

Mabel Tothill



Mabel Tothill was at the centre of the network of people in Bristol who ran CO support activities.

Mabel became a Quaker after moving to Bristol from Hull in the 1890s. She became active in campaigns for women's suffrage and against poverty in East Bristol. Mabel helped establish the [Barton Hill Settlement](#) in 1911 and became a member of the Independent Labour Party.

From the start of the war, Mabel argued for a negotiated peace and was a member of the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#), the Women's International League (which was to turn into the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#)) and she campaigned against conscription.

When conscription was introduced in 1916, Mabel became the secretary of Bristol's Joint Advisory Committee for Conscientious Objectors. Other members of this organisation were Bertha Ayles, wife of CO Walter Ayles, Annie Townley, wife of CO Ernest Townley, and Annie Chappell, wife of CO Bert Chappell. The Committee met at 27 Rosemary Street, now buried under the Broadmead shopping centre. Bertha and Annie Townley both lived in Station Road, Ashley Down.

The Committee brought together people who were Quakers and members of other non-conformist religious groups as well as supporters of political parties like the Independent Labour Party and the Socialist Labour Party. The Committee published and circulated leaflets alerting Bristolians to the treatment of COs. Copies of these survive in local archives. Among them was [What Every Bristol Man Should Know](#).

Letters kept by local COs demonstrate the effort and organisation that went into supporting COs and their families. The Committee organised supporters to attend tribunals with COs; placed 'watchers' outside local barracks to report when COs were moved in and out; visited COs in prison and work camps; and ensured families knew where COs were, often being able to inform families of a transfer before any official news was available. [This letter from Eric Crompton](#) to his parents tells them he has let 'Miss Tothill' know about his court-martial sentence and transfer to Wormwood Scrubs.

Circular letters were sent to Bristol COs in prisons and work camps across the country in Mabel Tothill's name, giving them information about their friends and families. Documents exist showing Mabel visited prisons and work camps in Dartmoor, Bristol, London and Ipswich. As well as the collection and distribution of information about COs, the Committee also offered material support to CO families including arranging holidays for the children of COs.

Mabel's support for COs brought criticism of her 'unpatriotic views' from local newspapers and from the Wills family who gave financial support to the Barton Hill Settlement. Mabel resigned from her role at the Settlement during the war because she didn't want to affect its work.

At the end of the war Mabel campaigned with others for the release of imprisoned COs. In 1920, she became the first woman to sit on Bristol City Council. She died, aged 96, in 1965.

See also the pdfs on this website relating to *Walter Ayles, Annie Townley, Annie Chappell, The Women Who Ran CO Support Activities in Bristol*.

The photo above is available [here](#) (image by permission of and with thanks to Bristol Archives).