Records of Thousands of Men Who Pledged Not to Go to War Now Online

EMBARGOED until 00:01 GMT, Wednesday 22 January 2014 – Today The National Archives is making the digitised records of over 8,000 individuals seeking exemption from conscription into the Army in Middlesex during the First World War available online.

The conscription appeal records are from the Middlesex Appeal Tribunal* (file series MH 47) which, between 1916 and 1918, heard appeals from men who had applied for exemption from compulsory military service. The records include case papers of thousands of individuals, as well as administrative papers reflecting the changing policy towards conscription as the war progressed. The collection is one of only two complete surviving collections of tribunal records. This sample from the Middlesex Appeal Tribunal records provides a unique insight into the impact of the First World War on families, businesses and communities far from the battlefields.

Chris Barnes, Records Specialist at The National Archives said: “The conscription appeal records provide a different perspective of the First World War away from the battles, revealing the impact the war had on the Home Front. Digitising this collection opens up the records to allow people across the globe to discover the lesser known stories of First World War for themselves.”

The records reveal men seeking exemption on medical, family or economic grounds as well as the relatively small proportion wishing not to fight on moral grounds as conscientious objectors. Of the 11,307 separate appeals heard between 1916 and 1918, only 577 were conscientious objection cases, just over 5%. The majority of appeals were dismissed and many people did go on to see war service. However, in some cases exemptions were granted.

Stories from the records:

- **John Gordon Shallis (MH 47/95)** appealed on grounds of domestic hardship, having lost four of his brothers during the war. John’s mother is described as a “cripple” on his appeal form, having broken her leg, and his father was away carrying out Home Defence duties with the Territorial Force. Given these exceptional personal
circumstances and his employment within the munitions industry, John was granted an exemption from compulsory military service by the tribunal system.

- The case of Charles Rubens Busby (MH 47/96) reveals the attitudes of the local community if it was perceived that certain members were unfairly avoiding these shared demands of wartime. An anonymous letter from a local resident, sent directly to the Middlesex Appeal Tribunal, is attached to Mr Busby’s case paper. The letter questions why Mr Busby is allowed to keep his butchers shop and not serve while “married men have had to shut up their shop and go”. Mr Busby is subsequently described as “a proper rotter of a man” and a “rotten shirker”. Mr Busby later served with the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force between 1917 and 1918.

- **Harry Harris (MH 47/30 - case paper M2784)** appealed on economic grounds so that he could look after his shop. ([photo available via Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/1234567890/1234567890))

- **Harry George Ward (MH 47/9/2)**: Note detailing series of questions raised in House of Commons regarding Mr Ward’s case. Appealed on conscientious grounds based on his socialist beliefs. Tribunal chairman allegedly stated that as a socialist he could not possibly have a conscience. Inquiry found in favour of Chairman and appeal dismissed.

- **Frederick Lunkenheimer (MH 47/9/18)**, whose parents migrated to Britain from Germany prior to 1914, appealed against conscription due to anti-war beliefs and because the family business had been targeted during a period of anti-German sentiment at the start of the conflict.

- **Aden Stone (MH 47/9/30)** was a butcher and appealed on economic grounds in order to look after his shop. An exemption was granted by the tribunal but it was only for one day, the shortest exemption granted by the tribunal. This was due to the tribunal deciding that Mr Stone had deliberately brought out a local competitor in an attempt to increase his business needs and thus improve his chances of exemption.

Images of a selection of Conscription Appeals are available here.

The digitisation of this collection has been generously supported by The Friends of The National Archives and Federation of Family History Societies and forms part of The National Archives’ programme of events to commemorate the centenary of the First World War, details of which can be found on [First World War 100](https://www.firstworldwar.com).
Notes to editors:

Spokespeople available:
Records Specialists from The National Archives: Chris Barnes, David Langrish and Kate Jarman.

Images available via Flickr:
http://www.flickr.com/photos/59260229@N06/sets/72157640004712635/

More about the Conscription appeal records (MH 47 series):
“Due to the sensitive issues that surrounded compulsory military service during and after the First World War, only a small minority of the tribunal papers survive. In the years that followed the end of the war, the Government issued instructions to the Local Government Boards that all tribunal material should be destroyed, except for the Middlesex Appeal records and a similar set for Lothian and Peebles in Scotland, which were to be retained as a benchmark for possible future use. A sample of records from the Central Tribunal were also retained, which are also part of the MH 47 series.

Typically, each case paper will include an appeal form, local tribunal application form and a notice of decision form which confirms the final decision of the Appeal Tribunal. Additionally, many of the case papers have surviving evidence attached to them. These range from letters, medical certificates or statements and religious pamphlets to business information. Where they survive, the evidence provides a direct insight into the impact of war upon individual households. For more examples from some of the collection, please see our series of blog posts at The National Archives’ blog.

Further information on other related material available through our catalogue, Discovery, can be found by using our research guide on conscientious objectors and those exempt from military service.

First World War 100 - The National Archives First World War Centenary Programme
First World War 100 – a new digital platform - has been created to guide people through the vast collection of historic records, letters, wills, maps, photographs, illustrations and artworks held by The National Archives on the First World War. Adding content throughout the five year programme, First World War 100 will be the central hub for the public to search and view official First World War records.

The National Archives’ unique collection documents ‘the road to war’ from the high level strategy and orders through to the ‘troops on the ground’ with the unit war diaries and medal cards of the regiments. The collection covers a large number of government departments, and incorporates many notable documents, including the UK’s official copy of the Treaty of Versailles.

About The National Archives:
For the record, for good…The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk  www.legislation.gov.uk

About The Federation of Family History Societies (FFHS):
The Federation of Family History Societies (FFHS) is an educational charity formed in 1974 and granted charitable status in 1982. Since 1997 the Federation has had its own Coat of Arms. Over the years, membership has grown to over 180 societies throughout the world, including national, regional and one-name groups.