

BROXTON'S TWO WAR POETS

Broxton has a minor claim to fame as the place where Wilfred Owen, one of the 'war poets' of the Great War of 1914-1918, first found his 'muse'.

He was born in Oswestry in 1893 although the family later moved to Birkenhead. Wilfred used to spend childhood holidays at his aunt's house in the village of Brown Knowl, in Broxton parish, at 'Cobbler's Bank' where the Tyson family now lives.

The following fragment survives from an early poem: *'For I fared back into my life's arrears / Even in the first week at Broxton, by the Hill / Where first I felt my boyhood fill / With uncontainable movements; there was born / My poethood'*.

In 1916 he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Manchester Regiment.

It was while he was invalided home to a military hospital in Scotland that he met Siegfried Sassoon, another war poet, who greatly influenced him.

Here he wrote many of his own now famous and intensely moving poems, including *Anthem for Doomed Youth*.

He returned to military duty in France in August 1918 and was killed in action the following November, a week before the end of the war.

Perhaps it was also the Broxton hills that provided inspiration for another aspiring poet, this time a native of the parish.

He was Lance-Corporal R G Lee of the King's Royal Rifles, son of the licensee of the 'Durham Heifer' (now re-named 'The Olive Grove').

In 1916 the *Chester Chronicle* published his photograph and the news that he had been awarded the Military Medal at Chester Castle on September 15th, for gallantry in action and for carrying dispatches.

The press report also stated that *'Some verse, written by the lance-corporal, has appeared in the Chronicle'*.

That verse had been published in January 1915 and takes the form of a poignant plea from the battlefield to his sweetheart back at home:

A SOLDIER'S POEM

*The day is slowly waning, and night is drawing nigh,
I think of you, my darling, and break into a sigh,
I think of the dear old folks at home, whose hearts with sorrow burn
For their dear soldier son, who may never again return.*

*Why am I here, I ask myself, why should I fight at all?
And a voice within me answers, "You have answered your country's call!"*

*Whatever hardships face me, however fierce the strife,
With a smile on my lips I shall fall dear; for you I have given my life.*

*But when I am far away, dear, others may whisper love to you,
But think of the boy who is fighting for his country and for you!
Spurn them aside with anger, dismiss them with hearts full of woe,
The cowards, who feared to join the ranks and fight their country's foe!*

*Think of me sometimes, darling, and when the conflict is o'er,
I am coming back to claim you, for my own and evermore!*

The lance-corporal did survive the war – but did he ever marry 'his darling'?

David Hayns