Belgium in the 1850s the first train had arrived at Ypres in March 1854. The line from Poperinghe was connected to the French border in 1870. The railway line from Ypres connected the town to the north, south, east and west. In turn, the town was well-connected to the coast and other parts of Belgium. From Ypres the railway lines ran: north to Tourhout; south to Comines on the French border, connecting Ieper with Armentières and Lille (Rijsel) and also connecting from Comines with Courtrai (Kortrijk) to the east; east to Poperinghe and Abele on the French border, connecting Ypres to Hazebrouck in French Flanders; and east to Roulers (Roeslare).

A network of tram lines also connected Ypres to the north, south, east and west, linking many of the larger villages in the town's outlying areas, and beyond. The tram lines ran from Ypres: to the north to Diksmuide; to the south to Kemmel and Nieuwkerke; to the east to Oostvleteren and on to Furnes (Veurne); to the west to Menin (Menen).

This tram transport system provided easy access for the local inhabitants to travel in and out of the town from the surrounding areas and even from the linking main railway lines further afield as far as the coast and Brugge. This transport system was especially important for traders taking goods to the Ypres' Saturday market and for the people buying things at the market to carry them home.

Canal

The Ypres-Yser (Ieper-Ijzer) canal was busy with boats bringing goods to and from the town.

The building of a second, southern canal from the Iepere river, where it enters the town of Ypres, as far as the Lys (Leie) River at Comines (Komen) on the French border was given the go ahead in 1859. However, the construction encountered major difficulties including landslides at Hollebeke and the collapse of a tunnel. Work was continued on and off, but in June 1913 the collapse of a steel bridge resulted in the final decision to stop the project completely.

Saturday Market

The Minckhuisje toll booth dating from 1899 at the fish market was rebuilt after the war.



Saturday's market day was a busy day in Ypres. The market place in the centre of town would be filled with carts and baskets, with people buying and selling fruit, vegetables and cheese.

Butter Market

The Ypres butter market was famous, and the street named Rue du Beurre (now Boterstraat in Flemish) is from that heritage.

Fish Market

The fish market was held in a street named Vismarkt from 1714. From this time the small boats were not able to sail as far as this point from the quay of the Ypres-Yser canal in the north of the town because the River Ieperleet had been vaulted and was now running under the Vismarkt street. The Minckhuisje was built as a toll booth by the town architect in 1899 and was rebuilt after the war.

Meat Market

Reconstructed railings in the location of the cattle market.



There was a meat market, formerly in the Vleeshuis near the Cloth Hall. By 1914 it was located in a wide street with railings down the centre of it to tie the cattle to. The street was called Veemarkt and it was near the slaughterhouse north-west of the Cloth Hall.

Wooden Houses & Façades

A reconstructed wooden façade near the Lille Gate (Rijselsepoort).



The wooden houses and wooden façades of the Gothic era, which had been plentiful in Ieper until the mid 19th century, had been demolished in large numbers from 1848. One was preserved in its entirety in the upper hall of the Cloth Hall until the Cloth Hall was set on fire in November 1914. That wooden house did not survive the fire.

An example of a wooden façade was reconstructed after the 1914-1918 war. It is located near the Lille Gate (Rijselsepoort) on Rijselsestraat.

A Garrison Town

In 1914 Ypres was a garrison town. There was still an infantry barracks inside the town walls in the south-west part of the town. The barracks had fortified shell-proof cellars. These cellars would prove to be useful protection when the First World War came to Ypres. In 1914 the many officers and soldiers based in the infantry barracks provided a good clientele and a steady income for the cafés, shops and businesses in Ypres.

The soldiers drilled on the parade square, known as the Esplanade, next to the infantry barracks. The targets and rifle ranges for military shooting practice (called the Doelen in Dutch) were situated at the buttes in a large wood north-east of Ypres called Polygone de Zonnebeke (or Polygonveld in Dutch) south of Zonnebeke village.

Military Riding Academy

A famous military riding academy (École d'Equitation) in Ypres, established in 1860, attracted high-ranking officers from Belgium and other parts of the world, including South America, to train here as cavalymen. Built on the site of a former Jesuit monastery the riding school consisted of a building complex with stables, hay barns, a smithy, schooling ring and accommodation for the men.

The presence of well-heeled, rich members of the Belgian and European aristocratic families made Ypres a fashionable place to be seen. The riders practised their riding skills and exercised the horses in the riding school, on the open ground of the Esplanade near the infantry barracks, on the Plaine d'Amour (or Minneplein) in the north of the town, and at a riding arena in Polygone de Zonnebeke Wood (Polygonveld) near Zonnebeke. Squadrons of cavalymen and gleaming horses would regularly be seen on parade making their way through Ypres, crossing the cobbles of the famous market place (Grande Place or Grote Markt) and passing the Cloth Hall.

Ramparts for Recreation

During the late 1800s there were major changes carried out on the defensive fortifications. This time, however, it was for deconstruction and decommissioning. On the western and northern sides of the town the ramparts and bastions were demolished. It was considered that the ramparts and fortifications were limiting the natural expansion of the town. A wide boulevard had been built on the west side of town opposite the station. One of those streets, Boulevard Malou, was named after one of the Belgian Prime Ministers, who had been born in Ypres, Jules Malou.

The ramparts on the eastern and southern sides of Ypres were, however, more or less left in situ. These ramparts were landscaped, planted with trees and paths were laid. It became a popular place to walk and relax. The ramparts by 1914 were well-used by the local people as recreation areas until the war came to Ypres in the autumn of 1914.

The Moats: Boterplas, Majoorgracht and Kasteelgracht

The ramparts and Kasteelgracht moat looking to the north from the south-east corner of the old Ypres fortifications. Nowadays the ramparts provide a popular walking route and the moat is a haven for wildlife.



In the late 1800s the moats and ditches around in the northern and western sides of the town were filled in during the demolition works to remove some of the rampart fortifications. A narrow stretch of canalised water was left lying from east to west across the north of the town. On the outside of the south-western, southern and eastern fortified stone ramparts three large bodies of water were left, known today as the Boterplas, the Majoorgracht and the Kasteelgracht. Fishing in the moats became a popular pastime.

In this new era of peace, when the fortifications were no longer considered necessary to keep out invaders, the early 1900s saw the construction of an outdoor swimming pool called the "Bassin de Natation". It was formed at the north-eastern corner of the Kasteelgracht moat.

Town Gates

The Lille Gate (Rijselfeepoort) and ramparts at the southern entrance to Ypres.



A feature of the old fortified city had been that there were a number of gates in and out of the town to protect access by road and waterway.

In earlier times the town's road gates had been locked at night, giving access to and from the town during the hours of 05.00 - 21.00 hours in the summer and hours of daylight in winter. Tolls were collected by the gate watchman. In the 1800s until 1865 there were duty taxes due to be paid at the gates for goods entering the town.

There had also been a water gate at the head of the Ypres-Yser (Ieper-Ijzer) canal until it was broken up in about 1884.

By the 1600s four main gates gave access to the major routes from Ypres. These were:

- **Diksmuidepoort:** gate on the Diksmuidsestraat on the road to Dixmuide to the north.
- **Hangwaertpoort, Meensepoort (Porte de Menin):** gate on the Rue de Menin also known as the Antwerp Gate until 1853 this was the gate on the road leading to Menin to the east.
- **Zuidpoort** (1123), **Mesenpoort** (1214), **Rijselpoort:** road and water gateway for the road to Mesen (Messines), Leie (Lys) and Rijsel (Lille) to the south.
- **Tempelpoort** (1200s), **Bellepoort** (1683): gate on the road to Belle (Bailleul) to the south-west. Rebuilt by Vauban in 1683 in place of the original Tempel gate, the Vauban version was broken up in 1896.

By 1914 only one of the four main town gates, the Mesenpoort/Rijselsepoort (Lille Gate), was surviving in the form of an actual gateway.

Plaine d'Amour (Minneplein)

One special place in Ypres at the turn of the 20th century was at the north-eastern corner of the town. This was called the "Plaine d'Amour" at the time when Ypres was French-speaking. In Dutch it was known as the "Minneplein". It was a large grassy space located between the old inner and outer fortified town walls. The people of the town used this wide open space for recreation and some animals grazed on it. Today the Plaine d'Amour (Minneplein) is home to a school and a football ground.

Restoration Project from 1895-1914

A major project to restore and refurbish the many fine historical buildings in Ypres was started in 1895. Jules Coomans was appointed as the city's architect for the work. Survey work was carried out on the buildings, restoration work was done and by the summer of 1914 most of the project was complete. The work on the Cloth Hall and belfry

was not quite finished, and in the autumn of 1914, when German artillery shells started landing on the town there was wooden scaffolding on the Cloth Hall and belfry.

Antony d'Ypres Photographic Studio

One of the well-known businesses in Ieper in 1914 was the photographic studio on the Rue du Beurre (Boterstraat) run by the photographer family Antony. Madame **Léontine Antony-Permbeke** (1858-1923) built up the business in Ypres and her two sons **Maurice Antony** (1883-1963) and **Robert Antony** (1884-1966) took over the business after her death. The superb collections of photographs by Antony d'Ypres before, during and after the First World War are famous not only for their composition, but for their record of the town as it was before, after the war had arrived and after the war was over.

Tourism to Ypres in 1914

Before the First World War the town of Ypres was popular as a tourist destination with visitors from within Belgium and also from abroad. Many arrived in Ypres by train. The Gothic architecture of the Cloth Hall, the frescoes in the Cloth Hall, historic buildings, the various specialist markets, the lace and the fine collections in the Merghelynckmuseum attracted visitors.

Interestingly, it is known that German officers posing as tourists visited Ypres on cycling tours around the area before the 1914-1918 war. Some of the information they gathered was believed to have been passed to German intelligence for use in planning troop movements in this part of Belgium.

7 October 1914: The German Army Arrives in Ypres

On one day of 7 October 1914 about 8,000 cavalymen and soldiers of an Imperial German cavalry division arrived in Ypres. They ordered thousands of loaves of bread to be baked, left bewildered shopkeepers with payment in German coins and notes or pre-printed German coupons for food, drink and other goods, and requisitioned hay for the horses. The Staff officers emptied the town's coffers of about 62,000 Francs and left the following day, having "passed through" Ypres. Apart from some accounts of stealing and damage no fighting, killing, sabotage or reprisals are believed to have taken place during this brief visit.

14 October 1914: The British & French Arrive in "Wipers"

Ordnance Survey map of Ypres for 1917 [\[OS\]](#)



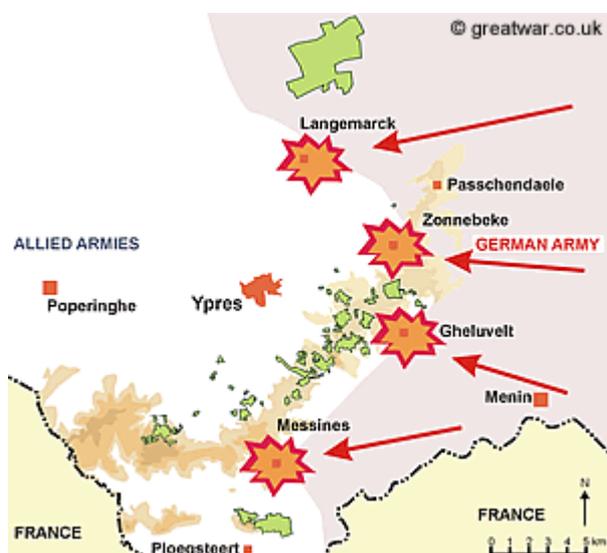
The first British soldiers to arrive in Ypres were men of the IV Corps under General Rawlinson (7th Division and 3rd Cavalry Division) on 14 October 1914. There they made contact with French troops of 87th Territorial Division who were already in the town. The British *Official History* states that the inhabitants were carrying on very much as usual. The British 7th Division was very tired by a two-day march from Ghent on pavé (cobble) roads and were billeted amongst the locals' houses to get some rest.

The British Corps Commander put up an outpost line covering the east of the town. The task was to defend the town and to block the route for the German Army through Ypres to the ports on the French and Belgian coast.

Soldiers in the British Army quickly turned the French name of Ypres into a much easier word to pronounce. They called it "Wipers". The British Army remained in "Wipers" for four years from October 1914 to the end of the war in November 1918.

Allies Block a German Return to Ypres

The British and German Armies clash in the First Battle of Ypres, October-November 1914.



As events developed at that time with the so-called "Race to the Sea", within three weeks of the German Army's brief visit to Ypres on 7 and 8 October 1914 the Germans

had to carry out a major offensive operation, very costly in German casualties, to try to make their way back into Ypres.

The First Fight for Ypres, Autumn 1914

The **First Battle of Ypres** (19 October - 22 November 1914) began to the east and south east of the city in mid October 1914. It was the first of many long battles during the Great War to hold or win possession of this ancient city and its strategic route to the French and Belgian coastal ports.

Although outnumbered, the British soldiers held their line against the odds. The British defence east of Ypres, including a crucial, successful counter-attack at Gheluvelt on 31 October 1914, was the final phase in the "Race to the Sea", putting a stop to the possible return of the German Army into Ypres before the onset of the winter weather.

With the defence of Ypres blocked by the British, and with the situation on the German Army's Western battlefront quickly turning from a war of movement into a static situation of siege warfare, the senior German commanders must have bitterly regretted having once been in possession of Ypres and having voluntarily left it.

German Attempts to Capture Ypres

German prisoners passing through Ypres captured in the Battle of the Menin Road in September 1917. St. Martin's cathedral can be seen in ruins on the right. The Cloister Gate is on the left. (GWPDA)



The town would become the focus of German attention to recapture it over the next three years. The German Army carried out major offensive operations in an attempt to gain possession of the town in the autumn of 1914, the spring of 1915 and the spring of 1918. The British carried out two major offensives to push the Germans off the dominating high ground around the north, east and south of the town in 1917.

During the massive operation of the 1918 German Spring Offensive ("Operation Georg" at Ypres) the German Army advanced to within a few kilometres east of Ypres, but was still not successful in capturing it. Marker stones, known as Demarcation Stones or Bornes du Front, were put up as a private project after the war to show the extent of the German advance into Belgium and France.

The city never fell into German hands during the war.

Holding the Strategic Landmark

Map showing the furthest extent of the line reached by the German Army in its advance during its 1918 Spring Offensive.



The defence of Ypres, or “Wipers”, was key to the British hold on this sector of the Western Front. The town was an important strategic landmark blocking the route for the Imperial German Army through to the French coastal ports. According to the British Official Military History, the danger of the Allied line being broken and rolled up at Ypres in October and November 1914 was “one of the most momentous and critical of the war, and only by the most desperate fighting did the Allies succeed in maintaining their front. Had they given ground on the scale they did after the Battle of the Frontiers in August 1914, or even in March and April 1918, the whole of Belgian territory must have been lost, and the Germans would have reached Dunkirk and Calais — which were, indeed, their objectives. If these ports had fallen to the enemy the effect on our sea communications and on operations generally might well have proved fatal not only to the British Empire, but to the whole of the civilized world.” (MO)

Many thousands of Allied troops died to maintain the Allies' possession of this place. They died in the rubble of its buildings and the shattered farmland around it, fighting in ferocious battles and surviving daily life in inhuman conditions.

On the German side of the wire, many thousands of German lives were also lost in the landscape north, east and south of Ypres during the German Army's four years of offensive and defensive battles.

Civilians in Ypres

Up until the spring of 1915 most of the civilian population, which numbered about 18,000 in 1914, continued to live in and around the town. With the sudden arrival of hundreds of French and British soldiers in the autumn of 1914 it soon became a busy hub for the military forces passing through it or spending time out of the line from the battle areas to the north, east and south of the city. The cafés and shops were busy with troops. A British Army Town Major was responsible for liaison between the civilian authorities and the military.

German artillery shells had been fired at the town from mid November 1914. Some 10 to 20 shells were said to have landed on the town every minute. The population took shelter in the cellars, in the ramparts and the bombproof shelters at the infantry barracks. In the following months the shelling was not constant over the winter of 1914/1915. Most of the local population were determined to stay in their town.

Civilians Evacuated, May 1915

The memorial in Ypres to Civilian Victims of the Great War.



From mid April 1915 there was an increase in the severity of German artillery shelling and aerial bombing onto the town. The shelling not only caused destruction of buildings and seriously endangered civilians sheltering in them, but the constant damage to the drainage and sewerage system made it irreparable and unsanitary. There was sickness amongst the people due to the poor living conditions.

Although the shopkeepers and cafe owners had kept their businesses going as far as they could, the severity of the shelling onto the town by 21 April resulted in people deciding to close down and leave. The German trial of a chlorine gas cloud as a war weapon on 22nd April was released against two French divisions in the northern sector of the Ypres Salient. At that time local people were still living in farms and villages very close behind the Front Line. Witness accounts from the first release of the gas cloud tell of civilians being caught up in the terror of the experience, taking shelter in their farms, arriving at Poperinge with symptoms of chlorine gas poisoning and being removed from the battle area by the German Army.

In May 1915 it was decided to evacuate the remaining civilians from Ypres who had wanted to stay in their town. The last to leave was the mayor, Monsieur Colaert. Taking what they could carry, many of them either walked, were put on trains from Ypres or Vlamertinge station or were helped on their way in army lorries in the direction of Poperinge.

Civilian Casualties of 1914-1918

A memorial in Ypres opposite the western end of the Cloth Hall commemorates the civilians killed during the 1914-1918 war in and around Ypres.

Ramparts and Fortifications

Modern-day doors give access to the casemates built by Vauban in the ramparts in the 1680s.



The history of Ypres up to 1914 records how the city was attacked and besieged over the centuries. Following a period of peace for Ypres after the founding of the Belgian nation in 1830, the surviving defensive ramparts on the eastern and southern sides of the town once more took on the role of fortified, defensive strongpoints to protect the city from an invader.

The tunnels, passageways, rooms and casemates built into the ramparts and bastions by the French military engineer **Sébastien Le Prestre, Seigneur de Vauban** (1633-1707), during the French occupation in the 1680s, were used by French and British troops as shelters, accommodation, medical dressing stations and headquarters from October 1914.

The infantry barracks in the west side of the city had deep cellars, thick walls and could offer good protection from artillery shelling. The rooms and casemates around the Rijselpoort (Lille Gate) provided secure bombproof rooms for headquarters and accommodation.

“The Wipers Times”

Facsimile front page of the first issue of The Wipers Times in March 1916.



In early 1916 one of the British units, the Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment), was holding the Front Line at Hooze in the Ypres Salient. The regiment's rear headquarters and billets was in Ypres in what the men described as rat-infested, waterlogged cellars. Finding a printing press, paper and most of the type (letters) in a building near the market square, some of the officers and men of the Sherwood Foresters, including a former editor, decided to set it up to print pages with anything that came into their heads.

The editorial "den" for about three months was in the casemates built by Vauban in Ypres' eastern ramparts. 100 copies of the first issue of what they called "The Wipers Times or Salient News" were printed on the press near the Cloth Hall, dated Saturday 12 February 1916. They produced the pages while out of the line after a night spent in the trenches on a working party, and during "quiet" periods when the German artillery shells weren't raining down on the town. "The Wipers Times" contained witty articles, poems and "adverts" referring to the awful circumstances of the war they found themselves in, the dangerous conditions they faced daily, but put across with a sense of humour and tongue-in-cheek. Clever text is written with good humour and illustrates well the tradition in which the British soldier has used his sense of humour to get him through very dark and difficult times.

A second issue of "The Wipers Times" (200 copies) was printed on the printing press by the Cloth Hall, but after a German 5.9 inch shell landed on the building and the printing press, the Sherwood Foresters managed to find another printing press near "Hellfire Corner". They moved it behind the lines to print the next two issues from Ypres. A further 11 issues were printed during the war from the Salient and the Somme battlefronts.

The Military in Ypres

British Army Trench Map 28 N.W.4 showing Ypres, dated July 1918, with some places of note highlighted on the map.



During the four years that the British Army was holding the Ypres Salient thousands of British troops spent time in Ypres or passed through it. They were either based in the town as part of a rear headquarters, running supply, pioneer, engineering and transport depots, or they were billeted in the town cellars and ramparts while out of the Front Line sector. Some would pass through it on their march from the rear areas west of Ypres,

passing through the city on their way to the Allied Front Line in the Ypres Salient battlefields. Many hundreds would never make the return journey.

Activity by Day and Night

In the early years of the war, 1915 and 1916, accounts by soldiers describe how the town was busy in the day but that it gave the appearance of being deserted at night. An account by "The Padre" in the first issue of "The Wipers Times" describes the daytime scene in Ypres in February 1916:

"Transports and troops pass and re-pass along the ruined streets. From almost every aspect, through gigantic holes torn in the intervening walls, the rugged spikes of the ruined cathedral town mark the centre of the town." [\(1\)](#)

The Padre goes on to describe how the town became deserted at night when the soldiers had gone up to the Front Line area to carry out working parties or as reliefs:

"But at night all is different. The town is well-nigh deserted. All its inhabitants, like moles, have come out at dusk and have gone, pioneers and engineers, to their work in the line. Night after night they pass through dangerous ways to more dangerous work. Lightly singing some catchy chorus they move to and fro across the open road, in front of the firing line, or hovering like black ghosts, about the communication trenches, as if there were no such thing as war. The whole scene lights up in quick succession round the semi-circle of the salient as the cold relentless star-shells sail up into the sky." [\(2\)](#)

Aerial photograph showing significant artillery damage to the buildings in Ypres. By the end of the war most of these buildings were almost completely demolished. (GW/PDA)



According to Veterans of the Ypres Salient, later in the war most movement by troops was carried out during the hours of darkness. Veterans have recounted how the shattered town was quiet with troop movement during daylight hours. This was likely due to the increase in enemy aerial activity by 1917. After darkness had fallen, however, the town and the surrounding area behind the British Front Line came alive with thousands of men, horses and wagons moving about to carry out reliefs for troops in the line or carry forward supplies and ammunition. WW1 Veterans also used to say that the winter months were preferable to the soldiers, in spite of the bad weather, because the long winter nights provided them with more hours of darkness and the protection from being seen by the enemy.

Menin Gate and Lille Gate

Two of the access routes in and out of the town on the east and south side of the city became very familiar to the British military units in the Ypres Salient.

Menin Gate

Taking the route from Ypres leading in the direction of Menin on the east side of the city, the soldiers would pass through the gap in the old raised ramparts where the originally named town gate called the Hangwaertpoort, Meensepoort or Porte de Menin had been located. For most of the four years when the Front Line east of Ypres was stabilized about 4 kilometres east of Ypres this route would take them into the battlefield zone to the north-east at Wieltje and east to Hooge on the Ypres Salient battlefields.

The route to Hooge along what the troops called "The Menin Road" became one of the most famous and dangerous places for the British to move about on the Western Front. A crossroads and railway crossing about 2 kilometres due east of Ypres on the Menin Road became known as "Hellfire Corner". This was due to the fact that the Germans had a view of it from their positions on the higher ground further east and, as a major road route for the British into the Salient, the Germans shelled it constantly. The Menin Gate, the Menin Road and Hellfire Corner are three names bound together in the British Military History of the Great War at Ypres.

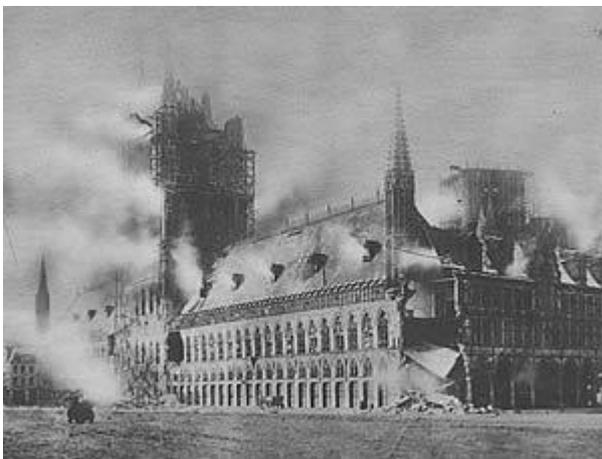
The Lille Gate

The access route to and from Ypres in the south of the city was very well used by troops making their way to and from the battlefields of the Ypres Salient. This gate was called the Rijselpoort and was the only one of the numerous formal town gates that had survived over the centuries in the form of an actual gateway.

The Destruction of Ypres

First Artillery Damage: November 1914

The eventual destruction of the Cloth Hall (Lakenhalle) at the centre of Ypres began with damage from German artillery shells from November 1914. (GWPDA)



German artillery fired continuously onto the town of Ypres from mid November during the **First Battle of Ypres** (19th October - 22nd November 1914). The shells set fire to buildings in numerous places. The German artillery fired incendiary shells onto the city from positions to the north-east, east and south-east of Ypres. The first serious damage to the buildings of Ypres occurred on 22nd November 1914. Two of Ypres' most famous

historic buildings, **St Martin's Cathedral** and the **Cloth Hall (Lakenhalle)** were set on fire by incendiary shells. Scaffolding on the belfry caught fire; ironically this was on the building because it had been undergoing refurbishment of the stonework which was almost complete when the war broke out.

Intense Bombardment: April 1915



A few months later in mid April 1915 an intensive, deliberate German bombardment started up onto the buildings of Ypres. There was increased activity by German planes bombing Ypres and Poperinge. There was also the arrival of long range, heavy German guns. These guns included a huge 42cm howitzer hidden in the Houthulst Forest to the north of the town. This huge gun was nicknamed "Dicke Bertha" by the German Army. This nickname translates as "big" or "large" Bertha. Consequently the gun soon became known as "**Big Bertha**" to the troops of the British Army. Accounts by soldiers say that the shell could be seen, it was so large, and that it sounded like a steam train rushing through the air.

Although the Cloth Hall had lost its roof for some weeks already the walls were still standing and, up to this point in time, it was used as billeting accommodation for about 1,500 men, the equivalent of two British battalions. But the shelling in late April caused too much danger for this and the building was evacuated by the British.

The bombardment in April 1915 was the prelude to the launch of a German trial gas attack on the Allied Front Line in the Ypres Salient on 22 April 1915. It was the beginning of the **Second Battle of Ypres** (22 April - 8 May 1915) and the beginning of the total destruction of one of the most beautiful cities in Flanders.

By the end of the Second Battle of Ypres the British Engineers of Second Army were constructing strong-points on the Ypres ramparts as part of a Third Defensive Line. This was called the "Canal Line" and it was located behind the forward defensive lines of the Front Line, the G.H.Q. Line, and the Second Line. The Canal Line ran around the north, east and south of Ypres, constructed from the Brielen Bridge on the Ieper-Ijser (Ypres-Yser) canal, at the boundary of the British and French Armies, along the eastern canal bank, around the eastern ramparts of Ypres and joined the Ypres-Comines canal south of Ypres.

Not all the damage to buildings was caused by the German artillery, however. The British Engineers blew down the tower of St. Jacob's church located near the eastern ramparts because it was being used by German artillerymen to range their targets on Ypres.

Later in the summer of 1915 an incident occurred with great loss of life when a group of about 40 men of the 6th Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (D.C.L.I.) were buried alive in the cathedral vaults. An intensive German bombardment shattered the ceilings of the vaults and 22 of the men could not be dug out alive and they died on that day. Their graves are close together in the Ypres Reservoir Cemetery in Ypres.

A Shattered City: 1917 & 1918

Aerial photograph of Ypres before most of these shattered buildings were reduced to rubble by the end of the war. [\[4\]](#)



During 1917 and 1918 the city was continuously shelled by German artillery. By the end of the war there was no building left untouched. Only a tiny number of buildings, walls or façades were still intact. These included the post office in the Rijselstraat, the Biebuyck House in the Diksmudsestraat and a row of terraced façades in the d'Hondtstraat. The medieval town with its historic buildings, centuries of traditions and its pre-war prosperity had been demolished.

Sacrifice and Memories

The memory of so much bloodshed, on all sides, is inextricably entwined with the name of Ypres.

These words were attributed to "The Padre" in the first edition of "The Wipers Times" soldiers' newspaper printed in Ypres in February 1916. He could not have foreseen that the war would last another two and a half years, and that even more destruction and death would take place in the city in that time. His thoughts in 1916 must indeed have

reflected the feelings of many British servicemen who spent time in and around Ypres in the war, wondering about the day when war was over and normal life had resumed, that the sacrifice and memories of those who gave their lives in her defence would still live on:

"Ypres has died but shall live again. Her name in the past was linked with kings; but tomorrow she will have a nobler fame. Men will speak of her as the home of the British soldier who lives in her mighty rampart caverns or in the many cellars of her mansions. And even when the busy hum of everyday life shall have resumed its sway in future days, still there will be heard in ghostly echo the muffled rumbling of the transport, and the rhythmic tread of soldiers' feet." [\(3\)](#)

Daily Last Post Ceremony in Ypres

Last Post Association buglers performing Last Post at the daily ceremony in Ypres. [\(5\)](#)



The people of Ypres have not forgotten the loss of the civilians and military men and women in Ypres and the Ypres Salient. A daily ceremony of Remembrance at the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres has been carried out since 1929 without interruption except for the period of German occupation in World War Two.

[Last Post Ceremony at the Menin](#)

Reconstruction of Ypres from 1919



Even before the Armistice on 11 November 1918 some of the local population were beginning to return to Ypres from their places of refuge in neighbouring parts of Flanders and France. Every building the locals had known was shattered and in ruins: houses, shops, municipal buildings, schools, the cathedral, churches, and the Lakenhalle (Cloth Hall) were gone. It was going to be a huge task to rebuild a whole town from its ancient roots.

With hundreds of men, women and children returning to Ypres there was a pressing need to accommodate them in new housing, to provide schools, medical facilities, shops,

workplaces, the everyday facilities of a small town, and to rebuild the shattered infrastructure of drains, sewers and water systems.

Inhabitants Return

From July 1919 a subsidy was offered to those who wanted to return to Ypres and the surrounding ruined landscape of the Ypres Salient. The subsidy would help towards the costs of building basic accommodation to live in. Payment for war damages was also offered to help people make a new start building again on their old property.

Many people heading towards the destroyed city were seeking work as builders and construction workers. The better-off people tended to stay away from Ypres until much of the clearance work was done. Some wealthy land-owners sold their property, deciding not to be part of the reconstruction.

By 1920 the number of people living in Ypres was about 6,000. The population grew significantly during the 1920s and there were already about 15,000 people in the city by 1930. More than half of the 15,000 inhabitants were, however, people who had moved here after the war and had not been born and brought up in the city before 1914. Many of the families who had lived in and around Ypres for generations had decided not to come back.

King Albert Fund Housing

Already before the war was over the King Albert Fund had been set up in 1917 with the aim of planning ahead for the inhabitants who would one day hope to return to the devastated regions. It was intended that emergency, temporary housing accommodation could be made available in pre-fabricated sections which could be put up and dismantled easily.

The finances for these huts were provided from February 1919 by the Belgian Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ministerie van Binnenlandsche Zaken) and **King Albert I**, King of Belgium (1875-1934). The king had remained in Allied-held territory in Belgium throughout the war to lead the Belgian Army against the invasion by the Imperial German Army. He involved himself in the reconstruction of the areas which were devastated by the four year long war.

From the spring of 1919 lots of small prefabricated huts were put up to house the returning people of Ypres. The area of the Plaine d'Amour (Minneplein) in the north-west of the town was designated as a safe area for this temporary living accommodation.

The requirement by the returning inhabitants for these emergency huts far outweighed their availability in the early 1920s. Those who couldn't be given a hut were offered a subsidy with which to build their own basic house. The King Albert Fund was stopped in 1925. As a temporary housing measure it had been the government's intention to ask people to move out within a few years and the government would sell the huts. However, there were too many people still using them in the mid 1920s as their only accommodation so that idea was dropped. The local town authorities were encouraged to buy the huts off the government and some were lived in for many years.

One of the emergency huts still exists in Ypres and is lived in. It is located in a small street (with no name) between Schlachthuisstraat and Adjutant Masscheleinlaan in the north of the town.

Food & Provisions

Very little food could be produced in the area of Ypres in the early days after the war, and warehouses were opened during 1919 to store food and provisions to feed the returning local population.

Returning farmers began the enormous task of trying to salvage what they could of their farms, equipment and machinery. It would take some years to clear the land of abandoned military equipment, ammunition and bodies. Ploughing the ravaged fields could be extremely hazardous due to unexploded shells and collapsing underground tunnels. Also, a plague of mice ate through much of the crop growth in the fields in the 1920s.

Even in the 21st century dangerous ammunition is ploughed up by farmers or construction workers. The artillery shells, gas shells, grenades, bombs and bullets have become known as "The Iron Harvest". Visitors to the battlefield areas are strongly advised never to touch anything like this that they may see or find - it may be unexploded ammunition.

Transport

The pavé (cobble) roads had to be relaid and the dirt tracks and lanes rediscovered where they had been totally destroyed.

The railway lines were rebuilt and used to bring food and provisions into the area. It was also now possible to start to relax and for some people the pre-war popular day trips to the Belgian seaside could be enjoyed again.

The Ieper-Ijser (Ypres-Yser) canal was not reworked until the early 1930s. It was decided not to re-start the abandoned pre-war project to build the Ieper-Komen (Ypres-Comines) canal south of Ypres.

Public Administration

The local authority and the police were first based in huts on the Plaine d'Amour (Minneplein). After the Kasselrij building on the market place (Grote Markt) was reconstructed they moved in there.

Schools and the library also functioned from huts on the Minneplein for a few years until the rebuilt public buildings to house them were finished.

The town museum was re-housed from 1929 in the former Meat Hall near the western end of the Cloth Hall.

The post office building, one of the very few to survive complete destruction, was re-opened in 1923.

Public utility systems for gas, water and electricity were rebuilt.

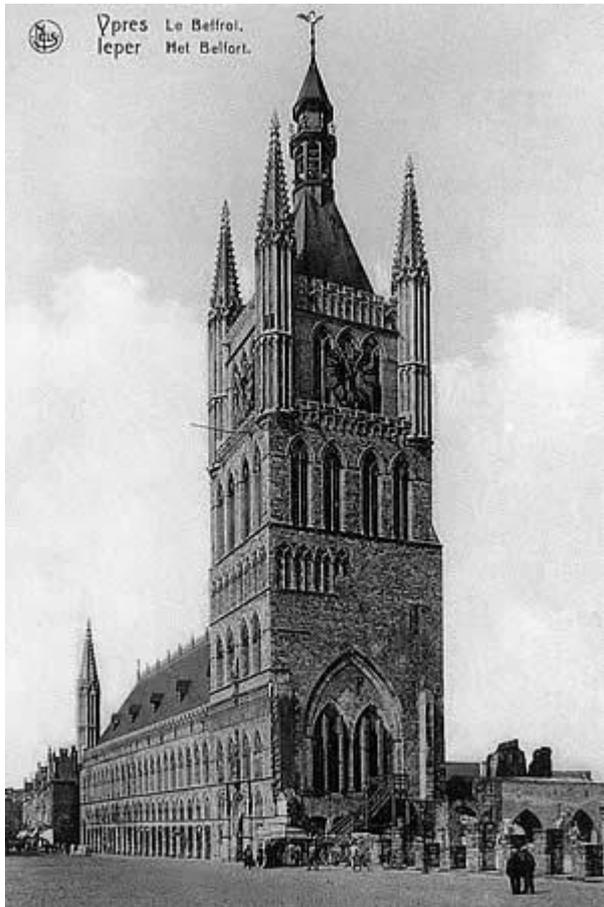
Ypres as a Memorial

The idea of not reconstructing the city and leaving Ypres in ruins as a memorial had been suggested during the war. It was thought that a new city could be built nearby and not on the rubble of the destroyed city.

In July 1919 the British government succeeded in getting agreement from the Belgian government to create a "Zone of Silence" in the area of the destroyed Cloth Hall, belfry and St. Martin's cathedral. However, this was not willingly accepted by all of the local people in Ypres and after two years it was agreed that the British would be able to build a monument in Ypres instead. The location was agreed for the construction of a large memorial, the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, to be built on the old eastern access route in and out of Ypres.

Reconstruction of Historic Ypres

The west wing and belfry of the Cloth Hall (Lakenhalle) were reconstructed by 1934. [1](#)



The city architect, Jules Coomans, who had been overseeing the restoration of many of the historic buildings before the war, returned to Ypres from Boulogne-sur-Mer. He wanted to rebuild Ypres exactly in an image of what it had been before the destruction.

Although there were some who wanted to create a modern city with the clean lines of the architecture of the 1920s, those wanting to rebuild the old city in the Flemish medieval and renaissance styles won the discussion. King Albert was also one of the people promoting the reconstruction to be carried out as the original pre-war city had looked.

Once the agreement to rebuild the city as a replica of its ancient image was made in 1920, the work started on the public and private buildings in earnest. Lots of architects were invited to take part in the rebuilding, with Jules Coomans at their head. There were hundreds of builders and workmen employed in the reconstruction work, including many local returning inhabitants. Within five years much of the rebuilding work for private

housing and most public buildings and utilities had been finished. Some public buildings were left to be completed in the 1930s. King Albert visited the city to see how the work was going.

The Cloth Hall (Lakenhalle)

The Cloth Hall (Lakenhalle) on the market square in the centre of Ypres - Ieper.



After great discussion it was decided to rebuild the Cloth Hall in the image of what it had looked like before its destruction. Architect Jules Coomans was in charge of the reconstruction. The work was started in 1928. In 1934 the western wing of the Cloth Hall and the belfry tower had been completed.

The eastern wing was not started at that time and only the pillars remained in their original location. Jules Coomans died in 1937 before the eastern wing could be started. An architect called P A Pawuwels took on the task of leading the rebuilding of the eastern wing and the Nieuwerk. The offices of the town administration moved into the eastern wing and Nieuwerk in 1967.

St. Martin's Cathedral

This photograph of the reconstructed St. Martin's cathedral was taken looking at the south façade from the market square in 1930. In the foreground of the photo the ruins at ground level of the east wing of the Cloth Hall can be seen. This long-distance view of the cathedral from the square was eventually blocked by the rebuilding of the Cloth Hall. [\[2\]](#)



Interestingly, when St. Martin's Cathedral was rebuilt from its ruins under the leadership of Jules Coomans, the shape of the spire was changed. Pre-1914 the spire had been a square tower. During the period of restoration of Ypres' historic buildings leading up to 1914 Jules Coomans had had plans to change the cathedral spire to a pointed one. When the new "gothic" cathedral was finished in 1930 it had been rebuilt with a pointed spire.

The Lapidarium

The Lapidarium was the location of the St. Martin's monastery and cloister next to the cathedral. Jules Coomans's plans for the rebuilding of the cathedral did include the reconstruction of the monastery's cloisters. However, they were not rebuilt. The site of the monastery was one of the few places in Ypres which was kept as open ground as a memorial site and remnants of the cathedral and monastery were left there.

The Cloister Gate (Kloosterpoort)

The Cloister Gate



The cloister or monastery gate of St. Martin's cathedral was one of the few structures which was not completely demolished by the end of the war. It was still standing while almost everything around it in the immediate vicinity was reduced to piles of rubble. It had stood since about 1780 and had withstood the terrible bombardments. It was restored in 1938.

Pilgrims and Tourists

Pilgrims remember: ceremony at the Menin Gate Memorial.



From 1919 there was also an influx of visitors to Ypres. The city had become a focus for many people wanting to visit the Ypres Salient battlefields. These visitors were travelling to the battlefields of Flanders to visit the graves of their loved ones lost in the fighting. Some came privately, others travelled with organized tours. Some believed they might even find a relative or friend still alive who had been reported as "missing in action". Ex-soldiers returned to the old Ypres Salient to see the ground they had fought over. There were formal and private ceremonies and anniversary commemorations along with the unveiling of numerous memorials across the Ypres Salient.

Some soldiers returned with items they had rescued from the ruins of the churches or cathedrals, such as remnants of stone statues and altarcloths. Such items had been taken back home after their time in Ypres. A piece of gold-embroidered stumpwork from St. Pieterskerk was found in the personal effects of an elderly WW1 Veteran and it had been his wish to return it to Ypres one day. His family returned it at a special ceremony and concert held on 11 November 1993 at St. Martin's cathedral to mark the 85th anniversary of 1918.

Hotels and Cafés

Hotels, restaurants and cafés were rebuilt or built in response to the need to offer accommodation and food for the many pilgrims and visitors who began to make journeys to Ypres.

Ieper (Ypres) Today

Cafés and restaurants on the market square of Ieper - Ypres.



Visitors travelling to Ypres for the first time are astonished to think that the busy, vibrant town they see today, with its medieval and renaissance architecture was completely flattened and that virtually the whole of the town was reconstructed stone by stone, brick by brick during the 1920's and 1930's.

In the mid 1990s the town square was dug up again and relaid. A First World War machine gun was found buried beneath the cobblestones, which had been relaid during the reconstruction in the 1920s and 1930s.

Recent buildings constructed in the last few decades sit comfortably side by side with the medieval style buildings. Ypres is a busy place with all the facilities one would expect to find for business and pleasure in one of the leading visitor destinations in Flanders.

Related Topic

Sights to See in Ypres/Ieper

Ramparts Cemetery near the Lille Gate (Rijselsepoort) in Ieper - Ypres.



A listing of places to see and visit in the town which relate to the First World War and the reconstructed buildings of particular historical significance:

<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/ypres-salient/town-ieper-history.htm>