The 1915 Morton Gymes Tragedy Commemoration Service

Sunday 22nd February 2015 at 2pm at St Paul's Church, Morton

Welcome and Introduction.

Opening Prayer.

Hymn: Onward Christian Soldiers [A&M New Standard 333].

Peter Bradshaw – The background to the events that occurred on 19th February 1915.

Tony Dunlop and friends from Batley, Carol Sklinar from Wakefield and Susan Edlington from the "Friends of Gainsborough Cemeteries and Chapel" will share some words with us about each of the soldiers who died in the tragedy.

Poem: The Fate of the Seven K.O.Y.L.I. —Tony Dunlop (see P. 7)

Unveiling of the Commemorative Plaque by Mrs Dorothy Keyworth, Private Myer's Niece after we have moved to the back of church.

Laying of a wreath below the Plaque.

Last Post – Minute's silence – Reveille.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and blessing.

Prayers of Intercession.

Hymn: Rock of Ages [A&M New Standard 135].

Notice by Peter Bradshaw about the Wreath Laying/Last Post at the location of the Gyme and invitation extended to those present who wish to attend.

Closing Prayer and Blessing.

The hymns we sing today are the same ones that were sung by the soldiers during their first Church Parade at All Saints and the Wesley Chapel on Sunday 25th October 1914.

IN SORROWFUL REMEMBRANCE

OF

Seven British Soldiers,

Privates W. DENT, E. COCKILL, J. MYERS, F. COOKE, A. BRUCE, E. BATTY, W. ATHERON,

"D" Co., 4th Battalion, K.O.Y.L.I.,

Who were accidentally drowned in the Gymes, Morton, Gainsborough, while doing their duty,

ON FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19th, 1915

At 12.07 on Friday February 19th, 1915, a terrible tragedy struck "D" Company of the 4th Battalion King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. They had gone to a field next to the Trent, just north of Morton, to practice raft building and crossing water. They chose one of the ponds (locally known as "gymes") to test their raft.

As it left the bank, the raft, crowded with soldiers dressed in their heavy khaki uniforms and boots, tipped over and dozens were suddenly fighting for their lives in the deep waters. Some heroic rescues were made but seven young soldiers were drowned.

The town was left deeply shocked by the tragedy. The bodies were taken to the stables behind the Crooked Billet public house in Morton. An inquest was held the next day in Morton School (site of the present day Co-op) and the young officer in charge, Captain Harold Hirst from Dewsbury, was closely questioned. The Coroner was Philip Gamble, a local solicitor, who lived on Front Street, and the foreman of the jury was local builder, Mr. John Reynold Fox, who lived at Brooklyn (opposite the church).

The Coroner and members of the jury viewed the bodies and also visited the gyme. After this the soldiers were placed in coffins and were moved by Army Ambulance wagons to Holy Trinity Church Hall, Trinity Street, in the area of town where they had been billeted.

The verdict was "accidentally drowned." Captain Hirst was cleared of any blame but the jury said it was regrettable that none of the men had any experience in raft building.

The next day the soldiers were returned to their home towns and the burials were held on Tuesday 23rd. Each was given a military funeral.

Private Atheron-Wakefield Cemetery.
Private Battye-Batley Cemetery.
Private Bruce-Harrogate Cemetery.
Private Cockell-Wakefield Cemetery
Private Cooke-East Ardsley Churchyard, near Wakefield.
Private Dent-Morley Cemetery near Leeds.
Private Myers-Dewsbury Cemetery.

Captain Harold Hirst
Photo courtesy of Rugby School

Within days of the tragedy the K.O.Y.L.I. soldiers were removed from Gainsborough and were sent to York. By 13th April 1915 they were in France and were soon in the trenches.

The "Gainsborough News" soon began to publish letters they had sent to families they had been billeted with describing their experiences. Sadly, news soon appeared of casualties.

One of the early casualties was Captain Hirst (right), he was shot and killed by a sniper on 24th June. He is buried in Bois Grenier Cemetery in Northern France, together with several other members of the K.O.Y.L.I.

"*Gainsborough News*"
26th February 1915

There were nine beautiful floral tributes sent with the bodies of the drowned soldiers on Monday. Seven of these were from their fellow soldiers, and two artificial wreaths, in cases, were the marks of respect shown by the billeters of Trent Street, who raised the cost of them by subscription. Another tribute was sent by the Co-operative Society employees.

TRIBUTES OF RESPECT

On Sunday evening, as a tribute of respect to those soldiers of the K.O.Y.L.I., who lost their lives in the sad drowning fatality last Friday, and as a token of sympathy to their friends and relatives, the bells of the Parish Church were rung half-muffled...

The Band of the Salvation Army played the Dead March from "Saul" on Sunday evening in the Market Place.

The Wakefield victims -
Private William Atheron, aged 20
Private Ernest Cockell, aged 20.

"Private W. Atheron was 20 years of age, and was to have been married in a fortnight. Before he joined the Territorials, soon after the outbreak of war, he worked at the Seamless Boat Works, Wakefield."

"Gainsborough News"
February 26th 1915

"Leeds Mercury"

E. Cockell, Wakefield.

Private E. Cockell of the K.O.Y.L.I. Infantry was, among with six others drowned at Gainsborough, 19th February, whilst undergoing instruction in pontoon building. He was laid to rest in the Wakefield Cemetery, 23rd February, being given a military funeral, the streets along the route being lined with people. There was a large number of floral tributes, among which was a beautiful wreath from his fellow-workers. The deceased returned to Gainsborough the evening of 18th February after forty-eight hours' leave spent with his parents. He was a member of St. John's Church Bible Class; an enthusiastic football player, and for two seasons he played with the Wakefield Rugby Union Club "A" team. Cockell was the son of Foreman Carter at Westfield Westgate. He entered the employ of Messrs. Thompson McKay and Co., October, 1907, and was transferred to the G.C. staff, Sept., 1909. He joined the colours 2nd September 1914. Cockell was held in in the highest respect by all his fellow clerks.

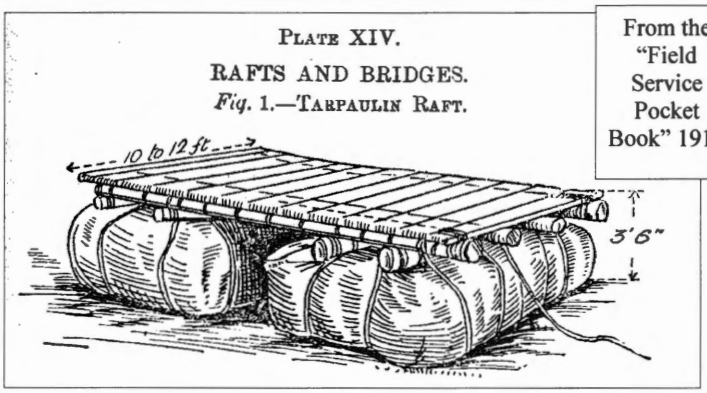
From the "Great Central Railway Memorial Book."
National Railway Museum

"Ossett Observer" 27th February 1915

FUNERALS WITH MILITARY HONOURS

The victims of the pontoon disaster at Gainsborough were buried on Tuesday with military honours.

The remains of Privates E. Cockell and W. Atheron, members of the 4th Battalion King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, were interred at Wakefield Cemetery. The cortege of Private E. Cockell left Stratheden Terrace, Balne Lane, and proceeded to St. John's Church, where the late Territorial had been a member of the bible class and men's institute. The service was conducted by the Rev. E.W. Hughes (vicar) in the presence of a large congregation. Several members of the battalion from Gainsborough were in attendance. On leaving the church the procession was headed by the band of the Reserve Battalion. On reaching Leigh Street it was joined by the funeral cortege of Private W. Atheron, a service having been held in the Wesleyan Chapel, Eastmoor, the Rev. A. J. Bromwich officiating. There was then one large procession to the cemetery, where the last rites were performed. Parties from the Wakefield companies fired volleys, and the buglers sounded the "Last Post."



From the "Field Service Pocket Book" 1914

The gyme where the accident happened no longer exists. During the 1947 floods the river bank adjacent to the gyme gave way and during the reconstruction of the breach the gyme was filled in (see photo below). One of the four gymes, near Wildsworth, still remains, it is used for fishing.

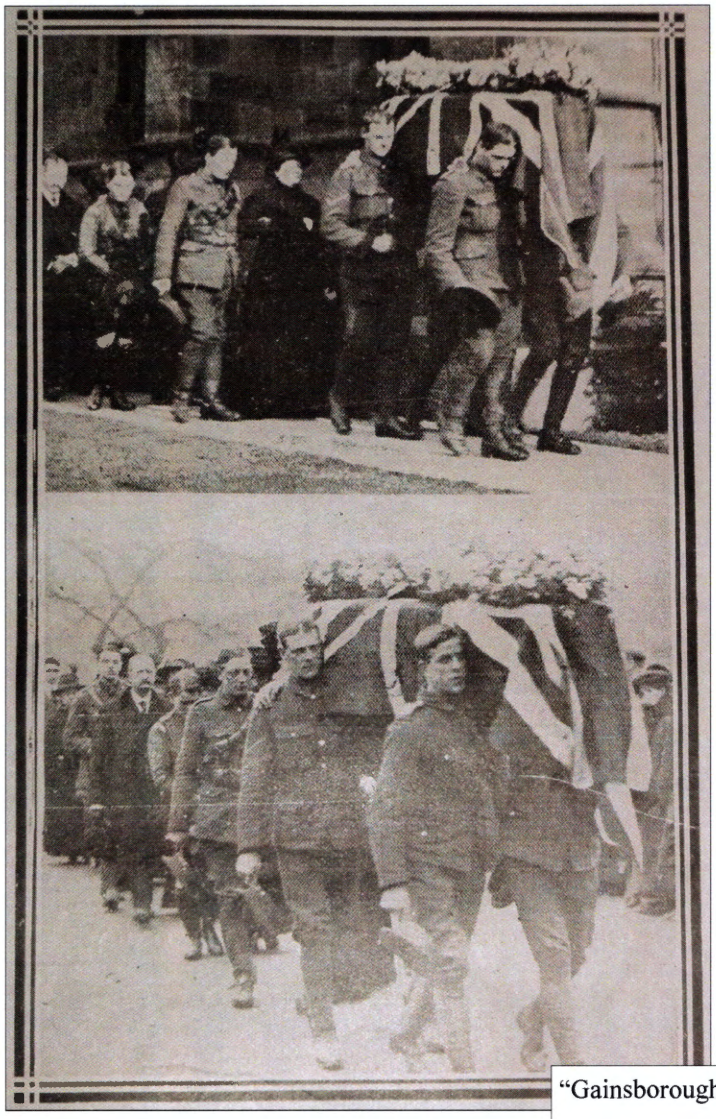
Soon after the accident in 1915 the depth of the gyme was measured—it was found to be 32 feet (9.75 metres) in the centre and 21 feet (6.4 metres) where the raft turned over. Corporal Punyer, who was on the raft in charge of the punting pole, said it was about 12 feet long (3.7 metres).

Photo courtesy of Paul Kemp.

Private A. Bruce joined the army in the early part of September. He joined from Wakefield, where for the past three years he has been a clerk in the West Riding County Offices. He won the West Riding County Minor Scholarship when only ten years old, and has since met with several educational successes. Bruce was a playing member of the Wakefield County Hall football team. Since joining the K.O.Y.L.I. Bruce has been with his company at Rotherham, North Somercoates, Totley Range, Sheffield and Gainsborough. He was going into his twenty-second year. Bruce, who is one of three sons, has an elder brother, William, a member of Lord Helmsley's troop of Yorkshire Hussars. His mother is a widow.

"Gainsborough News" 26th February 1915

PRIVATE ALFRED BRUCE, aged 22 years, second son of Mrs. Bruce, 40, Chatsworth Place, Harrogate. drowned in the pontoon accident at Gainsborough.



The Military Procession at Pte. Bruce's funeral in Harrogate. His mother and brother can be seen walking behind the coffin.
Photo courtesy Harrogate Library.

The funeral of Private Alfred Bruce, Chatsworth Place, Harrogate, another of the victims, took place at Harrogate Cemetery on Tuesday afternoon. A service was held at St. Luke's Church, conducted by the Rev. S.T. Dawson (vicar), assisted by the Rev. T.C. Greenwood (vicar of St. Mary's Wakefield) and the Rev. H. Madrell. The church and cemetery were crowded. At the graveside three volleys were fired by a detachment of the Yorkshire Hussars, and the "Last Post" sounded. The bearers were members of the K.O.Y.L.I., and half a company of the regiment also attended.

"Gainsborough News" 26th February 1915

"Fond of games, he overflowed with good spirits, and entered into almost every branch of sport with unbounded enthusiasm. He played cricket and football with several local junior clubs since going to Wakefield, but the one unfortunate exception was that swimming was not one of his many accomplishments in the realm of sport. His gentlemanly demeanour on the field of play and in everyday life had a great deal to do with the universal esteem in which he was held by his friends."

"Claro Times" 27.2.15

"Gainsborough News" 16.2.16

IN MEMORIAM

In sorrowful remembrance of our dear friend, Private Alfred Bruce, who was drowned in the Gymes, Morton, while doing his duty with the 4th K.O.Y.L.I. Regiment, February 19th, 1915.

"We think of him in silence.
And his name we often call,
Though there's nothing left to answer
But his photo on the wall."

Ever remembered by his friends, 22, Dickenson Terrace, Gainsborough.

"Leeds Mercury"

Private Edmund Battye was the son of Mr. John Battye, of Wentworth-place, Fieldhead Lane, Birstall, and until recently of Ward's Hill, Batley. Private Battye, who was 22 years of age, was employed as a miner before the outbreak of the war. He has two brothers who are serving their country, Harry, who is in the Army, and Benjamin, who is in the Navy.

"Gainsborough News" February 26th 1915

"Private Batty… lived with his sister at Batley. He joined the Territorials twelve months ago.

Yorkshire Evening Post Saturday Feb. 20th 1915

"Private Batty was a real friend of mine and a very good-hearted lad too – so quiet, modest and true, and a good soldier!"

Written by Batley soldier Private Ewart W. Mann.

Private Edmund Battye, was buried at Batley Cemetery. Several thousands of people lined the route taken by the funeral cortege, and were present at the cemetery. Lieutenant Fraser, from Gainsborough, attended as the representative of Colonel Haslegrave. Sixty members of the Reserve Territorial Battalion were also present. The Rev. Father Lee officiated.

"Ossett Observer" 27th February 1915

[In 1916 Lieutenant Harold Gordon Fraser was awarded the M.C. Before the war he lived in Wakefield].

Before the war Edmund Battye had been a miner at Howley Park Colliery. Miners proved to be especially fast and skilful at digging trenches.

Private Fred Cooke was 33 years of age, and was a platelayer on the Great Northern Railway. He was an old Territorial, and rejoined early in August.

"Gainsborough News" February 26th 1915

Fully two thousand people assembled in East Ardsley Churchyard on Tuesday, where the body of Private Fred Cooke, was interred with military honours. The Vicar, the Rev. J.H. D. Hill officiated, and addressed the mourners in church. Lieut. Williamson represented the 1st Battalion of the K.O.Y.L.I., and 24 men of the Second Battalion attended from Wakefield.

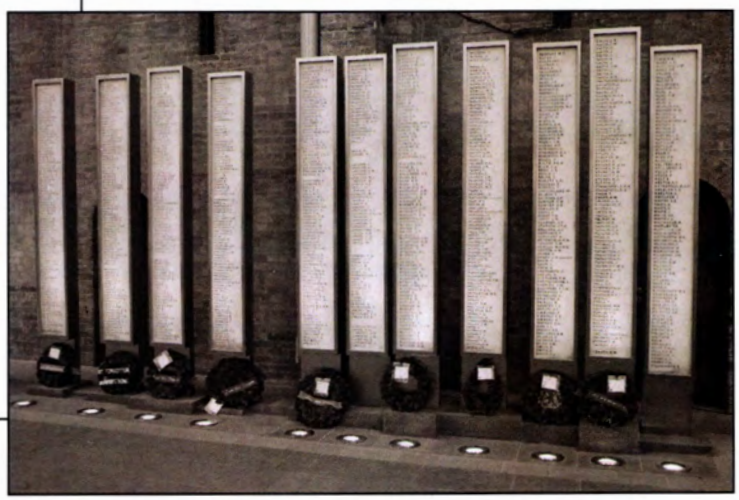
"Gainsborough News" 26th February 1915

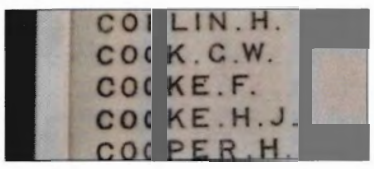
"Leeds Mercury"

Private Fred Cooke resided in Cardigan Terrace, the Falls, East Ardsley… He was married but had no children, and only on the day of the accident his wife received a letter from him saying he had intended visiting his home that day, but found he would not get his leave till this week...

Large crowds of people assembled at the Falls and the remainder of the route to the Parish Churchyard where the interment took place, and fully 2,000 people were in the churchyard; and there were many evidences of sorrow at the untimely death of Private Cooke and of genuine sympathy with his widow in her great loss….

"Morley Observer" 26th February 1915





Private Cooke is named on the newly restored Great Northern Railway War Memorial at King's Cross Station, London.

"Leeds Mercury"

Private William Dent, one of the victims, who resided at South View, Churwell, had been a member of the Territorial Force for four years when the war broke out. He was a single young man, 21 years of age, and was in the employ of Messrs. Hudson, Sykes, and Bousfield, cloth manufacturers, of Springfield Mills, Morley.

"Gainsborough News 26th February 1915"

Funeral of Private Dent

The funeral of Private T.W. Dent took place at the Morley Cemetery on Tuesday afternoon amid very impressive scenes. Large crowds of people assembled in New Churwell to witness the departure of the cortege, and many blinds were drawn, whilst along the route to the Cemetery there were also large gatherings of people, and many hundreds assembled in the Cemetery. The deceased was accorded military honours, about sixty of his comrades being present and twenty-two men of the Leeds Rifles, with a firing party and buglers under the command of Sergeant Instructor J. Harper. Six of the deceased's Morley comrades acted as bearers.

The coffin was of pitch pine, with brass fittings, and was covered with the Union Jack, and there were a number of beautiful wreaths. The deceased's father was present in military uniform, and the mourners included his uncle and aunt, with whom he lived, and other relations. Alderman W.L. Ingle, Deputy Mayor, also attended.

.... the firing party fired three volleys and the buglers sounded "The Last Post,"...

"Morley Observer" 26.2.15

Private Cockell's grave in Wakefield Cemetery (above) is the only one which mentions the cause of death -

"WHO WAS DROWNED AT GAINSBOROUGH"

Private Atheron, Wakefield Cemetery

Private Battye, Batley Cemetery

Private Cooke, East Ardsley Churchyard

Right Private Myers – Dewsbury Cemetery.
Centre—Private Dent, Morley Cemetery
Far right—Private Bruce, Harrogate Cemetery.

A particularly pathetic circumstance in the case of Private John Myers was that he attained his twenty-fourth birthday on Feb. 13th, and he had obtained forty-eight hours' leave as from Saturday morning last, in order to come home and celebrate the occasion, and also to attend to a friend's wedding. He was 21 years of age when he joined the Ossett detachment, of which he was a popular member. A chauffeur, he was employed by an Ossett gentleman prior to the war, and formerly he was in the employ of Dr. T.O. Halliwell, the Dewsbury Medical Officer of Health. He was the eldest of a family of nine, comprising four girls and five boys, and much sympathy is felt with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. William Myers.

"Gainsborough News"
February 26th 1915

"Leeds Mercury"

Dewsbury Reporter Saturday
February 27th 1915

INTERMENT OF PTE. MYERS

The interment of the remains of Pte. John Myers, the Savile Town victim of the disaster, at Dewsbury Cemetery, on Tuesday, excited widespread public interest. Deceased was the son of Mr and Mrs William Myers, and the oldest of a family of nine. At the outbreak of the war he was a chauffeur in the service of Capt. Surgeon Mill, Ossett, and had previously been in the service of Mr J.F. Tranmer, Ossett, and Dr. T.O. Halliwell, Dewsbury, in a similar capacity. He joined the Ossett Detachment of the 4th K.O.Y.L.I. three years ago and was a very popular member. He was an "old boy" of Boothroyd Lane Council School.

About 120 members of the 4th (Reserve) K.O.Y.L.I., under the command of Lieut. Norman Lee, attended the funeral, and Lieut. T. Chadwick and four men came over from Gainsborough to represent the deceased's battalion. Major P.B. Walker V.D., and Lieut. F.W. Butt-Thompson, of the 4th (Reserve) K.O.Y.L.I., were present at the cemetery.

Photo courtesy of Dorothy Keyworth

Private Ewart Whiteley Mann, the composer of the poem on the right, was from Dewsbury, where he was a well-known entertainer before the war.

Late in 1915 he was hospitalised due to shell shock, fever and gas. The following year he briefly returned to France but was again hospitalised and was brought back to England.

He died on 9th December 1917 and is buried in Dewsbury Cemetery not far from Private Myers.

Reverend Marris, mentioned in the poem, was the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Gainsborough.

THE FATE OF THE SEVEN K.O.Y.L.I.'S.

Dearest comrades, departed this life,
In sorrow deep we mourn your loss;
Now is ended your earthly strife,
You have bravely borne your cross.

Our comrades, who saved the lives,
Of those who were in distress;
In honour held is he who strives,
At his own peril! Him God will bless.

Gainsborough people, we know you're sad,
We know you love us all so dear;
This thought makes us feel so glad,
With your help, we'll have no fear.

All praise due to Mr. Marris,
Who in his house laid them side by side;
And all who live within his parish,
Esteem him for it, and with pride.

To the billeters one final word,
May God bless you for the wreaths you bought;
Throughout England all will have heard,
Of the duty you have wrought.

PTE. E.W. MANN
"D" Company, 4th K.O.Y.L.I."

"Gainsborough News" 26th February 1915

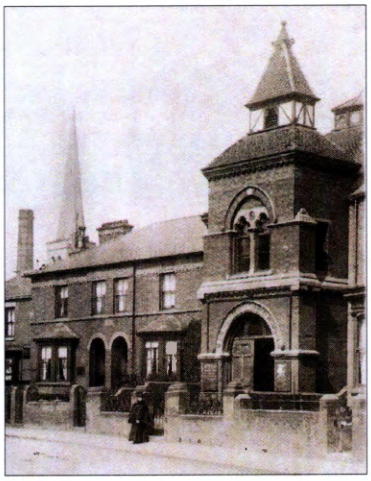
The Crooked Billet, Morton
Photo courtesy G.D.H.A.

Front Street, Morton

Willow Bank—home of Philip Anthony Gamble, local solicitor and District Coroner, who presided over the inquest.

Above right – the building on the left with the porch is Morton School where the inquest was held.
It is now the site of the Co-op but the school date stone has been retained.

Morton Hall

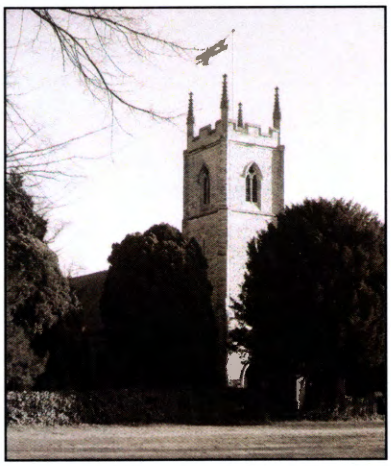


After the inquest on Saturday 20th Feb. the bodies were taken to the parish hall of Holy Trinity Church, Gainsborough.
Photo—courtesy of Paul Kemp

Above—
Brooklyn, home of John Reynold Fox, local builder, and foreman of the inquest jury.

West Lindsey
The Community Chest

The Friends of Gainsborough Cemeteries and Chapel are very grateful to West Lindsey District Council Community Chest which provided a grant to manufacture the plaque.
Special thanks to Revd. Canon M. Cooney, Revd. K. Dyke and Alan Clapham, Church Warden.
Thanks also to all the following organisations that have supported this project -



St. Paul's Church, Morton

Gainsborough and District Heritage Association

Gainsborough Royal British Legion

The Gainsborough Academy

1st Gainsborough Morton Scouts

THE BATTLEY AND BIRSTALL FIRST WORLD WAR COMMEMORATION PROJECT
Project Bugle
SUPPORTED BY THE HERITAGE LOTTERY FUND

Friends of Gainsborough Cemeteries and Chapel

"We will remember them..."