

Frank Merrick



Frank was 31 when he was arrested as an absentee from the Army in 1917. His conscientious objection was founded upon moral and political beliefs and was demonstrated by the fact that as a longstanding vegetarian he refused to kill a single living being. An absolutist C.O., he spent his war in prison.

Born in Clifton, Bristol, Frank was home educated because of asthma. His talent as a pianist was soon noticed and he studied in Vienna. In 1911 he went to teach at the Royal Manchester College of Music where he was Professor of Music. Before the war he had been politically active in the fight for women to get the vote and (unusually for the time but not necessarily for COs) had become a vegetarian, demonstrating a keen sense of social justice.

Frank received his call-up notice in 1916 and applied for complete exemption on conscience grounds but was granted only partial exemption in the form of the Non-Combatant Corps. This he refused to accept. He was arrested, fined and handed over to the military but refused to put on a uniform. He was court-martialled and sentenced to two years hard Labour, which he served in Wormwood Scrubs and Wandsworth Prisons.

In prison he was offered release on the specially created Home Office Scheme – involving alternative labour at camps around the country. This he also refused. Instead, like other COs around the country Frank protested against his treatment. He refused to cooperate when his wedding ring was confiscated. He evaded the severity of the hated silence rule, which meant prisoners could not talk to each other, communicating by tapping the pipes running between cells using a specially devised code. He was also involved in a CO attempt to disrupt prison discipline by concerted rule breaking.

Frank had been performing as a pianist and composing music from an early age. In prison he kept these activities up as far as he could – including pretending to play using a flat surface to keep up his manual dexterity. He also did some composing in his head as well as in a prison notebook when the rules were relaxed and he had access to paper.

His wartime experiences did not hold him back. Keen to get him back, the Royal Manchester College of Music pressed for his early release from prison – but he refused to be made a special case. Eventually freed on 24th April 1919, he returned to the College, later teaching at the Royal College of Music in London. He continued to compose and perform. Several recordings of his performances were released on vinyl.

In the 1970s he was [interviewed about his experiences for the Imperial War Museum](#), so you can listen to him tell his own story. He died in 1981 aged 94. Maintaining his links with Bristol, his family lodged his papers with the [University of Bristol Special Collections](#). Some [documents and photos relating to Frank](#), including his court martial charge sheet and prison letters between him and his first wife Hope Squire, can be found on this website. The photograph above is available [here](#).

With thanks to Frank's children, Celia Bloor, Frank Merrick and Phoebe Merrick, and University of Bristol Special Collections for their support as well as for the photographs and documents.

See also the pdf on this website relating to *COs in Prison*.