A Walk of Remembrance



Wetherby War Memorial

This is the story of Thomas Wiggins, who went to war in 1916. It is a description of life in Wetherby at that time, told by his niece Enid. Enid's father, Wilfred, was Tommy's youngest brother. Together they were third-generation tailors, who lived and worked in Wetherby.

The walk starts at the **War Memorial** on the bridge over the River Wharfe, above the Wilderness car park, where we find the name of Sergt TA Wiggins who served with the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI).

The War Memorial was built in 1922 with money raised by public subscription, to commemorate all the young men and women from Wetherby and elsewhere who were lost as a result of the First World War.

The population of Wetherby was just over two thousand in 1916, and the loss of these young people must have devastated the town.

Men were not alone in being conscripted to the war effort. Single women were expected to serve their country and did so in a variety of roles, including. nursing, working on the land in the Women's Land Army and in munitions factories.

Leaving the War Memorial behind you, cross **Bridgefoot** and continue up the **High Street** into the town, passing **Gas House Lane** on your right.

Take the next right into **Victoria Street**, formally New Street. This was the street where animals were bought and sold. Where Marks and Spencer's now stands was the site of the cattle market. According to Enid's father, he remembered the street being full of horses and soldiers in the early part of the 20th century. These were mustered before going to the railway station for embarkation to Ripon.

Horses were the main mode of transport for everyone and everything in 1914. They were compulsorily taken from their owners and sent to the front, with the sight of ladies weeping as their hunters were taken. During the First World War eight million horses, donkeys and mules died.

Halfway along Victoria Street turn left into **Nags Lane** and immediately on the right-hand side is a small brick building. This was the communal wash house for laundry and would have been very much part of life in Wetherby. It was used by all the families who lived in this square of buildings, formally known as Grafton Square. There was no piped mains water supply or sewerage system. The area behind the row of houses was a communal 'yard' with a well for clean fresh water near the wash house, and outside privies at the far end of the shared yard, for the families who lived there. The privies in the town were emptied by horse and cart.

Tommy lived around the corner in the second house on the right, now known as Tailors Cottage.



Thomas (Tommy) was born in 1886 in New Street, (now Victoria Street) the second son of Sarah and Thomas Wiggins. He also had five younger sisters, and the youngest son, Wilfred, Enid's father, was born in 1901. In 1904 the whole family moved to Grafton Square, which is now Walton Road. The front room of the house served as the tailor's workshop. The family lived in the one living room at the back of the house.

Leave Tommy's house and cross the road into **Horsefair,** continuing along into the **High Street.**



Artillery, troops, and horses in the High Street

Cross at the pedestrian crossing into the **Market Place,** ahead is the **Town Hall**. This is where young men flocked to join up to fight for their country. There were open-air public recruitment meetings held in the Market Place. The official minimum age was 18-19 in 1914, but often underage teenagers, some as young 12 and 13 lied about their age to enlist in a sense of patriotism or excitement.

As the war progressed during 1914 and 1915, many young men died in the fighting and gradually the age of conscription was raised. In 1916 it was raised to the age of 30, and this meant that Tommy became eligible to be called up. He signed up with the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry Brigade and was posted overseas the same year. He had learned tailoring with his father and grandfather, and when he went to war, he spent much of his spare time, in addition to fighting, working as a tailor,

With the Town Hall on your left, take **Church Street** which is further down on the right. Tommy would have known this busy street well. When he was growing up most of the population of Wetherby lived in close proximity of the town with many houses clustered around a communal yard, just like Grafton Square.

On either side of this pedestrian street were family businesses, with families living beside and above the shops, just like the Wiggins family. There was a corn merchant, a ropemaker making and selling nets, a butcher, a carting agent and a bookbinder. There was also a cart shed and coal house. There were 'yards'' and privies between the shops, with gas lighting in the living rooms.

The 'yards' are now filled in with newer shops.

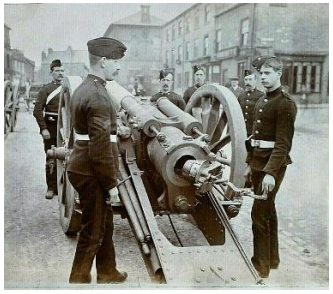
Ahead is St James Parish Church.

At the end of this pedestrian street, turn left into **Bank Street.** On the right is the **Methodist Chapel**, which was built on land bought by Tommy's ancestor James Wiggins, at the Great Sale of Wetherby in 1824. At the rear of the building was the first school to be opened in Wetherby in 1844. The original building no longer exists. Schooling started at aged five and focused heavily on practical education that supported local commerce, primary subjects being geography, commerce and the traditional subjects which were known as the 'Three 'Rs,' reading, writing, and arithmetic. Tommy attended this school until the age of twelve and then became an apprentice to his father and grandfather.

At the junction with **Westgate**, turn left. Across the road is the **Wetherby Library.** Continue to the pedestrian crossing, cross over and continue left along the pavement, and as the Market Place widens out, cross **Scott Lane,** which is on your right.

In 1914 troops and artillery paraded along this wide street before they left to go to Ripon for training.

Soldiers and artillery in Market Place March 1915



Tommy left Wetherby in 1916 with his Brigade and would have been waved off by members of his family from the Market Place. He fought on several fronts during the second half of the war and the Somme was where he suffered from mustard gas poisoning.

In February 1919 he was demobbed and returned home to his family home in Grafton Square where his parents, sisters and brother still lived. During that year, Tommy continued to suffer from the effects of gas poisoning and in November 1919 he died at home.

He had fought for his King and country and like all the young men who died, he was fighting, hopefully, for a safer world. In Tommy's case it was for the child born to his sister, the same night, in the same house, in which he died in Grafton Square, age 32.

Continue along the pavement, to the pedestrian crossing by the bus station. Cross over and climb the few steps up to Bridgefoot Gardens to look again at the War Memorial and its situation on the bridge over the River Wharfe. This is where the walk ends.

In memory of all those who have given their lives in times of war.

The walk takes approximately 30 minutes and is all on level ground apart from the slight rise from the War memorial into High Street and the few steps up to Bridgefoot Gardens.

With thanks to Enid Doyle (nee Wiggins), Mary Bentham, and Ian Leadley. Memories of Church Street from Ernest Barker born in 1915.

On behalf of the Royal British legion Community in Wetherby & District to commemorate and foster Remembrance - Compiled by Caroline Green - October 2026