

**Notes on GLOUCESTERSHIRE QUAKER
PEACEWORKERS
in wartime**

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May 2014*

These notes give some experience of individuals in Gloucestershire, Quakers and others, bringing together two strands of peace witness in both World Wars:

- taking the stand for exemption from military service on the grounds of conscientious objection and
- setting up and serving in peacebuilding action.

INTRODUCTION

Non-military service

With the outbreak of WW1 In 1914, a group of Quakers, appalled by news of the carnage at the front, and wanting to live by their pacifist principles, determined to take action. As an alternative to military service, they formed the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU). After conscription was introduced in 1916, the FAU grew, providing an outlet for many hundreds of men of all religious persuasions who were awarded exemption on grounds of conscientious objection to serving in the army.

Conscientious objection

At the start of WW1, the recruitment drive led by the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, had brought thousands forward to join the army; by early 1916, volunteer numbers had risen to three million men. But with the numbers of new recruits dropping and the vast number of deaths and casualties, the British government introduced compulsory conscription, with the Military Service Act.

To gain exemption from conscription, a man had to have one of four possible grounds:

- his non-military work was necessary for the national interest;
- the enlistment would cause him or his family exceptional hardship;
- he suffered from infirmity or ill-health; or
- he had a conscientious objection to undertaking combatant service.

To claim exemption on the fourth ground, he had to apply to a local Tribunal, of which some 2,000 were set up across the country. These were all to be civil courts, with representation of the military, the government, and the Labour party, and to include individuals with the training and experience which would enable a fair consideration to be given to conscientious objectors. It was also hoped (but the hope was not always realized) they would include some women.¹

A tribunal could decide to grant

- *absolute exemption* from all military service; or
- *conditional exemption* from military service (required to do 'alternative service' but finding work of 'national importance'); or
- *exemption from combatant duties only* (and enlisted in non-combatant activity such as the Friends Ambulance Unit)

¹'The Military Service Bill' by Arnold S Rowntree, in The Friend, 28 Jan 1916

or - they could refuse the applicant altogether and order him to join a fighting unit of the Army.

Out of the 16,000 altogether who applied to be recognized as conscientious objectors in WW1, just 400 were granted absolute exemption. Some 6,000 others refused to accept the Tribunals' decision; and for that, they spent much of the war in prison.²

Sources and findings

Many COs had no connection at all with the Religious Society of Friends. As the first section here suggests, the county record office is a wonderful resource for further research on the general experience of conscientious objection in Gloucestershire.

Files and minute books from local Quaker meetings tell us more.

Nick Peters' findings drew from these, together with other records in the County Archives that he has been consulting in his ongoing research into Quaker history.

It was from a collection of family papers that Margaret Sheldrick uncovered a precious insight into the firsthand experience of her father, as a young man, becoming active in the Friends Ambulance Unit.

Last, but certainly not least, is the possibility of exploring living memory. Thanks to a recent visit to Gloucester meeting, Brian Bone shared something of his own experience during the second World War, serving in the FAU section that his father, Walter Bone, had set up.

APPLYING FOR CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

Information from: three folders of papers in Gloucestershire County Archive with the title '*Transcripts of proceedings at military tribunals held in Gloucester to hear the cases of conscientious objectors (many of whom were members of the Society of Friends) March & April 1916*', consulted in February 2014.³

These papers tell of twenty three men's experience in Shire Hall, Gloucester, during March and April of 1916, facing one such tribunal. Presided over by the chairman of The Gloucestershire quarter sessions, Mr. F.A.Hyatt, the panel consisted of the Mayor of Cheltenham (Mr Rees Jones) Messrs H.Godwin Chance, and R.G.Foster, with the military being represented by Mr. Stamford Hutton

² 'Refusing to kill: conscientious objection and human rights in the First World War'. Peace Pledge Union (2006). www.ppu.org.uk

³ with thanks to: Gloucestershire Archives, Clarence Row, Alvin Street Gloucester GL1 3DW www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/archives tel: 01452 425295

We use initials to refer to the six men we quote here who appeared before them⁴ in their application for absolute exemption. All of them were granted exemption 'from combatant duties only'. They were:

- HB, aged 19, pianist and organist, member of the Society of Friends;
- EB*, aged 20, maker of beekeeping appliances, member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and attender with the Society of Friends
- ED, age 22, boot and shoe repairer, member of the Salvation Army
- JD, aged 31, driver for Shell Motor Spirit people, attender with the Society of Friends
and
- RE, aged 27, market gardener, no particular church but associated with the International Bible Students
- TP, aged 33, bank clerk, religious affiliation unknown.

Each had to begin by giving reasons in support their application. RE expressed his in these words:

To engage or assist in the shedding of human blood is contrary to the Divine Will of God and to the teachers of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ to Whom I have sworn allegiance; therefore I cannot, regardless of the consequences, depart from this principle, to render military service to the State

TP evidently spoke with equal passion:

Those of us who hold these principles maintain that Christianity should stand for disarmament and not militarism. We don't ask for the protection of the military. If the military does not exist we are willing to take our risks, and still hold to our principles.

Not all gave reasons of religious principle. CW, aged 21, a plumber said:

I apply for absolute exemption on the ground that my conscientious convictions will not let me engage in work which directly or indirectly will have the effect of prolonging war with its useless bloodshed and delaying peace. I have a conscientious objection to combatant and non-combatant service, and against engaging in any compulsory work destined to prolong the war'.

Panel members asked questions such as 'In the case of an invasion of this country, what would be your attitude?' When he was asked this question, CW's answer was: 'non-resisting'. This is what was said next:

Q You would not do anything to them if the Germans came? Are you prepared to say this: I have a conscientious objection to fighting: you can come"?

A I have got no quarrel with the German working-man.

Q Do you think the Belgians were justified in defending themselves against the Germans?

A I look upon it as a capitalists' war.

⁴ Staff at the archive recommended not using full names of those appearing before the tribunal, since the records are not yet 100 years old: the guidance being that, since relatives of those named may still be alive, it would be inconsiderate to publish their names without permission.

TP was also pressed to find answers.

Q Have you any views with regard to the result of the war? Do you mind who wins?

A I cannot help feeling for my country, although I cannot accept its military policy.

Q You want us to win, but you want other people to do the fighting for you?

A I don't say that; I wish my nation in years gone by had accepted the policy of disarmament.

Mr. Hutton was clearly the panel member who asked most questions, and who had the strongest views on the answers – such as:

(to EB): "I don't believe in the least that your conscience is anything else except . cowardice"; and

(about WG): "I will submit that this is a man who cannot be relieved under any circumstances. He will not answer a plain question. He wears the King's uniform of a postman and yet at heart he is a traitor".

The purpose of these tribunals was to ensure that claims for exemption on grounds of conscience were not merely 'a selfish excuse' for shirking. Clearly Mr. Hutton was not persuaded.

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SERVICE IN THE FRIENDS AMBULANCE UNIT

First world war

Two Quakers with memorial stones in the Quaker burial ground in Shortwood, Nailsworth had histories of service in the Friends Ambulance Unit in the First World War.

William Guest grew up as a Methodist living in Leigh, Lancashire. In 1916 at the age of 34, he joined the FAU, continuing to work with them until 1918 in Dunkirk, France and King Georges Hospital London.

After the war he became a Quaker; in 1936, moving to Nailsworth - where his name (and that of his wife Dorothy) features regularly in the minute books of the Quaker meeting from 1937onwards, until his death in 1968.

Edmond Graham Burtt was born in Gloucester in about 1895. A member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and a regular attender at Gloucester Quaker meeting, he was one of those who faced the Gloucester tribunal in his application for exemption as a conscientious objector, going on to service in the Friends Ambulance Unit between 1916-1919, attached to the Friends War Victims Relief Committee (a wholly Quaker organisation) and general service in France.

After the War he worshipped as a Quaker in a number of local meetings including Nailsworth, (where the Quaker Meeting minute books record him as serving as clerk from 1921 until 1940). He died in December 1986.

Two other Gloucestershire Quakers in the FAU were **Miss K Bellows** of Gloucester and **Miss E R Bengough**, who lived near Painswick, both of whom served in Dunkirk, France between 1915-1916.

Meanwhile, from family records, we have firsthand accounts from **Noel Taylor**. Born in 1899 to Quaker parents, Noel and his younger brother grew up in Middlesborough and attended the Friends' School, Great Ayton, Yorkshire. From there, like many scholars there, he volunteered to join the FAU as soon as he was old enough, in January 1918, serving in France until 1919.

In later years he was a faithful member of Gloucester meeting, until his death in 1971. Details of his early experiences in the FAU only became known to the family from papers that emerged after he died.

Walter Bone, a Quaker, a lifelong conscientious objector and a Unitarian Minister, served in the Friends Ambulance Unit in the first world war. From the 1930s until his death in 1944, he lived in Gloucester and when the WW2 broke out, he organised an FAU section in Gloucester Hospital. Those who worked there became known as 'Bone's Boys'. His son, Brian Bone - now in his 90s, and like his father a Quaker all his adult life, was one of those who served in that unit.

In her book 'Pacifists in Action' (William Sessions, 1998), Lyn Smith writes:

Throughout the [second world] war, hospital work became a major field of FAU activity providing a steady occupation of unquestionable usefulness both in gaining experience for work abroad and in helping to meet the acute shortage of staff. Numbers working in hospitals varied, rising and falling throughout the war according to competing claims on FAU personnel from the emergency services on the home front as well as demands from overseas. In all, the Unit served in 83 hospitals in Britain; work in Gloucester...lasted for five years or more.⁵

Gloucester Hospital, she writes, had a reputation as the 'Siberia' of FAU sections. Then, the City General Hospital, it was an updated workhouse with ten huts as emergency wards. FAU personnel did portering, occupational therapy, cleaning. 'We were up against quite a lot of hostility to start with', one remembered, 'both from the City Council and from within the hospital itself. One or two of the doctors refused to have us on their wards. One or two sisters made life hell for us 'shirkers'. But we expected that and got far less than we expected.'

Second world war

During the second world war, we know of two other Gloucestershire Quakers serving in the Friends Ambulance Unit: **David Arthur Niebuhr Tod** from Nailsworth Meeting and **Kenneth Hill** from Gloucester.

⁵ Smith, Lyn (1998) Pacifists in Action. William Sessions

In this period, we also know that **Lucy Burtt**, from Gloucester, had two years' experience as a prisoner of war in China. In 1930 she had been accepted by the Friends Service Council to lecture in Western History at Yenching University just outside Beijing (then Peiping). After Pearl Harbour in 1935, the Japanese had occupied Beijing. From March 1943 till 1945 Lucy Burtt was interned in Weihsien camp.

In later years, Lucy carried on service with the FSC including periods in India, Pakistan and Ceylon and lectured at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham. Her memorial stone in Shortwood Quaker burial ground records her death in 1986.