

# *Burgh Heath Remembers*

*Private Thomas Riches*  
*of 18 Oatlands Road, Burgh Heath*

*7<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment*  
*Served in France*  
*Killed in action, aged 19*



## **SUNDAY 23<sup>rd</sup> APRIL**

at All Saints Church, Banstead

10:50am: a short service of remembrance will be held

11:00am: a church bell will be tolled 100 times

The churchyard flag will be raised to half mast at 7:30am and lowered at 5:30pm

The Battle of Arras is often forgotten, overshadowed by the fighting that took place before it on the Somme and afterwards at Passchendaele. Eight men from Banstead and Burgh Heath were killed in the battle. Thomas was one of two Burgh Heath men to lose their lives on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1917.

*We will remember **each** one*

## *Private Thomas Riches of 18 Oatlands Road, Burgh Heath*

Thomas Henry Riches was born in Burgh Heath on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1897. He was the son of William and Sarah Riches of 9 (later renumbered 18) Oatlands Road.

Thomas went to the Wesleyan School on the Green, starting just before his 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, but later left to go to the Church of England School (now *Chips Folly*) opposite the future site of St Mary's church. Children usually left school at the age of 14 and the older boys who were approaching the end of their education often only attended school part-time, allowing them to start working. In his final year at school, Thomas became a part-time worker at Boots Cash Chemists, who had branches in Epsom and Sutton.

War broke out three years later and Thomas joined the Army at Epsom on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1915, enlisting under the Derby Scheme. He was a few days shy of his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and so was too young to be called up when the Derby Scheme men were mobilised early in 1916. Thomas seems to have taken the Army up on their offer of special training for 18-year-olds and volunteered to join earlier than he had to, beginning his training with the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Depot) Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment between April and July 1916. When Thomas turned 19, he was shipped out to France. Necessity trumped regimental loyalties and he found himself in the 7<sup>th</sup> Border Regiment in January 1917 rather than with the East Surreys.

The Battle of the Somme was over but a new offensive was soon to begin. The Battle of Arras was fought to divert German reserves north so that the French could try and break through on a wide front along the River Aisne, far to the south. The battle began on Easter Monday, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1917, and that day saw the largest gains made from a standing start in the war so far. The Canadians captured Vimy Ridge and the British Third Army smashed through the first two lines of German defences east of Arras. After two days of fighting for control of the *Monchyriegel* switch line, which ran between Feuchy and Wancourt, the British advanced into the village of Monchy-le-Preux, on top of a ridge of high ground that ran between the Scarpe and Cojeul rivers. There the advance halted and the First Battle of the Scarpe came to an end.

The French attack on the Aisne began on 16<sup>th</sup> April. It was a failure, the Germans knew they were coming and were ready for them. The British pressed on with their offensive, hoping to ease the pressure on the French, and as dawn was breaking at 4:45am on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, they renewed their attack on a 9-mile front which centred on Monchy-le-Preux.

Thomas had only been in France for three months when he went into battle for the first time. His battalion was north of Monchy-le-Preux and its objectives were Bayonet and Rifle Trench; they must be taken for the rest of the Brigade's advance to succeed. The 7<sup>th</sup> Borders gained Bayonet Trench but came under intense fire from Rifle Trench (a switch line that connected Bayonet to Halberd Trench) and from the far bank of the River Scarpe. Machine-guns mowed the men down as they advanced over open ground and they were forced to retire or to shelter in shell holes until dark. Thomas was one of the fallen. He was 19.

Like all but one of the other local men who lost their lives in the Battle of Arras, Thomas has no known grave and is commemorated on the Arras Memorial. He is also remembered at St Mary's, at All Saints and on the Roll of Honour in the Burgh Heath War Memorial Hall.