BCMH Battlefield Tour
Spain and Portugal, April 2012

Andy Grainger

Our trusty coach. It got into some tight spots, from which it was extricated by the skill of Jésus, our aptly-named driver, who found the BCMH Group different from the footballers of Atlético de Madrid.
Below: *Tennant's Marauders straggle in from yet another route march in Wellington's hoofprints.*

After years of preparation, 23 members of the British Commission for Military History and their guests met at Madrid Airport on 15 April to follow Dick Tennant around some of the key sites of the middle period of the Peninsular War.

This brief report is intended only to acknowledge the enormous efforts of Dick and his team for organising and presenting the Tour. I will produce a fuller account for the next issue of the BCMH Journal, *Mars and Clio*.

As ever, I think that a strength of these tours is the way that the presenters tackle their stands in an individual style which feeds across the tour. So Mark Thompson spent some time discussing the relationship between commanders, whilst Randall Nichol looked at the soldier's eye view. Simon Chapman looked at tactics, whilst Michael Orr expounded on operations and strategy. Dick Tennant talked about the great variety of terrain and weather, and Ed Coss about the social background and upbringing of the common British soldier, his diet and the hardships of campaigning.

Our accommodation was, for the most part, in Paradors (in Spain) or Pousadas (in Portugal), fine historic buildings converted to hotels. For example, we spent our first night in the former monastery at Oropesa from where Wellington wrote his despatch after Talavera. It also served as the location for the bullfight scene in the 1957 film *The Pride and the Passion* starring Frank Sinatra and Sophia Loren, itself being based on C S Forester's novel *The Gun*.

The group dinner on the final evening was held in the Library of the Irish College in Salamanca. In 1812 the College trained priests to serve in Ireland and was run by Dr Patrick Curtis who played an important role in Wellington's intelligence network. Michael Orr talked about him whilst we awaited the Tuna Femenina—not the first course as such, but a musical group of lady students in traditional dress who sang accompanied by mandolin and guitars.

At the end of the meal toasts were drunk, and we were honoured by Silent Fire for Dick from the four members of the Honourable Artillery Company (HAC) who had participated in the tour.

Apart from the Tour stands Dr Jane Orr spoke to us about medical aspects and—by popular request after the Silent Fire—Christopher Tanous talked about the HAC, the oldest formed military body in the world.

All the bookings for the tour were admirably handled by Neil Costidell of Holts Tours, whose local agent provided a guide and sourced the excellent transport. Between them they also ensured that all the dinners were accompanied by generous supplies of varied wines (something always much appreciated by BCMH members!)

This summary would not be complete without acknowledging the contributions of our Tour Guide, Miguel and driver Jésus.

Tour itinerary and speakers

Location	*Speaker*
Casa Salinas	Michael Orr
Talavera	Michael Orr
Roman bridge at Almaraz	Dick Tennant
Elvas	Self-guided
Albuera	Mark Thompson
Badajoz	Simon Chapman
Elvas British Cemetery	Ed Coss
Arroyo dos Molinos	Michael Orr
Roman bridge at Alcantara	Dick Tennant
Almeida	Self-guided
Craufurd, the Light Division and the Coa 1810	Simon Chapman
Freineda (Wellington's HQ)	Dick Tennant
Fuentes d'Onoro	Dick Tennant
Ciudad Rodrigo	Randall Nichol
Salamanca (day tour)	Toby McLeod
Garcia Hernandez	Michael Orr

Miguel's thoughtful contributions included the provision of sun cream unasked, after a number of members came under fire from excessive sunlight—an assault that unfortunately dwindled as the tour progressed. He also worked very hard behind the scenes to obtain our rations, resolve difficulties with rooms, sort a variety of traffic problems and many other difficulties of which I, at least, was blissfully unaware until I talked to him about the tour at the final dinner. He speaks excellent English, and made a pleasant little speech of appreciation on the final evening, assuring us that he and Jésus had much enjoyed our company, finding the whole party 'amazing'! We must certainly have made quite a contrast for them to the footballers of top football club Atlético Madrid, who are regular users of the Lorenzo Tours coaches.

All battlefield tourists appreciate a good driver, but Jésus very quickly secured a special place in our hearts. His station was typically at the wheel of our vast coach, which we quickly nicknamed the Königstiger after the largest, heaviest and most powerful battle tank of World War II.

Luxury, space, onboard wi-fi and power points come at a cost, however, and on our arrival at Oropesa we wondered just how Jésus was going to negotiate the incredibly narrow streets up the hill to the Castle. Much of the local population was intrigued too and turned out to watch. But get there he did, wearing the little smile that was his trademark whether in his seat, unloading luggage, discussing the route at breakfast or reversing to negotiate yet another acute-angled bend.

I am sure that I speak for everyone on the tour in thanking Dick Tennant and his team for a marvellous week.

Report by *Andy Grainger, former Editor of* Mars and Clio.

Layout and most photos *by Christopher Tanous, a member of the HAC and a guest on the tour.*

Above, top:
One of Albuera's town plaques; in the background Dick Tennant is permitting a stray HGV to trundle past.

Above, below:
Kathy Stevenson is listening, not despairing, as Mark Thompson tells of the bloody fighting on The Fatal Hill at Albuera some 200 years before.

Right, top:
In front of Badajoz town walls, Simon Chapman tries to persuade anyone from his audience to emulate the near impossible feats of the past, by shinning over and raising his or her jacket on the ramparts.

Right, below:
Toby McLeod makes his final Stand, on Salamanca's old Roman bridge. His listeners are concentrating, not rebelling.

Last night—in Salamanca

Well done and thanks to Dick Tennant for arranging so successful an evening at the Irish College in Salamanca. The enthusiast and melodic 'Tuna Femenina' musical group was delightful; it is an amateur group formed by the students, and part of an international movement.

Dick Tennant, **centre**, *dances to someone else's tuna, with John Drew and tour guide Miguel.*

They are wearing special robes only offered to people whom the Tuna wishes to honour.

Miguel, in excellent English, acknowledges the warm thanks of the whole party to himself and Jésus, our driver, beside him. John Drew manfully translates into Spanish for Jésus, whose skill in impossibly tight places impressed us all.
(***Photo**: Stuart Sampson*)

Michael Orr speaks informally after dinner in the Old Library of the College, now a part of the University of Salamanca, and an excellent venue for such a gathering, with good food and generous amounts of wine and other drinks.

Despite appearances, Michael has not sent Ed Coss and Mark Thompson to sleep.