

Peterborough Exemption Tribunals in WWI – by David Gray

1915

By mid-1915, the war was lasting longer than had been anticipated and the British military required more recruits; The 'Derby Scheme' was a survey to determine how many could be obtained, via the use of appointed canvassers visiting eligible men at home to persuade them to 'volunteer' for war service. The Scheme was a voluntary recruitment policy in Britain created in 1915 by Edward Stanley,



17th Earl of Derby. The concept behind The Derby Scheme was that for men who voluntarily registered, their name would be called upon for service only when necessary. Married men had an added incentive in that they were advised they would be called up only once the supply of single men was exhausted. Every eligible man, aged 18 to 41, who was not in a "starred" (essential) occupation was required to make a public declaration of whether he would enlist immediately or defer his service to a later date, to appear when called.

"We have heard the last of conscription," the *Peterborough Advertiser* proudly stated. "Thanks to those who, realising the greatness of our cause, are determined to fight for it, if they have to fight, as free men. Conscription, it seems to many...would be unworthy of those fine heroes who have fought and gallantly died with no other compulsion but that of a great moral call. It is up to those who remain to endeavour to be worthy."

Undoubtedly it is a hard decision for many. To speak as though all the single young men left are now shirkers is to be something less than just. For there are those upon whom important business enterprises in part, or wholly, depend – are those enterprises to be wrecked? There are those upon whom a home depends, even though they are not married – is the home to be dissipated? There are cases where mothers have spared – and lost – one or more sons; they feel they simply cannot spare another. Is he a coward, a shirker, if he pauses? There are the physically unfit, who cannot be denoted unless they brand themselves with a badge which to many will always be a stigma... These are the problems which will engage the Enlistment Tribunal which will shortly be in session consisting of the Dean of Peterborough, Mr. John Hy Beeby, and Mr. H. B. Hartley, a legal gentleman."

The Tribunal listened to cases where men had enlisted but their employers claimed they were badly needed in munitions factories, farms, railways or other essential works. In these cases, the job of the Tribunal was to persuade the man that he should not join the Forces, the opposite of what many people today believe that these tribunals were set up for. Cases were heard regarding other men who had not enlisted, or did not wish to, and whose employer still needed their services. The Tribunal would listen to the facts and then decide whether the man or his employer should accept the 'decision of the community,' and agree to him either joining up or staying at work.



Derby Scheme armband worn by men who had attested

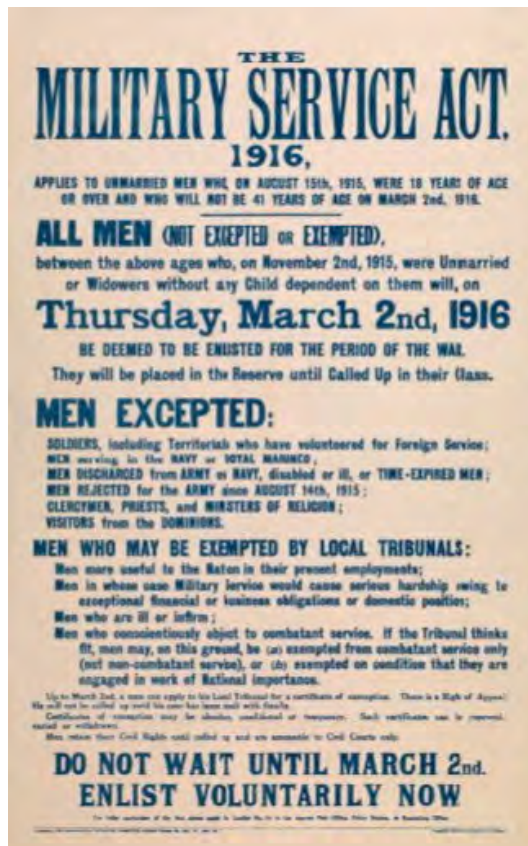
“In the end it is all a question of men,” Lord Kitchener stated. “The appointment of men to war, men to manufacture for war, men to make, circulate and save money for war. Men, more men, and still more men, until the enemy is crushed.”

Canvassing for men to attest in Lord Derby’s scheme in Peterborough was proving very arduous. In each case personal interviews were required, the weather had been very bad and the deadline date of 11th December was looming. It was in December that the scheme was abandoned; 38 per cent of single men and 54 per cent of married men who were not in 'starred' (reserved) occupations failed to come forward.

1916

Conscription at Last

Over 3,000,000 men volunteered to serve in the British Armed Forces during the first two years of the war. Due to heavy losses at the Western Front the government decided in 1916 to introduce conscription. The Military Service Act of January 1916 specified that single men between the ages of



18 and 41 were liable to be called-up for military service unless they were widowed with children or ministers of religion. Conscription started on 2nd March 1916 and the act was extended to married men on 25th May 1916. The law went through several changes before the war's end with the age limit eventually being raised to 51.

At Peterborough Tribunal Court on Saturday 26th February, appeals were heard regarding exemption from military service under the Military Service Act. A voluntary worker for the Y.M.C.A. applied for exemption giving as some of his grounds that he had had appendicitis, tonsillitis on four occasions, he had a deformed elbow, was totally deaf in the right ear, and that military training would probably kill him. A remark was made that he was not exactly the ideal example of a military man; however, his application for exemption was turned down!

There were 36 applications for postponement or exemption at the Tribunal on Tuesday 29th February. Mr. J. H. Beeby was Chairman and Major W. J. Deacon

was the military representative. An auctioneer’s clerk applied for exemption on the grounds that “war was against his mind,” and therefore he could not join the Army. He had been employed by his firm for twelve years and no one could do his work. In his view he was absolutely essential. If a man in the

street committed murder he would be executed, and he was certainly against committing murder by physical force.

Chairman: "Are you absolutely indispensable?"

Applicant: "No."

Major Deacon: "When did it first enter your mind to protest?"

"I have always been of the same opinion about fighting."

"Have you a mother?"

"Yes."

"Sisters?"

"No."

"Would you protect your mother against the Huns?"

"Yes...or at least I would answer that in a general way."

The application was refused.

A Peterborough dentist claimed for the exemption of his qualified assistant on the grounds of national interest. The decision was adjourned for a week.

An assistant manager to a tailor claimed for exemption on the grounds that he supported an invalid widowed mother and an epileptic brother. Application refused.

Two brothers, farriers and smiths, said that they were doing work of millstone dressing, which was essential to mills in Lancashire. There wasn't another firm within a hundred miles that did the same work.

Chairman: "I should have thought you would have established yourself in the centre of a milling district?"

Applicant: "This is a centre; there are hundreds of mills around Peterborough. I make the tools and temper them. I don't think there is a man in Northamptonshire who could take my place for a week."

Major Deacon: "I am shoeing horses all day until tea-time and then do the other work half the night. We haven't been able to get assistance since the war broke out."

Postponed for six months.

The father of a young farmer, builder and gravel merchant, who applied for a temporary postponement, stated that he was building houses for munitions workers and other contracts, and if his son went now, it would be impossible to complete the contracts. He asked for time to clear up the contracts before his son was called up. Of 100 men he employed, 24 men had gone, three had been killed and only three remained of military age.

Major Deacon: "Couldn't the building contracts be placed under the supervision of an architect?"

Applicant: "I shouldn't like it; I would prefer to cancel the contracts."

The applicant said he already had two sons serving in the Army. Postponed for one month.



A confectioner and provision merchant asked for exemption on the grounds that he would suffer financial loss and his widowed mother would suffer hardship. If called up he would have to close down his business. His mother had a second-hand clothes shop, but there had been no business at all in that way since the Belgians [refugees] came. Exemption refused.

A market gardener and florist applied on the grounds of national interest and domestic circumstances, his septuagenarian father and mother being dependent upon him. Application refused.

An insurance agent applied on the grounds of national interest and personal hardship.

Chairman: "Aren't there women collectors?"

Applicant: "No, they haven't been a success."

Major Deacon: "They would talk too much, sir."

Chairman: "You may have to put up with them you know."

Application refused.

A coal and firewood dealer, the only son of a widow, allowed her thirty shillings a week, including board, lodging, gas and rates. If he were called up the business would go.

The mother: "I have nothing to fall back on. If you take my son you take my all."

Application refused.

The Tribunals were certainly strict; however, there were some bizarre decisions such as the following example heard at Peterborough on Friday 3rd March 1916. A schoolmaster who was the commandant of a cadet corps applied on conscientious grounds for conditional non-combatant service. He stated that he had taken an oath before God, Holy Saints and Mary, that he would not undertake combatant service. In answer to the Chairman, the applicant said he would sooner see the boys he was training in the cadet corps die before being called on to fight. It was a fact that he had applied for a commission [in the cadet corps] in a moment of folly and under pressure.

The applicant said he had made the oath privately and took it to be none the less binding because of that. If the tribunal wished it, he would repeat it before a commissioner for oaths. A certificate of exemption from combatant service was granted.

One cannot help but wonder if the applicant ever imagined that he might actually have to fight in a real war when he joined the cadet corps.

Named and Shamed

On Saturday 8th July, a large column appeared in the 'Advertiser' headed; "MILITARY SERVICE ACT. The following men have failed to comply with the requirements of the Military Service Act, and are absentees:" The column contained the names of thirty-four men from Peterborough, seven men from Peterborough Rural (Longthorpe, Paston, Dogsthorpe, Woodston, Walton and Newark), four from Barnack and Stamford, five from Eye, one each from Kings Cliffe, Newborough, Yarwell and Maxey and two from Helpston. Below this it stated: "Information which will lead to tracing the present address of any of the above is invited. All communications should be marked 'Confidential' and addressed to the Recruiting Officer, Recruiting Office, Market Place."

All of these men were listed as having refused to answer the call to be drafted into the Forces. Their previously known addresses, their occupations where known, age, and marital status were also listed. The shame cast onto these men and their families was immense and any newspaper editor was duty bound to confirm the accuracy of their facts in these circumstances before going to print.

The next week, on the 15th July, the Advertisement Manager at the Advertiser was forced to make a number of 'corrections.' The advertiser was asked by Mr. J. Blood, manager to Mr. R. S. Jellings, builder and contractor, Peterborough, (as well as by Mr. Jellings), and by Mr. W. H. Mitcham, late of 140, Fletton Avenue, and now of March, to state that they were wrongly included in the War Office list published in the 'Advertiser.' Mr. Blood had already received exemption at the City Tribunal, and Mr. Mitcham had re-registered at March the previous April and was given exemption in June on the grounds that he farmed 334 acres and owned nearly 300 head of stock.

Mr. James Spriggs, bricklayer, of 21, Glenton Street, Peterborough, also stated that he should not have been included as he had been in the Army for the past ten months.

Cyclist Horace William Maywood, of 47, Orchard Street, Peterborough, wrote that he had been with 'C' Company, 25th Reserve Battalion, London Regiment (training in Richmond Park), for the past three months, and there had evidently been some mistake!

The Advertiser apologised (as newspapers do), but a lot of damage had been done.

1917

Astounding Case

Arthur Horace Wells, aged 20 and classed as B2 by the Central Medical Board, was a stocktaker at Brown, Son & Co. and now appeared before the Peterborough Tribunal Court. After Mr. Wells, his father, and the military representative had retired, the Tribunal agreed on a one-month final deferment. When Major Deacon returned into the room with Wells, he called the Tribunal's attention to a fact that he had



Conscripted men undergoing medical check-up

just learned while in the waiting room, that Wells had a partially paralysed arm, and thought it was a case for the Central Medical Board. How the Medical Board had passed him B2 he did not know! The chairman said they had no idea that Wells was so afflicted and immediately gave him three month's conditional exemption, Major Deacon stating that Wells was a man he would never press to be taken into the Army.

The following fitness categories for recruitment into the British Army had been established in January 1916:

- A: General Service.
- B1: Garrison Service Abroad.
- B2: Labour Service Abroad.
- B3: Sedentary Work Abroad.
- C1: Garrison Service at Home Camps.
- C2: Labour Service at Home Camps.
- C3: Sedentary Service at Home Camps.

The physical standards defining each category:

- A: Able to march, see to shoot, hear well and stand active service conditions.
- B: Free from serious organic diseases, able to stand service on the lines of communication in France, or in garrisons in the tropics.
- B1: Able to march five miles, and see to shoot with glasses and hear well.
- B2: Able to walk five miles to and from work, see and hear sufficiently for ordinary purposes.
- B3: Only suitable for sedentary work.
- C: Free from serious organic disease, able to stand service conditions in garrison at home.