

Bristol's WW1 Conscientious Objectors

Over 580 men from the Bristol area refused to fight in World War 1. They claimed the status of conscientious objector (CO) for moral, religious and/or political reasons. There were nearly 20,000 such men across Britain – and the numbers in this part of the country made it one of a number of hotspots of conscientious objection and war resistance.

Some of these 20,000 COs went into the military, undertaking non-combatant roles, for example, as medics or in the non-combatant corps (like Wilfred Whiteford). Some agreed to take non-military work of national importance on the land or worked in labour camps around the country, quarrying and building roads (like Eric Crompton and Gilford Wolland).

Others refused to cooperate and were tortured by the military. 35, including 16 who had been held prisoner at Richmond Castle, were sentenced to death in France but in the end were not executed. These 'absolutists' who refused to cooperate with the authorities in any way spent much of the war in prison, often under harsh conditions (like Hubert Whiteford and Frank Merrick). Some of these prisoners of conscience went on hunger strike and protested at their conditions (like Alfred James).

Some went underground, going on the run. They hid in safe houses and travelled through the countryside, using an underground network of supporters, camping or staying in safe houses. Some escaped to Ireland where conscription did not apply, and a few made it as far as the US by disguising themselves as engine room labourers on ships.

A number of COs died during the war or not long after. For some of these their wartime treatment was at least a factor in these deaths.

See also the pdfs on this website relating to the *Whiteford Brothers*, *Eric Crompton*, *Gilford Wolland*, *Frank Merrick*, *Alfred James* and *George Barker*.