

Battle of 200th Anniversary



Two centuries on, there's a huge celebration planned in central Belgium

This year marks the 200th anniversary of probably the best-known battle ever fought – Waterloo.

A re-enactment of the battle will take place on the actual battlefield on 19 and 20 June to commemorate this event. But what of the actual confrontation? And why did thousands of men die fighting?

The battle took place on 18 June 1815, south of Brussels, and saw the end to the wars with France that

had started in the wake of the French Revolution 23 years earlier. There had been a brief respite when, in April 1814, Napoleon had abdicated and was exiled on the small Mediterranean island of Elba. However, this peace was not to last. Napoleon, having spent nine months and 21 days in retirement on Elba,



The Duke of Wellington changed European history

slipped away with a handful of officers and 1050 soldiers of his personal guard.

Landing on the southern coast of France on 1 March 1815, Napoleon began his march towards Paris, building his forces along the way as soldiers and generals rallied to his cause. Just 19 days later,

Waterloo



Scotland Forever by Lady Butler - Leeds Art Gallery

Napoleon entered Paris and the events that would lead to a final confrontation began to take shape when coalition forces gathered to invade France. Napoleon decided to make the first move, taking his army across the border into Belgium to strike at the two closest armies, the Anglo-Dutch and the Prussians. Having defeated these, he would then head for Brussels. One man would stand in his way: Arthur Wellesley, The Duke of Wellington.

They had never met in person, or in battle, but soon these two military giants would meet in a nondescript shallow valley near the small town of Waterloo.

Rather than just a battle, Waterloo could be termed a campaign. After stealing a day's march on Wellington, Napoleon split his army in two, taking part to attack and defeat the Prussians commanded by Prince Gebhard von Blücher at Ligny, while leaving his left wing to

Napoleon Bonaparte atop Marengo, his famous steed, whose skeleton 'resides' in Chelsea!



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Lion Mound – the effort to climb it is repaid in full



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attack the British. Once one wing had defeated its foe, it would move to aid the other. At worst, Napoleon hoped to drive the Prussian and Anglo-Dutch armies apart, forcing them to retreat along their supply lines. He would then reach Brussels, confidently believing that peace would be sought. Unfortunately, things do not go according to plan for Napoleon and, despite beating the Prussians at Ligny, they retreated northward, staying in contact with Wellington who, having held the French at Quatre Bras, began to fall back to his pre-selected battlefield south of the village of Waterloo.

In 1815, Waterloo was a small town located on the Brussels/Genappe road, south of the Sonian Forest. Today the town has expanded greatly, almost incorporating the small hamlet of Mont-Saint-Jean. Wellington spent the nights of 17 and 18 June here, staying at the local coaching inn. It is here that he wrote the 'Waterloo Despatch' which gave weight to the battle's name. Today the inn is the Wellington Museum. You can visit the Duke's bedroom/office and his aide-de-camp's room. Other rooms in the building have each been dedicated to the armies that took part in the combat and include authentic

The Wellington Museum in Waterloo, his HQ in 1815



documents and souvenirs. There is also an impressive collection of weapons, including a cannon abandoned on the battlefield. A ticket into the museum entitles you to an audio guide available in various languages.

Wellington was a defensive general with a keen eye for a good ground. His and Blücher's plan to defeat Napoleon meant bringing their two armies together, creating a numerically superior force.

However, both armies were 12 miles apart and so Wellington had to hold and wait for the Prussians. At Mont-Saint-Jean, Wellington positioned his army on the reverse slope of the northern ridge out of the sight of the French.

Before him, in the shallow valley, he garrisoned two large farms, Hougomont and La Haye Sainte. These would act as breakwaters against the tide of French attacks. To his left, the small hamlet and farm of Papelotte would be occupied by Nassau troops and protect his flank.

And here he waited for the coming attack and for Blücher.

The battlefield site today is very much as it was in 1815 and is still dissected by the Brussels road. However, on what was Wellington's right, stands the Lion's Mound. This is the main monument and memorial of the Battle of Waterloo and was constructed in 1824. It indicates the spot where the Prince of Orange was wounded. The mound stands 43 metres high and a total of 226 steps lead to the top. From the viewing platform, just below the lion statue, you can enjoy a stunning view over the entire battlefield. A ticket to climb the mound can be obtained from the visitor centre.

The centre is located behind the Lion's Mound in what is known as the Lion village and a visit is recommended. The centre has an audiovisual display which indicates the strategic points of the battlefield and the movements of the different armies. Also showing is a movie about the battle that lasts for 20 minutes.

A large circular building in the village houses *The Panorama of the Battle*. This painting by Louis



THE MOUND STANDS 43 METRES HIGH
AND 226 STEPS LEAD TO THE TOP. FROM
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Camping Caravaning Club Brussels is a campsite in Wezembeek-Oppem, Flemish Brabant. This terraced site has a number of pitches with and without shade. The camp has an on-site club house where you can try those famous Belgium beers. For children there's a large playground, games room and video arcade. You can also use the internet, as the site has computers with internet connection, plus 80% wi-fi coverage. 75 minutes from Waterloo.

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Camping Cheslé is a three-star campsite almost 6 hectares in size, located near Namur and surrounded by natural beauty. A leisurely beer, wine, tea or coffee can be enjoyed on the terrace as well as a bite to eat. In the summer a weekly BBQ is held. The camp also has a chip shop (The Chipper) that's open nightly through high season. For kids there's a playground and sandpit. 54 minutes from Waterloo.



Dumoulin, in circular form, is 110 metres long and 12 metres high. The visitor stands on a central platform finding himself in the middle of the battle, surrounded by both armies. Audio elements have been added to enhance this visual experience.

Once on the battlefield you will notice how relatively small it is at just 5000 metres wide and 4000 metres deep. On the morning of 18 June, after one of the worst storms on record, the opposing armies, totalling 150,000 men, mustered to face each other. Wellington's main position was by 'Elm Tree' crossroads on top of the northern ridge 200 yards behind the farm of La Haye Saint. Napoleon was just forward of the small inn called La Belle Alliance.

Napoleon had spent the night at the farmhouse of Le Caillou. In the



Appareil servant à l'élévation du Lion de Waterloo. Lithographie de Jobard, d'après Bertrand

morning he gathered with his generals for breakfast, but in reality, this was a crisis management meeting. The majority of his generals had met Wellington in battle and had all been beaten by him. With this in mind, they tried hard to convince

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Battle of Waterloo, 1815 - William Sadler

their Emperor how good a general Wellington was and that he should exercise some caution. However, Napoleon would hear none of this, insisting that Wellington was a bad general and that the coming battle would 'trouble him no more than eating his breakfast'. The farmhouse has now been transformed into the Napoleon Museum and you can see the breakfast room and table that on the morning of 18 June was covered in maps, as well as the breakfast fare. It also houses the cot that Napoleon slept in.

At 11.30am, after waiting for the field to dry out, battle commenced with an opening salvo from his 'Grand Battery'. Then, believing Wellington's right flank to be his weakest, Napoleon ordered his brother, Prince Jérôme Bonaparte, to attack Hougomont farm, creating a diversion and weakening Wellington's centre. However, this diversionary attack was to draw in more and more French troops as the day progressed.

Hougomont château and farm is an area of the battlefield that is seldom visited. Wellington placed



Lieutenant Colonel James Macdonell of the Coldstream Guards in charge at Hougomont, with the order: "Defend the post to the last extremity." This Macdonell did, and Hougomont was not taken in nearly nine hours of continuous fighting, despite a determined attack by Sous-Lieutenant Legros who, wielding a huge axe, managed to break through the north gate. Macdonell and other guards managed to close the gate, trapping Legros and 30

Frenchmen inside and dispatching them. The château was burnt to the ground, with only the adjoining chapel surviving. The gardener's house and main barns are much the same as they were 200 years ago. The garden wall is still standing but is at least two feet lower.

Hougomont is an atmospheric place and it is easy to imagine the desperate defence that ensued here. Several memorial plaques are located in the wall and buildings commemorating this action.

While the attack on Hougomont went on, Napoleon tried to break Wellington's centre. At 2pm, after a violent artillery barrage, the French infantry of d'Erlons Corps attacked the English east of the Brussels road. The English resisted and pushed the French back, causing many losses. Killed in this attack was Lieutenant General Thomas Picton who commanded the 5th British Division. A memorial showing where he died can be located just east of the crossroads.

To finally see off the French assault, two British cavalry brigades, the Union and Household,

Amazing views from the top of Lion's Mound



charged the French infantry.

Sergeant Charles Ewart captured a French Imperial Eagle, one of two taken on the day. They then set about the 'Grand Battery', but were counter-attacked by French lancers who surrounded and massacred them. Lady Elizabeth Butler's painting showing the Scots Greys charging contains all the energy of this historic moment.

By mid afternoon, the battle had become a pounding match, but still the British clung to their ridge.

Time was beginning to run out for Napoleon, as the Prussian Army entered the field and pressed Napoleon's right wing. Now, whether Napoleon was ill, some say with haemorrhoids, and left the field, it is not clear, but his second in command, Marshal Ney, believed that it was possible to pierce the centre of the British line with a massive cavalry charge.

In total, 5000 French cavalry charged the English line. To face this onslaught, the British formed themselves in squares and welcomed the cavalry with extensive fire, causing huge losses. The majority of these attacks took place on Wellington's right wing in front of what is now the

Lion's Mound. British Royal Horse Artillery stood by their cannon until the last minute and then fired canister shot (metal balls or scrap metal pieces in a canister) into the massed cavalry before taking cover in the infantry squares. This grape-shot was devastatingly effective. A stone marker and plaque to the right of the Lion's Mound shows the last position of Captain Mercer's G Troop. Unable to break the squares, the French cavalry was retired broken, their dead littering the field.

Shortly after this attack, the Prussians began to exert themselves on the battlefield applying pressure on Napoleon's right flank around Plancenoit and Fishcermont. But despite this, Napoleon was still confident of defeating

Wellington and turning his army to face the Prussian threat. His optimism was bolstered when Le Haye Sainte fell.

Like Hougoumont and Papelotte, this beautiful farm was turned into a fortress and garrisoned by six companies of the King's German Legion, later reinforced by two companies of Nassau troops. Subjected to furious attack from 2pm, they were finally forced to withdraw from the farm. Two plaques on the walls commemorate the fierce struggle that occurred at this place.

Finally, playing his last card, Napoleon sent the Imperial Guard to attack the English centre. The Imperial Guard had never been beaten and always delivered a victory for their Emperor. As they neared the top of the ridge,



A fascinating visitor centre sits below Lion's Mound



Wellington personally gave the orders to his troops and commander: "Now Maitland, now's your time" and "Up guards and at them." The English line rose and subjected the French to intense musket fire, the attack failed and the Guard began to withdraw and retreat back down the valley leaving behind cannons, caissons, dead and wounded. With this, Wellington ordered the general advance and the whole Allied line rose and moved forward. Napoleon left the battlefield by coach only to be pursued by the Prussians into a final exile on the Island of St Helena.

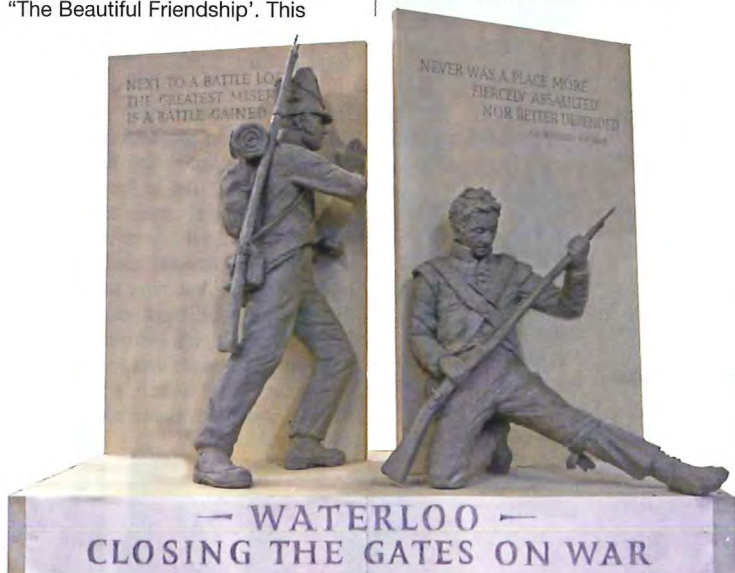
Wellington had won a great victory. Riding across the battlefield, he met General Blücher at 9.30pm near the Inn of Le Belle Alliance. "My dear comrade," exclaimed Blücher. "What an affair." Le Belle Alliance means "The Beautiful Friendship". This

would have been perhaps a more apt name for this famous battle, but Wellington was intent on calling it Waterloo, a name that has reverberated through military history for the following two centuries.

The cost in lives at Waterloo was staggering. It is said you could walk from one side of the battlefield to the other on the bodies of the dead. There was no Commonwealth War Graves Commission to give each soldier a grave and headstone. The British dead were buried in mass graves and the French burnt on huge funeral pyres. One of the mass graves sits at the 'Elm Tree' crossroads and is surmounted by the Belgium Memorial.

I have mentioned a few, but there are many more memorials worth looking at on the battlefield and the grandest are along the Brussels road. As you drive south, the first memorial you come to is probably the best known and most symbolic: the Gordon Monument. Erected by his family, Lt Col Alexander Gordon was one of Wellington's five ADC's who died after having his leg smashed by a cannon ball. On the opposite side of the road sits the Hanoverian Memorial, commemorating soldiers that fell at Waterloo largely trying to relieve the defenders at Le Haye Sainte. This sits on another mass grave, said to contain the bodies of 4000 soldiers from both sides. On the French ridge sits the Wounded Eagle Memorial. This memorial depicts the last agony of the French army as battalions of the Imperial guard fought to cover its retreat.

Seven nations fought at Waterloo and all have memorials to their armies, except one, and that is the British. However, in this anniversary year, a memorial is finally being erected. The bronze and stone sculpture by Vivien Mallock will be unveiled in June 2015 and will stand in the grounds of Hougoumont as a monument to



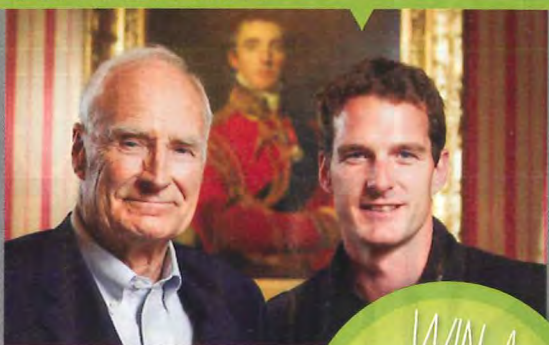
every British regiment that fought on that historic day.

So, after centuries, Waterloo still attracts 170,000 visitors a year.

They soak up the history and the atmosphere of the

most famous land battle ever fought. However, looking at the battlefield and the monuments to the dead, one is reminded of Wellington's last words on the battle: "Nothing except a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a battle won."

COMPETITION



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