

In the 1913 edition of Bradshaw's Continental Railway Guide, the Flemish city of Ypres is described as "an interesting clean old town... formerly, in the 13th century, of great importance." The Edwardian traveller's bible, which contains every rail and steamship route in Europe, even notes that the term "diaper" – a corruption of "d'Ypres" – came from its flourishing role in the wool trade.

A year after the guide recommended the charming town square to holidaymakers, Ypres would be synonymous with slaughter. Belgium was the scene of much of the First World War's bloodiest fighting, and "Wipers", as it was mispronounced by British soldiers, was almost completely destroyed.

The soldiers are long gone, the trenches they dug near the town are

largely effaced, but tourists still come to Ypres.

Just past the cobbled town square stands the Menin Gate, an imposing arch inscribed with the names of more than 54,000 soldiers of the British Empire and its allies who died in the Ypres Salient during the war.

Every evening since 1928, the Last Post has been played by the buglers under the arch. School parties are often present, the teenage chatter dying away as the ceremony begins. Regardless of weather, season or global events, the police shut the road to recall the fallen.

The arch's power as a symbol of remembrance is immense. Late last year, the Irish and British Prime Ministers, Enda Kenny and David Cameron, took time before a European Union summit in Brussels to lay wreaths there. Kenny became the first



Ypres: Remembrance brings its own conflicts

Irish Prime Minister to lay a wreath at a British military cemetery, and both men visited the grave of Irish Nationalist MP William Redmond, who served in the British army and was killed in 1917.

The British-Irish joint visit may symbolise reconciliation but in Flanders there is controversy. Ypres is just one flashpoint for the political difficulties of remembering the fallen in a country that is far from harmonious. Belgium is split into Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking

Wallonia. By far the most successful political party in Flanders is the N-VA, which wants independence for the region.

The N-VA's Geert Bourgeois, Flanders Minister of Tourism and Heritage, notes that the region is gearing up for vast numbers of tourists on the centenary of the war. Bourgeois said: "We are creating remembrance tourism. People come from all over the world, but first of all, it's respect for the victims, for the history, for the relics."

Ypres can expect many

high-profile visitors to the Menin Gate: the Governor-General of Australia and Prince Philip attended the Last Post ceremony last year. But the question of how to balance tourism and remembrance is a complicated one. Jean-Arthur Régibeau, deputy chairman of Belgium's national commemoration committee and a foreign ministry official, is not happy about how Flanders has approached it: "For us, it is a commemoration, it's not a business," he said.

Across the channel in London, Ypres looms large. Near Buckingham Palace, work has begun on a memorial garden beside the Guards Chapel, created with 70 sandbags of soil gathered by school children from 70 military cemeteries in Belgium. Andrew Murrison, the British defence minister responsible for the centenary, went to Flanders to collect it.

Murrison said: "One can

be a little bit cynical about tourism, but if tourists didn't come, it would be difficult to sustain the argument for putting money into institutions of this sort." He added: "Tourists are very much part of the mix as far as this centenary is concerned."

In London, work on the garden goes on. In Ypres, every night the buglers come to play their lament for the fallen. As four years of commemoration begin in an unstable world, those who visit the memorial insist the most important thing is to learn from history.

Jonathan Brenton, the British ambassador to Belgium, has participated numerous times. He said: "You have to avoid the Disneyfication of war. But I don't see that happening. On the contrary, I welcome that thousands will come and learn about history."

Frances Robinson