

# From Volunteer to Conscript part 1

## The Rickmansworth Urban Military Tribunal 1916-18

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*This is the first of a series of articles looking at the work of the Military Service Tribunal for Rickmansworth Urban District. It is part of my research on the impact of the First World War on Croxley Green so the articles will deal with the tribunal's Croxley cases. I am grateful to Heather Falvey and Geoff Saul for their helpful comments and suggestions.*

By the end of 1915 the British Government was increasingly concerned about how to gain more recruits for the Army. Their frustration was shared by the editor of the West Herts and Watford Observer who felt<sup>1</sup>, 'There is no hiding the fact that many young men are still at home who could, and should, don khaki.' He added, 'we should like to direct the attention of men not of military age to the obligation that rests on them to learn drill and the use of arms, so that they may be classed as efficient and stand ready if any great emergency arises here at home.'

In the face of mounting casualties, the traditional voluntary approach to enlistment appeared inadequate. Conscription was totally against the principles of Prime Minister Asquith and his supporters in the Liberal Party, yet there appeared to be no alternative. After heated debate at Westminster, the Military Service Act of 27 January 1916 was passed and came into operation on 2 March 1916. To begin with, conscription applied to all British male residents aged 18 to 41 who were unmarried or a widower without dependent children. Married men were brought within the compass of the Act in June 1916. Then in 1918, as the need for recruits became ever more pressing, the age limit was raised to 50. Men had to undergo medical examinations to determine their fitness for war service. Early in the war these were rigorous but later the medical requirements were relaxed. To begin with there were seven medical categories from A1 to C3; where A1 was fit for general service, B1 for garrison duty abroad and C1 for garrison duty at home. Later the classification was simplified to three: category 1 (formerly A1) men fit for general service; category 2 (formerly B1 and C1) men who were less fit but capable of combatant service after training; and category 3 (formerly B2, C2, B3 and C3) men not fit for combatant service but suitable for auxiliary positions.<sup>2</sup>

Individuals had to apply for an exemption certificate to their local Military Service Tribunal. Exemption was possible on four grounds: -

- ill health or infirmity;
- serious financial or domestic hardship;
- because the man concerned was engaged on work of national importance or
- conscientious objection to combatant service.

### **The Rickmansworth Urban Tribunal**

Urban Districts, such as Rickmansworth, were responsible for maintaining a local appeal tribunal. The panels were expected to be impartial, yet capable of having due regard for the national interest. The panel was expected to include some representation of labour.

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<sup>1</sup> *West Herts and Watford Observer* 2 October 1915

<sup>2</sup> Slocombe, Ivor. "Recruitment into the Armed Forces during the First World War. the work of the Military Tribunals in Wiltshire, 1915-1918" in the *Local Historian* May 2000

The tribunal could dismiss an application or provide an exemption certificate that was absolute, conditional (for example on service in the special constabulary) or temporary. The tribunal's military representative could challenge the appellants and ask the tribunal to review previous exemptions. Appeals could be made to the Hertfordshire County Tribunal and, in exceptional cases, to a Central Tribunal.

The local paper, the Observer, in its edition of 12 February 1916, reported that the Tribunals had been appointed in the previous week. To begin with, it was expected that they would complete their work in a few months but it turned out to be more difficult and protracted than expected. The County Appeal Tribunal heard its 3,000th case at the end of July 1917. The Chairman proudly stated that the 34 local tribunals in Hertfordshire had exempted only 11 per cent of all cases, compared with 20 per cent in Bedfordshire.<sup>3</sup>

The Rickmansworth tribunal held its first meeting at the Council offices at the beginning of March 1916.<sup>4</sup> The chairman was Mr S. Ingleby Oddie who was a member of the UDC, a barrister and resided at Chess-side, Cophorne Road, Croxley Green. There were two other UDC members on the panel, both from Croxley Green too; James Coutts, who was Vice Chairman of the Council and W. E. Catesby. Coutts lived at 3 Dickinson Square and was Clerk and Cashier at Croxley Mill. Catesby was a JP, lived at Highfield, Scots Hill and was Chairman of Catesby's Ltd., General Furnishing Store, London. The other members were Messrs. N. A. Rickett,<sup>5</sup> Newman Reynolds (a bootmaker living in Rickmansworth High Street), J. R. Mansfield (51 Church Lane, Mill End), Samuel A. Bateman, solicitor and later clerk to the UDC (Stafford House, Parsonage Road, Rickmansworth), and Donald A. Stewart (Batchworth House). The Clerk was H. Lomas and the Military representative was Mr C. Ward Davey. The panel contained a strong element of local conservatives. Membership was fairly stable throughout the war. Oddie was still chairman in 1918 when a further member of the UDC, Philip Thornton, joined the panel.

In November, the tribunal had to issue the following statement to clarify its role because of 'certain misapprehensions locally', presumably about the unfairness of the system.

'The Tribunal have nothing to do with calling up men for military service, but this is solely the duty of the Military Authorities. The Tribunal have no means of knowing who is or who is not liable to serve. It is a purely judicial body appointed to decide between the claims of the Military Authorities and the claims of the civil population to be exempted from serving in the Army in those cases only which come before them. The Government Offices exempt many persons without any claims being brought before the Tribunals at all or without any notice to the Tribunals.'<sup>6</sup>

One of the largest local employers, Dickinson's Croxley Mill, did not bring cases to the Tribunal asking for exemption of their staff. In the early stages of the war they had encouraged men who could be spared to join up. They, presumably, also achieved what they wanted in terms of getting the government to exempt their essential personnel. The

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<sup>3</sup> *WH&WO* 28 July 1917

<sup>4</sup> *WH&WO* 4 March 1916

<sup>5</sup> I have been unable to trace Mr Rickett but a Mrs Norman Rickett was living in Little Gillions, Croxley Green in 1917.

<sup>6</sup> *WH&WO* 4 November 1916

Observer suggested this when they reported<sup>7</sup> on the tribunal case of a paper packer, George Wilcox, commenting that the military had granted exemption for men engaged at the mill.

Unfortunately, the original records for the Rickmansworth Tribunal no longer exist. In 1921 the minute books from the Military Service Tribunals were ordered to be destroyed. Although some do survive for Hertfordshire, the county archive service does not hold anything for Rickmansworth.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, we have to rely on the accounts of the local newspaper. In September 1916 the Observer reported that the local Tribunals had nearly finished their work. However, hearings continued and the newspaper gave them a lot of attention from March 1916 to October 1918. The next part of this article will consider some of the Tribunal's cases.

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<sup>7</sup> *WH&WO* 28 July 1917

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication from Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies of 15 May 2013