

Press release: Battle of Messines Ridge Centenary

Events took place in Belgium today to mark the centenary of the Battle of Messines Ridge. The battle has considerable historic and symbolic significance for Ireland and Northern Ireland, as it was the first time that the 16th (Irish) and 36th (Ulster) Divisions fought alongside each other during the First World War.

The UK and Irish Governments, in partnership with the Messines authorities, hosted a shared commemorative event at the Island of Ireland Peace Park in Messines. The Peace Park was opened by Her Majesty The Queen and then President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, in 1998 and is a memorial to all the soldiers from the island of Ireland who died in the First World War.

The Duke of Cambridge, the Taoiseach Enda Kenny and Princess Astrid of Belgium attended the ceremony and laid wreaths at the foot of the Round Tower memorial, before meeting invited guests including descendants of those who fought at the Battle.

The Act of Remembrance included readings by members of the Royal Irish Regiment and the Irish Defence Forces, and musical interludes performed by the Royal Band of the Belgian Navy.

Speaking ahead of the commemorations, where he laid a wreath on behalf of UK Government, Lord Dunlop said:

We have seen all too well how history can divide, but our ambitious goal throughout this decade of centenaries is to seek to use history to bring us together.

This shared ceremony is an opportunity to remember the service and sacrifice of those who fought at Messines Ridge, as well as to further strengthen the important relationship that exists between the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Following the main service at the Island of Ireland Peace Park, a short, private service was held at Wytschaete Cemetery where over 1,000 servicemen of the First World War are buried, including many from the Battle of Messines Ridge. His Royal Highness, the Taoiseach and Princess Astrid, alongside representatives of both governments, paid their respects at the 16th Irish Division Memorial Cross before meeting family members of servicemen buried in the cemetery.