

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

What were Conscientious Objectors?

Many young men volunteered as soon as war was declared, some even lied about their age and could not wait to fight the Germans. However some men thought that to kill for any reason was wrong and did not feel that they could fight.

By September 1916 the supply of recruits was not meeting the numbers of men required to continue the war and the government reluctantly had to implement conscription. Several organisations were totally against the compulsory use of conscription and advised their members to go to tribunal as conscientious objectors (COs). Amongst these were the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Independent Labour party (ILP).

Under conscription, when a man received his call up papers he had to report to the local recruiting office and report for duty. Those who were CO's ignored the papers and were arrested and taken to a local jail to await a tribunal. The tribunal was held in front of local Justices of the Peace. It had to be determined whether a person was a genuine CO or had a just reason for not going to war, either for family reasons or because they were doing vital work for the war effort, or if they were just trying to dodge service.

If it was agreed that a CO's case was genuine he could agree to do non-combatant work eg. hospital work or stretcher bearer. If however he refused this he was treated as if he were a member of the armed forces and sent to an army unit where he was instructed to put on the full uniform. If he refused, it was considered as refusing to carry out an order and he was subjected to a Court Martial. These COs were normally given long prison sentences with hard labour.

Of the 23,000 CO's, 17,000 were imprisoned of which 1,000 were absolutists, they refused to do anything which would help the war effort believing that doing so was as bad as fighting.

Four men from Earby who did not believe in the war.

Arthur Denby Wilkinson was the son of the blacksmith on Water Street. He was very influenced by the Quaker religion believing that all life was sacred and that men should respect life. He was also connected to the ILP. Arrested in July 1918 following his 18th birthday, he was one of the youngest CO's and was taken to Skipton and then onto York for trial.

He was also an absolutist and did not agree to do any kind of work which would cause the killing to continue. He was sentenced to prison with hard labour and spent over a year in gaol.

You can listen to his story on CD available in our archives.

James Whitell lived at 9 Brown Hill. In the 1911 census his address is 4 Glen Farm Cottages; he was 37 years of age with 2 children and was a cotton weaver. He was sent for court martial at the same time as Arthur Denby Wilkinson. He was court martialed at Halifax Barracks for disobedience and sentenced to six months hard labour at Wormwood Scrubs

There the Central Tribunal pronounced him to be a genuine CO and offered him work of national importance under control of a new civilian committee in what came to be known as the Home Office Scheme which he accepted. By the 29th November 1918 he was at the Dartmoor Work Centre at Princeton. However he must have committed some offence against the regulations and was sent back to prison as No-Conscription Fellowship and Conscientious Objector records say he was back in Wormwood Scrubs in May 1919.

William Carradice of Salterforth, a CO on religious grounds, agreed to work in the medical corps as a stretcher bearer.

Robert William Roberts formerly of Lower Verjuice Farm but at the time of the war living in Foulridge was an absolutist, and very firm believer in Labour Party principles and a member of the ILP.

On the 22nd of September 1916 his arrest was reported in the Nelson leader:- with the headline **"He did not believe in Murder"**

At Colne on Monday, Robert William Roberts of Nelson was charged under the Military Service Act with being an absentee from the army. Police Constable Bell spoke of arresting the accused in Warehouse Lane Foulridge on Saturday. On charging him with being an absentee he replied "I have no intention of joining the army". Roberts, who said he did not believe in murder legal or illegal, was fined 40s and handed over to the military authorities.

On the 6th October 1916 he was court martialed and sentenced to 91 days hard labour at Wormwood scrubs. He was released on the 22nd of December 1916 only to be court martialed again on the 1st of January 1917 and sentenced to one year hard labour at Shrewsbury civil prison. Further Courts Martial on the 18th July 1917 and on 29th May 1918 led to him serving a total of four sentences including more than 2 years of hard labour.

William Carradice's enrolment papers showing he opted for a non-combatant role.



William Carradice



Robert William Roberts

The Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the start of Conscientious Objection

The ILP had a solid following in the larger industrial towns of East Lancashire and West Yorkshire. Nelson in particular had a very strong group of the ILP.

The ILP were against war and fought very hard to encourage politicians to use negotiations to avoid all out war. They considered that the war was caused by imperialistic leaders and that the working people should not be drawn into this fight.

Several prominent members such as Philip Snowden, Katherine Bruce Glaiser, and Selina Cooper gave well attended lectures and speeches on the need to prevent war.

Nationally, on the 1st August 1914, when the events in Europe were moving towards war, the ILP leaders including Kier Hardie, Arthur Henderson and the British Socialist party put forward a manifesto to the British People -

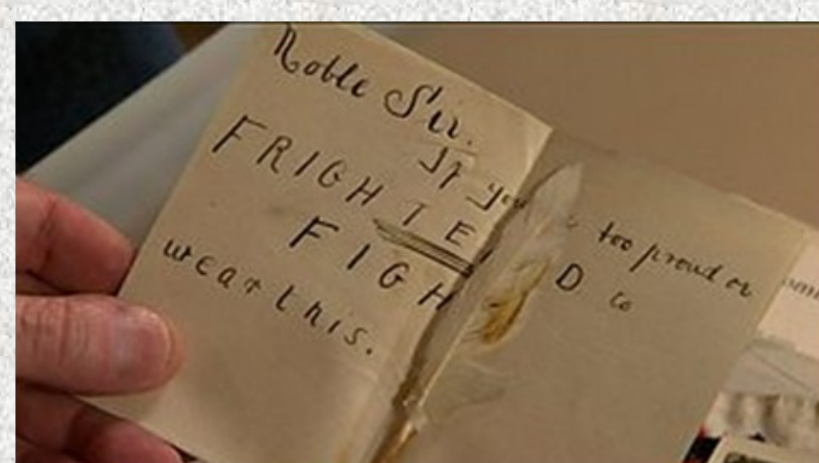
"Workers, stand together... for peace and combine and conquer the militarist enemy and the self-seeking Imperialist today, once and for all. Down with class rule. Down with the rule of brute force. Down with war. Up with the peaceful rule of the people." (Cyril Pearce Comrades in Conscience 2014).

Many groups under the Labour party did not always agree on what course of action to take whether to support the government once war was declared or to continue to resist. Once all out war was deemed to be unavoidable the main Labour party decided to support the war effort and advised its members to do all they could to support it.

The ILP, BSP and other groups decided to continue to resist the war, to hold to their principles and implored their members to continue to work for peace and to negotiate to try to stop the war.

White feathers

In Earby, even though weaving was a reserved occupation, some of the women felt that young men should join up to encourage them and to do this they would often leave a white feather on a mans loom while he was on a meal break.



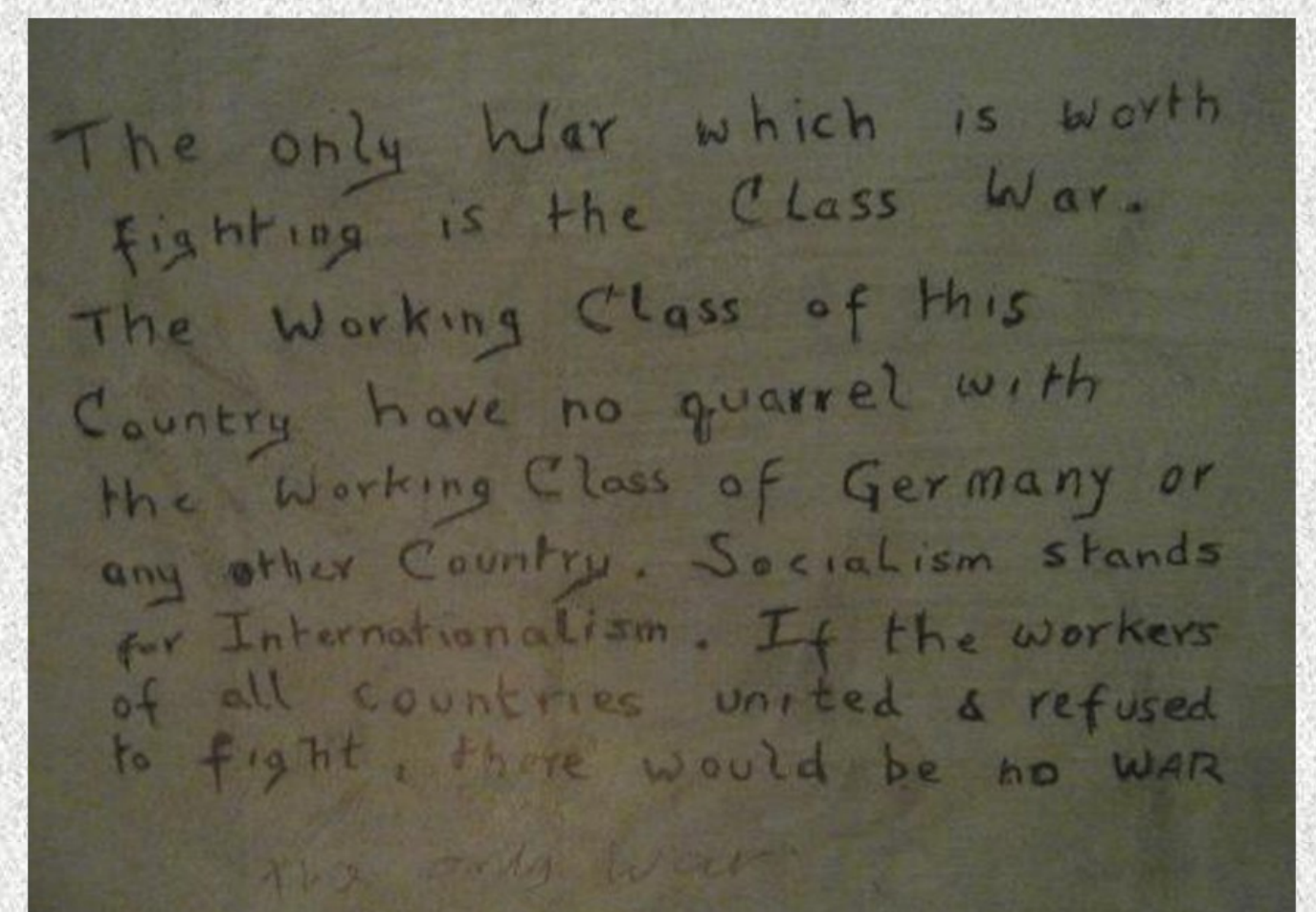
An example of a white feather

The Governments response to Conscientious objectors

With over 20,000 men refusing to join the armed services because of their strong and sincerely held beliefs that it was wrong to fight in the war, some because they felt that it was wrong to kill and others because they just did not believe that the war was a just war and that it should be resolved by discussion and negotiation.

The government could not allow such views to become widespread, reducing the numbers of young men who would fight. They therefore ran a propaganda campaign mocking the views of the conscientious objectors, portraying them as cowards, shirkers or German sympathisers. As part of this campaign they used post cards to reinforce the message.

Along with severe punishments for men who refused to fight, the Government hoped to enforce conscription and to get the whole population behind the war



Graffiti from Richmond Castle where C.O.'s were held prisoners



Post cards belittling the CO in an attempt to reduce the number of men refusing to join up

