



**A Burial Service for**

**Private Harry James Birch  
16<sup>th</sup> Battalion The Cheshire Regiment**

**&**

**Four unknown soldiers of unknown regiments**

**15.00 hours 21 May 2025  
CWGC Poelcapelle British Cemetery, Belgium**

**Service conducted by the Reverend Gary Birch CF  
Senior Chaplain Headquarters South West**



**Private Harry James Birch**

**1888 – 22 October 1917**

Harry James Birch was born in the Liverpool area in 1888, one of ten children of Alfred and Anna Birch. He was baptised at St. John's Church in Waterloo, Sefton on the 25 March 1888, and grew up in that same area. Prior to the war he worked as a Carrier on the local railways, particularly at Waterloo station. In 1915 Harry married Helen Josephine Norris, and in February 1916, at the age of 28, he joined the Army. He was originally posted to the Army Reserve, before joining the training depot of the King's Liverpool Regiment in December 1916. He was then transferred to the 16th Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment, arriving in France the following March.

When Birch joined them, the 16th Bn Cheshire Regiment were in the front line near Maissemy in the Somme area. They stayed on the Somme until mid-October when they moved up to an area south of Houthulst Forest in Belgium to take part in the Third Battle of Ypres. On 21 October 1917 the battalion moved into position for an attack the following day. At dawn on the 22 October they attacked, finding the going extremely hard over the shell-damaged and sodden ground. Whilst they did initially make some ground, the conditions and counter-attacks later in the day meant that by nightfall they had withdrawn back to their original line. Harry James Birch was one of 120 men of the 16th Battalion Cheshire Regiment who died on the 22 October 1917. A news report about his death claimed that he had died whilst trying to carry in

wounded comrades under heavy shell fire. After the war almost all of the 120 were missing, with 110 being listed on the Tyne Cot Memorial.

In September 2018, roadworks in the Poelkapelle-Hulsthoutseweg area uncovered the remains of five British soldiers. All are thought to have died on or around 22 October 1917. A leather belt with Pte Birch's name and service number scratched onto it helped to identify him – and DNA provided by his great-nephew confirmed this. Sadly, despite extensive research, it has not been possible to identify the four men found alongside Birch. Artefacts found with them indicate that they could have been other men of the Cheshire Regiment, or they could have been with the Lancashire Fusiliers, the Royal Engineers, the Royal Garrison Artillery, or the West Yorkshire Regiment. In total 2068 men lost their lives in Belgium between 22 and 24 October 1917 – more than 1000 of them remain missing.

## **The Cemetery**

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Poelcapelle British Cemetery was made after the Armistice when graves were brought in from the surrounding battlefields and several smaller cemeteries. There are over 7,400 Commonwealth service personnel of the First World War buried in the cemetery, of whom more than 6,000 remain unidentified. The five casualties being laid to rest today, including Private Harry James Birch, were recovered from these former battlefields.

## **Call to Worship**

Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

*John 11.25.26*

We are gathered here in this place of remembrance to honour our fallen from conflicts past.

Today we remember with thanksgiving Private Harry James Birch, alongside four unknown soldiers who, like so many others, answered the call of their country, served with honour and ultimately gave their lives in the service of their nation.

It is right that we finally give them the dignity and respect that they are due and commend them to the mercy and grace of God our redeemer and judge, in the hope and life given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us.

As we do so, let us also offer ourselves in His service that His will may be done on earth as it is in heaven and that His kingdom of justice and peace be established everywhere.

## **Bidding Prayer**

Let us recall the presence of God, the Father of all mankind, maker and sustainer of all that is, whose purposes are good, whose love is never withheld and whose mercy never passes away. We call to mind His faithfulness in times of darkness and despair.

We remember before Him, Private Birch, and our brothers whose names are known only to God, and all who have served in the Armed Forces of our nation; who counted service to others greater than service of self, and who gave their lives in battle.

Merciful Father, hear our prayers and comfort us; renew our trust in your Son whom you raised from the dead; strengthen our faith that all who have died in the love of Christ will share in His resurrection; who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

**Reading:** I went to see the soldiers – by Kenny Martin

*Read by Sergeant Dominic Masters, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, The Mercian Regiment*

I went to see the soldiers, row on row, on row,  
And wondered about each so still, their badges all on show.  
What brought them here, what life before  
Was like for each of them?  
What made them angry, laugh, or cry,  
These soldiers, boys and men.

Some so young, some older still, a bond more close than brothers  
These men have earned and shared a love, that's not like any others  
They trained as one, they fought as one  
They shared their last together  
That bond endures, that love is true  
And will be, now and ever.

I could not know, how could I guess, what choices each had made,  
Of how they came to soldiering, what part each one had played?  
But here they are and here they'll stay,  
Each one silent and in place,  
Their headstones line up row on row  
They guard this hallowed place.

## **Gospel Reading John 14:1-6 (NRSV)**

*Read by a representative of the British Embassy*

Jesus said to His disciples; "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going". Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way"? Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me".

**Reading:** To the unknown soldier, a thank you – Anon.

*Read by Sergeant Martin Kelsall, 1st Bn, The Mercian Regiment*

I do not know your name,  
although you were a mother's son.  
She must have waited patiently for some word from you,  
and for your safe return.

Your race, politics, creed - they matter not to me,  
As you, and the woman who let you go,  
sacrificed everything for my liberty.

A prayer of thanks I say for you, and for the mother who lost a son,  
and for the rights that I have, that your sacrifice for me won.

## **Address**

*Reverend Gary Birch*

## **The Committal**

Our days are like the grass;  
we flourish like a flower of the field;  
when the wind goes over it, it is gone  
and its place will know it no more.  
But the merciful goodness of the Lord endures for ever and ever.

We entrust Private Birch and these four soldiers whose names are known to God alone, to God's eternal keeping. We commit their earthly remains to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **The Exhortation**

*Read by Sergeant Dominic Masters, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, The Mercian Regiment*

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them.  
**We will remember them.**

## **The Last Post**

*Cpl Jason Pickin, The Band of the Mercian Regiment*

## **Silence**

## **Reveille**

## **Kohima Epitaph**

*Read by Sergeant Martin Kelsall, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, The Mercian Regiment*

When you go home tell them of us and say:

'For your tomorrow, we gave our today.'

## **Laying of Wreaths**

## **Prayers**

Eternal God, in your wisdom and grace you have given us joy through the lives of your departed servants. We thank you for the lives of Private Birch, our fallen comrades and for those who loved them. We thank you for your goodness and mercy that followed them all the days of their life and their ultimate faithfulness to the tasks to which you had called them.

**Amen**



Almighty God, protect all who serve in the Forces of The King; strengthen us in danger and temptation, give us courage and loyalty, that we may remain true to the highest traditions of our profession; and keep us steadfast when faced with the perils of action in war; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

Gracious God, who has revealed your only Son as the resurrection and the life; raise us, we pray, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness that, when we depart from this life, we may rest in Him, and at the last may receive the blessing; Well done good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord. Grant this, O merciful Father, through Jesus Christ, our mediator and redeemer.

**Amen.**

### **Collect of The Cheshire Regiment**

*Read by Peter Gresty, The Cheshire Regiment Association*

Almighty God, Lord, and giver of life, nourish, we pray thee, The Cheshire Regiment with thine abundant grace, that, as we wear the oak leaf in token of loyalty and forget not the valour of our fathers, so, being rooted in the love of Christ and of our brethren, we may not fall away in time of temptation but stand fast in the faith, and be strong like the oak for his sake, the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

## **The Lord's Prayer**

Trusting in the compassion of God, let us pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever.  
Amen.**

## **The Blessing**

Support us, O Lord, all the days of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening falls, the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then, Lord, in Your mercy grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at last; through Christ our Lord. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, rest upon you and remain with you and all those you love and for whom you pray, this day and always.

Go forth with hope and seek for peace in the service of God.  
In the name of Christ.  
**Amen.**



The Ministry of Defence, through the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre, is responsible for the research, identification and burial of all British casualties worldwide.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission cares for the graves, memorials, records and memory of the 1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen and women who died during the two World Wars.

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