

STRANGE MEETINGS

Wilfred Owen was born in Oswestry, Shropshire on 18th March 1893. The eldest of four children, he moved with his family first to Birkenhead, and then Shrewsbury, where they set up home in 1907. His mother was a strict Anglican, and Wilfred was brought up with her views, loyally attending the local church, and even becoming a curate's assistant in Dunsden, near Reading. While staying at the vicarage, he furthered his education by taking lessons in Botany and Old English, while also immersing himself in the poetry of Wordsworth and Keats, his favourite poet:

As a child, I was told that in reading the bible one can hear the voice of God. When I read Keats' poetry, I was hearing the poetic voice in that same Evangelical spirit.

Somewhat disillusioned with the church, he left England in 1913 to teach English at the Berlitz School, Bordeaux.



Craiglockhart Hospital

**Wilfred Owen's grave,
Ors Communal Cemetery**



When Wilfred enlisted in the British Army in October 1915, the war had been underway for more than a year. After training, he was posted to France where his experiences were brutal and damaging; he saw men drown in mud, shot through the head, and witnessed one soldier die from gas, 'choking to death on his own hissing entrails.'

10% of all officers went on to suffer from 'shell-shock', or neurasthenia, and Owen was no exception. Following a severe concussion, and then being caught in a shell blast which left him unconscious for several days, he was pulled from the Front. His meeting with Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart Hospital was timely, inspiring him to write powerfully and profusely, working to expose the horrendous truth of the war's 'desperate glory'.

Only five poems were published during Wilfred's lifetime. Having returned to France, he was killed in action crossing the Sambre-Oise canal on 4th November 1918, exactly one week before (almost to the hour) the signing of the Armistice and the end of the war. Who knows what fine poetry Wilfred Owen might have produced if he'd survived the battle, living just one more week and seeing out the war?



This presentation has been written and produced by Shaun Higgins for Spike Rose Productions. Shaun has been involved in almost 40 productions in the past ten years and, as well as writing plays, he has staged six of his own pantomimes, and written two novels and several collections of short stories. His next one-person show concerns the naturalist Charles Darwin, and his famed voyage aboard the *Beagle*.

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