

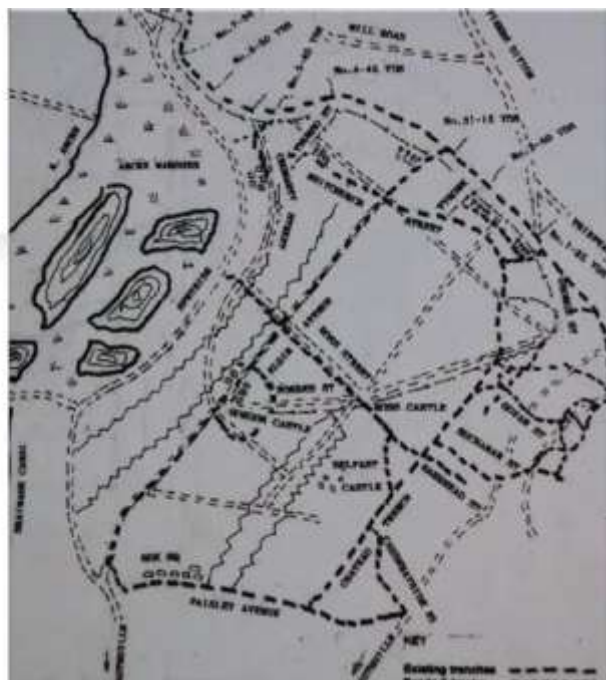
The Thiepval Wood Project.

The 1st of July 2026 was the 110th anniversary of first day of The Battle of the Somme, World War One (WW1) where the 36th (Ulster) Division, the only division to achieve its objective, suffered heavy losses. In memory of those who fought and died, a therapeutic garden of remembrance was designed by Deborah McDonald and built by fellow veterans who attend the Defence Garden Scheme (DGS) at The Somme Nursing Home Belfast. The Somme Nursing Home sits within the grounds of the former home of Sir James Craig who was the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland (NI). Sir James Craig donated his home to become a hospital for injured soldiers returning from battle during WW1. Deborah has recently completed a two-year Diploma in Social Therapeutic Horticulture at Thrive Reading and has used her learning at Thrive when leading therapeutic horticultural sessions to cultivate plants and develop the project. She has also delivered the first combined DGS and City and Guilds Level two Practical Horticulture in HMP Maghaberry in NI.

The Thiepval Wood Project was designed using the theoretical underpinning of the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989) taught during the STH Diploma course. ART identifies four characteristics of a therapeutic garden: being away, extent, fascination and compatibility. Designs considerations are cohesion, complexity, legibility and mystery (Marcus and Sachs, 2014, pp. 28-29).

The first design concept was to overlay a reduced version of the map of the trench at Thiepval Wood.

By overlaying a reduced version of the trench map from Thiepval Wood onto the Somme Nursing Home site, the layout of the pathways is established.



WW1 Battlefields (2018).



The design plan is situated and orientated within the person-centred wheelchair user seating area.

The second concept was to use the language of flowers. A planting plan was developed with the common name, Latin name and meaning of the flowers and plants used.

The overriding theme were flowers of remembrance and those that reflect the attributes of service personnel.



At the entrance of the project visitors are provided with a map of the trench system at Thiepval Wood and a short explanation of the design. The arbours are wide enough for two people to walk together and feature an apex for an uplifting entrance, marking the start of the educational journey.



On the left, Robin Bacon, Chair of Directors, DGS who attended the opening of the garden and Deborah McDonald designer and STH practitioner.

Along the pathways the garden incorporates seating areas for quiet reflection allowing visitors to pause and consider the historical significance of the site. Seating areas are thoughtfully positioned to offer social areas with a vantage point for viewing key features, encouraging moments of contemplation and remembrance. These elements further enhance the educational journey and create a welcoming environment for all.



A white poppy flutters in front of Craigavon House, the former hospital. The white poppy's core meaning is remembrance for all.



A display of purple poppies to focus remembrance of animals utilised during WW1. Metal silhouettes of animals; horse, mule, pigeons and a dog also feature in the garden.



Black poppies reflect the contribution of black servicemen who were not permitted to march in victory parades. Indian soldiers were recently recognised for the first time for their contribution during WW1 (BBC 2026).



Soft fascination is provided with art displays throughout the garden.





Blind Veterans created a medical a herb bed and a camomile lawn.

The course teaches reflective practice skills that help adjust to the unique needs and abilities of veterans. The garden incorporates various orientation elements to aid independent navigation of the garden such as different path textures and wind chimes.



A shaded games area was created by veterans affiliated to Blind Veterans UK.



Initially, the garden had low biodiversity. With a hedgehog highway, new flowers, and an upcoming wildlife pond, the Blind Veterans decided to add an 'Air Bee 'n' Bee'.



Pathways are defined and clearly signed throughout the extent of the garden.



A 'well-being support' made by the veterans to support sweet peas, allows veterans to contemplate Deborah's model for well-being; being grateful, learning a new skill, being mindful, being active, being connected and giving. This model was adapted from the NHS model.

Deborah would like to thank;

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Blind Veterans UK and every veteran, volunteer and supporter who contributed their time, skills and enthusiasm.

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