

# John Robert Thornton (1895 – 1959)

John Robert Thornton was born in Farnhill and was the son of a boatman who worked on the canal.

When John was 16 he was working as a doffer in a cotton mill and later he too became a boatman.

Serving with the Machine Gun Corps during WW1, he was injured at the Battle of Messines in 1917.

After the end of the war, John returned to his job on the canal and married in 1921. He and his wife had three children.

John re-joined the army in 1923, serving for four years.

He and his family lived for a time in Skipton but returned to Farnhill where he died in 1959.

No Photo Available

## Pre-war life

John Robert Thornton was born in Farnhill on 17<sup>th</sup> February 1895 and baptised at St. Andrew's Kildwick six weeks later. He was the second child and only son of Walter Thornton, a canal boatman on the Leeds – Liverpool canal, and Dora (nee Hill) who was originally from Brimington, near Chesterfield.

The 1901 census recorded the family living in The Arbour. In addition to John there were two daughters: Hilda (aged 8) and Doris (aged 1). A third daughter, Ada, had been born in 1897 but died less than a year later. The family was completed with the birth of two further girls: Hannah, born in 1903; and Gladys, born in 1905.

John's mother, Dora, died in September 1907 and this may have precipitated a house move for the family from The Arbour to Kirkgate, which is where they were reported as living on the 1911 census. John, aged sixteen, was recorded as working as a doffer in a cotton mill, although sometime before the end of 1915 he would take up his father's occupation as a canal boatman.

CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, 1911.									
<i>Before writing on this Schedule please read the Examples and the Instructions given on the other side of the paper, as well as the headings of the Columns. The entries should be written in Ink.</i>									
<i>The contents of the Schedule will be treated as confidential. Strict care will be taken that no information is disclosed with regard to individual persons. The returns are not to be used for proof of age, as in connection with Old Age Pensions, or than the preparation of Statistical Tables.</i>									
NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP to Head of Family	AGE (last Birthday) and SEX	PARTICULARS as to MARRIAGE	PROFESSION or OCCUPATION of Persons aged ten years and upwards.	BIRTHPLACE of every person.				
1 Walter Thornton	Head	43	widower	canal Boatman	Skipton Yorkshire				
2 John Robert Thornton	Son	16	Single	Doffer Cotton Mill	Kildwick Yorkshire				
3 Hilda Thornton	Daughter	18	Single	House Keeper	Kildwick Yorkshire				
4 Doris Thornton	Daughter	11		School	Kildwick Yorkshire				
5 Hannah Thornton	Daughter	7		School	Kildwick Yorkshire				
6 Gladys Thornton	Daughter	5		School	Kildwick Yorkshire				

Extract from the 1911 census return for the Thornton family, Kirkgate, Farnhill  
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## WW1 service

John Robert Thornton attested his willingness to serve in the armed forces on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1915, swearing his oath in front of local magistrate James Bairstow at Crosshills (the same day as another of the Farnhill WW1 Volunteers, Harry Walmsley).

As was usual for men who attested, he was initially accepted into the general army reserve before being assigned to the 11<sup>th</sup> (Reserve) battalion of the Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) Regiment (Private, no. 18446) on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1916. He then underwent four months of training before being transferred to the Machine Gun Corps (MGC) on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1916 (Private, no. 35084).

John's name was recorded on Farnhill Methodist Chapel's Roll of Honour, unveiled on 9<sup>th</sup> July 1916 (see later).

On 31<sup>st</sup> December 1916 a memorial service was held in Farnhill Methodist Chapel for Farnhill WW1 Volunteer Harry Walmsley, who had died of wounds earlier that month. At the end of the service Rev. Woodfield read out a "list of those connected with the church at Farnhill who had gone to fight for King and country" (Keighley News, 6/1/1917). The list included John Robert Thornton, who had been sent over to France with 195 Company MGC on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1916.

195 Company MGC joined the British army's 25<sup>th</sup> Division which, together with other British and ANZAC units, took part in the Battle of Messines in June 1917. The target of the offensive was the Messines Ridge, a natural stronghold southeast of Ypres. The attack started, famously, with the simultaneous detonation of 19 underground mines, totalling 600 tons of explosive, underneath the German lines at 3am on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup>. The offensive continued until the 14<sup>th</sup>.

It is highly likely that John Robert Thornton participated in this battle as on the 11<sup>th</sup> he was hospitalised with gunshot wounds to the back.

His father was notified of the incident with the standard sombrely worded despatch from the War Office that began "I regret to have to inform you ..." and ended "I am to express to you the sympathy and regret of the Army Council." In this case, however, it seems that the concern was misplaced as John left hospital on the 17<sup>th</sup> and returned to his unit.

No. 90/64-340

35084

(If replying, please quote  
above No.)

MACHINE GUN CORPS. Record Office,

91 York St SW,

25. 6. 1917.

SIR OR MADAM,

I regret to have to inform you that a report has been received  
from the War Office to the effect that (No.) 35084

(Rank) Ota

(Name) John Robert Thornton

(Regiment) MACHINE GUN CORPS.

has been wounded, and was admitted to

on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of June, 1917. The nature  
of the wound is not stated

I am to express to you the sympathy and regret of the Army Council.

Any further information received in this office as to his  
condition will be at once notified to you.

Yours faithfully,

*W. J. Jones*

Capt. for Colonel;

W/c Machine Gun Records,

Officer in charge of Records.

IMPORTANT.—Any change of address should be immediately notified to this Office.

John Robert Thornton's "I regret to have to inform you ..." letter – June 1917

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John was hospitalised again on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1918 (reason unknown) and on his discharge was immediately given leave in the UK. He was supposed to return to duty on 24<sup>th</sup> December but overstayed his leave by four days – for which he was deducted five days pay.

Regimental Number) 35084 Pte Thonlin			Attested _____				
and Name							
Place	Date of Offence	Rank	Case of Drunkenness	OFFENCE	Names of Witnesses	PUNISHMENT awarded	Date of award, or of order dispensing with trial
Belton Park	30/10/16	Pte		When on Active Service, overstaying his pass from 2 am. until 2 am 31/10/16 1 day	Sgt Smith Sgt Clarke	Deprived 3 days pay.	3/11/16
Field	24-12-18	Pte		See: O. A. S. Overstaying his leave to U.K. from 6-30 a.m. 24-12-18. to 6-30 a.m. 28-12-18. 4 Days.	Documentary	5 Days F.P. 702.	2-1-19

Extract from John's Regimental conduct sheet - overstaying his leave, Xmas 1918  
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John was returned to the UK on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1919 and was finally transferred to the reserves on 24<sup>th</sup> May.

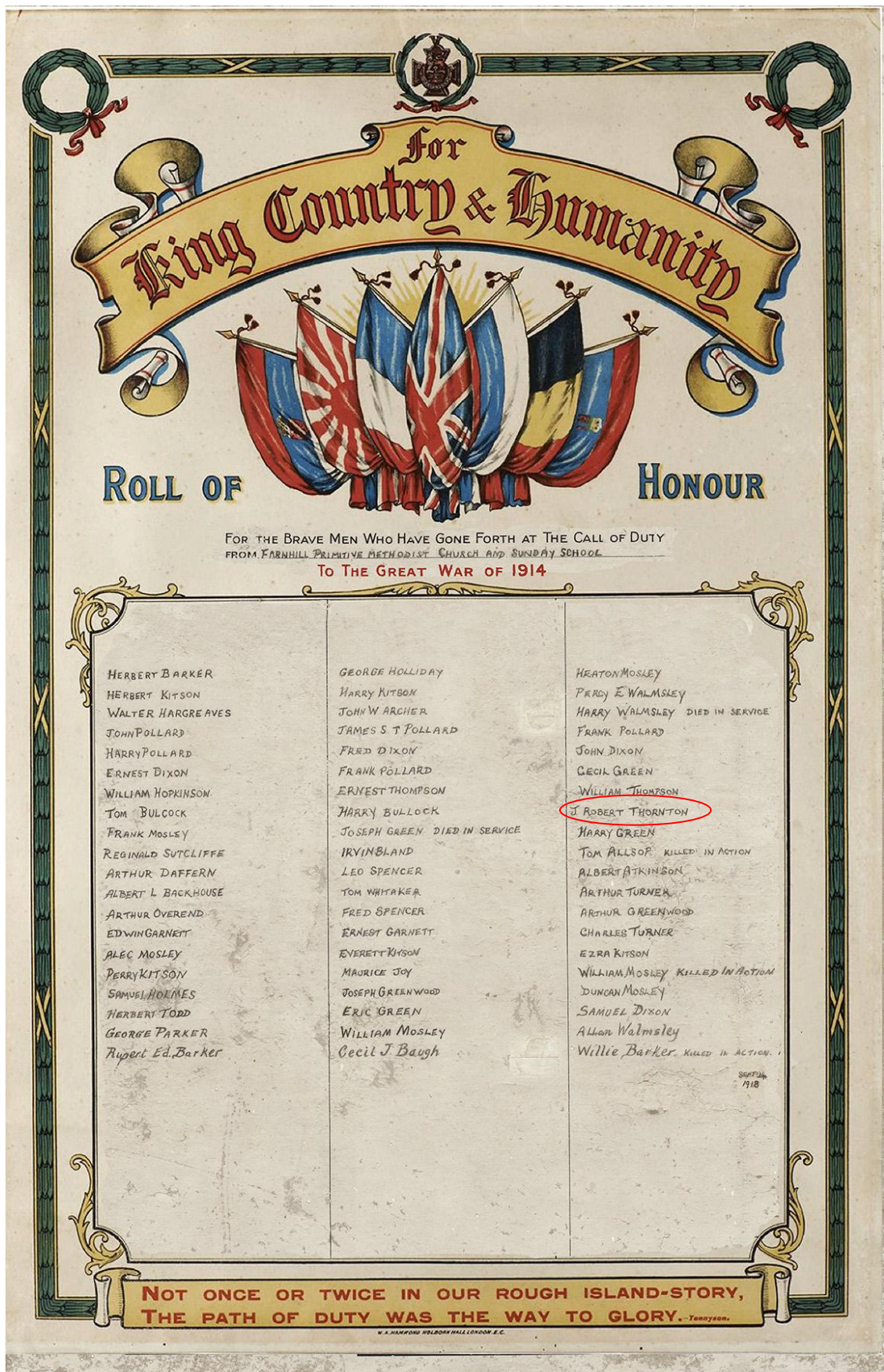
Name.	Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
THORNTON John. R.	M G C	Pte	35084
Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.
VICTORY	M G C 101	25	
BRITISH	do	do	
STAR			
Theatre of War first served in			
Date of entry therein			

K. 1230

John Robert Thornton's WW1 Medal Card  
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It would not be the end of his military career.





The digitally-restored Farnhill Methodist Roll of Honour (1916)

## Post-war life

After the war John returned to the family home at 3 Kirkgate, Farnhill, and to his old job as a canal boatman.

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 1920 John married 21 year-old Carrie Foster, of Settle, at Christ Church Skipton. The marriage was witnessed by John's oldest sister, Hilda, and by Carrie's youngest brother, Harry.

On the marriage certificate John gave his address as Hird's Yard, close to the canal basin in Skipton, although he was still registered on the electoral roll in Farnhill.

The following year, on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1921, the couple's first child Gladys was born in Settle. A second child, Charlie, was also born in Settle, in 1925, by which time both John and Carrie were on the electoral roll in Skipton.

The 1921 census records the family living at Well Hill, Settle. At this time John was out of work but gave his previous occupation as Labourer for a limestone quarrying company based in Horton-in-Ribblesdale.

On 27<sup>th</sup> June 1923 John rejoined the army, signing on for a four year term with 6<sup>th</sup> battalion Duke of Wellington's Regiment (Private, no. 4606760). He gave his address as Waller Place, Skipton, and his occupation as a labourer.

In any subsequent correspondence please quote the following number:—

ARMY OFFICE  
Army Form B. 104-21.  
19 JUL 1923  
MG/2129

**MEMORANDUM.**

From Officer i/c Infantry Records,  
York. (Station).

To Officer i/c M. & C. Records,  
Isleworth. (Station).

18 JUL 1923 191

Please attach for custody in this office the original attestation of the man re-enlisted into described in the margin, who was transferred from the 6<sup>th</sup> Batt. Duke of Wellington's Regt. on the 27-6-1923. Army No 4606760

Rank 35084.  
Thornley. J. R.  
M. & C.

Officer i/c Records.

P2312 40,000 5/19 HWV(cP538) Forms/B104-21/6

Request to the MGC from 6<sup>th</sup> battalion Duke of Wellington's Regt. for John's service documents – June 1923  
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**Note:** The photograph of the event shown above shows not only Gladys Thornton but also children of three other Farnhill WW1 Volunteers: Kathie Kitson, daughter of Albert Kitson; Winnie Smith, daughter of Ben Thornton Smith; and Doris and Norman Ward, children of William Ward.

By the time the register was taken to enable WW2 ration cards to be issued in September 1939, the family were living at 15 Starkey Lane, Farnhill, and John was employed – once again – as a boatman. The house move had taken place in 1934 but quite when John resumed his former occupation is not known.

Keith Bunnett, who lived in the village during WW2, remembers the two Thornton boys living in Starkey Lane. He recalls that John operated a barge on the canal but believes that he gave it up in 1941.

In 1944 Gladys Thornton married Jack Gaskell. The couple set up home with Jack's family at Bridge House, Kildwick.

In 1949 Charlie Thornton married Mabel Binns. They set up home at 3 Spring Gardens, Cowling.

In 1955 Clifford Thornton married Mollie Smith. They set up home at 8 Jacques Grove, Silsden.

John Robert Thornton died, of heart failure, at home, on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1959, at the age of 64. He was cremated at Skipton crematorium and his name entered in the Book of Remembrance.



Entry in Skipton crematorium Book of Remembrance

## Postscript

After John's death, Carrie Thornton continued to live at 15 Starkey Lane until she died on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1975.

All three of John and Carrie's children had children of their own and it is likely that there are descendants still living in the local area.



## John Robert Thornton – a life in summary

**Born:** 17/2/1895, Farnhill  
**Baptised:** 29/3/1895, Kildwick  
**Died:** 31/7/1959                      **Aged:** 64  
**Home address:** 15 Starkey Lane, Farnhill

### Parents

**Father:** Walter; bapt. 21/4/1867, Skipton; d. 4/10/1929, Farnhill  
**Mother:** Dora (Theodora) (nee Hill); b. 1874, Brimington, near Chesterfield;  
bapt. 19/4/1877, Brimington; d. September 1907, Farnhill  
**Married:** 1891, Skipton (Registration district)

### Siblings

Hilda Hill; b. 1/4/1893, Farnhill; m. John Simpson, 1921, Skipton (Registration district)  
d. 1965, Staincliffe (Registration district)  
Ada; b. 25/2/1897, Farnhill; d. January 1898, Farnhill  
Doris; b. 12/9/1899, Farnhill; d. 1976, Keighley (Registration district)  
Hannah; b. 8/11/1903, Farnhill; m. William R. Brown, 1941, Keighley (Registration district)  
Gladys; b. 23/11/1905, Farnhill

### Relationship to other volunteers

None known.

### WW1 service

**Attested:** 11/12/1915, Crosshills  
**Service started:** 26/1/1916  
**Regt.:** Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) Regiment (Private, no. 18446)  
195 Company, Machine Gun Corps (Private, no. 35084)  
**Medals:** British War Medal, Victory Medal  
**Home address:** Kirkgate, Farnhill

### Marriage

**Wife:** Carrie Foster; b. 20/4/1898, Settle (Registration district); d. 11/11/1975, Farnhill  
**Date:** 14/2/1920, at Christ Church, Skipton

## Children

Gladys; b. 22/2/1921, Settle; m. Jack H. Gaskell, 20/7/1944, Skipton (Registration district)

Charlie; b. 1925, Settle (Registration district); m. Mabel Binns, 1949, Staincliffe (Registration district)

Clifford; b. 1930; m. Mollie Smith, 1955, Staincliffe (Registration district)

