

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art



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Introduction

This resource uses some of the material gathered for the National Museum Cardiff exhibition 'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art, which took place in 2016, 100 years after the battle. It explores the responses of artists and poets to one of the fiercest battles involving Welsh regiments of the First World War.

During the battle, from 7th to 12th July 1916, the 38th (Welsh) Division fought to take control of Mametz Wood in northern France as part of the wider Somme offensive. It was at great human cost. In five days four thousand soldiers from The Welsh Division were killed, injured or declared missing in action.

The title for the exhibition is taken from Robert Graves's emotive poem, *A Dead Boche*, 1917. He was one of several poets and artists who experienced the Battle of Mametz Wood first-hand.

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Notes for teachers

This information pack contains :

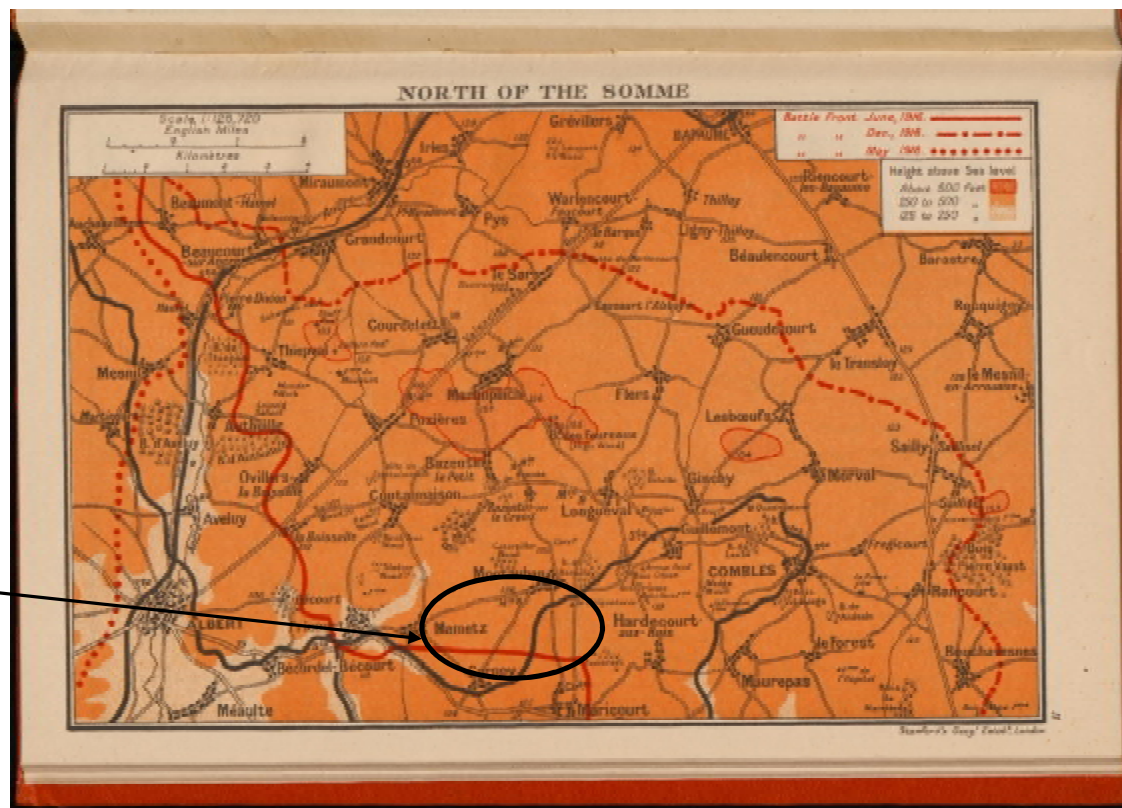
- Primary historical resources, including some artworks and poetry produced by poets and artists who fought in the battle or who responded to it afterwards .
- Useful questions to stimulate pupil reactions and develop an understanding of the battle, the artworks and poetry. These are highlighted on the slides.
- Notes on the poets and some of the artworks which are included in the accompanying 'Source' documents.

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Where is Mametz?

Mametz is in the
north east of
France

(Map from the National Library
of Wales)



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Mametz Wood

Soldiers from the Welsh Division had to advance over open ground, through a shallow valley and up a hill to reach the wood.

Why do you think this made it very difficult for soldiers to attack the wood?



This is a photograph of Mametz Wood today. The dragon statue is a memorial to the soldiers who fought and died in the battle.

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Poets who witnessed the battle first hand

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Poetry

The First World War inspired an outpouring of literature and poetry. Through writing soldiers expressed their emotions, whether patriotism, heroism and admiration or horror, anger and sadness. Writing was also a means of recording eye-witness accounts.

Source 1

Select a poem listed in *Source 1*. These were written by soldiers around the time of the Battle of Mametz Wood. Read, make notes and feedback your comments on the poems to the whole class.

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Reaction to Mametz

As soon as the battle was over there was analysis of the battle from a military point of view and the contribution made by the Welsh division was evaluated. Although many people praised the conduct and bravery of Welsh soldiers, others questioned the success of the battle and the conduct of Welsh troops.

Mametz Wood.

Danzig Alley and White Trench were dug in the chalk, Pommier's Redoubt and Fritz Trench in sticky clay, and during the days that followed heavy rains made these trenches anything but pleasant. Here the Welsh waited for five days, and from Danzig Alley on the Friday (July 7) witnessed the attempts to take Quadrangle Support and Contalmaison, whilst in front of Mametz Wood was being enacted in the rain and mud a tragedy which was to be felt all over the eastern end of South Wales.

Cambrian Daily Leader,
October 1918. Selection and
adaptation.
(National Library of Wales)

The Afternoon.

In the afternoon the advance was resumed, and a body of Germans between 80 and a 100 strong—the garrison that had caused the trouble to the left flank—laid down their arms to the 13th Royal Welsh Fusiliers. That afternoon the wood was cleared on the left beyond the railway, and our men reached the fields on the far side, but owing to the German resistance on the right they had once more to withdraw into the wood.

Meanwhile below the wood a diminishing army of stretcher-bearers was performing wonderful feats of endurance and gallantry in an attempt to deal with an ever-growing crowd of wounded. Over the ridge which is surmounted by White

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The Welsh Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George was eager to mark what he saw as the first major success of the Welsh battalion that he had put together.

David Lloyd George as painted by Christopher Williams in 1917
(Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales)



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Poets and artists who have responded to the battle since it took place

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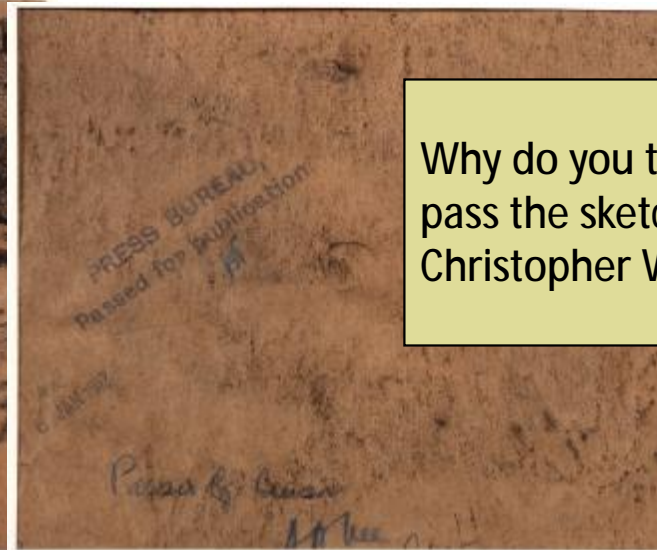


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David Lloyd George commissioned the Welsh artist Christopher Williams

Christopher Williams

Christopher Williams painted a huge work, *The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood*, to commemorate the battle. It hung in the drawing room in 10 Downing Street before it was later transferred to the National Museum Wales. Christopher Williams travelled to France to make sketches like this as preparation for the final painting.



Why do you think the censor had to pass the sketches and paintings that Christopher Williams created?

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Christopher Williams (1873 – 1934), *The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood*



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- Look at the painting *The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood*.
- What do you feel when you look at the painting?
- What can you see in the painting that shows that the German soldiers were better equipped for the battle?
- Look at the preparatory sketches and studies in *Source 3*. How did these help Christopher Williams make the final painting?
- Do you think this painting is a real depiction or a dramatization of what happened in the battle?
- How can works of art help you understand more about the battle and the First World War?

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Poetry

Some soldiers recorded their experience at the Battle of Mametz almost straightaway, but for others it took years to tell their stories.

The Battle still resonates today and people who were not alive when the battle occurred are drawn to react to it. In recent years the writer and poet Owen Sheers has written both a poem and a play about the battle.

Source 1

Select a poem listed in *Source 1* which was written sometime after the battle. Read, make notes and feedback your comments on the poem to the whole class.

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Songs and hymns

There are many accounts of Welsh troops singing in the First World War and today we associate songs such as *Keep the Home Fires Burning* with the War.

Why do you think that soldiers would sing together as they were about to go into battle?

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Hymns and songs may have had many advantages. They might have:

- Helped to raise morale and bring the soldiers together.
- Offered a distraction from the shell bursts and gun fire.
- Been a reminder of home.

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Sosban Fach

The poet and artist David Jones heard the 14th Battalion singing *Jesu Lover of my soul* as they were about to go to battle at Mametz and Robert Graves recalled hearing Welsh soldiers singing hymns rather than popular songs:

"...instead of the usual music-hall songs they sang Welsh hymns, each man taking a part. The Welsh always sang when pretending not to be scared; it kept them steady. And they never sang out of tune."

(From: *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves)

Now read the poem *Sospan Fach* written by Robert Graves in 1919.(Source 1)

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As part of an event linked to the exhibition 'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art there was a community 'Come and Sing' event which included First World War songs like 'Sosban Fach'.



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Find Out More

- Carry out your own historical research to find more songs that were popular during the First World War.
- You could learn and practice the tunes and give a class concert.

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What does the Battle of Mametz mean today?



- The Battle of Mametz still resonates very strongly in Wales. Perhaps this is because this battle was particularly brutal.
- The British army did not have the same level of skills and training as the German army. Soldiers were mostly volunteers. With only very basic training, they were ordered to “walk not run” across open ground and up a hill whilst professional German soldiers in Mametz Wood above them fired down with sweeping machine guns.
- There still remains a sense of awe together with a feeling of pride at the scale of the Welsh sacrifice. The site of the Battle of Mametz symbolises the Welsh presence on the Western Front during the First World War.
- Families of 4000 soldiers who were killed, injured or declared missing were affected. Today descendants still have strong connections with Mametz.

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“Mametz Wood became ingrained in our memory. We never really knew what happened there, except that it was unspeakably awful”

(Elizabeth Thomas, whose brother Jack fought there)

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