****[**The Story of Bert Brocklesby, Wesleyan Methodist Local Preacher and Conscientious Objector**](file:///C:\Users\toppingb\Dropbox\JPIT%20Members%20Docs\Bill%20Topping\CO100\Bert%20Brocklesby.docx)

Bert Brocklesby was born in Conisborough near Doncaster. He was an organist and choir master at the local Methodist chapel. He became a Wesleyan Methodist Local Preacher.

The strong Christian faith was shared by his brothers, and parents, but they all supported the war effort and his brothers enlisted and went to the front. His local Methodist church also strongly supported the war. His father was a Justice of the Peace and their home was next to the recruiting hall. But Bert stood out and stated that he could not kill another human being. He took the bible very seriously and especially the commandment which says ‘Thou shalt not kill ‘and also the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and the call to ‘Love our enemy’.

So going against his family and local chapel, and the local community he became an absolutist. That is someone who refused not just to kill another human being, but even to help on the frontline as stretcher bearer or first aid person. His stand brought great tension in the family and the wider community, yet his father respected Bert’s decision and amazingly at one point stated “I would rather Bert be shot for his beliefs than abandon them”.

Bert was put in front of a tribunal, his plea on grounds of religious conviction was refused and he was sent to prison in Richmond along with 15 other absolutists condemned to death. They became known as the Richmond 16 with each of them facing very harsh conditions.

At one stage the 16 were sent to France and in Boulogne amazingly he met up with his brother who was serving as a lieutenant in the army and had recently been posted to the region. In spite of their disagreements over the rights and wrongs of war they remained close brothers and Philip writing home to their parents wrote “I am right proud of him”.

The treatment meted out to the Conscientious Objectors, was often appalling, they were given very basic food rations, and sometimes they were tied up on a fence for two hours with their arms stretched out and their feet and knees tied tightly together. The reading of the sentences was done in a dramatic way with the verdict of “Death by shooting” being announced but after a very long pause it was changed to, “Commuted to 10 years of penal servitude”.

The Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was appalled when he heard of the way the COs were being treated and probably saved them from the death penalty. Increasingly the issue in Parliament was being raised especially by MP Philip Snowden and later as the war went on, the treatment improved to allow them to do prescribed work in the community. But public opinion, largely led by the newspapers remained very hostile. They were regarded as cowards or shirkers compared to the brave men who went to the front.

When he was sent to Dartmoor Prison in 1917 which housed about 1000 Conscientious Objectors they had a relatively easier life working on farms, in fields and quarries. But this only caused more anger to many in the general public as they were thought to being ‘pampered’ In reality this was far from the truth as they suffered in many different ways from a lack of medical care to loneliness and isolation. This ongoing hostility included the local community. When Henry Firth a Primitive Methodist Local Preacher died in the Dartmoor, his coffin was stoned.

When the war ended Bert had more time in prison before returning home. It was a mixed welcome, his brothers who had fought, suffered and survived, were warm and understanding of their brother’s position. But many in the church and community were hostile. Jobs were virtually impossible to get and he went to Vienna, to help with relief work after the war. Sadly his engagement was broken off and he became a missionary in East Africa. Before returning home to England and working as a teacher. For the rest of his life he continued to campaign for peace.

Bert had stuck to his principals and his family remained loving and supportive to the end, whilst not agreeing with him. At this time when we remember 100 years of the start of conscription in World War 1. Bert was a man of faith principal and peace. We remember him and others like him and honour their memory.

*(By The Revd Michael Parrott)*