

Letter to the Mayor of Arras 1st September 2022

Cher Monsieur le Maire

On this the occasion of the 78th anniversary of the liberation of your town from occupation in 1944, I reach out to you in remembrance of that happy occasion, but also of the sacrifices of France and Britain in the defence of freedom. And I commend to you a group of veterans from Tyneside Scottish who will be visiting Arras and Artois in a few weeks' time to carry that remembrance to the graves of their forebears in your war cemetery. [Pictured here on departure with author]

Our links go back over a century. The first civic exchange between Arras and Newcastle upon Tyne saw M. Leroy, one of your predecessors as Mayor, visit us in 1920. He presented our city with a bronze medal who inscription included the words "Honour to the defenders of Arras", Tyneside Scottish. We were pleased to contribute to the rebuilding of your town, shattered by the conflict. More importantly, a Roll of Honour of all the men from Newcastle who had fallen nearby was placed among the Arras Archives.

History repeated itself on 20th May 1940, when Tyneside Scottish established a blocking position immediately south of Arras (from Blairville to Mercatel). There they engaged the XV Panzer Corps, and despite over 100 losses and more captured, were able to ensure withdrawal of the rest to Dunkirk. Those who lost their lives now rest at the Bucquoy Road Cemetery, which the Tyneside Scottish representatives are visiting for a commemoration ceremony.

Lance Corporal Freddie Laidler was the piper that day in 1940. His grandson Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits, brought up in the North East of England, has written a song "Piper to the end" to mark the 1940 sacrifice. It concludes

This has been a day to die

Now the day is almost done

Hence the pipes will lay beside me

Silent with the battle drum.

If friends in time be severed

Someday we will meet again

I'll return to leave you never

Be a piper to the end.

Freddie Laidler was 20 years old. He is one of those who lies in Bucquoy Road Cemetery â€“ some corner of a foreign field that is forever England.

As you, Mr Mayor, said in our centenary commemoration brochure in 2018, we have "unshakeable ties" based on mutual sacrifice to free the region of Artois, whose name is engraved in the permanent memory of Tyneside Scottish and the history of Newcastle.

It is our most earnest hope that such conflict is never fought again across your fields and through your homes. And as your President said a few weeks ago, Britain and its people will always be allies and friends of France.

My predecessor as Lord Mayor, David Down, who I hope you will meet during this visit, said during the 2018 commemorations "peace isn't just the absence of war, it is people deciding to live differently": All I can do is echo that most fervently.

Vive la France! Vive la paix entre les peuples!

With every best fraternal wish

Councillor Karen Robinson

Lord Mayor of Newcastle upon Tyne