



ON THE TRAIL OF THE CHEMNITZ REGIMENTS

For some time now, we have been intensively researching the history of a German military cemetery from the First World War. It is located in the small northern French town of **Quesnoy-sur-Deûle** – not far from the metropolis of **Lille**, but also close to the Belgian border.

<https://kriegsgraeberstaetten.volksbund.de/friedhof/quesnoy-sur-deule>

Within a week of taking Lille on 12th October 1914, the 40th (Saxon) Infantry Division was fighting the British Expeditionary Force to a standstill west of the city. Here it would remain until the beginning of August 1916, while both its trench system and its casualty lists steadily expanded. Cemeteries also developed and the one in Quesnoy became a burial place primarily for Saxon soldiers. Since the division mainly recruited in Chemnitz and the surrounding area, the Erzgebirge and the Vogtland (two of the infantry regiments deployed here came from Chemnitz, and one from Plauen), it would also later become known as the "**Cemetery of the Chemnitz Regiments**".

A particularly interesting aspect of the site is that after the withdrawal of the Saxon regiments from this area in summer 1916, there were no further wartime interments and the existing burials were spared from subsequent transfers of remains. This means that the structure of the cemetery today is essentially as it was at the time, including the fallen in their original graves. This is the exception rather than the rule for First World War German military cemeteries. The central memorial, dedicated in 1916, is also still in a good state of preservation.

Unfortunately, today's gravestones only reveal very little information about the fallen. Therefore our aim was and is to find out more about as many of them as possible. How old were they, where did they come from? What was their background and what did they do before the war? What did they look like and how did they die? We have already succeeded in doing this for well over 100 of the approximately 2000 men buried here. We have also discovered much about the history of the cemetery, from its establishment in 1914 through the 1920s to the present day, including structural and design changes, ongoing maintenance and visiting arrangements. In addition to our own collection of photos, published rolls of honour, regimental histories and the like, the Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge, a local history group in Quesnoy-sur-Deûle and other historians have all been particularly helpful. Over the course of several years, 60 pages of extensive documentation on the cemetery have been compiled.

However, we do not consider this work complete and are constantly striving to find out more. We are aware that the subject is quite specific, but sometimes we are lucky and someone happens to have a photo of the cemetery or a story from a book of honour. Or someone knows someone, who knows someone, who may have a relative lying in the cemetery ... If this is you, we would be delighted to hear about it! Of course, our work to date is not 'classified information' and we are happy to share it with interested parties. We expressly encourage you to share this article with other historically interested persons, groups or associations.

If, after visiting the cemetery, you should also feel inclined to explore the area where most of those buried at Quesnoy lost their lives, we can give you some pointers. The division's positions extended from Frelinghien on the Lys along the edge of **Ploegsteert Wood** to the Douve. Very early on this wood's name became associated with an almost unbelievable event that took place at Christmas 1914 and later became world-famous in books and films as the "**Christmas Truce**".

Fraternalisation, especially between the British and Germans, took place on several sections of the front over Christmas 1914, but the events around Ploegsteert Wood would be among the most well documented and publicised, especially in contemporary British newspapers. This section of the front has thus come to symbolise this profoundly human event like no other. And what is particularly interesting for us Saxons is that this was the front of the 40th Infantry Division, and that here it was mostly Saxon soldiers who not only agreed a local truce with the British to recover the fallen (some of whom had lain unburied for weeks between the lines), but also sang Christmas carols, met in no man's land, exchanged small gifts and even had 'kick-about's' together. This helped earn the Saxons a reputation on the British side as the most agreeable of the Kaiser's troops, and cases even arose in which other German contingents pretended to be Saxons in the hope of being a little better received by the Britons opposite.

To mark the 100th anniversary of the Christmas Truce and with reference to the legendary football match, UEFA got involved in 2014 by donating a somewhat strange-looking monument. It is a stele in a square containing balls and is usually also draped with fan scarves from various clubs – mostly English ones. Next to it is a replica section of trench, although it does not quite stand up to examination as historically accurate for that period of the war. Display boards explain the history and tell the stories.

Many a Saxon soldier who witnessed the Christmas Truce would eventually find his last resting place in the cemetery in Quesnoy, as did many a Tommy in one of the British cemeteries in and around Ploegsteert Wood. However by Western Front standards this sector remained 'quiet' throughout 1915.

After the Saxon troops were sent to the Somme at the end of July 1916, this front remained the scene of fighting, which reached its climax on 7th June 1917. That morning, after days of sustained bombardment, the British detonated **19 underground mines** with a total of around 450 tonnes of explosives under the German lines as the opening of the Battle of Messines. The detonations were among the largest man-made explosions before the invention of the atomic bomb. The effect was devastating and the German losses were enormous. Several of the huge craters, some of which were originally over 80 metres wide, can still be seen today. Six mines were not detonated, variously because they had been lost to countermining or quicksand, or else because the Germans had pulled back shortly beforehand. These charges still lie below the ground today, with the exception of one at Ploegsteert Wood which exploded in 1955 during a heavy thunderstorm. Fortunately, only one cow was killed. So a small thrill of danger is also guaranteed.

To close the circle on the 40th Infantry Division: after two gruelling tours on the Somme battlefield with a week at Neuve Chapelle in between, they returned to this area and occupied a new sector at Messines within sight of Ploegsteert Wood. They narrowly escaped the actual mine explosions due to being relieved the day before, but their losses from the bombardment and subsequent battle were still enormous. The fallen, if they were ever found, were no longer buried in Quesnoy-sur-Deûle. Today, the majority of them lie in the German military cemetery in Menen, but that would be our next tip ...

