

# Who was Wilfred?

**WILFRED OWEN** (1893-1918) is rightly celebrated as perhaps the greatest poet of the First World War.

He is remembered for taking as his subject: 'War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.' But much as he loathed war and demonstrated a profound compassion for the suffering it caused, 2nd Lt. Owen was also a war hero, awarded the MC for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty.

Just five of Owen's poems were published in his lifetime. Although Siegfried Sassoon published Owen's work in 1920, he remained little known until the 1930s.

The village of Dunsden in Oxfordshire remembers Owen not as a war poet but as a romantically minded young man who came to the parish in October 1911 to assist the Vicar and to prepare for university entry.

Wilfred was born into a Welsh-English family of devout and evangelically minded Christians. His mother hoped he might become a clergyman.

## AT ODDS WITH THE VICAR

The luxurious life at Dunsden Vicarage came as a shock to young Wilfred, particularly when compared with the grinding poverty of the hundreds of farm workers living in 'wretched hovels' around it. Servants tended to his every need. The Revd Wigan was more concerned with saving souls than with improving the lot of his flock.

Wilfred visited the sick, supervised Sunday school, led the choir and spoke at revival meetings in the Mission Hall on the green. His letters recall particular favourites among the children he encountered. Among them were Milly Montague, Vivian Rampton and Laurence Ambrose whose family of 12 lived in a tiny 'stone box with a straw lid' - the thatched cottage on the road to Sonning Common.

Wilfred's growing doubts about his religious vocation deepened in his boys' bible study classes. One boy could not believe in immortality. 'How shall I answer?' Owen wrote.

14 people, with an average age of 37, died in Wilfred's 15 months in the parish, including two 15-year-olds, of diphtheria. 'A warning to us all to be ready for the Master's coming' according to the Revd Wigan.

## A TRAGIC ACCIDENT

A tragic accident on Dunsden Green caused the 19-year-old Wilfred to question those glib certainties.

At harvest time in 1912, a local carter, John Allen, was leaving Binfield Heath for a job in Maidenhead, with all his worldly possessions piled up on his cart. On top of the high load was roped a sofa on which sat his two young daughters, with his wife carrying their baby son.

The horses bolted on the steep hill to Playhatch, and the family was thrown from the cart. A wheel ran over four-year-old Hilda, killing her, and her 27-year-old mother Alice died from a thigh wound shortly after, having been cared for by the side of the road.

Owen wrote four verses in response to this tragedy which have been seen as the first sign of his mature voice, based on personal experience and strongly at odds with conventional opinion.

## A CRISIS OF FAITH

Wilfred began to feel the strain of living a double life as both would be churchman and as a free-thinking poet. He announced to the Vicar his intention to leave. By the spring of 1913 he was at his parents' home recuperating from a breakdown. A period teaching English abroad followed.

In October, 1915 Owen enlisted in the Artists' Rifles and was sent to France. He died in Ors, France, on 4 November, 1918, as he led his men in an ill-fated attempt to cross the Sambre-Oise canal. His mother heard of his death one week later, just as the bells were ringing out in thanksgiving for the end of what was once called 'the war to end all wars'.

Many of Owen's 650 letters to Susan Owen were uncovered at his parents' home in Emmer Green. They are testimony to perhaps his most intense relationship. Wilfred's parents and sister lie buried in the graveyard of All Saints Church in Dunsden and a plaque inside the church commemorates his life.

Wilfred  
Owen  
IN DUNSDEN

## The Wilfred Owen Trail, Dunsden

Walk, cycle or drive  
to Owen sites in and  
around Dunsden

[WWW.OWENINDUNSDEN.ORG](http://WWW.OWENINDUNSDEN.ORG)



Outrider  
Anthems



[www.designforprint.org](http://www.designforprint.org)



## Old Thatched Cottage

Wilfred visited a family of 12 in a 'stone box with a straw lid'

## To 'Alpenrose', former home of Wilfred's aunt

Local links brought Owen to Dunsden

# Highlights of the Wilfred Owen Trail

Follow the trail using this map or go to [www.owenindunsden.org](http://www.owenindunsden.org) and download our free interactive multi-media phone app

Please note that the houses on the trail are not open to the public.

## 'THE SEND-OFF'

Down the close, darkening lanes they sang their way  
To the siding-shed,  
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray  
As men's are, dead.

Dull porters watched them, and a casual tramp  
Stood staring hard,  
Sorry to miss them from the upland camp.  
Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp  
Winked to the guard.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.  
They were not ours:  
We never heard to which front these were sent.  
Nor there if they yet mock what women meant  
Who gave them flowers.

Shall they return to beatings of great bells  
In wild trainloads?  
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,  
May creep back, silent, to still village wells  
Up half-known roads.



## FROM 'DEEP UNDER TURFY GRASS'

So I rebelled, storming and mocking such  
As had the ignorant callousness to wed  
On altar-steps long frozen by the touch  
Of stretcher after stretcher of our dead,  
Love's blindness is too terrible, I said;  
I will go counsel men, and show what bin  
The harvest of their homes is gathered in.

## Dunsden old Vicarage

Wilfred was disturbed by the Vicar's lavish life

## All Saints Church

Owen's sister and parents lie here

## To the former home of Wilfred's parents

Over 600 letters to his mother were found here

## Dunsden Green and hill

Wilfred taught religion and gave lantern slide shows in the mission hall

## Dunsden's former school, now hall

Wilfred helped run the school. A statue in the foyer by Anthony Padgett celebrates Owen