

COs in Prison

Absolutist COs spent their war in prison. They refused to cooperate with the authorities and would not compromise. They included intensely religious men as well as political or moral objectors. For example, Bristol CO Frank Merrick based his objections on moral grounds, whilst Alfred James was a political objector.

Prison at this time had seen some reform since the Victorian age but conditions were still harsh. As the Frank Merrick biographical description explains, prisoners contact with the outside world was initially prohibited but gradually, if they behaved, they would be allowed occasional letters and visits. If they misbehaved however these things would be withdrawn and they could find themselves on a punishment diet and might be put in solitary confinement. What many COs seemed to find the worse thing, however, was the silence rule, which meant talking was forbidden.

Objectors in prison could take very different approaches to their captivity. Some sought to be obedient in so far as their consciences would allow and followed the rules and undertook work such as sewing mail bags as long as this was not something done for the benefit of the military. Others resisted and protested, with strikes and attempts to disrupt the prison regime, and there were hunger strikes followed by the torture of force-feeding (like the suffragettes before them COs became subject to the '[Cat and Mouse Act](#)', whereby they were released when they became dangerously ill from striking, then were returned to prison when sufficiently recovered). COs also came up with some creative ways of evading the harsh rules. CO prisoners developed secret codes which allowed them to tap out messages on the metal pipes which ran between their cells and they smuggled paper and pencils and produced their own secret newspapers which were circulated between CO inmates (find out more about the [Winchester Whisperer newspaper](#) by listening to this BBC clip).

As the war progressed, prison conditions were relaxed somewhat for COs but they were held long after the Armistice, with many released in April 1919 but some remaining in prison longer.

You can hear Bristol born CO [Frank Merrick talk about his prison experiences](#) in recordings from the Imperial War Museum. On this website you can also read some of the [letters he sent to his wife Hope Squire from prison as well as those she wrote back, and see some official prison documents](#).

See also the pdfs on this website relating to Frank Merrick and Alfred James.