

From Volunteer to Conscript part 4

The Rickmansworth Urban Military Tribunal 1916-18: the Blacksmith, the Laundryman and the Hairdresser.

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This is the last of four articles and it reviews the way the Tribunal dealt with appeals for exemption from small businesses in Croxley Green.

When it came to businesses outside the farming sector it was not so clear whether they were of national importance and therefore whether their staff deserved exemption. This was a matter of judgment for the Tribunal. Moreover, to begin with there was clearly an expectation that the Military Representative would play a role in finding substitute workers to replace those being called up. However, as time went on and the pressure grew to find more conscripts, exemptions given previously were reviewed and the Military Representative, Mr. Ward Davey, made it clear that it was not his responsibility but up to the Employment Exchange or National Service Department to find substitutes.¹

There was one Croxley enterprise which gained full support from the local Tribunal, the blacksmiths in New Road run by the **Gibbs** family. James Gibbs of 46 New Road who worked as an agricultural smith was given an absolute exemption. So was **W. Chapman** of Hagden Lane, Watford who worked for Jesse Gibbs as a wheelwright and farrier. Gibbs said that Chapman repaired every kind of machinery used on a farm and the Tribunal exempted him because he was in a certified occupation.

Other businesses had a protracted wrangle with the Tribunal in an attempt to keep their key workers. **Harold Aitken** (35) of 127 New Road was a shop assistant at **Messrs Beeson and Sons**, Church Street, Rickmansworth.² Beesons was an important local business involved in building, ironmongery, builders' supplies and small scale engineering work. They were finding it hard to keep going when several members of staff were called up. Mr Beeson argued to the Tribunal in September 1917 that Aitken was the only man left in the shop and his work could not be done by a woman. But the Tribunal was only prepared to grant exemption until the end of November. Beesons appealed on the grounds that there were previously four men in the shop and three had joined up. On that basis, the County Tribunal granted a six months conditional exemption. The firm was back at the County Tribunal in April 1918, represented by Mr S J Ellis who pointed out that there were originally seven brothers in the firm and four had joined the Army. Mrs Beeson, who was head of the firm, had broken down in health. He argued that there was a bargain with the Local Tribunal that Aitken should not be called up if the other sons of military age enlisted. They had done so and he therefore contended that the bargain still held good. The National Service Representative said that conditions had changed with the present urgent need for men. The appeal was refused but Mr Ellis was granted leave to appeal to the central tribunal.³ No report has been found of any appeal to the Central Tribunal so the outcome is not known. However, according to the 1918 Absent Voters' List, Harold Aitken joined the 3rd Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment) as a Private.

¹ WH&WO 19 May 1917

² See *Rickmansworth Historical Society Newsletter* article on Beesons in issue 53 of June 2001.

³ WH&WO 13 April 1918

The **Croxley Green Laundry** found itself in a similar position. The proprietor, Mr **B. C. Cheetham**, argued that his boilerman, **Percival Green** (aged 29 of 262 New Road), should be exempt because he was the only man on the premises and Cheetham had advertised five times without receiving a single reply. He would have to close down if Green went into the army. The Tribunal allowed six months' exemption in August 1916 provided that Green joined the special constables. In June 1917, Cheetham was back before the Tribunal arguing that substitutes sent from the Labour Exchange had proved useless. The Military Representative said that Green was a priority for enlistment because he was classed A and under 31. However, it was true that he was in a certified occupation. The Tribunal gave a further two months' exemption and Cheetham was instructed to do his best to find a substitute. He tried for more leniency by appealing to the County Tribunal but they confirmed the decision. The last record of this case in the Observer is of a further appearance at the local Tribunal in September 1917, when despite Cheetham's arguments about the impossibility of finding a substitute, the Tribunal decided that the exemption should only last until the end of November. Green enlisted and, in 1918, was an Air Mechanic in 118 Squadron, RAF. Finally, Cheetham himself (aged 39) was forced to apply to the Tribunal in October 1918 but managed to gain exemption on grounds of his occupation.

The **Croxley Green Co-operative Society** failed to prevent their vanman and bakery assistant, **G. Mead** (24), being called up early in 1917. However, they were more successful with respect to the manager, **George Kingham** (aged 38 of Yorke Road). He was granted conditional exemption in May and December 1917. Kingham's case was examined again in October 1918 and by then he held a protection certificate, obtained by the Co-operative Society.

George Ide (aged 41) was a motor engineer living in Watford Road who managed the works for George Jones and Sons, Coachbuilders and Motor Engineers, Church Street Rickmansworth.⁴ Ide appeared before the tribunal five times. He had been working on government controlled agricultural tractors so, because of his skills, he managed to get the tribunal to renew his conditional exemption throughout the war.

In contrast, **Wallis' builders and decorators** were not so successful. **C H Wallis** (24) of 3 New Road argued that his father could not run the business alone if he was called up. But the Tribunal was having none of it and both he and **H R Revell** who worked for the Wallis family were required to enlist in 1916. In 1918, when the electoral register was compiled, Wallis was an Air Mechanic with the RAF but Revell was living at home in Copthorne Cottages.

Henry Sharman was 35 when he first appeared before the Tribunal in April 1917. He was a hairdresser and lived at 226 New Road. Although hairdressing could hardly be described as a vital contribution to the war effort, Sharman managed to remain exempt, provided he joined the special constables, until the end of the war. The reason appears to be his lack of medical fitness.

It is noticeable that, as the war went on, more pressure was brought to enlist men who had, earlier, warranted exemption because of their contribution to the community. For example, **Arthur Dorrell** (39) baker, **Percy Singleton** foreman baker at the Co-op and **Jeremiah Saunders** (Sanders) butcher (38) were granted absolute exemption in July 1916. However, Singleton enlisted in 1917 and became a Private in the 12th Field Battery,

⁴ See RHS Newsletter article on John and George Jones in issue 79

Army Service Corps. Dorrell and Saunders, had to apply to the Tribunal again in 1918 to maintain their exemptions. **Fred Harrison** (29 of Scots Hill), butcher's manager in charge of Fletcher's Rickmansworth branch had been exempted too. However, this was successfully challenged by the Military Representative in January 1917. Harrison joined up a few months later. He was a Gunner in the Royal Field Artillery.

Conclusion

Overall, there are 353 names of Croxley Green men who enlisted on All Saints' Shrine, and 66 more are recorded on the 1918 Absent Voter's List. So more than one in six of Croxley's population served in the forces or the Red Cross. About 200 men (around half the total) joined up as volunteers, before conscription was introduced.

Small businesses suffered badly from the loss of staff, especially those dependent on one or two men, and it usually was men in those days. Employers were reluctant even to consider taking on women instead. It appears that those involved in essential supplies, e.g. grocers and bakers, managed to keep going. After all, the Government wanted to maintain morale at home. But Kelly's Directory for 1919 also includes listings for the Laundry, Wallis's builders and Harry Sharman the hairdresser so it appears that they survived in spite of the problems.

Some businesses, such as Gibbs the blacksmiths and Jones' engineers in Rickmansworth, were so important for the vital farming industry that they received official support. Farmers themselves were encouraged to keep going but had to manage without many of their farm workers. This led to schemes for providing extra hands, particularly at harvest, such as mobilising soldiers in training or on leave, using German prisoners and eventually launching the Women's Land Army.

Recruiting so many able-bodied men from Croxley Green placed everyone's lives under stress. Women had to expand their roles, families had to try to make ends meet and those left with the responsibility of running businesses had to cope with increasing burdens.