

Conscientious Objectors in Badsey by Peter Stewart

In 1916 the Military Service Act was passed which imposed conscription on all single men aged 18 to 41. Those seeking to be excluded from military service could select from the following reasons when applying to a tribunal. They were:

A: On the ground that it is expedient in the national interests that the man should, instead of being employed in military service, be engaged in other work in which he is habitually engaged.

B: On the ground that it is expedient in the national interests that the man should, instead of being employed in military service, be engaged in other work which he wishes to be engaged.

C: If he is being educated or trained for any work, on the ground that it is expedient in the national interests that, instead of being employed in military service, he should continue to be so educated or trained.

D: On the ground that serious hardship would ensue if the man were called up for Army service, owing to his exceptional financial or business obligations or domestic position.

E: On the ground of ill-health or infirmity.

F: On the ground of a conscientious objection to the undertaking of combatant service.

G: On the ground that the principal and usual occupation of the man is one of those included in the list of occupations certified by Government Departments for exemption. One tribunal which took place at Market Bosworth in Leicestershire, exempted all members of the local Atherstone Hunt on the grounds that their occupation was indispensable (just one of the more unusual and controversial occupations certified for exemption from the War Office).

However, although conscription proved necessary during this time to ensure all those who were eligible enlisted, many of those on the front line had joined the armed forces before the war had begun and were considered to be professional soldiers. Many posters were displayed around the country outlying the conditions of the Act and those men who may be excepted or exempted from service. Under the Military Service Act tribunals were established, showing a modicum of recognition for conscientious objectors.

The 1916 issue of the Evesham Journal contains the results of many local Tribunals, involving hundreds of men, all seeking exemption. Throughout Britain these Tribunals were kept busy with men claiming exemption on domestic and business grounds and with those who became known as conscientious objectors. In June 1916 alone the Tribunals had received claims from 748,587 men. While I have not counted the number of Worcestershire men seeking exemption I became aware some time ago that two members of the Aldington Stewart families had sought exemption and was able to find the notes regarding their appearance at a local Tribunal in the Evesham Journal. This involved two brothers Walter and William Stewart, the former objecting on religious grounds, a conscientious objector, and just one of the 16,000 conscientious objectors who were to pass through the Tribunals during the course of the war.



Walter Stewart 1889 - 1953

Walter was one of seven children born to William Henry & Charlotte Stewart (née Hartwell) of Aldington. He was educated at the Fircroft College, founded by George Cadbury in 1909. He married Francis Ellen (née Field) in 1915 in the Quaker Chapel in Badsey and was eventually to reside at the Chapel cottage. Among the Stewart papers in my possession I found the Journal article relating to his appearance at a local Tribunal claiming exemption from WW1 service on religious grounds along with his brother William which is shown here along with a copies of Walter's Exemption certificates. William was detained at Worcester County Prison before appearing at a Central Tribunal at Wormwood Shrubs, after he was retained at Winson Green Prison in Birmingham before taking Home Office Scheme work at Llangadock, Carmarthenshire in Wales. Work in the Welsh mine was hard labour. He was

eventually to return to work on the land with his brother Walter but he never married. In 1917 Walters only son James William was born. Like his father James was to become a conscientious objector and appeared at a Local Tribunal in Manchester on February 2nd, 1940 where he read out his application. He stated that he was a Quaker. He held the tenets of the Quaker body with regard to peace and war as a matter of personal conscience. His application was approved. On January 19, 1942, James was appointed a 'Fire Guard' in the Civil Defence Services for the Borough of Prestwich. He was then residing at 12 Clayton Street, Prestwich.


There is no evidence to suggest that Walter Stewart, his son James, or other locals were ever made to suffer for their objection to war, despite articles and letters being published in the local press, particularly during 1916 when local tribunals were taking place and conscientious objection came under close scrutiny particularly the activities of the Friends meeting house.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS.

William Henry Stewart (33), Aldington, claimed exemption as responsible for 4 acres of land and he assisted his father in working his land. He worked a horse. — The Military Representative: If it was a question of you or your brother going, which would rather go, you or him?—Applicant: I would rather he went. (Laughter.) He added that he was seven years older than his brother.—The appeal of his brother Walter was next heard. The younger brother appeared in the role of a conscientious objector. Among his stated reasons, he stated that he was opposed to all wars as contrary to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Questioned, he proceeded to state his views at length. He said he was opposed to all war as all wars were contrary to the teaching of Jesus Christ in the New Testament and he could not be involved in taking up arms and assisting to send millions of lives to eternity before their time. He did not believe in war.—The Chairman: Do you believe in the Old and New Testament?—Applicant: I believe that when Jesus Christ came He gave us a new dispensation. My principles are based on the New Testament and not on the Old Testament and I take the New Testament as a guide.—The Chairman: You object to fighting?—Yes. Christ gave us a different —.—The Military Representative: Are you a Quaker?—Applicant: Yes.—The Military Representative: I have a great respect for Quakers, although I don't believe in their views. Do you know the verse in the Bible that "he who love chaseth?" Why not chasen the Germans.—Applicant: I don't quite see your meaning.—The Military Representative: You know you are indirectly prosecuting the war; if you grow feeding stuff for the soldiers you are helping the war. You won't object to going into the R.A.M.C.?—Applicant: Yes.

The point is made in my own manner. I cannot conscientiously go and undertake a thing that is contrary to my religious belief. —Further questioned, Stewart said that he did not speak for his brother, adding, "It is a serious position I am placed in to-day."—Mr. Cope: We are expected to love our enemies. Do you expect us to love the Germans at the present time?—Applicant: Yes. We are asked to forgive.—Mr. Cope: I'm afraid it would not be reciprocated. —The Chairman: What if they came over your house and dropped a bomb? —Applicant's answer was not plainly heard.—In reply to Mr. A. R. Williams he said he objected to helping to produce ammunition and to home defence just as much as foreign service. He would be trained and equal to the others if the necessity arose.—The Military Representative: Is your brother a Quaker?—Applicant: No; we should have been on a par had he been.—The Military Representative: What do you mean on a par?—Applicant: Equal.—The Military Representative: Meaning that he is inferior to you?—Applicant: I did not say so.—Mr. Williams: Have you had this conscientious objection since the war started?—Applicant: No: I have had it for twelve years.—William Henry Stewart was refused exemption and Walter Stewart was granted exemption, the Chairman saying the Tribunal considered he would be more useful on the land.

News article from the Evesham Journal & Advertiser regarding William and Walter Stewart.



Local Tribunal: Name _____
 Address _____
 Certificate No. 44

This is to certify that:—
 Name (in full) Walter Stewart
 Address (in full) Aldington, Evesham.
 Age 26.
 Occupation, profession or business Market Gardener.

is exempted from the provisions of the Military Service Act, 1916.
 The exemption is* absolute.

The ground on which the exemption is granted is
F.

Signature J. Wadams
 Date 14 MAR 1916 for the Tribunal.

* State whether the exemption is absolute, conditional (in which case the conditions should be stated) or temporary (in which case the period of time should be stated).
 If the exemption is granted on conscientious grounds and is from combatant service only, this should also be stated.

R. 39.

MILITARY SERVICE ACT, 1916.

CERTIFICATE OF EXEMPTION.

This Certificate must be signed by the holder in the space provided below and must be carefully preserved by him. It must be returned to the Local Tribunal when it ceases to be in force. If the Certificate is conditional and if the conditions are no longer satisfied, notice must be given to the Local Tribunal. The man who fails to do this is liable to a penalty.

Signature of holder of Certificate. (The Certificate should be signed as soon as it is received.)
Walter Stewart

(p 5750) Wt. 50865-12 250x 2/16 II & S

Walter Stewart's Certificates of Exemption.