



The History of the Verdun Oaks by Paul Blurton of the Crewe Historical Society

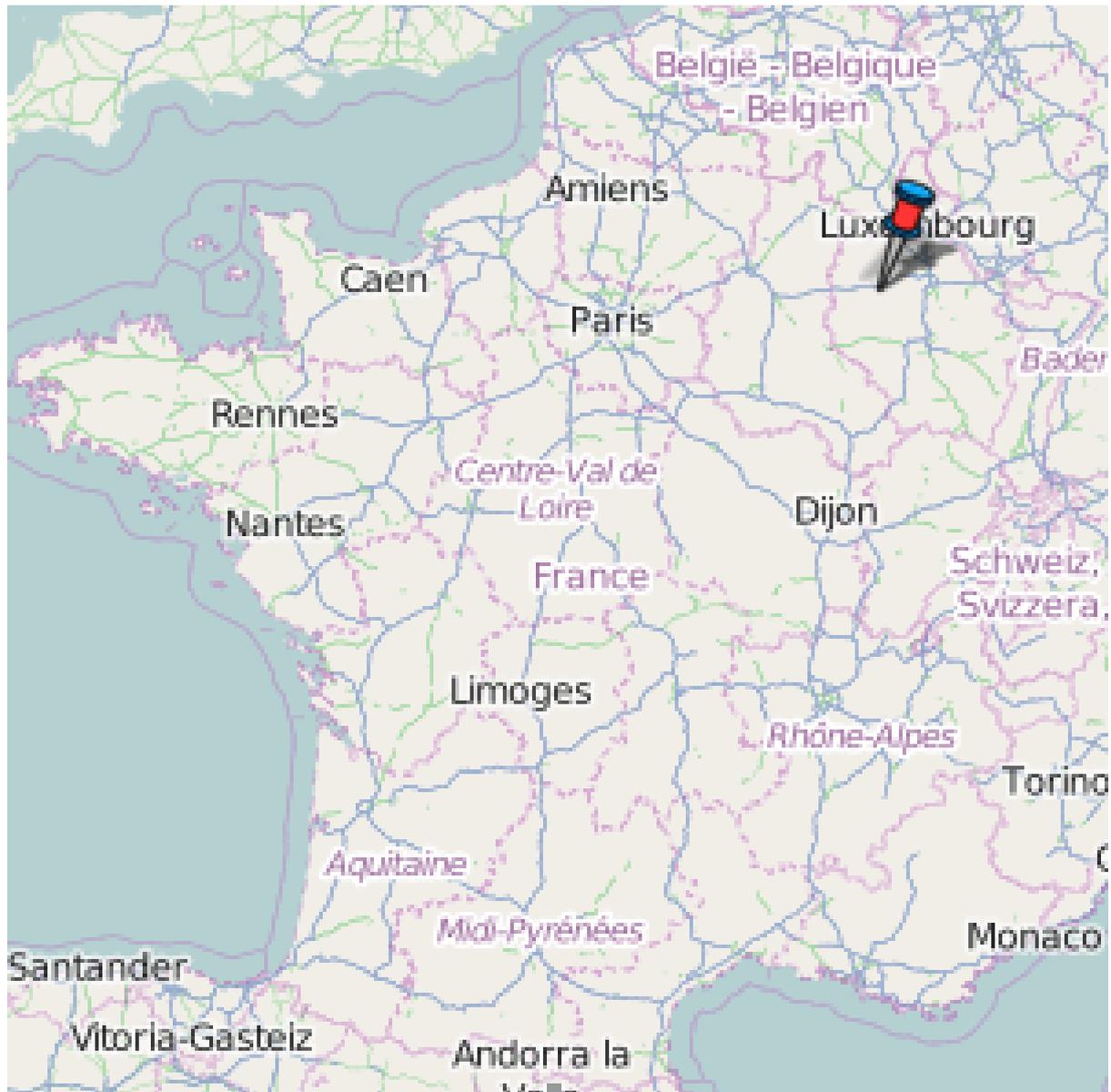
After the First World War, twelve trees (six oak and six chestnut) from Verdun in France were grown in Queens Park from acorns and conkers collected from the battlegrounds. It must be pointed out that although the council minutes say that trees were given it would in fact have been acorns and conkers that were received by the Park gardeners, who then grew saplings from these seeds that were planted on the 19th of July 1919. The Woodland Trust stated that the summer of 1919 was a practically wet one therefore constant watering of the saplings was not a requirement.

Of the six original chestnuts planted in Queens Park Crewe, none now remain. Of the six original oaks, only four can be identified and of these the Woodlands Trust identified them as two pairs of two different sub species of typical common European oaks.

A new information board explaining the background of the trees was unveiled by Crewe Town Mayor – Councillor Nan Walton – on Tuesday 19th July 2022.

Where is Verdun?

Verdun is a small city in the Meuse department of Grand Est in North-Eastern France and is the city well known for the WW1 battle of that name. Verdun is shown by the marker pin.



Battle of Verdun

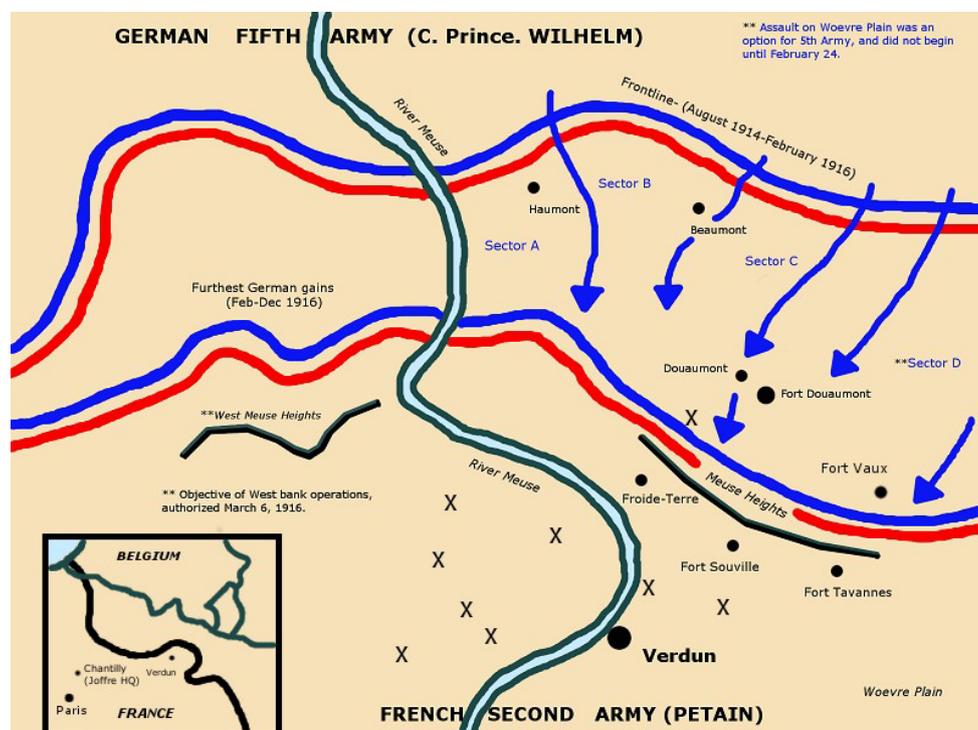
Date: 21 February – 18 December 1916 (9 months, 3 weeks and 6 days)

Location: *Region Fortifiée de Verdun* (RFV) Verdun-sur-Meuse, France

Result : French Victory

	German Empire	France
Commanders and leaders	Erich von Falkenhayn Crown Prince Wilhelm Konstantin Schmidt von Knobelsdorf Ewald von Lochow Max von Gallwitz Georg von der Marwitz	Joseph Joffre Noel de Castelnaud Fernand de Langle de Cary Frederic-Georges Herr Robert Nivelle Adolphe Guillaumat Auguste Hirschauer Charles Mangin
Strength	c. 50 divisions	75 divisions (in rotation)
Casualties and losses	336,000 – 355,000 casualties c. 143,000 killed	379,000 – 400,000 casualties 163,000 killed 216,000 wounded

What happened in the Battle of Verdun?



The Battle of Verdun was fought from 21st February to 18th December 1916 on the Western Front in France. The battle was the longest of the First World War and took place on the hills north of Verdun-sur-Meuse. The German 5th Army attacked the defences of the Fortified Region of Verdun and those of the French Second Army on the right (east) bank of the Meuse. Using the experience of the Second Battle of Champagne in 1915, the Germans planned to capture the Meuse Heights, an excellent defensive position with good observation for artillery-fire on Verdun. The Germans hoped that the French would commit their strategic reserve to recapture the position and suffer catastrophic losses at little cost to the Germans i.e. It was intended to be a battle of attrition, to kill as many of the French with as little a loss as possible to the Germans.

Poor weather delayed the beginning of the attack until 21st February but the Germans captured Fort Douaumont in the first three days. The advance then slowed for several days, despite inflicting many French casualties. By 6th March, 20 1/2 French divisions were in the RFV (Region Fortifiée de Verdun) and a more extensive defence in depth had been constructed. Philippe Pétain ordered no retreat and that German attacks were to be counter-attacked, despite this exposing French infantry to German artillery-fire. By 29th March, French guns on the west bank had begun a constant bombardment of Germans on the east bank, causing many infantry casualties. The German offensive was extended to the left (west) bank of the Meuse, to gain observation and eliminate the French artillery firing over the river but the attacks failed to reach their objectives.

In early May, the Germans changed tactics again and made local attacks and counter-attacks; the French recaptured part of Fort Douaumont but then the Germans ejected them and took many prisoners. The Germans tried alternating their attacks on either side of the Meuse and in June captured Fort Vaux. The Germans advanced towards the last geographical objectives of the original plan, at Fleury-devant-Douaumont and Fort Souville, driving a salient into the French defences. Fleury was captured and the Germans came within 4 km (2 miles) of the Verdun citadel but in July the offensive was cut back to provide troops, artillery and ammunition for the Battle of the Somme, leading to a similar transfer of the French Tenth Army to the Somme front. From 23rd June to 17th August, Fleury changed hands sixteen times and a German attack on Fort Souville failed. The offensive was reduced further but to keep French troops in the RFV, away from the Somme, ruses were used to disguise the change. In September and December, French counter-offensives recaptured much ground on the east bank and recovered Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux.

The battle lasted for 302 days, the longest and one of the most costly in human history. In 2000, Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann calculated that the French suffered 377,231 casualties and the Germans 337,000, a total of 714,231, an average of 70,000 a month. In 2014, William Philpott wrote of 976,000 casualties in 1916 and 1,250,000 in the vicinity during the war. In France, the battle came to symbolise the determination of the French Army and the destructiveness of the war.

How did the Verdun oak and chestnut trees get here?

For an initial explanation of the Verdun oaks, see the Woodlands Trust website:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>

After the fighting ended, acorns were collected from the battlefields and planted in our towns as a tribute to the fallen.

One story suggests that Lord John French, who led the British into Northern Europe in 1914/15, took a handful of acorns to commemorate the stand the French had made at the Battle of Verdun.

There are also reports that the Mayor of Verdun sent a box of acorns to the London and North West Railway Company (LNWR) in early 1917 to be sold for the benefit of the War Seal Foundation, a charity which supported ex-servicemen and their families (this charity still exists today). Sample boxes were sent to mayors in towns and cities along the route of the railway.

The acorns and chestnuts came into the hands of Mr. C.J. Bowen Cooke, the then L & N. W. Railway Chief Mechanical Engineer, in 1917.

Council Meeting of 6th June, 1917. p235, para 5:

‘The Mayor reported that Mr. C.J. Bowen Cooke had presented to the Park a number of young oak trees which had been brought from Verdun, France.’

Council Park and Cemetery Committee of 13th June, 1917. p242-244. From the Park Curator’s monthly report, lines 11-13 :

‘Receipt of half a dozen oak and half a dozen chestnut trees from Mr. C.J. Bowen Cooke which he understood were from Verdun in France;’

Page 243 para 4:

‘It was moved by the Ex-Mayor, seconded by Councillor Vaughn and resolved that the Town Clerk write to Mr. C.J. Bowen Cooke and convey this Committee’s thanks for his gift of the trees from Verdun mentioned in the Curators report.’

From the Chester Chronicle of 7th July, 1917.

Mr. C.J. Bowen Cooke, Chief Mechanical Engineer of the L & NW Rly., Crewe presented to the Queens Park Crewe, half a dozen oak trees and half a dozen chestnut trees from Verdun in France. Mr. Cooke has now been thanked for his gift.

The following is a brief description of the Peace Day celebrations relating to the planting of the Verdun oaks and chestnuts. Taken from the Crewe Chronicle of Saturday 26th July, 1919, p5 col 3. and the Crewe Guardian of Tuesday 22nd July 1919. p2 col 3. and a precis can be found on page 264 of Mark Potts/Tony Marks book, ‘Where The Fallen Live Forever.’ The following is taken from that book:

“-----The Mayor then offered a few words, and brought attention to the large crowd of the loss of Captain Warnford just four days previous, and that July 19th would have been his 24th birthday. There then followed a moment of silence for all who lost their lives during the war. There were further speeches from J. H. Kettell and Councillor J. Smith, before the National Anthem concluded events on the Square. Festivities were then held in Queen’s Park where there were a series of sports events for boys and girls (who numbered around 8,000), and afterwards each was given a bun, an orange and a cup of milk. In “Happy Valley” there was a three hour programme of entertainment and the artists included Will Horabin, L. Townley, J. Gell and A. Unsworth, with Mr. Riley on the piano. During the afternoon the Mayor and Mayoress visited the Cottage Hospital and presented bouquets in several wards before returning to the park to take part in the planting of oak and chestnut trees from the French town of Verdun, on a plot of land near the bandstand. The Mayor planted the first - a chestnut, and other dignitaries followed suit, including the former member of parliament, Ernest Craig. By each tree was placed either a Union Flag or tricolour and the ceremony was brought to a conclusion with the West End Silver Band playing the ‘Marseillaise’-----
----”

Minutes of various Council meetings:-

Park and Cemetery Committee of 11th September 1930. p1400-1402

From Park Curators report p1400:

‘----- also drawing attention to the desirability of fixing an iron plate recording the planting of trees, adjoining the piece of ground of which the Bandstand was the centre by the Mayor, Mayoress, Aldermen and Town Clark on Peace Day, July 9th (?), 1919. The seeds of the trees in question having been brought from Verdun during the war and given by the L. & N.

W. Rly. Co. to the Corporation. p1401 para 3:

Resolved - A suitably inscribed iron plate commemorating the planting of the ‘Verdun’ trees in the park be provided, the park-----

Parks and Cemetery Committee of 9th October, 1930. p1483-1486 p1485 para 5:

Resolved - Proposed inscription for ‘Verdun Trees’ be approved.

OAK AND CHESTNUT TREES FROM VERDUN.

INTERESTING CEREMONY AT NORTHWICH.

An interesting ceremony took place at Northwich Station on Tuesday. The staff had obtained two young trees, grown from an acorn and a chestnut sent from Verdun, and these were planted on the station premises by Mr. Shoobridge (the stationmaster), in the presence of a number of the staff. Mr. Shoobridge said that when the staff looked at the trees in time to come it would remind them of the severe struggle which had taken place at Verdun, where our noble and gallant ally had put up such a glorious defence in the world war. If any of the public would like to obtain one or more of these trees they can do so on application to the general manager's office, L. and N.W. Ry. Co., Publicity Department, 7, Euston Square, London,

Paul Blurton - thanks and acknowledgements:

I would like to say thank you to such local historians as Michael Gilsenan for asking the initial question about the Verdun oaks and providing information especially about Council Meetings. Peter Ollerhead for his memory of the plaques (Peter remembers that during the late 1960's/1970's on return from work, his wife having prepared a picnic, he, his wife and children would have this picnic near the bandstand where the iron plaque mentioning the Verdun oaks was to be found) and the staff and volunteers at the park for their help in providing information about the area around the bandstand together with staff at MMU library.

I think it appropriate at this point to mention the Mayor of Verdun who was contacted in January 2018. M. Samuel Hazard supplied a tremendous amount of information relative to the acorns and chestnuts of 1916/17

Further information about the Verdun oaks and chestnuts can be found in the Spring 2018 journal of the Crewe & District Local History Assn., which is available in the library.