

French Souvenir Brooches of the Great War by Simon Wilson

The *Civil & Military Gazette* carried an interesting article on Sunday 14 February 1915 with travel advice to Britons wishing to travel to the South of France as they had done in pre-war times. The formalities of passports and baggage searches at London Victoria were easily dealt with, they said, particularly if you engaged the services of a travel agent such as Thomas Cook. Travel was via Paris and, due to wartime conditions, could be expected to take about five hours longer than in peacetime.



Once on the Riviera, the tourists could expect a warm welcome, and lower prices, as business was down and the French were doing their best to attract visitors. Many people stayed away as they did not wish to travel in wartime, and the Germans were, of course, completely absent. It always surprises me that civilians travelled to France in wartime.

There are several articles about travel in France. It was, in 1915, necessary to obtain a pass to travel and one to stay, but the regulations were not rigorously enforced unless you were close to the Front. British passport holders had to renew their passports in early 1915 as ones issued earlier were cancelled. Travel to France was not just for holidays, there was still business to be done and many families, with War Office assistance went to visit wounded family members in France. Presumably this help declined as the casualties increased. In 1915, Thomas Cook actually ran an advert in *The Times* to ask people to stop enquiring about the availability of tours to France while the war was still in progress. However, in 1919, they started running tours, along with several other operators, and seemed to have done well from the business.

And that shows the problem with discussing these brooches. They are often seen, or collected, in association with sweetheart brooches. However, they may have been bought on pre-war tours of France, they may (as many silk postcards were) have been bought by British soldiers in France during the war, or they may (in common with a lot of trench art) have been purchased on post-war visits. There are some, such as one for Monte Carlo, which were clearly holiday purchases as Monte Carlo did not see action in the war. There are others, such as the ones for Brussels, which are unlikely to have been bought by a British soldier, as the city spent the war in German hands.





I am convinced that some of them are holiday souvenirs. I'm also convinced that they weren't really a wartime thing, as you see plenty of women wearing sweetheart brooches in wartime pictures, but none of them wearing these French brooches. It seems to me that the majority of these brooches were post-war purchases by the families visiting graves, or possibly by returning veterans., both British and German.

I'm prepared to be corrected on this point if anyone has thoughts or evidence to the contrary, as it's not something I've thought too deeply about, and I cannot find any references to them. However, most of them are from sectors held by the British during the war, and, in many cases places that probably wouldn't attract many visitors if it wasn't for the bereaved families and ex-soldiers.

Many of them are just the arms of towns with various embellishments, but there are several identifiable sub-groups of brooches.



One design features coloured enamel with a scroll underneath. I have one example, from Ypres, (*left*), though there are others around, including, as I mentioned before, Monte Carlo.

There are also the ones that have the names of towns dangling beneath them. Again, this type is poorly represented in my collection, with just one – LENS (*below right*).

Another sort features two shields with a British Royal Coat of Arms in between, an obvious play for the British market. I have two Arras brooches of this type. One has the coat of arms of Arras and the coat of arms of France, the other has Arras and Belgium on the shields.

There are also generic designs with scrolls that appear to be interchangeable. I don't have enough of them to have examples of the same brooch with different scrolls but have plenty – swallow, dove, ivy leaf, shamrock – where this could be done, and





a number of ivy leaves can be found on the internet with different town names on scrolls.

The famous 75mm field gun, the “Fayeur des Boches” (The Fear of the Germans) is well-represented (*left*), but although some do feature own names many do not and could be classed as a fund-raising or patriotic brooch. They are often teamed with a Cockerel and a motto on the reverse.

The final selection are the bayonets (*right*). They range from 36 to 60 mm and generally have mother of pearl handles, though a few have wooden handles. Mostly, they have pin backs though the smaller sizes are sometimes seen with stickpins. The names stamped on them include places like Ostende and Zeebrugge which were primarily naval actions for the British. There is a larger size which is sometimes seen as a paper knife. They seem to be quite popular, and well-made compared to some of the other types.

