

AA members and their families from across the world who come to England often make a point of visiting Winchester. They explore, and admire, the cathedral. They search the graveyard for the famous stone - for they like to see and read the familiar inscription for themselves. And they may take a little time to reflect on the gift of sobriety, on universal goodwill towards comrades, and on the twist of fate which joined the stories of two young soldiers - Bill Wilson of Alcoholics Anonymous, and Thomas Thetcher, the Hampshire Grenadier.

The tombstone that Bill Wilson saw in 1918 was the copy of the 1764 original (which had unfortunately been destroyed) erected in 1802. In 1966 it was taken for safekeeping to the Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum in Serles House, Southgate Street - where it can still be seen by visitors - and replaced by the present updated copy, also based on the 1764 original.



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The full text of the inscription on the gravestone reads:

In Memory of
THOMAS THETCHER
a Grenadier in the North Regt
of Hants Militia, who died of a
violent Fever contracted by drinking
Small Beer when hot the 12th of
May 1764. Aged 26 Years.

In grateful remembrance of whose universal good will towards his Comrades, this Stone is placed here at their expence, as a small testimony of their regard and concern. Here sleeps in peace a Hampshire Grenadier, Who caught his death by drinking cold small Beer, Soldiers be wise from his untimely fall And when ye're hot drink Strong or none at all.

This memorial being decay'd was restor'd by the Officers of the Garrison A.D. 1781.

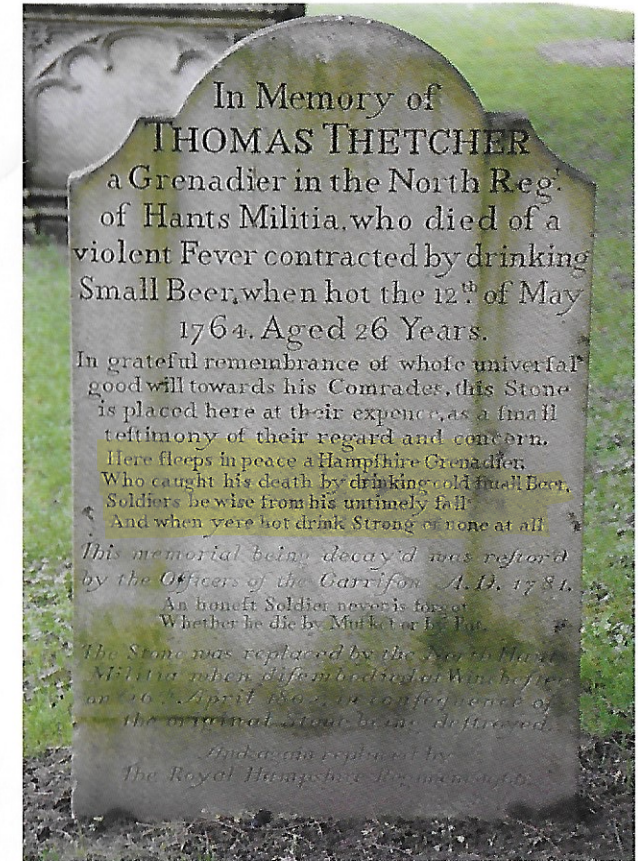
An Honest Soldier never is forgot

Whether he die by Musket or by Pot.

The Stone was replaced by the North Hants Militia when disembodied at Winchester on 26 April 1802, in consequence of the original Stone being destroyed.

And again replaced by
The Royal Hampshire Regiment 1966.

The grave of
Thomas Thetcher
and its
connection with
Alcoholics Anonymous



Although the story is well known to members of Alcoholics Anonymous, the curious link between a gravestone in the churchyard of Winchester Cathedral and AA comes as a surprise to many people.

In 1918, during the First World War, a young American soldier named Bill Wilson happened by chance to visit the Cathedral. He was in England with a US Army unit en route for France, and was temporarily quartered near the city in the enormous army camp north of Morn Hill. Strolling in the churchyard, he noticed one of the tombstones, and something in the inscription caught his eye.

Bill Wilson survived the war, and returned to America. Back in civvy street he became a successful businessman, but his career gradually disintegrated as a result of his drinking. He was eventually told that he would either die from his alcoholism, or have to be locked up permanently.

But, unlikely as it might seem, he and a handful of fellow alcoholics, including an old boyhood drinking companion called Ebby Thacher, discovered a way in which sobriety

could be achieved. Bill became one of the founding members of Alcoholics Anonymous and later, writing a book about his experiences in the hope of offering inspiration to other still suffering alcoholics, he recalled his visit to Winchester Cathedral as a young man, and how the similarity to his friend's name in the inscription on the gravestone had first caught his eye.

'We landed in England. I visited Winchester Cathedral. Much moved, I wandered outside. My attention was caught by a doggerel on an old tombstone: 'Here lies a Hampshire Grenadier / Who caught his death / Drinking cold small beer / A good soldier is ne'er forgot / Whether he dieth by musket / Or by pot.'

Bill went on to comment wryly, *'Ominous warning which I failed to heed.'* He had, however, clearly forgotten the part of the inscription which read: *'When ye're hot drink Strong or none at all'...*

There is, of course, no suggestion that Thomas Thetcher was himself an alcoholic. In a time when water was unsafe to drink because of cholera, typhoid and other water-borne diseases everyone drank small beer – including the schoolboys at Winchester College!

It was actually a weak brew, often made from the left-over mash from a strong beer, and the 'violent fever' which, according to the gravestone, carried off poor Thomas Thetcher was probably caused by a water-borne disease

which had not been killed off in the making of that particular batch of beer. Paradoxically had he drunk 'strong' beer, with its higher alcohol content, he would probably have survived.

The small movement started by Bill Wilson and his fellow alcoholics went on to develop into an organisation which has helped untold numbers of sufferers to deal with the problems of alcoholism, and today AA holds meetings all over the world. The book in which Bill's story of his visit to Winchester Cathedral appears - AA's famous 'Big Book' (believe it or not, it got its name from the thickness of the paper used in the first edition) has become one of the best-selling books of all time.

The 25 millionth copy was published back in 2005, and about a million copies are still sold each year - even though it is now available free online in English, Spanish and French. In 2011, Time magazine placed the book on its list of the 100 best and most influential books written in English since 1923, (the beginning of the magazine); and a year later the Library of Congress designated it as one of 88 "Books that Shaped America."

The 'Big Book' is still very much in active use by AA today. It is read and discussed at most AA meetings, and there are probably very few members of the fellowship who don't have a much cherished copy.
