

# Conscientious Objectors

## George Ewan

The story of this absolutist CO takes us slightly beyond the geographical boundaries of Moseley, but I hope the reader will forgive this as George Ewan's tale contains references to places which will be familiar to any resident of Birmingham. George's memoir was written for his family, and was not originally intended for publication, but Peter Brock felt it was an important account and included it in his book *These Strange Criminals*.<sup>1</sup>

George Ewan was a member of the Stirchley Quaker Meeting and worked for the Ten Acres and Stirchley Co-operative society. He was called up in 1917 at the age of 40. George could have been exempted due to the essential nature of his work, but refused because his junior would have then been conscripted and gone to fight. His absolutist position would earn him two prison sentences, the first of 112 days, then a second of two years, serving time at both Wormwood Scrubs and Portsmouth prisons. Although George's experiences are similar to many other CO's, his naturally happy disposition gives an unusual touch of serenity and even humour to his account.

George's struggle began on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1917 when he was arrested on a charge of 'refusing to obey an order and put on military clothing'. He was held in the army guardroom at Warwick for three weeks whilst awaiting his court-martial. He compared the court to a Friends' service as he felt 'the prayer of those who were not there and God's presence and was filled with a quiet calm'. In the court his statement was read out by the Adjutant and witnesses were interviewed. He was given the opportunity to ask questions of the witnesses but stated 'with goodwill to these men I would say I have no questions to ask'. He was found guilty. The sentence was read out several days later on the parade ground in front of all the soldiers on parade. The court had decided on a sentence of 112 days' hard labour, to be served at Wormwood Scrubs.

Before his transfer George was allowed to see his wife, children and a Quaker chaplain, feeling that the military police were kind and 'respected my God'. He took with him his copy of the Fellowship Hymn Book, which had a photograph of his wife and her fellow teachers of the Sunday school tucked inside the cover. On his way from the guardroom, he was calm and remembers his escort was 'correct and kind in bearing' and that the 'walk to the station was refreshing'. His journey was first by train and then by bus; he entered into friendly talk with the escort and shared the food his wife had brought him with the escort and a fellow passenger. When George arrived at Wormwood Scrubs, he was happy to see the figures of the Elizabeth Fry and John Howard in stone above the gate, hoping that God was also going to use his life in the effort of prison reform.



Figure 1: Photo showing the image of Elizabeth Fry above the main gate of Wormwood Scrubs<sup>2</sup>.

Upon arriving at the prison, outside clothes were taken away and a bath was given which George found 'very refreshing after three weeks sleeping in our clothing'. Then prison clothing was put on and a supper of cocoa and bread provided. The doctor inspected each prisoner on arrival to confirm him fit for hard labour duties. George's cell was in B ward, and he described his impression of it on the first night as 'a great hall, four stories high...It was whitewashed and each cell lighted up...looking up I saw wire netting across the middle of each storey. What a good fowl run!' A warder got each new prisoner to sign a notification to their nearest relative that they were safely in Wormwood Scrubs. New prisoners could earn the right to write letters after 56 days of good behaviour.

1. Brock, P. 2004, *These strange criminals: an anthology of prison memoirs by conscientious objectors to military service from the Great War to the Cold War*, University of Toronto Press.
2. Image by Chnee2 used under creative commons licence, available [here](#).

## Figure 2: Typical day for George Ewan at Wormwood Scrubs

### 5.30am

Morning bell rings for 5 minutes. The lights are lit and prisoners get up.

### 6am

Doors opened, slops emptied and fresh water given.

### 7am

Breakfast of porridge brought by a prisoner who works as a cleaner, carried in 5-gallon can. One pint given to each prisoner. Also 3oz of bread with breakfast. George with his sense of humour described the first meal of the day as a 'sumptuous feast'! Cells then cleaned and swept, tin knife, spoon, dust shovel and chamber pot are placed on the floor for inspection by the governor. Untidiness or unclean utensils might result in a punishment of bread and water.

### 8am

40 minutes of exercise in the yard to a voice saying 'left, right, left'.

### 8.40am

Those who go out to work are collected and marched away to the book-binding shop, part-worn store etc. Cleaners and prisoners in the first 28 days taken back to hall.

### 12noon

Men return to hall for lunch. They are inspected by an officer to make sure they have not taken anything from the workshop. Lunch eaten in cells, consisting of 1 pint stew, 4oz. potatoes, 3oz. bread, varied by having either 2 kippers or corned beef. On Wednesdays the meal is bacon and beans (although Jewish prisoners would have extra beans instead of bacon). Twice a week the cleaner leaves a bucket of water and cloth for washing floor, bedboard, table and stool. Then mailbag sewing until return to workshops: 8 mail bags are expected a day.

### 1.30pm

Warder collects dinner tins, slops emptied and fresh water given as required. Reassemble for afternoon work in workshops.

### 4pm

Another inspection and return to cells for supper of 3 oz. bread, ½ oz. margarine and 1 pint cocoa. Then work in cells.

### 7pm

A quick worker might finish in time to read before bed. Prisoners are allowed a Bible, hymn book, prayer book and an educational book. After 28 days he can also have another book which may be fiction. George enjoyed this quiet time and 'found spiritual help in it'.

### 8pm

Lights out.

### C of E Church services

**Wednesday** 1/2 hour service after breakfast or exercise

**Sunday Services** at 10-11.30 and 2-3.30.

George did not attend the services at Wormwood because the chaplain said he could not do so without listening to the war news.

George's clever wife got around this rule after the first six weeks by writing to ask for financial advice, as prisoners were allowed to write answers to letters concerning money matters. He was able to put 'I am in good health, dear, and meeting with good treatment' at the end of the letter.

For the first 28 days of the sentence prisoners would work in their cells sewing, but after that they would be given other work in the prison too. A typical day at Wormwood Scrubs went as shown in Figure 2.

After his first 28 days, a stripe was put onto the sleeve and the prisoner was sent to the chief warder who would find him work in one of the shops. George was asked if he was willing to make ship fenders, but refused because he did not want to force another man to have to go into military service by doing work which might be his. Instead he was given a place in the part-worn stores, taking in washing and sorting clothing, boots and cell utensils.

At the end of his sentence George thanked the Governor for 'the consideration given by the officials under you, and yourselves for the fairness shown in these unlovely places. I am pleased to have the knowledge at first hand of men living under the eye of the law'.

George's respite was brief, for, after meeting his wife, daughter Mary and sister at the gate, he spent a day together with them in London before meeting his escort for the steamer and train ride to Newport on the Isle of Wight where he had to return to the army guardroom.

His second court-martial was held in Portsmouth and this time the sentence was for two years, which shocked George as 'six or twelve months had been in my mind'. Before transfer to Portsmouth prison the guard gave him a large dinner with a very nice pudding and gave him an apple to put in his pocket. George left peace magazines for distribution among the soldiers.

George was then walked to the prison and felt that 'God had had a place for me in challenging the war machine'. Portsmouth prison held about 160 male prisoners (and 26

women in a separate wing). Of these 24 were CO's so George felt 'a real welcome in the smile of these friends, and there were two members of the Society of Friends there'. The Quaker chaplains held a service once a fortnight which was overseen by a warder, with a hymn, reading and a minute of quiet reflection before one of them spoke where they hoped 'Christ's spirit was felt'. The chaplains visited the prisoners in their cells on the other week. One of the chaplains, Charles Woodam, left the district soon after George's sentence began, but the other, Robert Penny, continued on his own. Before their meetings George would think out a spiritual problem and they would talk it over; the chaplain would also tell him the news. Once Robert said he'd come last to George Ewan as he found himself having to hurry his visits and George said 'I don't mind if you have to pass me by. These are mostly younger men than I and I want you to be doing what you can for them.' He also had visits from the C of E minister and found his 'sympathy ready and very patient'. At Portsmouth he was therefore able to attend the C of E services (Wednesdays 8.30am and Sundays 10am and 2.30pm) and remembers the humour of a prisoner awaiting trial who would always sing 'and lead us not into police station' during the Lord's Prayer!

At Portsmouth his job was that of a cleaner, which gave him more freedom to roam the block, carrying out duties including washing the WCs and landing daily, polishing the rails on landing and stairs, and putting buckets of water into cells for cleaning. He also did the porridge round and tried to give the CO's their fair share –or a bit over when he could!

Although George Ewan was one of the prisoners released in order to work with the Home Office Scheme at Wakefield, he soon came to feel it was a compromise he was unwilling to make and returned to Portsmouth to complete his prison sentence, at which time there were only six CO's left there. This time he worked in the store, again assisting with the deliveries and storage of goods, including checking items for repair.

One morning the governor brought a card, for discharge from the non-combatant corps, which when signed would allow George's release to be ordered. However George Ewan felt he could not sign this military document, and was not released until six months later, although six weeks before this one of the other CO's being released, a man called Brewer, had asked if he could stay and serve out Ewan's sentence because he was a single man and he wished George could return to his family. When the day of release finally came it was sudden – they took a taxi and wired 'Coming 10.15 Snow Hill'. George described the journey as a happy one: 'what a funny thing, free to home and loved ones. What a wonderful thought, and the train could not move quickly enough.' George was met at the station by his wife and her closest friend (who would later marry George Ewan after the death of his first wife). For George it was 'good to meet, to talk and to feel the sacred beauty of human life again'.

George remained a committed Quaker and felt that his calling to be a conscientious objector was part of Christ's spirit of love. Christianity was a way of life that meant 'taking a stand, facing odds, risking all natural things, liberty, friendship, separation' and this would not be in vain if it allowed the portrayal of Christ's 'love and character to point out to the war weary a new way of life, joy, peace and contentment in His love.'



Figure 3: Postcard showing the interior of Snow Hill station in the early 20th century<sup>3</sup>.

3. Available at: <http://www.warwickshirerailways.com/gwr/gwrbs75.htm>