

From Volunteer to Conscript part 3

The Rickmansworth Urban Military Tribunal 1916-18: Farmers and Watercress Growers.

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The first two articles in this series, published in, set out the background to the Tribunal and dealt with conscientious objection and cases of domestic hardship. This article reviews the way the Tribunal dealt with appeals for exemption based on the agricultural work the appellant was doing.

As the war went on food shortages became a serious concern, particularly in 1917. The combination of German U-boat attacks on shipping and the lack of farm labour, because of conscription, meant that there was not enough food to go round. The Government launched initiatives such as the Women's Land Army to increase production. At county level the Hertfordshire War Agricultural Committee was set up to raise the area of land under arable crops. It was against this background that the Tribunal dealt with seventeen cases from Croxley Green involving farming, including five from the watercress industry.

James Dorrofield was aged 40 in 1916 and lived at Fishery Cottage (and subsequently the Pest House). The *Observer* records¹ that he owned 4 acres of cress, 2 of potatoes and 20 of hay. Dorrofield appeared before the Tribunal six times between June 1916 and October 1918. Each time he was granted a temporary exemption to continue the business and in December 1917 he was also required to join the Hertfordshire Volunteers. On his final appearance before the Tribunal in October 1918, Dorrofield handed in a certificate establishing that his occupation was protected by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. However, James' younger brother **Joseph Dorrofield** (aged 35 of 1 Yorke Road) had his application for exemption refused in June 1916.

The **Sansom family** also grew watercress locally. In March 1916, one of their labourers, **William Treacher** (118 New Road) was exempted for two months to gather in the watercress harvest. He enlisted later in 1916. **Charles Herbert Sansom** (aged 29 in 1916) had taken over his parents' business at Croxley Hall. According to the *Observer*, he farmed 30 acres, including 10 acres of market garden and 8 of cress, in Hertfordshire plus 7 acres in Hampshire (*WO* 24 March 1917). In March 1916 he was granted 6 months' exemption on the grounds of serious financial hardship. Then in June he appeared before the Tribunal again and they adjourned his case pending further instructions (presumably from the War Agricultural Committee). Charles applied for exemption for one of his watercress cutters, **Daniel Ward** (aged 36 of 1 Vine Cottages, Scots Hill) in November 1916. Sansom argued that he had already cut back his work force to nine men and two boys compared to fifteen before the war. However, the application was dismissed and Ward joined up. Charles himself faced the Tribunal again in March 1917 when the Military Representative challenged his exemption.

Meanwhile, Charles' uncle Harry (**Henry George Sansom**) ran his watercress business at Cassiobridge. In January 1917 Harry (40) was granted 6 months conditional exemption but then the Military Representative applied for a review in May. According to the report in the *Observer* of 19 May 1917, Harry had offered to look after his nephew's business while he joined the Army, but his nephew had produced a medical certificate saying that he was tubercular and thus unfit for military service. In his defence, Harry Sansom said that he

¹ *WH&WO* 6 Jan 1917

had eight children, the eldest in the army and the youngest in the cradle. His conditional exemption was renewed provided he joined the special constabulary. At about the same time as this was going on in Rickmansworth, Harry's eldest son Frederick was killed in action in France. Neither Charles nor Harry enlisted. Charles went on to become the first chairman of the National Watercress Growers' Association in 1928.²

Despite the importance of agriculture in the war effort, farm workers did not always receive preferential treatment. **Alfred Gunnell** (271 New Road) was a market gardener and watercress cutter. He also argued that his parents were both aged and he was their sole support now that two of his three brothers were in the army. Gunnell was refused exemption and enlisted in 1916.

George T Snelgrove of Scots Hill Cottage was also refused in June 1916 in spite of arguing that he was a farmer and market gardener. His appeal was dismissed by the County Tribunal in February 1917. The Observer reported the Military Representative as saying that the man's employer, Mr Greves, only kept him on a pleasure farm at 26s per week. G W Davey for the appellant contradicted this and claimed that Snelgrove looked after 11 acres of grassland, 44 acres of farmland, calves, cows, pigs and a large number of poultry, in addition to the garden. Consequently, he was a real producer of food. Having regard to his medical classification (C1) he was serving his country better than he would do if he joined up and was given the task of sweeping a barrack square.

Age and the difficulty of replacing skills appear to have been factors in the Tribunal's decisions. **Ernest Hart** (39) of New Road was a ploughman working for **John Coxhill** of Killingdown farm. He was granted conditional exemption in June 1916. A year later, the case of **H R Sear** (42), farmer and fruit grower of Scots Hill, was adjourned for instructions from the War Agricultural Committee. His name does not appear on the All Saints' Shrine so it seems that he may have been exempted. Coxhill, who is recorded as farming 50 acres, also applied for exemption for a cowman, **H. Parsons** (30), in November 1916. Parsons was a member of the Volunteer Training Corps and Coxhill described him as absolutely indispensable. He too was granted conditional exemption.

W. Stone was less successful. According to the Observer³ he had five cows and 15 young stock and was a contractor for the County Council. The tribunal dismissed applications for two of his sons, **Jesse Walter Stone**, cowman and coal carter and **G. W Stone** (29) carter, contractor and cowman.

By 1918 the pressure to enlist was becoming greater, especially for younger men. Two agricultural cases from Croxley reached the County Appeal Tribunal. **W T Dickins** was an eighteen-year old cowman on the family farm at Croxley Hall. In December 1917, he was given a final exemption until March 1918 which he appealed unsuccessfully. Another eighteen-year old, **William Spencer Banting**, worked for his father at Red Heath farm as both a horse ploughman and a motor tractor driver. Mr W Banting senior (47) emphasised that he had adopted modern techniques by becoming the first man in the county to buy a motor tractor. Mr Crawford, for the appellant, argued strongly for exemption, bearing in mind Banting's great assistance to smallholders in the county. However, Ward Davey (National Service Representative) argued that, being such a young man himself, Banting ought to allow his son to go into the Army. Mr Crawford said that tractor driving was a

² *Watford in the 20th Century Volume 1 p. 78*; Oliver Phillips; Watford Observer June 2011.

³ *WH&WO* 4 November 1916

young man's job, and an old man could not be trained to do it. By a majority it was decided that Banting junior should be called up on 29 June. Mr Banting senior protested that he would sell his tractor.⁴ It is not clear whether Dickins or Banting actually enlisted. Neither man's name appears on the All Saints' Shrine.

Overall, the Tribunal were a lot more sympathetic to appeals for exemption from men working in agriculture than they were to appeals based on domestic hardship. However, agricultural labourers were generally required to enlist.

⁴ *WH&WO* 1 June 1918