

From Volunteer to Conscript part 2

The Rickmansworth Urban Military Tribunal 1916-18: the Croxley Green cases.

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The first article in this series, published in RHR....., set out the background to the Tribunal and its members. This article gives an overview of the Croxley Green cases and looks in particular at the way the Tribunal dealt with appeals for exemption based on conscientious objection and domestic hardship.

Croxley Green Absconders

Some men failed to report to the military authorities when they were called up. In May 1916,¹ one Croxley man, **Charles Edward Kersley** of New Road, found himself before the local magistrates on a charge of failing to report. He claimed he had not received a notice but the Recruiting Office said they had sent two. A fine of 40 shillings (equivalent to 8 days wages for soldiers engaged in the 1916 harvest²) was imposed and the defendant was handed over to the military authorities.³ By July 1916, the Observer contained lists of men who had failed to appear before the Tribunals. At least two Croxley men fell in that category; **George Rogers** aged 36 of Dickinson Square and **John Ingram** aged 38 whose address was given care of the John Dickinson Paper Mill Boat.⁴ It is not clear whether either was tracked down.

The Croxley Green Tribunal Cases

53 Croxley cases have been extracted from the reporting by the West Herts and Watford Observer. There may be other cases which I have not found or which were not reported. The 53 comprise 52 Croxley residents and one Watford man working for Croxley's blacksmith, Jesse Gibbs. In 36 cases, they, or their employer, sought exemption because of the work they were doing. 17 of those cases concerned farming and food production. 11 men cited domestic hardship and one sought exemption on conscientious grounds. In five cases the grounds were not reported. The tribunal dismissed 19 of the applications and only gave seven of them absolute exemptions. Three of those absolute exemptions were rescinded in 1917 and 1918 as the shortage of men became ever more acute. 23 of the men concerned are listed on the All Saints' Shrine,⁵ which recorded the names of Croxley men who served in the armed forces during the war. However, that does not mean that the missing thirty did not join the military since the Shrine's list may not be complete.

Conscientious Objection

¹ WH&WO 27 May 1916

² WH&HO 14 October 1916

³ Kersley is not listed on All Saints' Shrine - see footnote 17 - as having enlisted.

⁴ WH&WO 29 July 1916

⁵ The Shrine is a wooden memorial, now in All Saints' church, on which the names are recorded of all those who enlisted in the armed forces from Croxley Green. Shrine is the name used when it was erected in 1917 on the initiative of the Vicar. It is an important contemporary record but not necessarily complete.

Arthur S Prime came before the Tribunal in October 1916 and claimed exemption as a conscientious objector. This must have taken considerable courage because there was so much hostility against C Os or “conchies”, who were seen by many people as unpatriotic, cowardly and treasonous shirkers. The Editor of the Observer concurred with this view. He commented as follows on a case at the Berkhamsted tribunal: -

‘One conscientious objector was bluntly told by Major Parsons [chairman of the Tribunal] that if anyone was doing God’s work at the present time it was the man who was killing Germans. It is indeed a strange sort of religion which calls on its professors to stand aside in maudlin contemplation while their fellow Englishmen are freely shedding their blood in the struggle against the most barbarous form of militarism the world has ever known. It is in the hearts of those who go forth cheerfully against the Huns that we find enshrined the highest ideals of Christianity.’⁶

Prime was 32, lived in Yorke Road, and was formerly employed by John Dickinson’s as a papermaker’s machineman. He said that war was anti-Christian and he claimed the privileges of the Toleration Act⁷ under which men were given the liberty of serving God according to their conscientious belief. Prime had been a member of the Plymouth Brethren but was now a Seventh Day Adventist. He had thrown up his employment with Dickinson’s because working on Saturday was against Adventist beliefs. Prime said that he felt bound to offer to do non-combatant service. This set him apart from the more extreme conscientious objectors who were not prepared to accept any form of conscription or war service. The Tribunal gave Prime exemption until 30 November to give him time to join the Non-Combatant Corps which had been set up in March 1916 as part of the army. Members of the Corps were army privates, wore army uniform and were subject to army discipline, but did not carry weapons or take part in battle. Their duties were mainly physical labour in support of the military, including acting as stretcher-bearers and medical orderlies.⁸ It is not clear what happened next but Prime appeared again before the Tribunal in May 1918 and was, again, ordered to join the Non-Combatant Corps. Did he manage to prolong his exemption until then?

Domestic Hardship

The Tribunal had little sympathy for those applying on grounds of domestic hardship. At least 8 of the 11 men falling into this category ended up in the armed forces. Even **E J Graver**, butler to the influential Newall family of Red Heath, was only allowed one month’s grace before joining up. In a comparable case, Miss Dugdale failed to convince the tribunal to exempt her chauffeur and groom, **J. Guise** (35) of Tudor Cottage. Again, he was only allowed a month. **C B Bird**, aged 38 of 120 New Road, was a motor driver for John Dickinson’s. He said that he had served 12 years in the forces and did not want to serve any more. It would be very hard for his wife, who suffered from ill health, if he was called up. The Tribunal gave him 6 months’ exemption in June 1916. By January 1917 he had failed to turn up for his next hearing but the Tribunal was told that he had joined the Red Cross as a driver. Another Croxley man, **A. Warn**, joined the Red Cross and was given exemption from service in the armed forces so long as he continued to work for them.

⁶ WH&WO 4 March 1916

⁷ 1689 act of Parliament granting freedom of worship to Nonconformists. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Library Edition. Retrieved 10 May 2013 from <http://library.eb.co.uk/eb/article-9072799>

⁸ see www.ppu.org.uk/learn/infodocs/cos/

L H Ford, aged 30, of 40 New Road and a paper cutter at Croxley Mill, was initially refused but appealed to the County Tribunal. He argued that the doctor had reclassified him as B1 instead of B3 without a proper examination. He was granted six months' exemption but it is not clear what happened after that. He is not listed on All Saints' Shrine as having joined the forces.

The **Chapman** family of 155 New Road became locally celebrated because four brothers had joined up early in the war and one, Lance-Corporal Bert Chapman of the 3rd Dragoon Guards was seriously wounded at Hooge, near Ypres, in 1915 and had his leg amputated. So, when their younger brother, eighteen-year old G Chapman, was called up, his father sought his exemption in July 1916 saying that he had eight sons alive of whom five were serving in the forces. The Tribunal was initially sympathetic and gave six months' exemption but by January 1917 they had changed their view and G Chapman was forced to enlist. He was subsequently wounded.⁹

⁹ See entry on All Saints' Shrine