

The Right to Refuse

Sound Architect Creative Media and Newlands School

November 2014



The Conscientious Objectors

In April 2014 Newlands School began a Heritage Lottery Funded Project on Conscientious Objectors in the First World War. The Charity Sound Architect worked with the students in year 9: those between 13 and 14 years old, to research the story of the men who had "The Right to Refuse".

Tula Dyer, Headteacher on behalf of Newlands School and Susanne Crosby, on behalf of Sound Architect



100 years on, this is still an emotive subject for many people. The objective of this project was to research the history and tell their story, not to judge, not to applaud, not to condemn. But what the students found was a complex story in a very different society that takes a lot of understanding.

Objecting to enlisting into military service on the grounds of conscience included those who objected on religious grounds, and many of them found alternative ways of supporting the war effort, without taking up arms. There were also those who refused to have anything to do with the war, and would not serve in non-combatant duties. These "absolutists" were treated very badly both during and after the war, where some of them were still imprisoned and others were refused work.

It is so difficult not to have an opinion of whether they were right or wrong to refuse the call to fight for "King and Country", but many of them served what they considered to be higher duties: to their fellow man, or to God. These "conchies" as they were nicknamed endured hardship, ridicule, ostracisation and some even endured torture for doing what they believed to be the right thing. They would rather face death, than force death upon another human being.

While brave men were signing up to fight in their thousands and facing the unspeakable horrors of war, it would be difficult to argue that having the conviction of the belief to rather die than harm another, is not also courage. Men on all sides of the front lines faced the horror of war, no one is better than the other.

The students encountered many different and often strong opinions during this project, and learned that there is still sensitivity and stigma attached to the subject even today. They learned to question, they learned to think, they learned to make up their own minds and stand up for what they believe to be true and just, and that is a great achievement in itself.

Newlands lost 48 former pupils and staff as a result of war and conflicts around the world between 1914 and 2007. They are remembered with the greatest respect.



Students during the journalism masterclass

Britain declared War on Germany on the 4th of August 1914. There were mixed reactions from the British public, each with their own call to duty.

Historically, there had always been strong links between Britain and Germany at all levels of society including the very top: the King and the Kaiser were cousins. England and Germany were not natural enemies, and many people in Britain regarded Germany and the German people as their friends.

With the threat of war being declared on Germany, feelings were so strong in the Country that there was a peace march on 2nd August to Trafalgar Square. There was a strong feeling of brotherhood and support. Nevertheless once War was declared most of the Country considered it their duty to support it.



Fenner Brockway, leader of the NCF

No Conscription Fellowship

By Azlan

Few believed that conscription would be introduced, it never had before; by the end of September 1914 over 750,000 men had volunteered. The No Conscription Fellowship (NCF) formed in November 1914, lead by Fenner Brockway, who invited those who were not prepared to fight to get in contact. By 1915 the membership was so large an official office had to be opened in Fleet Street, London, and as it became clear that the War would not end soon, they established a network of branches across the Country. Members declared their intention neither to serve or to perform war-work, published pamphlets, and from March 1916 they published a weekly newspaper called “The Tribunal”. The Government tried hard to suppress the paper, raiding offices and dismantling printing machinery, arresting the people involved and sending some of them to prison: both men and women.

“by the end of September 1914 over 750,000 men had volunteered”

The Military Service Act

By Oscar

This was the first time conscription had been introduced in Britain, and came into force on 2 March 1916. This applied to men aged between 18 and 41, unless they were married, or widowed with children, or in certain reserved occupations. The Act was broadened twice: in May 1916 to include married men, and in 1918 to increase the

What people knew of wars up until this point was that Britain was ready to defend the defenceless: the Empire and Colonies. Propaganda had ensured that wars were generally thought of as organised by gentlemen’s rules. And most people thought this conflict would be “over by Christmas”.

Many flocked to the call to take up arms and fight for King and Country, fuelled by a sense of doing right. And fuelled by that same sense of doing right, were those who considered their first duty to God; and others who considered their first duty to their fellow man: both by refusing to kill. Their sense of loyalty to what they believed: their “Right to Refuse”, was their call to duty.

upper age limit to 51. In this Act was a “conscience clause”, and Britain was the only Country to have one. This stated that men “who conscientiously object to combatant service” could apply to a local Tribunal for exemption from “combatant service only (not non-combatant service)” or “on condition that they are engaged in work of National importance.” The Act was designed to allow people who didn’t want to fight to have alternative role in the War, but not allow people to just object.

Tribunals

By Andreea

The Tribunals in Lewisham and Deptford had high numbers of applicants for exemption from military service. Lewisham had multiple sittings but Deptford kept theirs far more private. The Kentish Mercury and Lewisham Borough News reported full names and addresses of those appealing. It is hard to estimate how many were conscientious objectors as most records were destroyed after the War, but it is understood that more appealed on other grounds, rather than conscience,

such as: work of national interest, or stating that hardship would occur, or ill health. The aims of the Tribunals throughout the Country were to recruit as many men as possible, and they did not grant exemption easily. Questions to conscientious objectors included asking men what they would do if their female relative (mother/sister) was attacked by a German and there are a few records of asking if men were vegetarian, the thought being that if they were meat eaters then they were not so against killing as they said.

Conscientious Objectors in Dartmoor Prison



© Peace Pledge Union



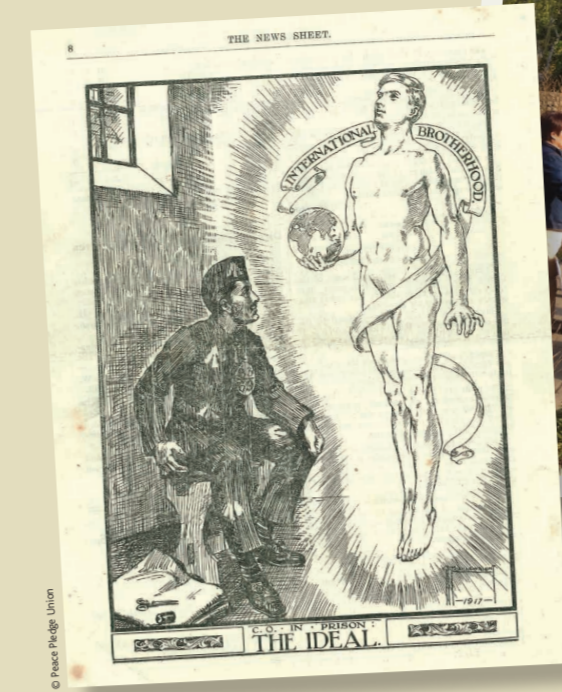
White Feathers

By Emily

The giving of white feathers to men not in uniform to shame them into enlisting was an effective propaganda campaign during the First World War. The white feather was a symbol of cowardice and failure to fulfil their male duties. The White Feather Brigade was started by Admiral Fitzgerald on 30 August 1914, when he gave out 30 white feathers to women giving instructions on distributing them to any man seemingly capable of joining the army that was out of uniform. The idea came from a popular novel from 1902 about the Boer War, where the central character was shamed into reclaiming his masculinity and redeemed himself and became a hero. Images of women were already being used in propaganda campaigns to persuade men to enlist, but this active role was empowering for women, and deeply shaming for men in a time where culture valued masculinity and female approval. There are some stories of men being given a feather in error and the shame that ensued.

“They lost a lot, probably most of their friends”

Sue Johnston



© Peace Pledge Union



Friends Ambulance Unit Ambulance Train

© 2014 The Weekly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain

Friends Ambulance Unit

By Charlie

The Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU) was formed by Quakers in early September 1914, after an appeal from Philip Noel Baker in August. It started with about 60 young men being trained using military discipline in Buckinghamshire. Both the British Red Cross and the Army were reluctant at first but when the Belgian Army collapsed in October, they were granted equipment and supplies and a party of 43 left for Belgium. The FAU expanded as needs grew and many non Quakers joined. There were two sections: the Foreign Service and the Home Service. They established hospitals both at home and abroad, by 1915 they were running ambulance trains, and by 1916 they had two hospital ships. They rescued their wounded, dressed wounds, gave typhoid inoculations, and assisted with water purification. By the end of the War they numbered 640 and had transported over a quarter of a million sick or injured men and saved countless lives.



© 2014 The Weekly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain



Quakers Bob Booth, Mary de Pleave and Ralph Taylor being interviewed by the students



Quakers

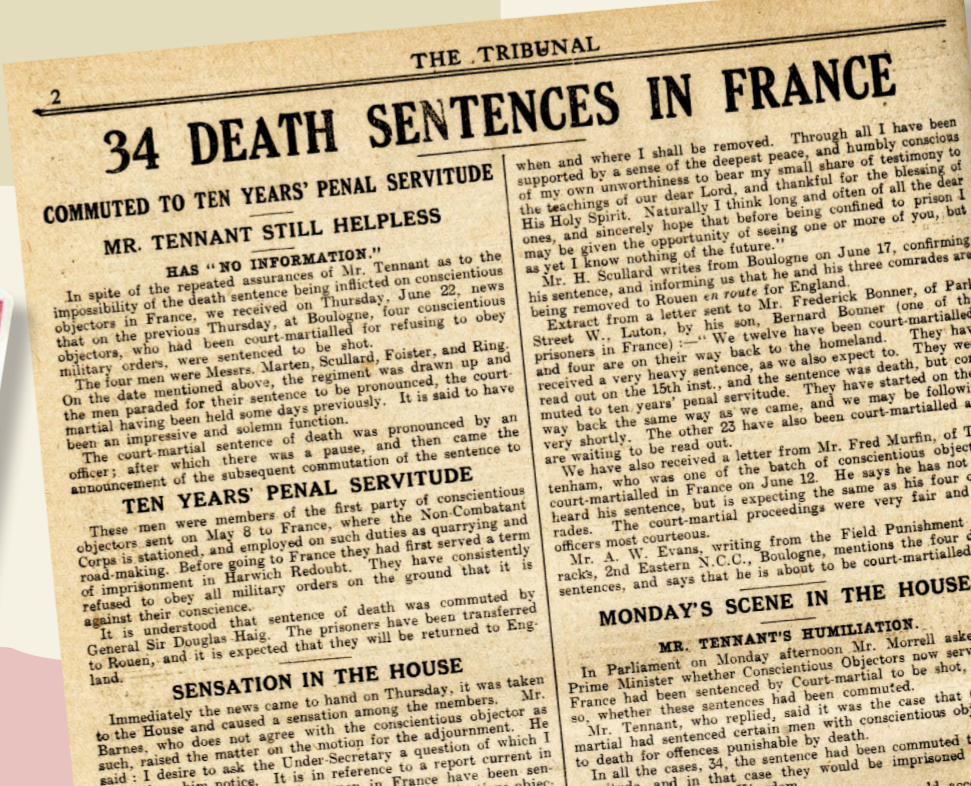
By Jack

The Religious Society of Friends, Quakers or “Friends” have pacifism and human rights at their core. They are peaceful, and non violent. Their beliefs are based in the equality of all human beings, and they work actively to make this a better world. Quakers differ all around the world, most are Christian in base. They believe in the freedom of conscience, and that the light of God is in every single person.

Interviewing the Quakers

By Charlotte

Three Quakers from the Seaford Meeting came in to talk to us and be interviewed. It meant we could put into practice all that we had been researching on Quakers beliefs on non violence, and all that we had learned in our oral history session about interviewing people. They were three very different people who all were Quakers for different reasons, which was really interesting, because we hadn’t realised that they could be so different. One said: “we are on this earth, we are very diverse and there is no reason why we can’t coexist peacefully”. They were very helpful and incredibly calm.



© Peace Pledge Union

International Conscientious Objectors’ Day

On 15 May 2014, Vigil For Peace was held in Seaford Peace Garden.

“This Vigil is being held to celebrate the courage and commitment of all those, throughout the world, who believe that killing is wrong and therefore refuse military service.”

Ralph Taylor 1945 – 2014

Far left: One of a series of drawings by G. P. Micklewright of the CO in prison; left: The Peace Vigil at Seaford Peace Garden, on 15 May 2014

Interviewing Two Sisters

By Jack

Jenny and Sue are two sisters living in Seaford whose grandfather was a conscientious objector in the First World War and their father was a conscientious objector in the Second World War. Their family tree goes back to Constable, the famous painter. They were really interesting as they had grown up and lived with the consequences of their family objecting to conscription. But their grandfather had the support of the village he lived in, all the people petitioned to get him freed from prison. Their father was treated badly in the Second World War, which is the opposite to most of the research we had done. The sisters brought in all their photos of their family, it made what we were reading about as “history” more real.



Jenny Swindell and Sue Johnston, grand-daughters of Horace Woollard, conscientious objector in the First World War, being interviewed by students

“I think they were very brave, very courageous people, who had obviously given their stance a great deal of very careful thought, and were prepared to stand against the tide, which is always a difficult thing to do.”

Jenny Swindell



Redoubt Fortress & Military Museum

32 students went to the Redoubt Military Museum and Fortress in Eastbourne for a special trip on World War One, to understand the context of what people were objecting to.

Among the exhibits which particularly captured the students' attentions was the replica World War One trench. They also enjoyed trying on some real uniforms from different ages.



Students try on some of the uniforms from different eras



Students examine the World War One replica trench

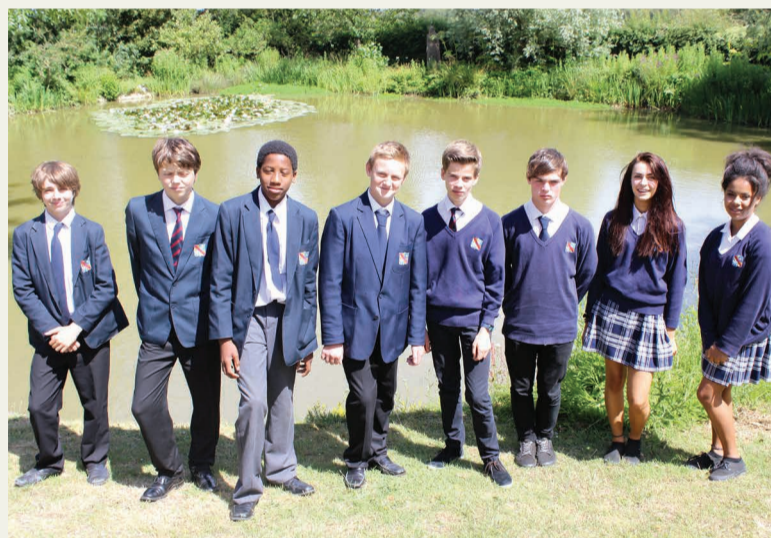
Below: replica trench art, at the Redoubt Fortress and Military Museum



Charleston

The students researched many avenues throughout the project, and one that kept coming up was the connection of conscientious objectors (CO's) to the Bloomsbury Group, and in particular, Charleston Farmhouse.

Duncan Grant, artist and CO, moved to Charleston Farmhouse near Fittle in 1916 to live off the land with Vanessa Bell and fellow CO David Garnett and escape the War. This was an ideal opportunity for the students to visit the home of two famous conscientious objectors and their family and understand a little of how they lived.



Left: some students in the grounds of Charleston



In the grounds of Charleston

Famous Objectors

Students researched many individual conscientious objectors and found that some of them were in fact famous for contributing to the War, and to the Second World War, and British culture.

Siegfried Sassoon: 1886 – 1967

The famous war poet, was passionate about fighting “the Hun” and earned the nickname “Mad Jack” due to his recklessness in battle. He was awarded the Military Cross in 1916. However, due to what he saw on the front line, or due to “shell shock” from injury, he changed his mind about the War and became a CO.

George Powell: 1880 – 1951

He was a Welsh songwriter, and under the name George Asaf, wrote “Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag” in 1915, which has been named as the most popular British War time song in History.

Sir Roland Penrose: 1900 – 1984

He was an English artist, historian and poet. He grew up in a Quaker family and joined the Friends Ambulance Unit in 1918 and served with the British Red Cross in Italy. After the War he was associated with many artists and the surrealist movement and became friends with Pablo Picasso, and helped many artists secure safe passage from Europe including Salvador Dali. In the Second World War he became involved in camouflage development and taught military camouflage at the Home Guard training centre.



*Siegfried Sassoon
1886 - 1967*

Acknowledgements

Sound Architect would like to thank the following for their contribution to the project:

Newlands School
The Redoubt Fortress & Military Museum
The Religious Society of Friends, and the Seaford Meeting
The Peace Pledge Union
Charleston Farmhouse
Seaford Little Theatre
Seaford Museum

Our Volunteer Researchers and Contributors:

Jenny Swindell, Sue Johnston, R A Booth, Mary De Pleave, Jenny Wistreich, Andy Crosby, Steve Darvill, Vicky Darvill, Oscar Stafford, William Robinson, Sam Standen, Ben Cassan, Jack Powley, Kevin Gordon, and in memoriam, our Friend, Ralph Taylor.

The Sound Architect Creative Media Team:
Ann Kramer, Anita Broad, Peter Lindsey, Annabel Clements, Vicky Richards, Tim Robertson, Susanne Crosby.

