

EXPO The ANGELS of Mons



BELIEFS AND APPARITIONS
IN 14 - 18

Press kit

Organisation

The City of Mons Museum Complex

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Press release

To mark the 110th anniversary of the Battle of Mons in 1914, the Mons Memorial Museum presents a brand-new exhibition from 6 July 2024 to 11 May 2025, dedicated to one of the most remarkable supernatural phenomena of World War I : the appearance of the Angels of Mons.

The legend of the Angels of Mons, inspired by a story written by Arthur Machen, aroused considerable interest among British readers who were sorely in need of meaning and hope in the early months of the Great War. Depending on the version of the story, the figure of Saint George seems to have appeared accompanied by a host of phantom bowmen or angels dressed in white. 110 years after the Battle of 23 August 1914, this exhibition attempts to understand the popularity of the story by examining the phenomenon of miracles and apparitions that occurred during the war.

The exhibition examines the need to believe in times of war, looking at why angels played such a significant role in the imagination of the time. Under the scientific direction of Corentin Rousman, Curator at the Mons Memorial Museum, French historian Annette Becker and historian Laurence van Ypersele, it analyses the links between religiosity, propaganda and the culture of war, offering a fascinating insight into the deep-seated motivations that fuelled this belief.

This exhibition presents a variety of objects and images, from the angelic harbinger to the angelic destroyer, demonstrating the omnipresence of angels in the propaganda of the First World War. It highlights the crucial role of propaganda, institutionalised during the conflict to galvanise the troops and mobilise the masses in the war effort. It offers an introspective look at a tumultuous period in history, inviting the public to reflect on the complexity of beliefs and representations in wartime.

This project complements and deepens the themes of the Mons Memorial Museum's permanent exhibition, which traces the military history of the Mons region from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. During their visit, visitors are invited to reflect on the multiple and complex realities of war.

About the curators

Laurence Van Ypersele

Laurence Van Ypersele is a professor at Université catholique de Louvain, where she teaches critical history and contemporary history. She is considered a specialist in the First World War. She chaired the Wallonia and Wallonia–Brussels Federation steering group for the 1914–18 commemorations. She became a member of the Belgian Royal Academy on 2 June 2018. She has written and contributed to the publication of many books.

Annette Becker

Annette Becker is a French emeritus professor at Université Paris-Nanterre and a senior honorary member of the Institut Universitaire de France. She specialises in the study of the First World War, and particularly its cultural and religious representations.

Since the 1990s, Annette Becker has broadened her research interests, developing a particular study of trauma, remembrance issues, extreme violence against civilians and genocide in both world wars.

She has many publications to her name.

The exhibition

A miracle — that was how it was described in the British press at the end of 1914. Angel archers assisted by Saint George were said to have appeared in the sky over Mons to protect His Majesty's troops as they retreated. With this divine apparition, God had chosen his side. Good against evil and civilisation against barbarism were essential values that could be called on when the fighting became bogged down and stretched out into a long war.

What exactly happened in the Mons sky on 23 August 1914? Was it really a band of angels that enabled the British troops to retreat to safety? How could Saint George, so familiar to both the British and the people of Mons, have intervened? Why was it archers, mediaeval soldiers from the English army, who appeared in the form of angels? How was it possible for the people of the time believe in this apparition?

To answer these questions, this exhibition tries to contextualise and explain the Angels of Mons story and draw out its resonance with the First World War as a whole. It interprets the ways in which strength of spirit and superstitious rumour transformed a retreat into a victory — or at least a mystical and moral one. Above all, it aims to reflect on how spirituality plays a decisive role in understanding cultures of war on all sides.

Somewhere between propaganda, disinformation and mass manipulation, the story of the Angels of Mons is chiefly a pretext for examining how information is spread during wartime. The exhibition will reveal the process by which a story or legend is manufactured today and question the reasons why populations still believe in them in the twenty-first century.



Marcel Gillis, *Les Anges de Mons*, 1934. Collection of the Fine Arts Museum, property of the City of Mons.

The Battle of Mons

In August 1914, following the violation of Belgian neutrality, the British empire sent its expeditionary force to counter the German military advance. His Majesty's soldiers were stationed around Mons on the front line along the canal on 21 August. The British built hurried defences in this difficult location, and the Germans attacked their positions on 23 August. This first day of fighting was particularly deadly on the German side, due to the firepower and experience of the British soldiers, who were nevertheless forced to retreat, the Kaiser's troops crossing the canal in their wake. Enraged by their heavy losses, the German soldiers set fire to over a hundred homes in the village of Nimy. They also used civilians as human shields as they passed through the city of Mons. The British soldiers headed for France, hoping to be able to counter the Germans in a further offensive. There were many losses on both sides, hospitals and public institutions took in the injured and many graves appeared on the battlefield.



Familiar characters

European societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had been revolutionised by the industrial revolution, starting with the United Kingdom. However, they remained sociologically rooted in a world where religion, superstition and beliefs in the supernatural were strong. They permeated through all levels of society, from the richest to the poorest. This was intensified by the development of spiritualism in Great Britain. With the foundations for belief in supernatural phenomena established, all that was missing was a pretext that would allow them to spread.

When the story of the Angels of Mons appeared in the press, the British took it to their hearts. The cultural background of the story's three protagonists generated a patriotic and religious fervour among the public. Saint George, the archer and the angel formed a kind of national trinity in the United Kingdom. With Art Nouveau at its height, English society was emerging from the Gothic Revival period, in which these three figures had been central to the construction of the Empire and its representations. The presence of these familiar archetypes in Mons during the first battle of an ever-expanding war gave the population back home across the Channel reassurance that the soldiers on the front would be victorious.

Saint George

The fourth-century martyr George of Lydda is considered a saint by Christian churches. His story developed in mediaeval Europe after Jacobus de Voragine included it in his book *The Golden Legend*. The account describes Saint George's role in the liberation of a city terrorised by a fearsome dragon, which he killed with Christ's help. Against the backdrop of the Crusades, Saint George was seen as a model of the Christian knight. In both Windsor and Mons, a brotherhood and a chapel were devoted to the saint's honour in the fourteenth century. As the patron saint of the British army, his importance to English soldiers dates back to 1100, when the troops are said to have requested his protection. Since then, Saint George has inspired many soldiers departing for battle, and he is used as the ultimate symbol of divine guardianship.

The archer

Archers were elite mediaeval soldiers used for long-range combat by the English army, which relied on groups of archers armed with longbows. The archers were usually peasants or yeomen (villagers) rather than men at arms. Their longbows had a range of up to 270 metres. However, their lack of precision over long distances made them a mass weapon rather than an individual one. During the Hundred Years War, archers with longbows were often used in large numbers, and many victories have been attributed to them, including Crécy (1346) and Agincourt (1415), which brought the reign of the cavalry to an end in favour of long-range weapons. Thanks to these successes, the English longbow entered British military tradition.

The angel

Supernatural creatures found in many traditions, angels are God's envoys, acting as intermediaries on his behalf. Also considered as messengers, they are normally invisible but may take on human form, transfigured by a supernatural light. Angels are found in the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and are venerated by the faithful. In the Middle Ages, the figure of the angel became a recurring theme in popular culture and art, and is found in many religious buildings. The angel can take on several forms – herald, warrior, protector but also comforter.



Divine apparitions during wartime

Regardless of the period, humans instinctively seek supernatural protection in times of war, when death can strike at any time. From the Christian Middle Ages to the present day, invoking assistance before, during or after battle is a universal psychic motif. The Great War was no exception, and soldiers constantly prayed for, perceived or even saw rescue from divine forces. In addition, a holy war is a just war – and all the warring parties did everything they could to demonstrate that God and God's will were on their side.

As soon as the war started, the Virgin, Christ and saints appeared to soldiers in their moments of greatest need. Artistic production emerged to play a role as war propaganda, and the spread of these images rooted these purported apparitions in popular culture, to the extent that many saw them as real. In Russia, images were produced representing the miracle of the Virgin's apparition in the forests of Avgustovo in August 1914. In France, Joan of Arc, symbol of unity and embodiment of the Sacred Union, appeared on the battlefield to protect French soldiers following her beatification in 1909. For the British, Saint George naturally carried the standard and reassured the nation that they would be victorious. All these apparitions gave rise to festivities and performances, songs, medals and insignia, posters and postcards, furniture and various craft items, all of which added credibility to their veracity and showed that no segment of the societies at war was exempt.



Other divine manifestations took place during the Great War, one of which was officially recognised by the Roman Catholic church in 1930. This was a series of Marian apparitions in Fátima, Portugal. A “lady in white” appeared to three shepherd children, asking them to pray “the Rosary every day, to bring peace to the world and an end to the war”. Could the need to believe in these apparitions be a response to the problems besetting the country at the time, as it struggled with economic crisis and counted the losses following its participation in the Allied war effort from May 1916?

How the Legend emerged and became established

In the United Kingdom at the beginning of the war, when victory was uncertain, spiritual forces and superstitious rumours were stronger than the prospect of defeat. This was clear on 29 September 1914, when the London Evening News published a story by the fantasy author Arthur Machen, "The Bowmen". With his tale of angel archers assisted by Saint George, Machen wanted to sell papers; he never expected success on the scale of what followed.

Although Machen did not locate the events in Mons, the British press associated the account with the battle of 23 August 1914. Journalists set out to find witnesses, and the press reported soldiers' visions in a way that was both universal and circular. Universal, because articles on the Mons apparitions were published equally in the national press and in local and specialist outlets, which echoed the dispatches in unison. And circular, because the reports published locally were taken up again at national level and then recopied by other local papers, causing the stories to spread across the whole United Kingdom.

Finally, spiritualist journals, followed by the popular press, publishers, artists and songwriters, took hold of the theme right across the British Empire (United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, Australia) as well as in the countries involved in the fighting, including Germany.

Convincing the public that God has chosen their side

From the herald angel to the exterminating angel, the consoling angel and the cherubs, not to mention the wings of Victory and the figure of Satan, the fallen angel, these beings are everywhere in the propaganda of the First World War. Even those with no belief in angels were swayed by the messages spread by the propaganda machines created on all sides as soon as the war began.

State propaganda became institutionalised as all the warring nations set up specialist bodies to control, censor and distribute information. At the same time, an unofficial propaganda also developed, mobilising forces both military and civilian, material and symbolic. Propaganda has a dual role, conveying messages that are simultaneously self-legitimising and critical of the enemy. It is most effective when it is based on well-established beliefs.

It was essential to stand fast until the end, until victory was achieved, to save the nation and civilisation itself against the barbarism of the enemy. The longed-for peace could only come through victory. The imaginary world of the Crusades was invoked to give meaning to this never-ending war. Angels were a natural choice in this context. This is why we find countless posters depicting a mediaeval knight, Saint George, overcoming a satanic dragon. These posters were equally common in Germany, Austria, Russia, the United Kingdom and France.

Keeping hope alive and finding reassurance

Societies at war have always been subject to religious hopes that place the homeland at the centre of an intense mysticism. For all warring peoples, "God is with us", "Dieu est de notre côté", "Gott mit uns". Belief in God and belief in the homeland are often inseparable; and while this does not mean that everyone was a believer, still less a practising one, it is clear that spiritual values (good, evil, light, purity) and vocabulary (the mysticism of combat, the sacred union) informed the perceptions of men and women on both sides of the front lines, convinced that they were taking part in a form of crusade against their enemies.

To stand firm among universal mobilisation, to live surrounded by death, required reassurance on multiple sides: love of family, homeland, faith and superstition, which, far from cancelling each other out, actually strengthened each other. There are many stories of soldiers or their families describing the protection they received: one convinced his life was saved thanks to a wallet stuffed with letters from his fiancée, others thanks to the intervention of the Virgin, a saint, an amulet or a copied-out prayer. Some hung horseshoes above their dugouts or collected postcards decorated with four-leafed clovers. The objects with which the troops surrounded themselves, in these massively Christian societies, made Christs of soldiers and a soldier of Christ.

Healing the body

During the First World War, nurses became the embodiment of the white angel protecting the soldiers. The armed forces initially had few nurses, but tens of thousands of women volunteered to care for the men who had set off to defend the nation, driven by an unprecedented patriotic fervour. Most of them, having no medical experience and sharing an idealised view of the profession, had absolutely no idea of what was in store for them. Reserved strictly for women, the role of nurse was depicted on many propaganda postcards as a symbol of protection for the wounded.



Healing the soul

With psychiatrists few and far between, and often inexperienced in the shocks of modern warfare, the clergy took charge of problems of the soul and the spirit, during combat and in the occupied zones. Priests provided a link between earth and heaven and dispensed the necessary spiritual

healing. In occupied zones, the clergy tried to protect civilians and minimise the pain, encouraging the resilience that would allow the hope of imminent liberation to survive.

Superstition

Soldiers whose faith was less firm, demonstrating a sometimes morbid fatalism, gave themselves up to luck, superstition or the inevitable to keep them alive. Fear and lack of hope provided fertile ground for the development and production of objects of all kinds designed to confer a dubious safety on their bearer. Sellers of lucky charms swarmed the streets, and families sent amulets and prayers in parcels to the soldiers. At the front, soldiers made rings from four-leafed clovers and religious symbols. A whole craft industry devoted to superstition developed in the trenches.

The homeland

The motherland played a predominant role in the First World War and provided almost divine protection for soldiers and civilians alike. Not to believe in the homeland was considered almost an act of capitulation to the enemy. Often associated with superstition, this patriotism provided comfort and protection for individuals, whether they were at the front or not. Objects were produced and soldiers created their own crafts symbolising their belief in their motherland. The new goddess of the Great War, the homeland was one of the foundations of its remembrance.

Angels and the Great War

As the war came to an end, images of angels were still being used. The angel of victory was dominant, with additional roles as the consoling angel and the protective angel. The occupied zones were restored to liberty and became aware of events on the other side of the front line. The end of the war was marked by counting of the dead and the sacrifices that had been made. A movement of “never again” grew and a process of remembrance began. Artists seized on the image of the angel to produce commemorative monuments and certificates for participation in the war. From the beginning of the war to its end, angels fulfilled their mission of protection and salvation.

The discovery of the Angels in Mons

When Mons was liberated in 1918 by Canadian troops and the 5th Royal Irish Lancers, the city's inhabitants heard the story of the Angels for the first time, as it was not part of either their collective memory or their identity. Under the occupation, it had not been possible to know what was happening on the other side of the front line. From 1919 onwards, British soldiers came to Mons to commemorate the loss of their comrades. These encounters with soldiers on pilgrimages generated curiosity and significant interest among the people of Mons, who began to appropriate the legend.

A lasting legend

During the preparations to commemorate the centenary of the Battle of Mons and its coronation as the European Capital of Culture in 2015, the City of Mons launched a communication campaign to highlight its military history and its links to the United Kingdom. The story of the Angels of Mons emerged as the most unifying element, with the largest scope for cultural interpretation. Due to the impact of the subsequent entry of the Angels of Mons into the Car d'Or procession and the monumental projections in 2014 and 2018, the legend has been fully adopted by the population, and is now being used for tie-in products.



The Mons Memorial Museum

A museum of social history, a place for reflection, an opportunity for questioning... The Mons Memorial Museum is all these things and more.

This museum space invites visitors of all ages to think about the multiple, complex realities of warfare. A huge permanent exhibition presents visitors with the military history of the Mons region, from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. The displays are centred on the events of the two world wars. Through the destiny of individual men and women, visitors are immersed in the daily lives of soldiers and civilians in wartime. Their stories form a guiding thread for the museum tour and bring to life the hundreds of objects on display. Letters, notebooks and interviews throw sensitive light on the events covered at the Mons Memorial Museum.

Every year, the museum offers a range of temporary exhibitions associated with the themes addressed in the permanent exhibition or the museum's philosophy.



The Saint-Symphorien military cemetery

This cemetery houses the tombs of the German and Commonwealth (British and Canadian) soldiers who died in Mons and the surrounding area during the Battles of Mons on 23–24 August 1914 and 11 November 1918. The site was laid out by the German occupiers in 1916 to bring together in one place soldiers buried in the region's fields following the August 1914 battle. The land was made freely available in perpetuity, as long as it remains a military cemetery, by Jean Houzeau de Lehaie, a scientist from Mons.

The cemetery is designed according to the principles of the Waldfriedhof, the woodland cemeteries gained popularity in Germany in the early 20th century. The first was created in 1907 by Hans Grässel in Munich. The war grave horticultural department uses many species of trees, particularly conifers, from the collection of Jean Houzeau de Lehaie, which came to him from the German dendrology society. Bluestone monuments are dedicated to the soldiers of both sides, including the obelisk that overlooks the whole cemetery. The graves of the German and Commonwealth soldiers are spread out in uniform groups within the cemetery, divided into little islands of varying sizes on different levels.

Further burials took place in the cemetery when the region was liberated. The Imperial War Commission (now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) placed white Portland stone monuments at both entrances, together with a Cross of Sacrifice created by Reginald Blomfield, a prolific British architect who completely redesigned London's Regent Street at the end of the 19th century. Individual tombstones for each Commonwealth soldier were also added.

On 4 August 2014, a new stone was inaugurated at the entrance to the cemetery during the centenary commemorations of Britain's declaration of war on Germany. The ceremony was attended by the British royal family and the president of Germany.

This quiet, peaceful setting, surrounded by fields and woods, was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2023. With its two stars in the Michelin guide, the site rivals Belgium's greatest tourist attractions.

Address: Rue Nestor Dehon, 7030 Saint-Symphorien



Infos pratiques

The Angels of Mons. Beliefs and apparitions in 14-18

06.07.2024 to 11.05.2025

Mons Memorial Museum

Boulevard Dolez, 51

7000 Mons

From Tuesday to Sunday, from 10 a.m until 6 p.m

Booking and ticket sales at visitMons

- Grand-Place de Mons
- www.visitmons.be / +32(0)65 33 55 80

Exhibition info

- **Free weekend admission** 6-7 July
- **Free Sunday Admission** Visit the exhibition for free on the first Sunday of the month
- **Events and activities** taking place around the 23 August to commemorate the 110th anniversary of the Battle of Mons

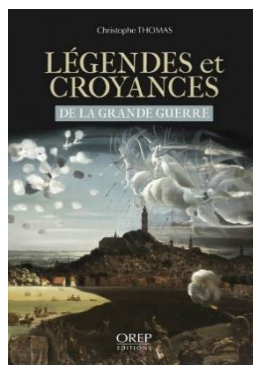
Publications linked to the exhibition

Exhibition catalogue

Format: 19.5 x 23 cm, 162 pages

Authors: Annette Becker, historian — Laurence van Ypersele, historian — Marie Cappart, genealogical historian and Corentin Rousman, curator of the Mons Memorial Museum

Price: €25



Légendes et croyances de la Grande Guerre

Author: Christophe Thomas

OREP Editions

Price: €13.90 — On sale in our shop

From the legend of the Angels of Mons to the incredible success of Nenette and Rintintin, discover the singular and supernatural aspects of the Great War.

Visuals available for the press



Les Anges de Mons, oil on canvas, by Marcel Gillis, 1934.

Collection of the Fine Arts Museum, property of the City of Mons.



British soldiers of the 4th Royal Fusiliers resting in the Grand'Place in Mons on 23 August 1914 during their retreat. Coming from Nimy, they passed through the city along the Rue de la Chaussée.

Collection of the Mons Memorial Museum, property of the City of Mons.



German troops passing through the Grand'Place in Mons on 24 August 1914.

Collection of the Mons Memorial Museum, property of the City of Mons.



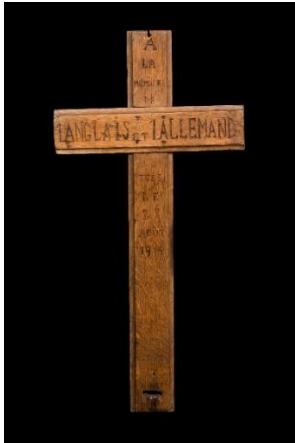
British prisoners captured during the Battle of Mons and interned at the Döberitz camp near Berlin.

Collection of the Mons Memorial Museum, property of the City of Mons.



Lord Manners' ambulance, outside Rue du Grand Trou Oudart, Mons.

Collection of the Mons Memorial Museum, property of the City of Mons.



Crucifix made by a Mons civilian for the grave of a British and a German soldier killed during the Battle of Mons on 23 August 1914.

A strong symbol at the beginning of the war: enemies in life, reunited in death.

Photograph by Rino Noviello. Collection of the Mons Memorial Museum, property of the City of Mons.



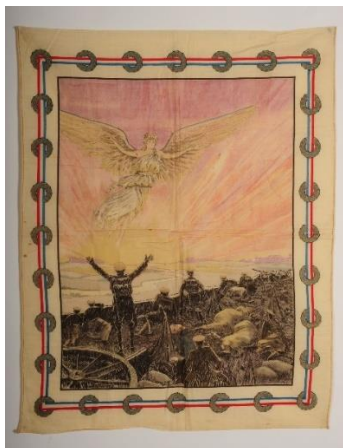
Belgian poster, *Belgian Red Cross*.

Conserved at the Imperial War Museum.



Postcard entitled *The Real Angel of Mons. L'ange de nos blessés*.

Conserved at the Mons Memorial Museum.



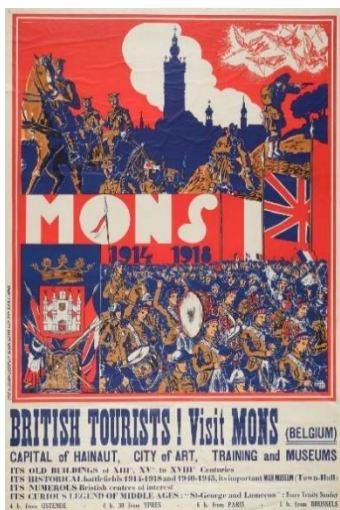
Patriotic headscarf representing the apparition of the Angels of Mons.

Collection of the Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne.



No Sir, I never see no Angels at Mons, but our Sergeant swore he seen one at the canteen.
Cartoon reflecting how indirect sightings of apparitions of the Angels of Mons were spreading.

Collection of the Mons Memorial Museum, property of the City of Mons.



British tourists! Visit Mons, poster by Henri Léonard, 1938.

Collection of the Mons Memorial Museum, property of the City of Mons.



City of Mons © Oswald.Tlr



Saint Symphorien cemetery
© Gregory Mathelot