



# 'PURE GOLD'

NOTES ON THE LIFE OF  
THOMAS BIRKETT OF WIGSTON

JEREMY BIRKETT

"A young friend described him  
as 'pure gold'. Needless to say,  
I'm biased, but I think that  
everyone whose path he  
crossed in his long lifetime  
would have agreed with  
that characterisation."

Joyce Black

Née Birkett

'Recollections' June 1989



# PURE GOLD

## NOTES ON THE LIFE OF THOMAS BIRKETT OF WIGSTON

The last few years have seen extensive coverage in national media commemorating the First World War, and remembering the millions of soldiers of all nationalities who lost their lives. On 11th November this year, we will commemorate the signing of the armistice a hundred years ago. I find it very moving, not least because my Great Uncle,



Thomas Birkett

William Boulter, fought in the trenches of the Somme with the Northamptonshire Regiment. On account of an 'act of outstanding valour', he was awarded the Victoria Cross. I'm proud to have the official citation, his dress medals and accompanying memorabilia.

But this little book is not about Uncle Billy. The record of his brave deeds, and his life story, was entertainingly written and published some years ago by local historian

Derek Seaton. When assisting in its research, however, it occurred to me that Billy's brother-in-law, Thomas Birkett, had an equally impressive story to tell. And I wanted to tell it, because he was my beloved paternal grandfather. Known affectionately as 'Gampy' by my brother and me and by our Birkett and Black cousins, Thomas Birkett also saw action in WWI. But not on the Somme. And not in combat.

So let me tell you his story.

At the start of the First World War, Thomas was aged thirty three, married with two small children, and living at Arrochar Lodge in Glen Parva, south Leicester. In the first few months of the war, the general expectation was that it would 'all be over by Christmas.' But it wasn't. It dragged on and on, endless trench

**THE  
MILITARY SERVICE ACT,  
1916,**

APPLIES TO UNMARRIED MEN WHO, ON AUGUST 15th, 1915, WERE 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OVER AND WHO WILL NOT BE 41 YEARS OF AGE ON MARCH 2nd, 1916.

**ALL MEN (NOT EXCEPTED OR EXEMPTED),**  
between the above ages who, on November 2nd, 1915, were Unmarried or Widowers without any Child dependent on them will, on

**Thursday, March 2nd, 1916**

BE DEEMED TO BE ENLISTED FOR THE PERIOD OF THE WAR.  
They will be placed in the Reserve until Called Up in their Class.

**MEN EXCEPTED:**

SOLDIERS, including Territorials who have volunteered for Foreign Service;  
MEN serving in the NAVY or ROYAL MARINES;  
MEN DISCHARGED from ARMY or NAVY, disabled or ill, or TIME-EXPIRED MEN;  
MEN REJECTED for the ARMY since AUGUST 14th, 1915;  
CLERGYMEN, PRIESTS, and MINISTERS OF RELIGION;  
VISITORS from the DOMINIONS.

**MEN WHO MAY BE EXEMPTED BY LOCAL TRIBUNALS:**

Men more useful to the Nation in their present employments;  
Men in whose case Military Service would cause serious hardship owing to exceptional financial or business obligations or domestic position;  
Men who are ill or infirm;  
Men who conscientiously object to combatant service. If the Tribunal thinks fit, men may, on this ground, be (a) exempted from combatant service only (not non-combatant service), or (b) exempted on condition that they are engaged in work of National importance.

Up to March 2nd, a man can apply to his Local Tribunal for a certificate of exemption. There is a right of Appeal. He will not be called up until his case has been dealt with finally.  
Certificates of exemption may be absolute, conditional or temporary. Such certificate can be renewed, varied or withdrawn.  
Men retain their Civil Rights until called up and are amenable to Civil Courts only.

**DO NOT WAIT UNTIL MARCH 2nd.  
ENLIST VOLUNTARILY NOW.**

For full particulars of the Act, please apply for Leaflet No. 11 to the nearest Post Office, Police Station, or Recruiting Office.

warfare resulting in staggering loss of life on both sides. In the first two years of hostilities, the British Regular Army's strength had declined due to heavy losses, at first the numbers being made up by the Territorial Force, then by volunteers from Field Marshal Earl Kitchener's New Army.

However, if Britain, with the French, was to continue to hold the allied line on the Western Front, it became clear that conscription had to be introduced. So it was that, in March 1916, Asquith's government passed the Military Service Act. This decreed that single men aged 18 to 41 were deemed to be enlisted for military service – unless they were widowed with children, ministers of

a religion, or conscientious objectors.

Tom Birkett was a conscientious objector. He was a committed Christian and knew in his heart he could never kill or injure another man, even in the cause of defending King and Country. But he was no coward. He was determined to play his part in some way.



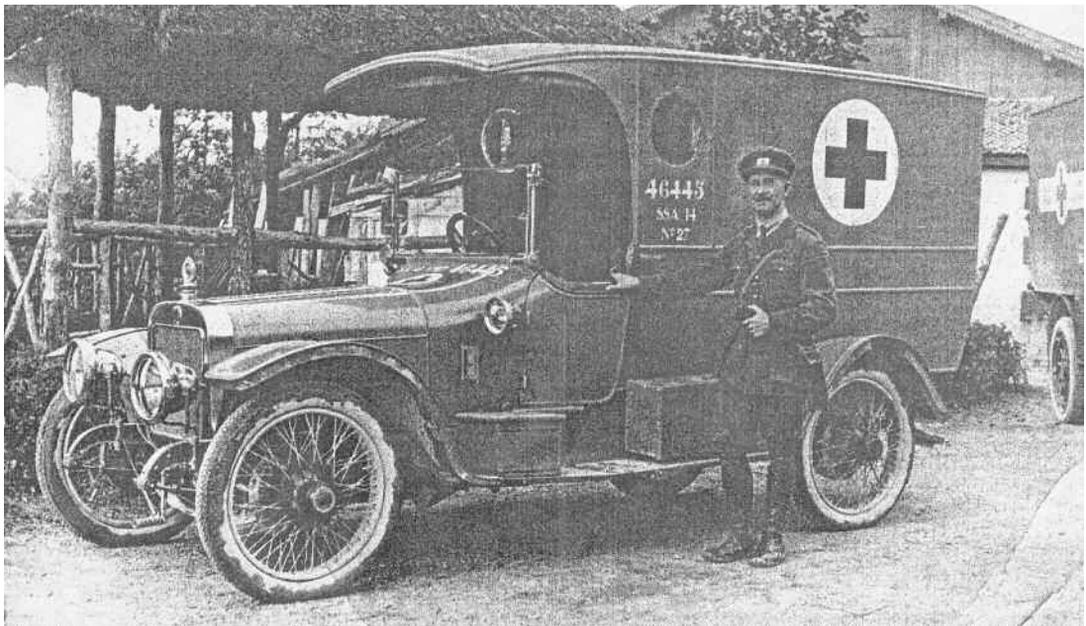
*1916 recruitment poster*

After considering various options, Tom alighted on an idea that might allow him to play a role in the war effort in a way that would be acceptable to the authorities, but without undermining his religious beliefs. As part of a reasonably affluent family, Tom was fortunate at this time to own a large car, an Argyll 12/14. Built in 1912 by the Scottish

manufacturer Argyll Motors, then Britain's leading car manufacturer, this model was widely sold as a taxicab. In fact, fifty Argylls were exported to New York for taxi service on the streets of Manhattan.

A lot of civilians who were conscientious objectors on account of their spirituality,

wished nonetheless to 'do their bit' for Britain. Many contacted the Red Cross, prominent among them men and women from British Quaker families, asking if they could help as nursing assistants, stretcher bearers, ambulance drivers, or in other crucial support roles. One result was the



*Thomas Birkett at a field station on the Western Front in Northern France with his 'converted ambulance'*

formation of The Friends' Ambulance Unit (FAU), a volunteer ambulance service, founded by individual members of the British Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), in line with their Peace Testimony. Tom Birkett was not a Quaker, but belonging to the evangelical movement, Churches of Christ, believed he was eligible to join. He gained his St. John's Ambulance First Aid certificate after a 5 week course at Jordans.

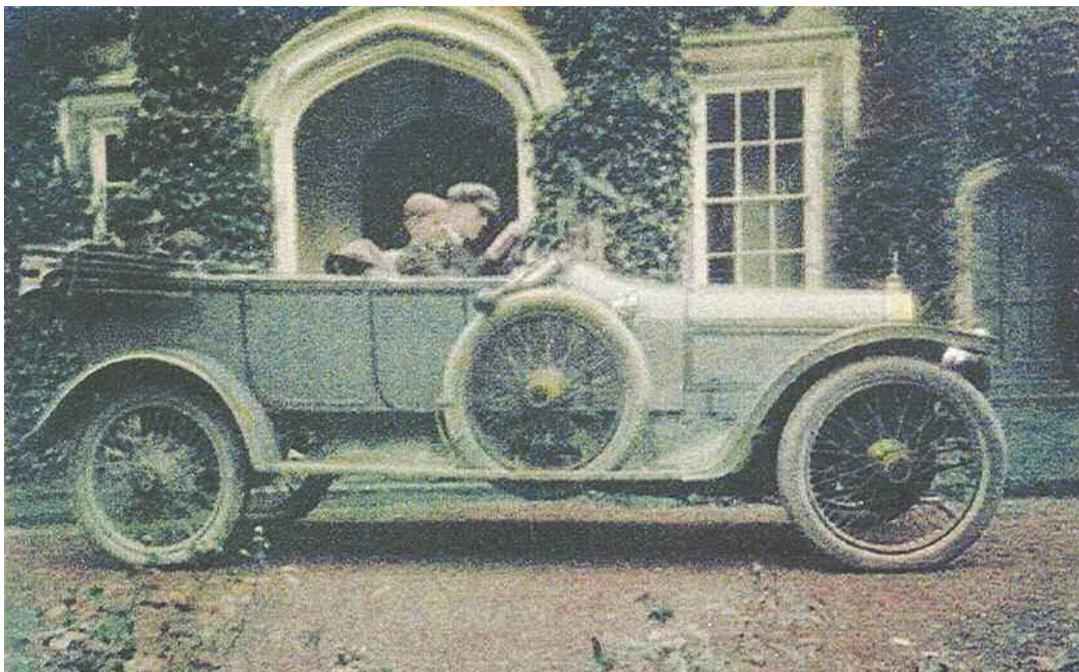
Tom wondered if he could convert his beloved Argyll into an ambulance. To this end, he approached a Midlands coach-maker, who confirmed that the broad chassis of this handsome



*Tom Birkett in uniform*

car should allow it to be safely fitted with a solid coach-style body. It would be, in effect, an early style of commercial van. The conversion would have been costly, it being hand-built by motor bodywork experts, but doubtless, to Tom's way of thinking, fully justifiable. He was on a mission from God.

Some weeks later his personal emergency vehicle was finished, complete with large white circles containing a big red cross painted on each side. In the Spring of 1916, with just a kit bag and his trusty guitar, he bade goodbye to his wife and two young children, and drove his ambulance over to



*The 'Argyll' parked at the front door of Wigston Hall shortly after the end of the war, restored to its original state.  
Tom's brother John in the passenger seat, John's son George at the wheel.*

Dunkirk to join the FAU. His service card (number 8404) with the simple designation "Driver-own car" lists him as 3rd in command of SSA14, which stands for Section Sanitaire Anglaise 14, the name given to the sections of aid units under the British Red Cross.

SSA14 moved as a small convoy of ambulances, sometimes being billeted in glorious old chateaux in small rural towns such as Epernay and Chalons-sur-Marne. It worked all along the Western Front in North East France evacuating wounded and dying

soldiers and transporting them back to the aid posts or field hospitals, from where they would eventually arrive at the base hospitals, manned by the Royal Army Medical Corps. The work also involved assisting the evacuation of men suffering from dysentery, and other war-related ills. It was dangerous work at times, and several ambulance drivers and stretcher bearers from the unit were killed while on duty.

Having joined the FAU convoy in Dunkirk, and arriving a day later at the Western front and the scene of battle, Tom was appalled at what he witnessed. The terrifying crack and thunder of the incoming shells,



“Reserve the wine for our soldiers”

the yells of the French troops, the screams of the wounded, the shouts of the stretcher bearers as they struggled with their damaged human cargo towards him. He’d manoeuvre his vehicle as close as was practically possible – the drivers were ordered not to get in the line of fire, not just for their own safety, but because the ambulances were of vital importance, and there were only





took six bearers to carry the stretcher. It was natural for the exhausted men to expect the ambulance to be close by. Some wounded and dying arrived carried on a fellow squaddie's shoulders, both drenched in blood. Tom would then help lay the wounded carefully on the mattress-covered benches in the back of the Argyll, and ferry

a few to each infantry unit – but took care not to get bogged down in the mud or shell holes. If it was raining and the wounded man weighed twelve stone or more, it often

them back to the aid posts and field-hospital stations, often over muddy, uneven terrain. Sometimes, needless to say, a passenger would be lifeless. The work was grim and

*War! No one except those who participate can realise the conditions! We took up our first position in the dark – guns were booming all around us, the sky was vivid with the flashes and the noise! We live in dugouts like so many rabbits, and have plenty of rats for company!! In my innocence, I left a couple of biscuits in my overcoat pocket. Brother rat politely ate through my coat in order to get at the biscuit in my pocket. Nice, eh?*



exhausting, not only putting them in the way of personal danger, but testing their strength of spirit as they witnessed first hand the unspeakable horrors of war. In later life Tom talked little about his wartime experiences, but he would never forget the terrifying pounding of the shells all around them as they worked. His poem 'Half a World in Ruins'

(next page) is a poignant description of the carnage, not just the terrible loss of military lives, but civilian too, with the destruction of bombed-out local towns, villages and homes. Despite his spirituality, the poem confirms his belief in the moral integrity of the Allied action: "So must a world be cleansed... until the evil burn itself away."

## HALF A WORLD IN RUINS

Half a world in ruins!

Night after night of blastings

Day after day of terror and destruction

By air and sea and land

Maiming and death and loss.

The dry-eyed sobbing of broken hearts

Desolate homes with shattered present

And blank future –

The iron of cruelty

Eating into the soul.

Thus is the price paid for arrogance

And proud ambition and hatred

For sneering overthrow of truth

And gibes at goodness, casting out of love

And blasphemous dismissal of God.

So must a world be cleansed

So must the price be paid

Until the evil burn itself away

Until the cruel mood be passed

And deep contrition come.

Then may its slow healing start

And in the darkness and the quiet

God's own love most tender

And redeeming power

Soften the heart and make it feel again.

So shall the wounds be healed

And over the torn and shattered earth

The green grass and the flowers shall grow

To cover up the ugliness and scars

With beauty and with fragrance.

Homes shall be rebuilt

And men shall learn to love and trust

And understand and serve.

Their hearts shall yearn for God

And, seeking, find Him and be comforted.

*Tom Birkett*



*'Half a world in ruins'*

APPLICANTS for service with this Unit are requested to answer as clearly as they can, the following questions. W

Name in full: Thomas Bicket Amochan Lodge, Glenparke, Leicester  
 Address:  
 Nationality at Birth: British

1. Name, address & Relationship of nearest Relative. Wife. Mrs Thomas Bicket. as above

2. Nationality of both Parents. British

3. Age. 34 4. Married or Single? Married

5. Profession or Occupation? Shoe Manufacturer.

6. Are you a Member of the Society of Friends, or if not, are you in any way connected with it? No. <sup>member of</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>Leicester</sup> <sup>Friends</sup> <sup>Church of Christ</sup>

7. Were you at a Friends' Meeting? No.

8. Have you been inoculated against Typhoid? If so, where? If not are you willing to be? No. Quite willing

9. Have you been, or are you willing to be vaccinated? Yes, as a child. No objections

10. Are you qualified for a British Red Cross or a St. John's Ambulance Certificate? Have you had any training in Ambulance work? Yes. <sup>have American First Aid and St John Certificate</sup>

11. Have you had any experience in driving Motor Cars? Yes.

12. Can you speak French? No.

13. Have you any special qualifications that might be useful? Willing to loan own Car

14. Are you prepared to pay for your outfit? Yes.

15. To whom should the bill be sent (name & address). Thomas Bicket Amochan Lodge, Glenparke, Leicester

16. For how long are you prepared to serve with this Unit? 6 months.

17. Name & Address of reference not a relative, who has known you for 3 years at least. (Reference Friend) Jonathon North Esq, Mayor Leicester

18. Previous service in any Army or Navy? None.

19. Previous service in the Home of the Armies, if any, with dates. None

20. Are you willing for service in England? Either Home or Abroad

Place: Wesborough  
 Date: Oct. 27<sup>th</sup> 1917

SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:  
Thomas Bicket

FRIENDS AMBULANCE APPLICATION

Tom's completed form applying to join the Friends Ambulance Unit.

Note the question 'Have you any special qualifications that might be useful?' to which he replies: 'Willing to loan own car.'

He is also asked where the bill to him should be sent for the cost of his 'outfit'.

In answer to item 15, he gives as a reference Jonathon North Esq, Mayor of Leicester.

# RALLY ROUND THE FLAG



**“WE MUST HAVE MORE MEN”**

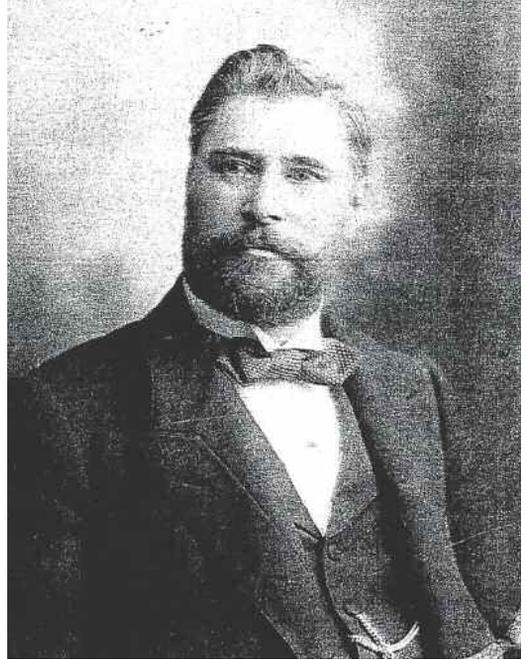
*Enormous losses at the start of the war resulted in urgent calls for more soldiers*



*Birkett siblings circ. 1899. Left to right: Alf, George, Kate, Bessie, Tom & Dave  
Seated: John Opposite page: Their father George*

*The fifth sibling, Harry, a big strong boy, died of rheumatic fever at the age of 12*

**T**om was born in 1881 in Ulverston in Furness\*, Lancashire, the second eldest of eight children, but spent much of his childhood in America. His father George, originally a slate dealer in the village of Lindal in Furness, had become an agent for the Prudential Assurance in Chesterfield, and after several successful years was offered a lucrative post in Philadelphia. So in 1890, George Birkett uprooted his large family, and emigrated to the USA, establishing himself in the Philadelphia HQ, then later becoming manager of Prudential's St. Louis



*George Birkett, "Great Grandfather"*

office in the southern state of Missouri. As a young boy, Tom would spend hours in the company of their old black gardener as he sat outside the potting shed at their St. Louis home, strumming an old guitar. The old feller

\*Norman Birkett, the eminent QC and High Court judge, later to become Lord Birkett of Ulverstone, was a third cousin, born around the same time as Tom, also in Ulverston in Furness

had a fund of great 'African American' songs, many of which were sadly poignant, his family, prior to the Civil War, having been enslaved. Tom learned to play the guitar and learned many songs, including spirituals,



*Betsy Birkett with her five sons. Tom front right*

during those long happy hours spent listening as the old gardener sang and plucked away.

So it was that, twenty or so years later when serving with the FAU in France, Tom would take out his guitar from under the front seat of his vehicle, and sing to the troops during evening lulls in the fighting. During one period of intense action, he was sitting one evening with his ambulance convoy colleagues and a company of French soldiers to whom they were attached, playing his guitar and singing along with the men to keep the spirits up. Songs such as "Smile the While," "It's a long way to Tipperary," "Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag," "Till we meet again." Suddenly the company came under a barrage of



*The two elder brothers, John and Tom, in full song*

intensive shelling, and the order was given to pull back – drop everything, evacuate the position immediately. In the rush, many personal possessions, including Tom’s guitar, were abandoned.

The following evening, after setting up camp further back, the same group of men was sitting around the camp-fire and the mood was sombre. Tom started to sing

quietly, and, slowly, the men began to join in. At that moment, a French soldier ran towards the group with a shout and seeing him, a loud cheer went up. The ‘poilus’ was holding Tom’s guitar. Too important a morale booster to be left behind.

As part of my research for this little volume, I visited the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in London. The imposing

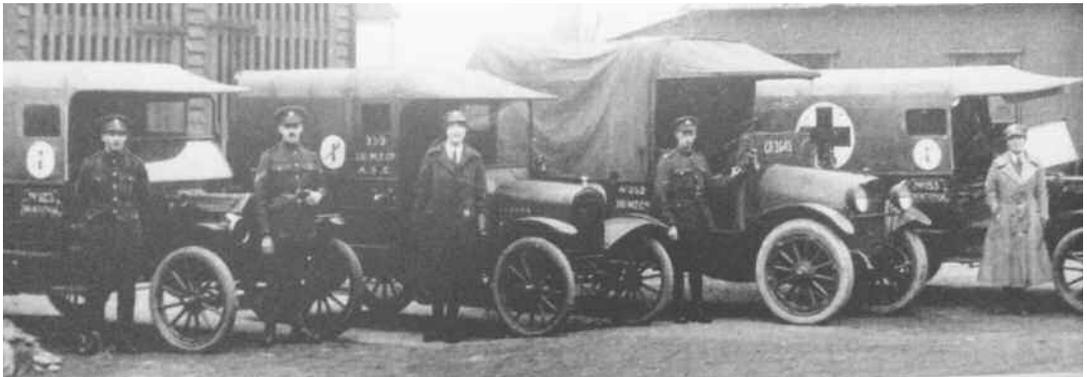


*French ‘poilus’ WWI*

building opposite Euston station houses the Quaker library, where a helpful archivist dug out a bunch of ancient WWI photographs of the Friends Ambulance Unit, and other papers and materials. I could find few photos specific to Tom, but amongst the items was an intriguing little book giving a diary account of the whole of the FAU convoy's travels and actions. To my delight, I discovered several mentions of Thomas Birkett – some referring to him as T.B, others

as Briquet, a soubriquet given to him by the French squaddies. These all related to the Section Sanitaire Anglaise, and the frequent nightly singalongs with the French soldiers and the other drivers. One such mention goes:

“Informal open-air sing songs became the order of the day, and of an evening quite a crowd of French soldiers and village folk would gather round an ambulance, in which sat T.B. with his guitar, surrounded by the convoy ‘choristers’ . . . ”



*Standardised ambulance, unlike Tom Birkett's*

Another evening:

“...for many of the old favourite songs, we had to fall back on the orchestra – the spirited twang of Briquet’s guitar, and the sonorous wail of Milly’s one-string fiddle ...while “Little Mister Baggy Breeches” would sound quite unfamiliar with a piano.”

And again:

“There were a number of “darkies” billeted here, and the writer well remembers an enjoyable evening spent listening to them “playing on the old banjo” – in this case, T.B.’s guitar – and singing, with rhythmic cadence, their sweet, melancholy tunes.”

References also to Tom’s special vehicle:

“The first stage of the journey took us to Pont-Sainte-Maxence, where we unloaded all surplus kit and stores, and installed

## EVERYONE SANG

Everyone suddenly burst out singing

And I was filled with such delight

As prisoned birds must find in freedom

Winging wildly across the white

Orchards and dark-green fields;

on – on – and out of sight.

Everyone’s voice was suddenly lifted

And beauty came like the setting sun

My heart was shaken with tears; and horror

Drifted away . . .O, but Everyone

Was a bird; and the song was wordless;

the singing will never be done

*Siegfried Sassoon April 1919*

the Vulcan soup-kitchen, Austin workshop, the lorry and Birkett’s (converted) Argyll, with half a dozen men under his charge, here to await our return.”

Anecdotes to be treasured.



## THE SOLDIER

If I should die, think only  
this of me:  
That there's some corner  
of a foreign field  
That is forever England.  
There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer  
dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore,  
shaped, made aware,  
Gave, once, her flowers to  
love, her ways to roam,  
A body of England's,  
breathing England's air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest

by suns of home.  
And think, this heart, all  
evil shed away,  
A pulse in the eternal mind,  
no less  
Gives somewhere back the  
thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds;  
dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of  
friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an  
English heaven.

*Rupert Brooke 1914*

**T**hroughout his life, Tom was much loved by all who came to know him. To use his daughter Joyce's words in her memoirs: "He was a kind, warm-hearted, loving personality, utterly unselfish, a dedicated Christian, but never a thin-lipped one, he had great compassion for people and would go to endless trouble to help and comfort. I know of one good friend, when they were both young men, who described him as 'pure gold' Needless to say, I am biased, but I think that everyone whose path he crossed in his long lifetime, would have agreed with that characterization."



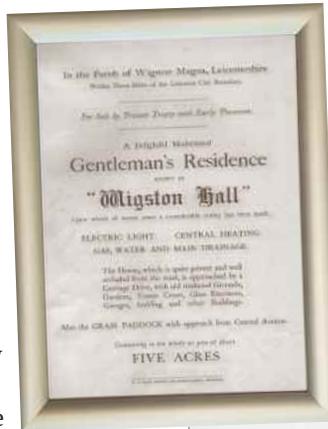
*Edith and Tom at the wedding of their son Bob to Joan Shuff (author's parents).*

We saw earlier how George Birkett had taken his wife Betsey and seven children to the USA when he accepted a managerial post

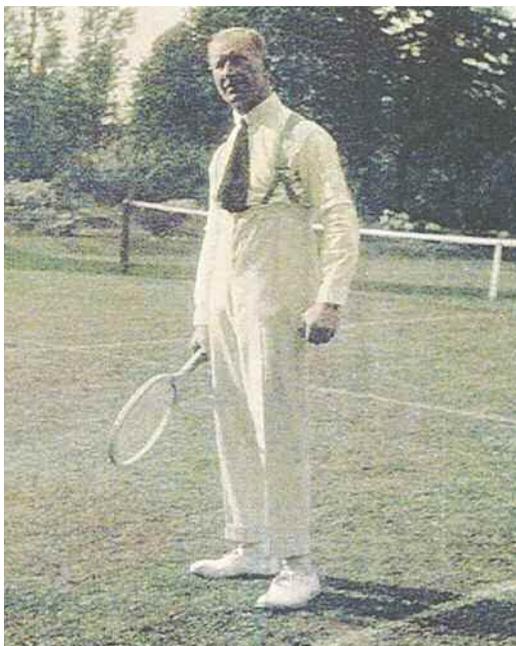
with the Prudential Assurance. After some years, however, Betsey tired of the American life and yearned to be back in England. Eventually, she returned, with her husband's full support, and moved to Wigston in south Leicester, where she opened a hardware shop. George would join the family for holidays and at Christmas, always returning to St. Louis. The eldest son, John, moved to America in his early twenties, to join his father at the Pru. He became a nationalised American and married Ada Hindle, and they had a son George, named after his grandfather. George became a farmer in Maine, New England, and he and his wife Doris had a daughter, Betsey, named after her great grandmother,

who married Jack Hall, and a son Jim, who married Sarah Burley. They later took over the farm. The American Birketts and Halls, now in their sixth generation, have proliferated, a great credit to old George and Betsey.

Once John had returned to the USA, Tom effectively became head of the family, and it seems



*Wigston Hall*

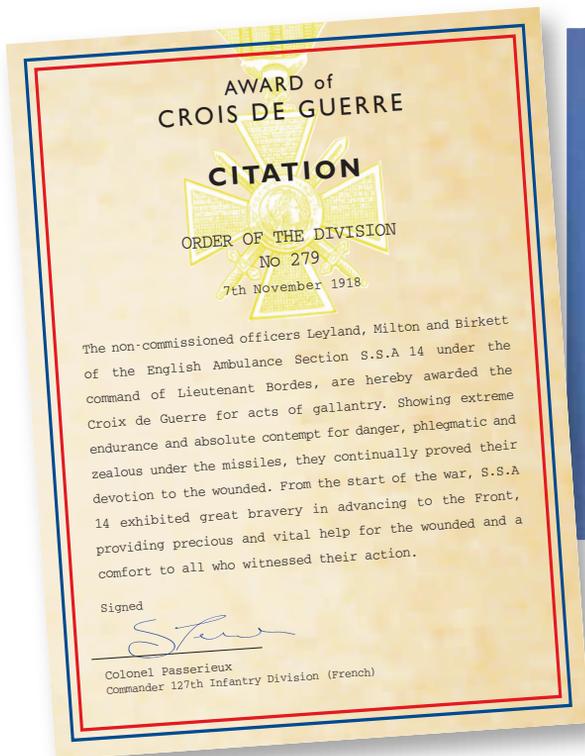


*Tom on the tennis court at Wigston Hall*

certain he would have carried out the role with loving efficiency, running the hardware business, and helping to care for his younger siblings.

As already seen, Tom Birkett was a devoted member of the Churches of Christ, and in later life became an elder and

lay-preacher at the Church of Christ chapel in South Wigston, on the edge of the city of Leicester. But in no way could he be described as a goody-goody, with his wry sense of humour, and a twinkle in his eye. He was broad-minded and enjoyed telling, with some pride, his wartime tale of how, during one retreat, he “saved a fine pair of silver candlesticks from a French chateau.” (Today, a century later, those same candlesticks adorn the mantelpiece in the home of a certain resident of Tunbridge Wells in the County of Kent). A love of life in all its aspects, including sport – tennis, swimming and ice skating in particular – and music, and a seemingly ever-cheerful disposition and love of his fellow beings made him the man he was.



*The Croix de Guerre awarded by the French to Tom for valour in WWI*

The family is proud to have possession of Tom's war medals, which include 'The Croix de Guerre.' A significant medal awarded for outstanding valour by the French military, it was awarded "to Leyland, Milton and Birkett, of the English Ambulance Section S.S.A 14

for acts of gallantry...they continually proved their devotion to the wounded and a comfort to all who witnessed their action." He was also "mentioned in despatches"

Tom's commitment to war service continued in the second world war when he joined the ambulance section of the Wigston Civil Defence Corps, a civilian volunteer organisation tasked to take control in the aftermath of a major national emergency.

After the war, the faithful guitar was put to good use once again, when Tom enrolled as a prison visitor in Leicester, and would sing and play to the inmates. On one notable visit, to the amusement of governor and prisoners alike, he sang the old Spiritual “Steal away! Steal away Home!”

Perhaps that old, well-used acoustic guitar, truly a war veteran itself, deserved a medal too.

Thomas Birkett married Edith Pegg in 1905 and they started married life in Lansdown House, a small house on the Blaby Road, South Wigston. They had three children: Joyce (b. 1909), Robert (my father b.1913), and Peter (b.1923).

My grandmother Edith, born 1881, was

the daughter of Sarah Hannah Osborne of Coventry and James Pegg of Hinkley. James died when Edith was just four years old, and,



*Sarah Hannah  
as a young woman*

with no income, Sarah Hannah took work at Toone & Black’s boot and shoe factory. The business had been started by Benjamin Toone of Wigston towards the end of the nineteenth century, an abrupt career change, as his family had

previously been ‘gentleman farmers’. A short time later, J.W. Black – Cyril Black’s Uncle Wycliffe – became a partner, giving the company its name. There was a growing interest in the area for a new church. A group of ‘baptised believers’ (as my research finds them known) who were members of the Church of Christ in Leicester, a low form of

Baptist teaching having originated in the US, wanted to form their own church. Initially they met regularly at the home of Mr and Mrs Toone on Blaby Road for bible study. The group quickly grew, however, and Benjamin Toone decided to offer them a part of the warehouse of his boot factory for their weekly worship. For some years this acted as their official place of worship, until finally Benjamin sold a piece of land in Canal Street, Wigston, on which was built the neat and inviting chapel where Church of Christ services and meetings took place for decades to come.

But let's just go back for a moment to Sarah Hannah, my great grandmother. She was a woman of some beauty, tall and graceful

with flowing auburn hair often tied up in a bun. Presumably highly capable too, as she steadily rose to a managerial position at the boot and shoe factory. Within a few years, she and Benjamin Toone junior, son of the owner, had fallen in love and were married. They built a house in Glen Parva that they named "Arrochar Lodge", and in 1897, they



*Small cameo painting of Sarah Hannah in middle age*

had a daughter, Irene. When Irene was just



*The Standard 6 Saloon replaced the old Argyll, tired after her wartime duties*



*THE HALL IN 1919*

*In porch, L to R: Joyce, Rene, Betsy, Tom, Edith  
On tricycle: Bob*

nine, and her step-sister Edith now 25 and married, their mother Sarah Hannah died. Relevant to this story is the fact that Rene, as we all knew her, went on to marry Billy Boulter, he of the VC award referred to earlier. Tom and Edith moved into Arrochar Lodge in order to help Benjamin Junior,

known to the family as Uncle Pa, to look after young Rene.

Tom Birkett had joined Toone & Black, who, during the war years, had been making boots for the troops, and a few years later a separate business, B. Toone & Co, opened up in Desborough in Northamptonshire, Tom becoming Governing Director. The business was a success, manufacturing a high class of shoes and boots for boys and young men under the name "Little Duke." Tom was very proud of his distinctive brand, and my brother Martin remembers as a small boy his grandfather telling him how he'd write the signature "Little Duke" with his own pen, before it was transferred in gold to the instep of every shoe. And also my Father as a young boy, remembered walking in Leicester with

his father, and how, as another boy passed, he would exclaim: “Ah, there goes another pair of “Little Dukes!”

The business thrived, and the family moved to Wigston Hall, in Long Street, South Wigston. It was a large, distinguished 18th century house with eleven bedrooms, set in five acres of gardens and paddock, with pond, bluebell wood, orchard and coach house. They were happy times, the lawn tennis court in regular use, the whole family enjoying a game.

Martin recalls a visit to Wigston Hall as a small child during the War when he would run excitedly into the breakfast room to find “Gampy,” only to be greeted by a big ‘shush!’ His grandfather was sitting beside his old fiddle radio listening intently to a broadcast from Germany by the hated traitor

‘Lord Haw Haw’ as he listed the names of British soldiers taken prisoner by the Germans that week, followed by his regular denunciation of Winston Churchill and the British war effort.

Martin also recounted the fun he had with his grandfather as a very small boy



*Tom and Edith*

during wartime, which included trips to the ‘pictures’ to see the Melody Time films such as ‘Little Johnnie Appleseed’ and ‘Little Toot’. After one such outing, they had arrived home and ‘Gampy’ was giving him his bath. Little Martin put his head under the water and blew bubbles and was delighted when his grandfather told him he was The Singing Whale.

On another occasion, in the middle of a night time thunder storm, Martin, aged four, stood in his pyjamas with his grandparents in the porch as they watched a fighter plane that had been struck by lightning, the flames lighting up the sky. It crashed just a few streets away, and a story was told that a shocked neighbour discovered the severed head of the Polish pilot in her living room. Behind the grand piano.

There was a small workshop on the top floor of Wigston Hall where, during the war, Tom made jigsaw puzzles and little wooden cars and buses and army ambulances for the grandchildren.

Tom also loved to devise riotous games, one being a ‘Pirate’s Feast’ to be held on the top landing of the grand staircase. He affixed a pulley to the ceiling and attached a long rope to it, which dropped three floors to the hallway below. This was tied to a large hamper into which Miss Lewis the cook and Marie, the little maid, carefully loaded the feast. Everyone sang “Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum” as the hamper, swinging wildly, was slowly hauled to the top floor, while all the little pirates went scrambling up the three flights to the top, where the ‘Pirate’s Feast’



*Tom on the beach at Middleton-on-Sea with, left to right, his younger son Peter, daughter Joyce and her son Tony and daughter Jennifer*

then commenced.

Martin was taught to play the guitar by his grandfather, including how to move up from the key of C to the key of G and back again. When in Glasgow on one occasion, Tom

stopped a busker in the street and, asking to borrow his guitar for a second, demonstrated to the man how to improvise the base notes. Whether the grateful busker's takings increased after this episode wasn't reported.

On another occasion, Tom had an important meeting in Glasgow and was due to catch an early morning train from Leicester station. After enquiring of the stationmaster the time of the train, he went into the station café for a cup of tea. A train pulled in but not at the specified time. After a longish wait, Tom went once more to the stationmaster, asking about the delay, to be told that the previous train was in fact the Glasgow train. There would not be another until later that afternoon. Somewhat agitated, Tom stated that he would now miss his meeting in Scotland, which was rather important.

The concerned stationmaster, aware the problem was of his doing, made a phone call, and pulled a few strings, with spectacular results: a special train would be laid on to

take Thomas Birkett Esquire to Glasgow!

The story was reported in the Leicester Mercury, with the headline: 'THE BIRKETT SPECIAL'. How times have changed!

Following the second world war, the 'Little Duke' business was in decline. Times were tough, people were rebuilding their lives after six years of fear, uncertainty and hardship. There was rationing, and the whole country was feeling the pinch. So the once thriving shoe business was sold.

Tom was also beginning to find the big old Hall more and more expensive to run, and in 1949 it too was sold, and a few years later was acquired by a developer who wanted to demolish it to build flats. Today it would have been Grade I listed, and hence protected. The local paper reported: "Eighteenth century

## He Served Red Cross With Own Ambulance

A FORMER managing director of B. Toone and Co., Desborough, Mr. Thomas Birkett (85), died at his home, 12, Wimbledon Close, The Downs, Wimbledon, after a short illness.

Mr. Birkett, formerly of Wigston Hall, spent his school-days divided between America and this country.

He settled in South Wigston at the beginning of the century and became a junior executive with Toone and Black — later J. W. Black and Co.

In the First World War he drove an ambulance which he bought and equipped himself—serving with the Red Cross in France. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre for gallantry.

When the last war broke out, Mr. Birkett served in an ambulance unit of the Civil Defence at Wigston Magna.

Wigston Hall comes tumbling down”

Later, when in his eighties and retired to Wimbledon to be near his daughter Joyce and family, Tom would entertain residents of a nearby home for elderly blind folk, his trusty

old guitar, now somewhat battered, sounding the lovely chords as he sang the old songs, and those he had learnt as a boy in St. Louis. He used to like referring to his audience as the “Old Folk,” though he was probably older than nearly all of them.

Loved by everyone who knew him for his gentle kindness and compassion, Thomas Birkett died in Wimbledon in 1965, aged eighty four, 3 years after he lost his beloved Edith. His memory and his music live on as my brother Martin and his daughter Hannah in Tunbridge Wells, and our cousin Andrew and I and our little choir in St. Albans, guitars and ukuleles in hand, continue his tradition, singing and playing his songs, and bringing smiles to old, tired faces in many care homes for the elderly and infirm.

# THE NEW SPIRIT IN INDUSTRY

Very great interest is being shown in the Profit Sharing Scheme which we have inaugurated for the benefit of the employees of B. Toone & Co. Every post brings us letters of enquiry and congratulations from firms who see along these lines the hope of happier and more stable conditions, and the solution of many of the difficulties with which commerce is faced.

There is undoubtedly in this country at the present time a growing body of employers who welcome the prospect of a new and better era in industry with improved conditions, and the possibility of a wider and fuller life for their co-workers . . . we are wholehearted in our



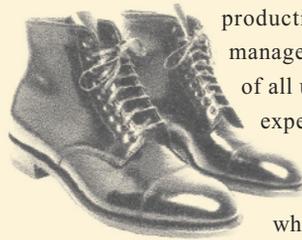
Tom

support of these ideals, and the present scheme is a sincere attempt to lead the way to their practical application.

The growing demand for "Little Duke" boys' footwear has made a large extension of our business inevitable, and we are incorporating in

the reconstruction several features of interest. We have always believed in paying the best wages possible and are now introducing piece work in all departments, holding that to be the most satisfactory method.

It is my conviction that the future holds a severe testing time for industry, and the old systems will not stand the strain; but specialised production, keen scientific management, the elimination of all unnecessary waste and expense, and a harmonious working together, will make success certain, whatever conditions may come. If industry leaders everywhere will move forward in the right spirit to meet the new day, this dear old Britain of ours will maintain her stability, and increasing prosperity and happiness will come to her people.



*Thomas Birkett*

Synopsis of article published in  
Northamptonshire Journal of Commerce,  
February 1920

by Thomas Birkett, Governing Director B. Toone & Co,  
boot and shoe manufacturers, Desborough.



**Little Duke**  
THE  
ARISTOCRAT  
OF BOYS' FOOTWEAR

Put your trust in the name  
"LITTLE DUKE"

BEHIND the brand is a well-organized institution which is second to none in the world to-day, and a special organization whose sole interest is to produce boy's footwear as good as it is possible to make it.

"Little Duke" has been publicly tested for reliability, and has proved our greater worth. The brand is present at the feet of boy's masters - but absent from the feet of school boys, and school boys, but unfortunately, our best quality "Little Duke" shoes are unobtainable in most schools as a consequence of their approval by the teachers of England. This is due to a breach.

Send every pair of "Little Duke" shoes to the manufacturer's guarantee of responsibility. The name is better than any other "Little Duke" the name has in your shoe department.

**B. TOONE & CO. LTD.**  
"LITTLE DUKE" SHOES  
DUNDEE, NORTON



Look for the mark  
"Little Duke"  
on the sole, the top  
band, and the side  
- the mark which  
Guarantees  
dependability  
in boy's footwear



**Little Duke**



Your boy will be proud to wear "Little Duke" Footwear. He knows they are the highest grade made, and that in addition to being always comfortable, they carry the most but unobtainable style which characterizes

**The Aristocrat of Boys' Footwear**

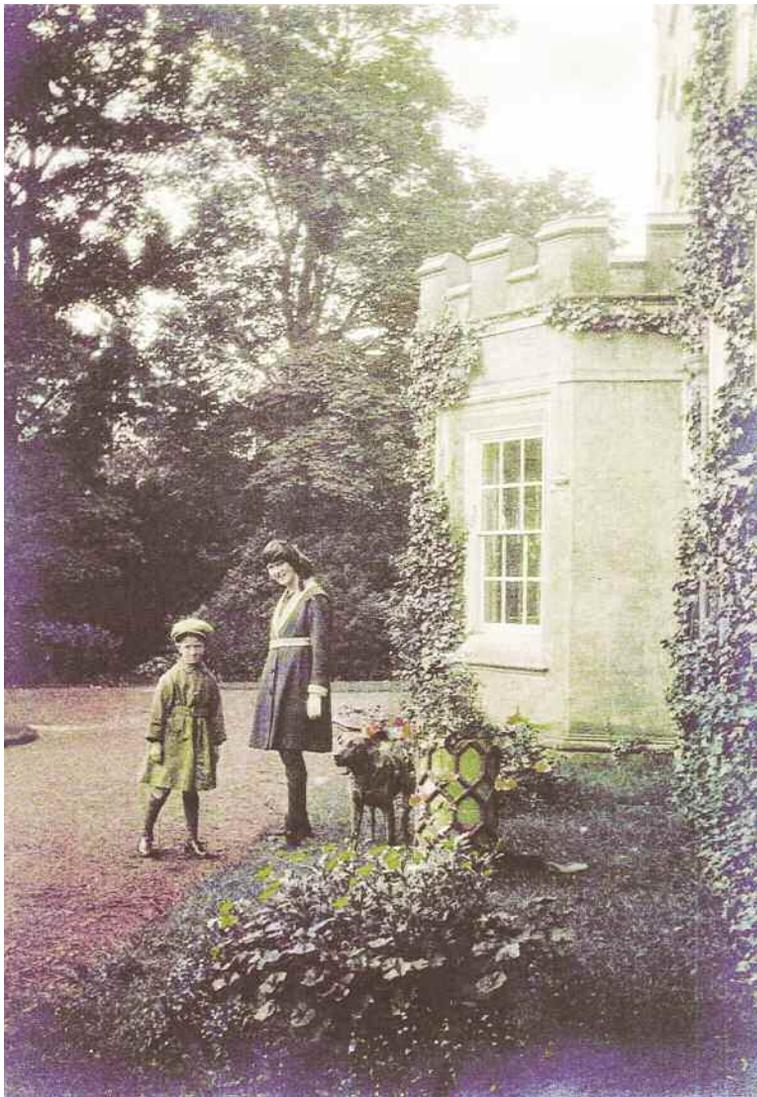
which you will be sure that nothing is so strong that although they are not too thick they are bound to maintain the look of unobtainable boy's shoes.



**A MOST INTERESTING BOOKLET FOR BOYS FREE.**

Every boy is interested in athletics, and if from desire of their feet they get to know about it, they will be sure to get a booklet on "THE LITTLE DUKE'S" which is a most interesting and valuable booklet, and a guide to a glorious life of living better and what they mean.

SEND A POSTCARD TODAY IN LITTLE DUKE MARK, DUNDEE, NORTON.



*Joyce Birkett, later  
to become Lady Black,  
with her brother  
Bob and family dog  
at Wigston Hall*



*John Birkett marries Ada Hindle. Tom, best man, next to John. George and Betsey stand at far left*

So we come to the end of Tom's story. A story of a life of loving dedication: to his God, to his family and friends, to his wartime duties, to his business employees, to his poetry and hymns – and to his wonderful repertoire of songs. His guitar was close by throughout his life – when as a boy in America's Deep South, when serving in The Great War in Northern France, and

during the many hours he spent as a prison visitor and entertainer to the elderly. It was with him at every family gathering, and in his old age in Wimbledon, when he'd sit beside his now severely disabled Edith, crooning his adoration in the little love songs he'd composed for her.

The battered old guitar had one final role. In the hands of grandson Martin, it

accompanied us as we sang to Tom the night he lay dying, favourites such as "Little Mister Baggy Breeches, I love you," "Down in the South where the sly ole possum, climb up de sycamore tree . . ." "My Hannah Baby, whose sweet baby am you" and many more.

Here was a man who knew everything there is to know about Love.

Pure Gold.



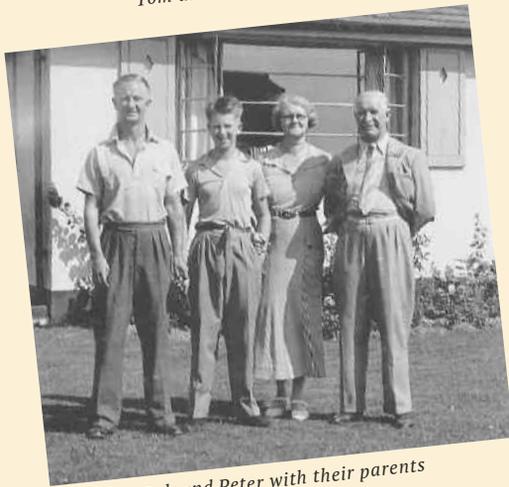
*Young Bob jamming with his father*



*Tom and son Peter*



*Joyce with brother Bob and daughter Jennifer*



*Bob and Peter with their parents*



*Bob Birkett's wedding to Joan Shuff, Leicester, 1938. From left: Edith Birkett, Tom Birkett, bridesmaid Mary Tapley, bridesmaid Jennifer Black (now fit and well and in her eighties) best man Harry Lees, Bob and Joan, page Tony Black, bridesmaid Pam Shuff, Rupert Shuff, bridesmaid Peggy Starbuck, Gladys Shuff*



## Down Memory Lane



A CLASSIC pose of a couple sitting in the living room of their home is our Memory Lane picture this week.

They are Mr. and Mrs. Tom Birkett of Wigston Hall, Long Street, which has long since been demolished to make way for the Elizabeth Court flats.

The photograph belongs to Mr. E. Whait of Oakleigh Avenue, Glen Parva who remembers them well. He writes: "Many of the older generation will no doubt remember these two lovely people. During their lifetime, both were stalwart members of Canal Street Church of Christ, Canal Street, South Wigston, where Mr. Birkett was an elder.

"Their interests were many and varied and concerned the people of Wigston."



*Martin Birkett keeping up with tradition*

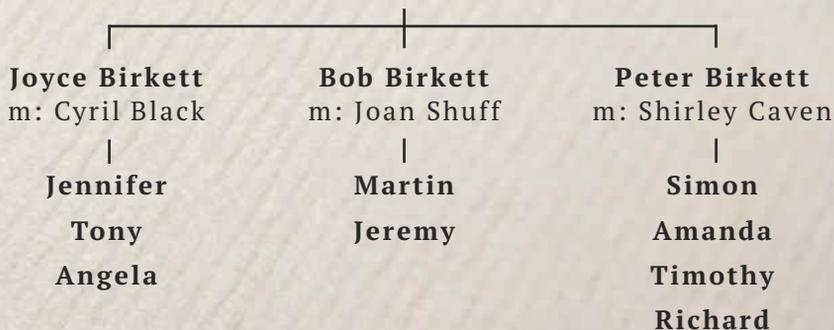


*Senior family member Jennifer with son Stephen, right, and her cousins Martin, left, and Jeremy Spring 2017*

*At the time of writing, Tom and Edith's progeny runs to five generations, but sadly there are far too many of us to sensibly record in this modest volume. I invite the reader to attach a sheet of foolscap to this page, and, commencing with the third generation, following on from the names below, add the name of every family member whose lineage can be traced directly to Thomas Birkett of Wigston as their primogenitor.*

*First person who delivers a complete and accurate record to the author receives a magnum of Prosecco Spumante.*

### **Thomas & Edith Birkett**



## THANKS

Thanks are due to several people for their help with compiling and producing this little book.

To my brother Martin, who conjured up so many happy childhood memories of the times spent with our Grandfather.

To Lisa McQuillan at the Library of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Euston, and to Jess Jenkins at Leicester Records Office in Wigston.

To Derek Seaton, local historian and writer, for his wise advice, and for sourcing valuable information relating to Tom's business affairs.

And finally, to Nick Allen for putting it all together with boundless enthusiasm and endless patience.

JB March 2018

He grew up in the 1890s in America's Deep South, cultivating his unswerving Christian faith and, influenced by African American and gospel music, his love of singing.

In 1916, with his converted ambulance, he joined the Red Cross on the Western Front, tending and evacuating French wounded. During evening lulls in the shelling, he'd help raise spirits, playing his guitar and singing to the tired troops. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Between the wars, he headed a successful manufacturing business making boots for boys, the welfare of his workforce always paramount.

He lived a long and happy family life, writing poetry and composing songs, his old guitar always to hand.

My grandfather: Thomas Birkett of Wigston.



RUPERT  
SHUFF

PUBLISHING

2018