

Edward Thomas Exhibition

Paul Reed

The Imperial War Museum recently put on an exhibition relating to the war poet Edward Thomas, to mark the 70th anniversary of his death. The display was divided into three sections. The first two dealt with Edward Thomas's early life and items included numerous Thomas first editions, books from his own library, furniture made by Thomas for his study, portraits of his children and also maps used on many of his walks in the countryside, along with his original school report and many photographs of members of his family. The section dealing with the Great War included first drafts of a number of Thomas's poems plus letters written before and during his service in France. The final part of this section displayed papers relating to Thomas's tragic death in 1917, including letters from men who served with him and the official telegram announcing him being killed in action — the sort of telegram which all families feared in the Great War. Along with extracts from much of his poetry mounted on the wall, and with pleasant background music, an atmosphere was certainly achieved.

On an historical note, Edward Thomas enlisted into the 2/28th Battalion of the London Regiment (Artists Rifles) in 1916. This unit was an officer training Battalion stationed in Essex and thus Thomas, after initial training, was granted a temporary commission in the Royal Garrison Artillery. He went out to France in early 1917 and joined 244th Siege Battery which operated 9.2-inch howitzers at that time. He grew accustomed to Battery life and in fact on many occasions was only a short distance from Henry's Machine Gun Company, then in the Bapaume/Arras area. On 9th April 1917 — the opening day of the Battle of Arras — 244th Siege Battery was involved in the preliminary bombardment and Thomas was selected for duty in the front line as a Forward Observation Officer (FOO). There is some dispute over how he actually died, but it is widely accepted that he was killed by German shell fire while going about his duties. The men of the Battery felt his loss keenly and so brought Thomas's body back for a decent burial near the gun positions at Agny. Henry rightly claims that he was only a few miles from Thomas on 9th April — Thomas was in the trenches at Neuville Vitasse and HW in action with the MGC opposite Bullecourt.

Today, Edward Thomas's grave can be found in Agny Military Cemetery and during the recent Battlefields Tour, twelve members of the Society visited his last resting place on the 9th April 1987 — exactly seventy years after he was killed. We were surprised to find a large wreath on the grave, apparently put there on the orders of the Director General of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, himself a great admirer of the work of Edward Thomas.