

THE RICHMOND 16 – CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS OF WORLD WAR 1

Hazel Townsend, a founder member of Faringdon Peace group who recently returned to the area after many years in North Yorkshire, gave a fascinating talk to the Peace Group about 'The Richmond 16', a group of Conscientious Objectors (COs) who were imprisoned in Richmond Castle in Yorkshire during the First World War.

When conscription was introduced in 1916, the men, all from the north of England, appealed under the Military Service Act to the local tribunal in Darlington to be granted exemption on the grounds of moral beliefs. This failed, and when they refused to join the 'Non-Combatant Corps', doing work for the war effort without actually fighting, they were imprisoned in solitary confinement and harsh conditions in Richmond Castle. Here they refused to wear uniform, do drill or prepare food for officers and were frequently punished. The cell walls are still covered in their drawings and notes from this time.

Despite their refusal to fight, or rather because of it and Kitchener's desire to make an example of them, in May 1916 they were sent to the front in the knowledge that they would disobey orders 'while on active service' and thus be subject to court-martial and death by firing squad. However, on their way to France, one of the 16 managed to get a message to his brother who took it to his MP and when Kitchener died suddenly on 5th June, Prime Minister Asquith commuted their sentence to 10 years hard labour. They were sent to join 1000 other COs in a labour camp in Dyce, Scotland, where they endured cold, neglect and brutal treatment before finishing the war in civilian prisons. It was only then that their 10 year sentence began, but in fact they were released after 6 months.

Their suffering however continued as they were ostracised and made social outcasts, unable to get jobs, or continue their normal lives. Some were driven to suicide, others suffered mental illness, but their commitment to their beliefs to the point of being prepared to die for them helped to change public opinion and make things easier for COs in the Second World War. The 16 are commemorated in the gardens of Richmond Castle by 16 groups of yew trees.

Karen Vogt

Faringdon Peace Group meets on the first Wednesday of the month at 7.30 in the Friends Meeting House, Lechlade Road. April's meeting will have a speaker from Syria.