

At The Memorial Stone

Adrian Tilley

I saw them though I know you will doubt it:
The fifteen held 'in grateful memory',
Shuffling into line, looking down at their boots,
Awkward in rough tunics, too big, too small,
Stitched by the resentful fingers of girls
Waiting for the dark factories' hoots.
Belts were pulled tight on skinny waists,
Shoulders sagged with the Lee Enfield weights.
A voice – the assured tone of the squire class –
Called their names; a roll call of the local
Yeomanry: Metherell, Hayman and Holmes,
Murrin, Down, Luscombe and Edworthys,
Local lads who had it all before them.
The names hung in the moth-busy air.
A sharp order, backs straightened, webbing creaked
And eyes now looked beyond the granite stone.
As one they turned and as one they marched off
Down the dark, dripping lane back to their homes
Of silence, low ceilings and blackened hearths
And sleeping strangers barely remembered
By longing hearts.
And did we deserve them?
Have we done our best? Would we make them proud?
I saw them though I know you will doubt it.

Winner of the poetry competition, Celebrating Cicely, 21 June 2014.
The judge commented: *"A beautifully crafted and thought-provoking poem. The poet has given us a haunting image of those men of Bow who are remembered in St. Bartholomew's churchyard. 'At The Memorial Stone' is worthy of inclusion in any respected WW1 poetry anthology."*