

What we Did in Our Holidays
Emrys Williams
24 April 2011

Sheila and I needed a break. Somewhere. Anywhere! Sheila thought of Helsinki - never been to Finland, doesn't seem too expensive, looks nice in this article in the paper. Oh, no, it's really cold still. Our neighbours suggested Marrakesh - really nice riad, right next to the souk, has a room free, should be hot. Oh, no, the flight has moved from Luton to Gatwick and it takes 3 train changes to get there with the engineering works and we'd have to stay up all night for the 0615 plane and that's just tedious. "What about your dead relatives in France and Belgium?", Sheila asked. "You've always said you wanted to go."

My dead relatives are Alec Lucy, my cousin, and Dougie Williams, my uncle. Both are listed online by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Alec in St Désir War Cemetery in Normandy, and Dougie in Schoonselhof Cemetery in Anwerp, Belgium. Brenda Sennitt tells me that she and her mother, Brenda Lucy, visited Alec's grave long ago. As far as I know, that's the only visit to either grave, and nobody has been to Dougie's. So it was long past time that somebody from the family visited, and on the Three Bears theory of selection, we chose to take our break in France and Belgium.

We also wanted to go to Bayeux, because we both wanted to see the Bayeux tapestry. Air travel to Bayeux and Antwerp isn't very convenient. We could have gone by train, and taken taxis to find the cemeteries, but booking all those train tickets online is an adventure in itself, and it adds up to quite a lot of money for two of us. So we decided to take our car. Sheila's niece, Sam, could housesit for us from Saturday (16 April 2011) to Thursday, and with a lot of online fooling about, we booked the car ferry to Calais and hotels in Bayeux, Amiens (I wanted to see the cathedral) and Antwerp. It was all quick once we'd decided where to go. Passports checked, EHICs ordered online (they ran out the month before and didn't arrive until after we returned), satnav programmed, all ready to go!

We used www.tripadvisor.com to pick the hotels. It provides user reviews of places they've stayed. There are some problems with Tripadvisor:

- Hotels near the top of the rankings tend to be booked by people who read Tripadvisor and then leave positive reviews, so they move even higher up the rankings, leaving perfectly good hotels in the mid-range to languish
- People are much more likely to leave negative reviews than neutral or good ones, so everywhere tends to look bad
- People can cheat and submit false good or bad reviews to bias the rankings

but on the whole it works pretty well.

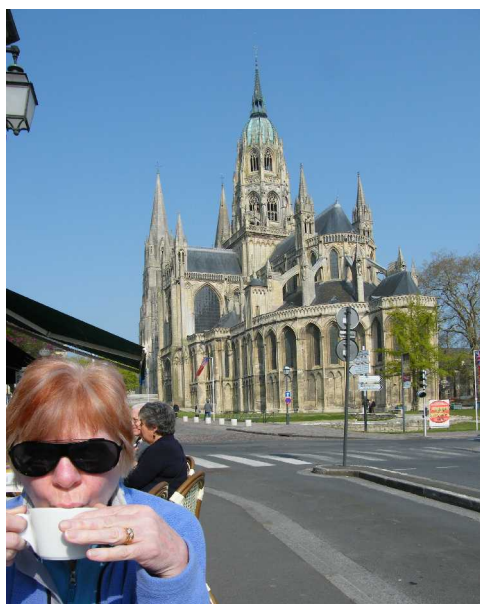


A long but straightforward drive

We had a really trouble-free trip from Eversholt to Dover, a breeze of a crossing to Calais (we recommend the brasserie on the P&O ferries for breakfast), and a long but straightforward drive down to Bayeux on the *péages*. I'd ordered a new paper road atlas of France as a backup to the Satnav Lady, but we didn't use it. I have the Copilot 8 navigator app in my phone, which claims to be able to take me from Eversholt to Moldova turn-by-turn, so France should be pretty easy, and it was. Satnav Lady took us to *Hotel Le Bayeux* with only a small amount of swearing.

(By me, not her. She's very patient and forgiving.) The hotel is basic but cheap, and is in the middle

of town so we could walk everywhere.



Bayeux cathedral and some very hot coffee

evening. The reviews were right - it was one of life's memorable meals. It's only tiny, about 35 seats, and fills up every night.

Bayeux turned out to be delightful. It is a pretty little town that trades on its unique association with two invasions. It's the home of the Bayeux tapestry describing the invasion from France to England by William in 1066, and it was the first town liberated (and briefly the capital of France) in the invasion from England to France in 1944. There are plenty of tourists. The place is full of classic French small-town shops, with bars and cafes. We stayed two nights at *Hotel Le Bayeux* and had nice food, and saw the tapestry, arriving at opening time to miss the crowds. We toured the cathedral and the small D-Day museum. We could have seen much more of the WWII sites, but we didn't have long and we wanted to take things easy.

Tripadvisor told us that the best restaurant in the town was *La Rapière*, so we booked a table there for Sunday



Delightful Bayeux



On Tuesday morning, Sheila drove us along the back roads (helped by Satnav Lady) to the St Désir war cemetery, which took about an hour. The cemetery turned out to be easy to find. It's out in the fields outside Lisieux, and, although it is becoming built up with new developments, it's still a peaceful place. It's very beautifully kept. There are about 500 graves there, and we had to walk up and down the rows searching for Alec's. It did look lovely, with well tended flowers growing there. We left some roses, so the people who look after it will know that someone remembers Alec.



We went into Lisieux, intending to have lunch there, but it didn't look very nice, so we drove on. That was a mistake, because Sheila had now missed breakfast and lunch, and the services on the motorways were pretty grim too, so we arrived in Amiens in mid-afternoon with Sheila very, very grumpy. (She does that if she's not fed regularly.) We stayed at the *Mercure*, close to the cathedral. It's a modern business hotel in a great location but not very romantic.

After some emergency salad and fruit (Sheila can't eat wheat, so sandwiches are out) we visited the cathedral, which is one of the world's largest gothic buildings. It is quite extraordinary. Nowadays they don't make a lot of fuss over their major relic, the skull (allegedly) of John the Baptist. Apparently there might be a bit of a controversy over the date if someone looked too closely, so they only take it out to worship once a month. Crawling on knees round the labyrinth isn't too popular either, since the pews get in the way. It used to be sold as an alternative to making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The place is incredibly rich, with gold-leaf-covered statues and old master paintings. My favourite bit was the motto advising humility, over the gilded chairs and beside the greater-than-life-size marble statue. It's a fascinating building, but wouldn't it have been better to spend all that money on something practical instead? Like, say, teaching people to read? I found the whole thing a bit distasteful. None of which makes the view from the tower (lots and lots of steps) any less enchanting.



Emergency salad



Amiens Cathedral



Don't forget the humility

We hunted round for somewhere to eat, but nowhere looked good. It was all a bit grimy and shut. (France is closed on Mondays.) We had to wait until 7pm, and then we ate in The Salmon House, which turned out to be delicious. It's a good job we'd not looked on Tripadvisor, because the reviews there were truly lousy, but we had a delightful time.

On Tuesday morning, Amiens was open, and looking much nicer than Monday. We had a great breakfast in the hotel (must remember to keep Sheila well fed!) and walked round the fancy shops and enjoyed the day. Sheila bought two outfits for our grandchildren in Australia, beautifully wrapped, *très Français*, *très cher* aussi, I suspect.

Around lunchtime, we headed for Antwerp, Satnav Lady guiding the way. we'd driven halfway through Belgium before we realised that we had absolutely no paper map of Belgium anywhere, at any scale - we'd forgotten it entirely. Satnav Lady has spells of confusion when she can't see enough satellites, but she did manage to get us to Antwerp, when things became altogether more interesting. She was leading us to our hotel, the streets getting narrower and narrower, the buildings each side getting taller and taller, the traffic getting ever more scary, when she got stuck because the tall buildings hid the sky. There followed a lot of driving in circles - well, five minutes - until she found herself again and put us on the right track. Driving in Antwerp, on the wrong side of the road, in tiny streets with huge trams, when you don't know the speed limit and you have no idea where you're going, is, I can report, one of life's less relaxing diversions. Eventually, Satnav Lady said, "You have reached your destination". We were in a tiny street with a lot of building work. There was nowhere to stop and there was a 20-ton tram about a metre from our rear bumper. And there was no hotel in sight. So we drove round the block again. And again. No hotel. but it seemed to be the right road, and we had the hotel street address, so it should be there somewhere. We double-parked and Sheila guarded the car while I ran off to search on foot.

Our hotel, *Hotel Julien*, was so discreet it was almost invisible. The only sign it existed was a little brass plaque on the door. I had to push the doorbell to be admitted. The lady at reception looked a bit alarmed to have such a harried scruff as me claim to have a reservation, but she was very nice

and explained that there was just room to park outside to drop off bags without getting hit by the tram.



Sheila feeling at home

I need to tell you about this hotel. It's the top ranked hotel in Antwerp on Tripadvisor, and it's a bit more expensive, but it is utterly wonderful. Save up, save up lots, and go. Do not hesitate! The old town streets of Antwerp all around are hot and dusty and busy with small shops and lots of bars and restaurants, great fun but hard work. A few steps away we can press the bell to be admitted to our private hideaway, a calm oasis in the busy city. Inside, the city is remote. It's cool and quiet and calm. The hotel is beautifully decorated with up-to-the-minute style, but we feel completely at home. The staff are as helpful and friendly as they

could possibly be. Breakfast is a gourmet experience in itself.

On Wednesday, after (gourmet!) breakfast, Satnav Lady took us to Schoonselhof cemetery, with only the usual number of confusions caused by tunnels, dug-up roads, and general chaos. The cemetery is enormous, with both military and civilian graves. We found ourselves in the car park for the crematorium and decided to park and explore on foot, since we weren't sure we were allowed to drive further (we were) and we didn't think even the all-knowing Satnav Lady could have a map of the internals of a European cemetery (she didn't). The cemetery is very green, with tall trees along the avenues, and big hedges dividing the plots. There are big ponds everywhere - we came across a heron looking for eelworms. It's well kept but not quite as neat as St Desir - it must cost a fortune to run. We walked for about 20 minutes following the CWGC map and the Google satellite printout we'd brought, and found ourselves in the military section.

Again, we had to search through a couple of hundred gravestones, but then we found it. Corporal K. D. Williams, 10th March 1945, age 28. Was this the first time anyone had ever come to visit him? Anyway, we were here now, so we brushed up his gravestone a bit and left some more flowers to show that someone cared and was grateful that his grave was still marked. He's in row 5B.





The next plot over, Belgian soldiers, has a very moving statue, a monument to "The victims of the murderous V-weapons, Antwerp 1944-1945". That includes Dougie.

I find it very heartening to think how peaceful our life in Europe is now, compared to the two horrible wars of the first half of the twentieth century. Sheila and I could drive to France and Belgium, and there was no barbed wire, there were no minefields, no smell of fear or smell of death. Britain lost a great deal in those conflicts, and our family lost Alec and Dougie, but in what better cause could one lose anything than for freedom and peace? We do have quarrels and dislikes, but I do think our European Union is a great force for good compared to the enmity of the past. It's not about the shape of cucumbers or the size of a pack of soap powder, it's about building peace by avoiding war. And you have my blessing to give the next UKIP canvasser who calls the full benefit of my opinion!

We drove back to the hotel - hey, driving in

Antwerp's not so bad, we can cope with this, really - and topped Sheila up with (what else?) chips with mayonnaise. Neither of us is any good at Flemish at all, but, without exception, everyone in Antwerp spoke to us in perfect English. Even the young girl behind the counter at the chips-and-burger stand.

We went to the Plantin-Moretus museum, a printing works that has been little changed in 500 years. It's fascinating, and I'd not have missed it, but it's all a bit dense and learned. I can gaze in awe at only so many books in languages I can't read before my eyes start to glaze over. That made three Unesco World Heritage sites in 3 days (Bayeux Tapestry, Amiens cathedral, Plantin-Moretus) so we had plenty of culture to go with our cemeteries.

On thursday, we didn't want to leave. Despite the expense, we'd have stayed on and enjoyed the weekend in the oh-so-nice *Hotel Julien*, drinking and peoplewatching in the cheerful bars of Antwerp. But Sam had her own plans and had to stop housesitting for us, and so we had to get back. After (gourmet) breakfast, we bid the hotel staff a reluctant goodbye and let Satnav Lady take us back to Calais, an easy drive. We arrived early and caught an earlier ferry, had another nice lunch in the brasserie on board, then (having breezed about through two countries and dozens of *péage* tolls without a care) we sat still for an hour and a half on the M25 before we reached home. Oh, and the car radio finally died - it had been ill for some time - so we sat on the M25 *in silence*.

We had a lot of fun and one very, very fine meal, and a nice little adventure. I really enjoyed it all, and I'm really pleased we've been able to show our thanks to Dougie and Alec for helping to make Europe the peaceful and happy place it is now.

If you get a chance, do go and say hello to Alec or Dougie or both. And definitely save up and spend some time at *Hotel Julien* in Antwerp.

Kenneth Douglas Haig Williams

Born at 85, Roding Road, Hackney, on 28 October 1916

Killed by enemy action near Antwerp, 10 March 1945

Dougie was the youngest of the thirteen Williams siblings, children of Annie Watkins and John Thomas Williams. He was a van driver before the war and joined the Royal Army Service Corps as a truck driver around September 1940. He was killed by a V1 flying bomb launched in the general direction of Antwerp by retreating German troops in the last two months of the war. The allies used the port of Antwerp to supply their advance, which is why the RASC were working there. The Germans bombarded Antwerp with over 5000 V1 and V2 rockets trying to stop them, killing over 3000 civilians. There is a detailed account of the campaign at <http://www.v2rocket.com/start/chapters/antwerp.html>.



Dougie (at back), Aneurin and Alan Wood, outside 6, Thornbury Road, Clapham, about 1928



Dougie, Brenda Wells, Gwladys, about 1937



NO. 22 MOBILE PETROL FILLING CENTRE
B.L.A.

DEAR SIR,

I HAVE SOME DIFFICULTY IN ANSWERING YOUR LETTER CONCERNING THE DEATH OF CPL WILLIAMS K.D. THE OCCURANCE IS STILL RECENT ENOUGH TO CAUSE PAINFUL MEMORIES WITH THE UNIT, AND ALTHOUGH I WROTE TO HIS MOTHER, I WITH SET PURPOSE, LEFT OUT ALL THE DETAILS.

I AM PREPARED TO GIVE YOU DETAILS NOW, BUT ASK YOU TO DEAL KINDLY WITH THE LADY AND SPARE HER ALL THE PAIN YOU CAN.

ON THE DAY IN QUESTION, WILLIAMS WAS WORKING ON REPAIRS TO A VEHICLE 'JACKED UP' ON THE VEHICLE PARK. AT ABOUT 15.00 HRS THE ROAR OF A V.I. WAS HEARD, NOTHING UNUSUAL AT THAT PERIOD. THE BOMB LANDED ONLY A FEW YARDS AWAY FROM THE PARTICULAR VEHICLE ON WHICH HE WAS WORKING.

LATER WHEN THE WOUNDED WERE TENDED AND SENT AWAY, WE WERE ABLE TO RECOVER THE BODY AND IDENTIFY IT.

I WAS ABLE TO OBTAIN A PADRE TO OFFICIATE AT THE FUNERAL, AND AM GLAD TO SAY THAT THE LAST HONOURS WERE PAID TO THE BOY, IN A WAY FITTING TO SUCH A LOYAL AND GOOD COMRADE.

YOU MIGHT TELL MRS WILLIAMS THAT HER SON LIES BESIDE MANY OF HIS COUNTRYMEN - A PROUD COMPANY, - AND THEIR LITTLE PLOTS OF 'ENGLAND' ARE WELL CARED FOR BY THE LOCAL PEOPLE, AND ALWAYS ONE CAN FIND FRESH FLOWERS AND SIGNS OF GRATEFUL LABOUR.

YOURS FAITHFULLY,

P. J. KETLEY. CAPT. R.A.S.C.

THE GRAVE IS NO. 107. ROW -6 SCHOONSELHOF CEMETARY
ANTWERP.

Stephen Alexander Lucy

Born near Merthyr Tydfil, 1921

Killed by enemy action, Normandy, 23 August 1944



Alec Lucy (left), Gwladys, Brenda Sennitt aged 0, Stephen Lucy, at 6, Thornbury Road, Clapham, about 1929.

Alec Lucy was the oldest child and only son of Brenda Williams, one of the thirteen Williams siblings, and Stephen Lucy. He attended Ratcliffe College, a private Catholic school, and gained a scholarship to study at Caius College, Cambridge.



Gwladys, Hywel, Brenda, Haydn; Brenda Wells, Brenda Sennitt, Alec Lucy; about 1932

Obituary

CAPTAIN STEPHEN ALEXANDER LUCY (1933-40)

It was a great shock to receive news of the death in action of Alec Lucy, Captain, South Wales Borderers, attached to the Hallamshire Battalion of the Yorkshire and Lancashires. No details of his death are available, but he landed in France a few days after the invasion had started. He was 23 years of age, and reached France on his birthday. He was last seen in the Caen area, where he gave a message to his family to some men from South Wales, who were returning home. Seldom has a boy arrived at school with a calmer determination to do well. Alec was a keen student,



CAPTAIN STEPHEN ALEXANDER LUCY
(1933-40) South Wales Borderers
Killed in Action

a boxer who ended his career as Captain of this sport, a fine forward with his rugger colours, a good half-miler, record holder in the Round the Square Challenge, winner of a Ratcliffian Association Scholarship to Caius, Cambridge, a keen debater, a prefect of unusual calm and strength. All he did was characteristic of him. He made many friends, he enjoyed every moment of his life, did not know what it was to waste time, and had a strong purpose in all his undertakings. There was nothing hard about him: his judgments were sure, kindly and balanced, but he could never be led from his purpose by example or crowd consciousness, and it was this that secured him an admiration all his own. He left school in war-time

and his sense of duty to his country soon took precedence over his great ambition to be a lawyer. He left the University in 1941 with his A and B Certificates, and went at once in the infantry, on the ground that it would take him too long to be combatant if he joined the R.A.F. He was gazetted to the South Wales Borderers in 1941, was acting Captain in a Divisional Battle School, became liaison officer to a Brigade Staff, returned to his Battle School as an instructor, and went from there to France.

Alec was devoted to his school, was a keen Catholic, being especially interested in sociology. His death is a great loss to his contemporaries. Our heartfelt sympathies go out to his father, mother and sisters. R.I.P.

The following letters were written by his Commanding Officer and Company Commander, respectively:

31st August, 1944.

Dear Mrs. Lucy,

I feel I must write to say how much we all feel for you in your great loss. Your boy was killed while leading his platoon to the attack in his characteristically brave manner. An enemy machine gun opened fire from behind a hedge the other side of the orchard and your boy was killed instantly. You will have heard officially from the War Office by now, but I know you will like to hear how it happened.

These losses of our best and bravest are such sad blows, but they cannot be avoided. Your son was quite outstanding as a platoon commander, his men would go anywhere with him. He has carried out some good patrol work too since joining us, and I thought of promoting him when a vacancy next came. It may be a consolation to know that his battalion has taken a leading part in freeing Normandy. The faces of the people make up a lot for all the suffering we have endured through casualties, etc., since we landed. It is you mothers and wives we always think of when we suffer losses. The lads themselves could have no better death.

Yours very sincerely,

T. HART DYKE, Lt.-Col.

Dear Mrs. Lucy,

May I first apologise for the fact that this letter must seem long overdue. However, the War Office insists that we do not write for two weeks. Also things have been moving so fast that I had no time.

May I offer my deepest sympathy to you all. Alec will be a great loss to you as he is to me. He was a wonderful platoon commander and seemed to fear nothing. Since he joined the Hallams he has done some wonderful work. He was always cheerful even under the most difficult circumstances.

Alec was killed leading his platoon, No. 9, in an attack on a high hill after we had successfully crossed a river. I am as yet unable to give you the name of the place for censorship reasons.

He was in his usual way doing extremely well. He had just taken five prisoners and eliminated several other Boches when he was shot by a sniper with a machine gun. I was not near at the time, but his platoon say he must have suffered no pain as he died immediately. His platoon achieved their objective and turned the whole tide of the battle. As a result the enemy withdrew 15 miles. We buried Alec in the grounds of one of the most beautiful chateaux in Normandy in a small cemetery. I will write again as soon as I am allowed to tell you where.

I have done as you say and divided the cigarettes between his platoon. His personal kit has been forwarded to you and should arrive in due course.

May I again convey my sympathy? I have lost a great friend and officer. Do not hesitate to write me again if I can be of any assistance.

Yours sincerely,

TONY NICHOLSON.

