

FARINGDON PEACE GROUP

On the 2nd March 1916, the Military Service Act that introduced conscription came into force. It was therefore highly appropriate that exactly 100 years ago to the day - 2nd March 2016 - a packed Friends Meeting House heard from Sheila Triggs what it was like to be a "conchie" – or conscientious objector. Sheila is a long-standing peace campaigner and also on the committee of WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and was therefore also able to shed light on the important role that women played in supporting the conchies. There were 2000 local tribunals that were set up around the country to judge on exemptions to conscription; each with an army recruiting officer to speak for the army, whose job it was to minimise the exemptions. In total , 16,000 (2%) were recorded as conscientious objectors; the grounds for objecting including moral, religious, and pacifism. In some cases, the conchies accepted non-combatant roles. But the "absolutists" refused to accept any role that could be considered a contribution to the war effort. Court martial and prison usually followed; with harsh 19th century conditions and pointless tasks such as rock breaking imposed. In one case, 50 COs were sent to France "under active service conditions" – which meant that if they refused to obey orders they could be shot. More than 100 conchies were recorded as having died in prison, but it would have been many more than that had it not been for the tireless work of many brave women who stood up for the rights of the COs. One of these women was Catherine Marshall. As Honorary Secretary to the "No Conscription Fellowship" she kept careful track of the case histories of more than 1000 COs . The records were copied and kept in six locations, because their offices were regularly being raided. She planted questions in Parliament that the War Office could only answer by coming back to her, and thus made sure that the plight of the COs was not ignored. When the war ended, life was no easier. After the armistice, no one was in any hurry to release them from prison; the last were not released until the end of 1919. It was then extremely difficult to find employment, and conchies generally continued to be shunned by society.

Only now can we fully appreciate a number of points : how difficult it was for the COs to stand by their convictions; how COs from completely different classes and backgrounds worked together; the lack of rancour between the absolutists and those who did accept alternative work; and the vital role that women played in supporting them.