

Attitudes to Peace and War – Sussex Peace Groups 1914–1945

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The current interest in peace and the problems associated with the causes of modern war is grounded in the personal and collective witness to peace in the past. There is a long military tradition in Sussex. In World War I, for example, the percentage of volunteers by December 1915 in many towns was considerably higher than the national average¹ and with one exception, the Members of Parliament returned to Westminster between 1914 and 1945 were all Conservative, supporters of armaments and war as an integral part of policy.² Only determined pacifist protest, could have had any impact.

Several vigorous anti-war groups, branches of national organisations, existed in Sussex, particularly in the 1930s. Three are dealt with here: Brighton No-Conscription Fellowship (N.-C.F.), 1915–1918, concerned primarily with conscientious objection in wartime; and two peacetime movements – Hastings Peace Group (H.P.G.), 1929–1939; and Lewes Fellowship of Reconciliation (F.o.R.), 1933–1945. Others, in particular the Peace Pledge Union (P.P.U.) branch in Brighton founded under Dr. D.A. Crow in 1935, contributed to the network of active groups in the County at the time.³ Continuity between World War I and the 1930s is tenuous, except inasmuch as national peace societies and the Society of Friends continued to work for peace and some individuals locally were latent sources of activism.

A local approach to this subject presented many problems, especially in locating sufficient relevant source material on any but a few well-documented groups. The records of central organisations provided some information, but these were more concerned with examination of ideals than the minutiae of branches' activities. In the case of the Brighton branch of the P.P.U. for example, apparently a dedicated and thriving group, little oral or documentary evidence of its exertions and dynamics survived. Three peace groups were sufficiently documented to study in some detail.

Motivation is important, bearing in mind that a general preference for peace is not the same as active participation in a peace movement. Anti-war attitudes cover a wide spectrum of opinion, ranging from a

moral conviction that war, and indeed all violence, is always wrong, although some are prepared to support a state at war so long as this does not involve them in killing, to the belief that it can be justified in the short term under certain exceptional conditions.⁴ The dominant ethos of the Sussex groups studied was absolute pacifist.

They sprang from the founding in 1816 of the Peace Society through the Society of Friends, an initiative which found its fruition in the proliferation of peace-oriented societies in the twentieth century. Pacifism in this period expressed itself either as a sectarian activity, as an expression of the sect to which it gave allegiance, or as the product of certain circumstances at a particular time.

This article focuses on particular features of the three groups examined: origins; membership and its role; the ideals and convictions of members and the extent to which these were sustained and realised; relationship of members with those outside the group; actions and reactions of members under stress; their cultural life where it is evident; and the influences which determined the nature and fate of the group. Finally it attempts to identify the distinctive characteristics of each group.

No-Conscription Fellowship: Brighton 1915-1918

When war broke out in 1914 there was no national organisation in existence, founded exclusively to prosecute the anti-war cause, apart from the near-moribund Peace Society and religious pacifist sects. Major anti-war groups, such as the Society of Friends and the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.), included peace testimony as one of their tenets, but could not unite the large number of men of military age and their supporters opposed to war who were not of their particular religious or political faith.

War crystallized opposition and by the end of 1914 two specifically anti-war movements had been founded. One, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, of Christian inspiration and orientation, was quietist in its activity, while the N.-C.F. emerged as the most militant and dynamic force in war resistance. With a membership of socialists and Quakers in a proportion of roughly three to one it was primarily concerned with conscientious objection to compulsory war service.⁵ It should be stressed, however, that 'conscientious objector' was a title given by the State to a war resister, not a definition of objection. The definition was the interpretation of conscience expressed by the objector, and the N.-C.F., therefore, enshrined a diversity of attitudes. Members were enrolled, grouped into nationwide branches

and communication was maintained with some difficulty through the N.-C.F. journal *Tribunal*. One such branch was that of Brighton and District.

The Brighton N.-C.F. only emerges for the historian when its members' activities came before the public eye.⁶ At some point during 1915 a group had formed, probably at the instigation of students from Brighton Art College, one of whom, Royle Richmond, joined the Fellowship as an individual member in June 1915. A number were also members of the I.L.P., described by Rae as 'the most fertile source of political objection in the First World War'.⁷ The political bias, however, did not exclude religious objectors, but, although Quakers were prominent nationally, there is no record of any member of the Brighton preparative meeting having joined the N.-C.F.⁸

In early 1916 membership was about 40. Full membership was restricted to young men aged originally between 18 and 25, liable to be conscripted, but participation was not so exclusive. Women of all ages co-operated, including mothers of members, and the secretary of the branch for a time was a local schoolteacher, Miss Marion Daunt. There was no common social or occupational status, although there were five absolutist conscientious objectors from Brighton Art College, as well as other students, originally N.-C.F. members who did not file an objection to military service. Occupations described in tribunal reports include a cycle engineer, Y.M.C.A. worker, estate agent's clerk, electrician, shopkeeper, student teacher, woodcarver and manager of builders' merchants.

The group initially centred on Brighton. However, with the introduction of conscription in January 1916, the original membership expanded to draw in objectors from Horsham, Haywards Heath, Burgess Hill and Eastbourne. A register of members' appearances before local tribunals lists 37 names and comments by 'watchers' (mainly female associates). A further list of 29 names of N.-C.F. members includes three of the first list and three women, but is undated. The tribunal reports are all dated March 1916. The level of commitment varied, some independent c.o.'s being merely transitory members during the period of their tribunals, while others such as Royle Richmond and his friend, Percy Horton, a student at Brighton Art College, had been instrumental in forming the branch.

From the beginning the group met regularly once a week at the Adult School, in the Friends Meeting House, for discussion of socialist principles. However, following conscription it adopted two further roles: support for members under attack from the law; and as

a medium of communication for those who, granted no exemptions, were sentenced by courts martial to prison sentences.

The group ethic was strongly resistant in orientation and the hard core was absolutist. A letter from Brighton member, Richard Penifold, to Horton, when the latter was in prison in Scotland, illustrates pressure for conformity.

We missed you at the Branch . . . Richmond was there. Webber also there and gave us a very interesting account of his experiences in the F.A.U. (Friends Ambulance Unit). One did not feel the trust and reliance in him. His nature is not one of those deep-rooted natures. . . . We are called dreamers and cranks, etc. We shall see.¹⁰

Notwithstanding, the Brighton N.-C.F. managed to accommodate a range of attitudes to war and the individual's response to its demands. Royle Richmond put the socialist position at his tribunal in Hove on 16 March, 1916:

Believing as I do in the sacredness of human life and the underlying unity of mankind and that force, although it may appear expedient, is in reality no argument. I refuse to take part in anything to do with war. I believe in the unity of mankind. I am a socialist and believe that force is no argument and that international arbitration is a reasonable method of settling disputes.¹¹

Charles Humphrey, who presented a Christian point of view, was given, unusually in Brighton, total exemption. This decision was reversed on 28 April, 1916, on appeal from the military representative on the grounds that 'It is highly undesirable that this highly intelligent young man should be exempted from service'. Humphrey accepted alternative service and joined the F.A.U.¹²

Many, however, would not compromise. The authority of conscience became morally and irreversibly binding. Geoffrey Hicks of Burgess Hill expressed a common feeling at his appeal tribunal on 24 March 1916:

I claim absolute exemption as I cannot conscientiously undertake any service under military authority . . . Neither can I accept any exemption which is conditional . . . To undertake non-combatant duties would be expressing willingness to assist others in doing that which I am not prepared to do myself.¹³

Horton went even further and questioned the competence of any tribunal to judge the extent and quality of a man's conscience.

Unacceptable verdicts were perceived by objectors almost totally in terms of the intransigence of the tribunals. The impression given by watchers at Brighton and at Hove is that tribunal members were at best politely unsympathetic to or uncomprehending of the objectors' positions. At worst, members were openly hostile and, in the case of the military representative at Brighton, Sir John Blaker, abusive. Yet, in Brighton, most applicants received conditional exemption in acknowledgement of their conscientious objection.¹⁴ That this was insufficient was symptomatic of the absolutism of the Brighton N.-C.F., rather than of a necessarily hard-line tribunal attitude.

Bitter antagonism was experienced from the general public. Horton was one of many absolutists subjected to a variety of humiliating experiences. In common with many c.o.'s rejected by local and appeal tribunals he refused any form of exemption and was eventually imprisoned for a technical military offence. He later wrote to his parents on his experiences travelling to Edinburgh in 1916.

At Chichester I got into trouble for refusing to carry my kit bag which was finally put on my back by two of the Derby recruits, ordered to do so by the Sergeant. When they discovered that I was a conscientious objector, there was trouble. Three or four wanted to knock me to smithereens . . . I was sworn at by all classes and types of people . . . I was pointed out to them as a b . . . skunk. . . . Passing pedestrians pointed sticks at me and several stopped to hurl their abuse at me . . .¹⁵

Katharine Richmond, Royle's mother, wrote to Horton after hearing of this incident, saying, 'one can only pity people that don't know any better . . . We need all you young men who think when reconstruction comes. Try and remember in middle age not to forget the ideals of youth'.¹⁶

Those who wrote from first hand experience of conscientious objectors in World War I concentrated on the primacy of conscience, which in brooking no alternative to total exemption inexorably led to martyrdom.¹⁷ Royle Richmond stated, 'if I fail to receive the absolute exemption for which I have asked . . . I am prepared to suffer the penalties for refusing to comply with this Act.' Geoffrey Hicks also asserted on appeal, 'I shall be content to suffer for the cause in which I believe.'¹⁸ Richmond died from a chronic heart condition after release from prison in December 1916, aged 26,

having refused to contemplate certain exemption on medical grounds. *Tribunal* commented that he

died under circumstances which justify us in saying that he threw his life away . . . His death was due to his own deliberate choice.¹⁹

Two Brighton members, O.S. Bridle and Geoffrey Hicks, were among the 34 c.o.'s sent to France in June 1916 and sentenced to death by court martial at Boulogne, although all were reprieved at the eleventh hour and sentenced to ten years hard labour.²⁰ Bridle, a coachbuilder of the London, Brighton and South Coast railway and member of Brighton National Union of Railwaymen, died, accepting no concessions, on 4 January, 1919 in Maidstone gaol. His objection was religious. On his death *Tribunal* commented

Those of us who were privileged to know something of him . . . knew that those words 'to the very last' . . . were uttered with all the sincerity of a quiet deep nature.²¹

Hicks survived.

For Richmond and Horton, at least, parental love and support for their conscientious stance, removed one source of conflict and furnished a secure base other than the N.-C.F. The rest of the Horton family were not objectors and a younger brother, Harry, joined up when he reached military age.

For Horton misunderstanding of his position was almost harder to bear than physical deprivation. From Edinburgh he wrote to his parents

How difficult it is to convince these people one is in earnest. They seem incapable of realizing the hopelessness of attempting to smash a spiritual movement by material force.²²

However, later when in prison hospital he emphasized the contradictions inherent in his position.

Sister tells me that nurses and doctors all feel convinced of my sincerity but cannot comprehend my mental outlook.²³

When Horton was released on health grounds in December 1917 Sister Christie at the prison hospital wrote to his parents,

It is useless to tell you how Percy won all our hearts and however

much we differ from him we respect the boy and he has our sympathy.²⁴

In 1921 Horton married Lydia Smith, an ex Editor of *Tribunal*. She had been instrumental in agitating for c.o.'s appeals and in drawing attention to the inequities of imprisonment for conscience sake. In the course of her work she had kept Horton in touch with the general activities of the N.-C.F. and the fate of his friends in Brighton.²⁵

The correspondence with Lydia Smith highlights two significant characteristics of the Brighton N.-C.F. which consolidated their group identity and satisfaction. The first was the existence among members of several strong personalities whose influence had a profound effect on morale and relationships within the group. Secondly, a product of these influences was a high level of communication between members which sustained them through difficulty.

As to individuals, Horton, a young artist of exceptional ability, and Penniford, later to become President of the Brighton Trades and Labour Council, both brought practical political will to the group. A deeper, spiritual influence was exerted by Richmond. Horton, writing to Lydia Smith, expressed his own appreciation of his friend:

He little knew then how *great* was the work he had done. The effects of it are still being felt and will be perpetuated into eternity. 'Tiny' had been with me always but I have felt his presence and help most keenly in time of difficulty.²⁶

Richmond's obituaries, in the *Labour Leader* and *Tribunal* respectively, endorsed these sentiments and emphasized his intellectual ability, his capacity for clear argument and genial, quiet character.²⁷

A second characteristic of the group was their sense of fellowship. Horton in the early days after his arrest wrote to Miss Daunt of missing his friends at N.-C.F. meetings, although he felt they were 'united in spirit'.²⁸ This unity encapsulated very concisely the mood of the Brighton N.-C.F. and was an important factor, when members were dispersed after arrest, in their courage and will to endure.

Group solidarity was unimpaired by the heterogeneity of members' perception of conscience and its application. Despite Penniford's comments (p. 145) tolerance of conscience was, by the very nature of the object of the group, a norm. Yet, this had to be learned. In an article published in *Tribunal* shortly after his death, Richmond described the development of his own tolerance, the influence of which in all probability affected other branch members.

Though I hoped for solidarity in the N.-C.F., I realize that solidarity I desired was the solidarity of absolutism. I must admit that when the question arises of solidarity or progress, then progress is the more important. And, indeed, in a Fellowship such as ours, we could not reasonably expect absolute unity; we could not bind the absolutist to accept less than his conscience dictates, nor could we bind the alternativist to go beyond his belief.²⁹

Where the external effectiveness of the group is concerned it is doubtful how much of Richmond's 'progress' was realized. The N.-C.F. nationally and locally succeeded neither in preventing nor removing conscription. Resistance led to martyrdom, not a change in Government policy, and *ipso facto* dispersal of effective resisters at large. In Brighton, however, the branch unified anti-conscription, anti-war activities, and gained publicity for the cause, since all c.o. tribunals were reported in some detail in the *Sussex Daily News* from February 1916 onwards, although the reports often highlighted aspects of the proceedings unfavourable to objectors, who were always unnamed. In a limited circle the stand taken by absolutists commanded respect from those with whom they came in contact. In the long term, the experiences of the World War I c.o.'s paved the way for more tolerant treatment in World War II by authority and the public alike, and many registers formed an experienced core of peace groups in the 1930s.

Hastings and Lewes 1929-1945

In the inter-war period local pacifist societies came into existence in one of four, not mutually exclusive ways: as a self-generated group; a group affiliated to a central society; a branch of a central society; a group within an existing organisation. Examples of each of these were to be found in Sussex, but the following deals with two of the more outstanding groups, Hastings and Lewes.

With the exception of the Brighton Branch of the N.-C.F. in World War I and the Meetings of the Society of Friends, very little co-operative peace work had been undertaken in Sussex before this period. In Hastings and Lewes long-established preparative meetings of the Society of Friends, founded in 1890 and 1668 respectively, contributed substantially to autonomous peace groups, but did not as religious bodies initiate their formation.

Hastings

The Hastings Peace Group (H.P.G.) was founded first. It sprang from a meeting held on 8 November, 1929. The timing of the meeting was unrelated to pressure of external events, but it had been called by a local couple, Kenneth and Mary Wray, who, with certain like-minded friends, 'decided we ought to get together because things were looking not too good even then. And we thought we'd try and form some sort of peace group.'³⁰ The Market Hall was empty at the appointed time, so 'two or three of us went out into the street and accosted people and told them what was happening. And we finished up with about seventy'.³¹ A number of these formed the nucleus of the H.P.G. The formation of a self-generated peace group, with no official or overt political or religious connection, was unusual at this date, and, although it soon affiliated to the National Peace Council, it was not until 1936 that the group became a branch of the Peace Pledge Union.

The structure of the group was formal. An annual subscription of 1/- did not meet expenses, so fund-raising activities were organised. Meetings were held at first in the Wray's flat in Hastings and, as the Group expanded, in other members' homes, with public meetings and invited speakers in halls in the town. Kenneth and Mary Wray became permanent president and secretary respectively. For the Wrays pacifism and all it entailed was the governing factor in their lives, and always predominated over other interests. Wray, an architect, noted 'I was a member of a firm in Hastings, small firm. But there was no question as to which was dominant in our lives actually.'³² He became one of eight designated P.P.U. speakers in Sussex and Mary Wray adopted a promotional role for the group and the pacifist point of view, principally through the columns of the local paper, the *Hastings Observer*.

The philosophy that determined the objectives of the group lay in the ideals of the Wrays themselves – ideals which sprang from a secular 'reverence for life'.³³ Wray, a lapsed Quaker who had converted his wife, a former theosophist, to pacifism, saw himself as a revolutionary and pacifism as a revolutionary creed. He condemned the Society of Friends for an approach to peace matters which he considered too tentative and lukewarm,

I don't feel they come out with the absolute saying that war is wrong and a sin against God. They don't say it sufficiently or loud enough . . .³⁴

However, for the Quakers, their peace testimony is not doctrinal but interpretation of the guidance of the inner light.

Primary aims, substantially the Wray's aims, were humanist in inspiration and wide-ranging:

1. To stand for Peace
2. To help to prepare the way for World Peace, believing war to be morally wrong and to promote the ideal of peace and goodwill among men.
3. To practise Universal Brotherhood without regard to creed, class or colour.
4. To follow the activities of contemporary Peace movements and to assist and co-operate wherever possible.³⁵

Of the ethical and political issues involved 'from the pacifist point of view my main plank was disarmament. Disarm, disarm. And that's the only safe way of achieving a peace and happiness of man.'³⁶ The objectives above were a product of the group's existence, a means of witnessing to the first and of carrying-out the other three.

In pursuit of item two, 'we were primarily a study group . . .' and held small discussion meetings, on occasion splitting into cells of a few members, meeting seven nights a week to study particular aspects of the problems of international relations.³⁷ Richard Gregg's *The Power of Non-Violence*, recommended by the P.P.U. as obligatory study material, was taken chapter by chapter, read and discussed.³⁸ In his argument for non-violent resistance Gregg had pinpointed the crucial difference between the pacifist approach and that of the League of Nations supporters, 'the end is the summation of all the means in reaching it.'³⁹

Item three concerned particularly the Wray's involvement with the International Friendship League, an organisation for youthful friendship and exchanges. After moving to Battle they organised in 1932 an I.F.L. camp in their garden which was unfortunately marred by friction between Nazi German and Jewish visitors.

For individual members the absence of a supporting institutional culture, even a specifically Christian foundation, despite many Christian members, meant that immediate aims turned on personal enrichment as one way to further collective ends. The rationalization of this role was summarized by Mary Wray in *Peace News*, a publication of the P.P.U.

Negative pacifism is not enough. Along with your refusal to take part in war you must be able to offer a constructive alternative solution to conflict. In those already familiar words, 'What are you going to do about it?'⁴⁰

The reinforcement of personal morality was expressed as a practical demonstration of the role of the pacifist, individually and as, in item four, collaboratively.

Publicity was a first priority, not only through newspapers but at public meetings in halls and on the beach. These included a series of Topical News Talks, monthly lectures in 1934-35 under the title of 'Peace How Far' given by members of other peace-oriented groups, such as the F.o.R. A caravanserei of small cars, covered with posters, toured the area for village meetings, lobbying ministers of religion and making personal contact with local people. One successful enterprise, the formation of a theatre group, the Pax Players, carried the message with peace plays. The Players even won a prize with their float in the 1937 Hastings Festival and with a play at Hastings Arts Festival in 1938.

Public reaction was mixed. Hastings Borough Council was tolerant in attitude, freely granting licences for meetings. A local debating society, the Hastings Parliament of some 700 members, however, condemned Dick Sheppard, founder of the P.P.U., as a traitor.⁴¹ In addition, the *Hastings Observer* was blatantly unsympathetic to pacifism and encouraged anti-pacifist correspondence in reply to Mary Wray's letters. After a particularly passionate anti-A.R.P. demonstration by the H.P.G. at a civil defence exercise at the bathing pool in 1938 the Editor wrote,

... it is pacifism run mad when the right of self preservation, let alone retaliation is denied the victims of an aggressor.⁴²

and, after conscripts had been intensively questioned and provocative literature circulated, suggested that these should be made criminal offences.

The H.P.G. disbanded shortly after the beginning of the war. Only twelve, from a membership of 200, registered as conscientious objectors. Many accepted the inevitable and co-operated with the war effort. The reasons were twofold: firstly, the group was not part of any existing organisation in Hastings. At no point did the culture of other groups, religious or secular, impinge to any degree on the activities of the H.P.G., although members of the group participated in local religious and social affairs. Since there was no parallel or sub-culture within the group its operational base was destroyed by war. The Wray's personal decision not to register for rations or National Service provoked no reaction from the authorities.

We knew the local bobby here. In one evening . . . I said, 'Well,

look, – you'll have to come and arrest me very shortly.' And he smiled and no more was said. But he never came.⁴³

Wray found the ignoring of his willingness to be a martyr 'wasn't easy, very difficult' and 'hard to bear'.⁴⁴ Although the Wrays contributed to humanitarian and pacifist causes elsewhere during the war, their commitment to the H.P.G., and thus the H.P.G. itself, ceased.

Secondly, although H.P.G. members' pacifism sprang from many sources, its reasoned intellectual approach underestimated the emotional response provoked by Nazi ideology and militarism.

Lewes

By contrast with Hastings, the Lewes branch of the F.o.R. possessed qualities, inherent in its emergence, evolution and ideology, that sustained it through crisis. Resembling closely what Bryan Wilson has described as a conversionist sect,⁴⁵ particularly in a drive to evangelism and in its sociology, the group turned Lewes into a hotbed of pacifism in the 1930s. It owed its inspiration and dynamism to the charismatic, though not necessarily titular leadership of the town's 'turbulent priest', the Rev. Kenneth Rawlings, Rector of St. Michael', Lewes Parish Church.

The Lewes peace movement emerged because background and trigger factors combined at a critical moment in November 1934 to provide a sensational climax to an otherwise unexceptional Town Hall Armistice Day service.

Wilson, in discussing the circumstances of sect emergence points to the importance of local charismatic leader. Rawlings had charisma but Wilson's model does not take into account the precipitant factors, namely the coincidental presence in Lewes in 1934 of four leading citizens with strong pacifist convictions. Rawlings, whose radical and socialist ideas which led to pacifism had developed during his curacy in Birmingham, came to Lewes in 1925. He disrupted the *status quo* and alienated sections of his conservative middle-class congregation by open support for the strikers in 1925 and in the early 1930s by help and sympathy for the unemployed.

The second man, John P. Brewer, a Quaker, a member of Brighton N.-C.F. in World War I, was a man of immense spirituality, a 'genuinely humble man', who worked for the Y.M.C.A. with refugees from Germany and served as Quaker chaplain to c.o.'s in Lewes prison during World War II.⁴⁶ The third, Frank Hancock, a crusading pacifist and socialist with great organising ability, was also a

Quaker and absolutist c.o. in World War I. He first appeared in Lewes in 1931 as Labour candidate and settled at Rodmell in 1934, leaving in 1938, after losing the candidature when he refused to compromise his pacifist views by endorsing official Labour Party defence policy.⁴⁷ The fourth man, Rev. Jack Newton Holder had been converted to pacifism by the Rev. Leyton Richards in 1927 and came to Lewes in 1933 as Congregational minister, leaving also in 1938.⁴⁸ All four were respected public figures in a position to attract and influence others, for whom pacifism was a concomitant of their spiritual and social conscience.

The trigger was the sermon preached by Father Kenneth Rawlings at the annual civic inter-denominational Remembrance Day service. With eloquence and passion he denounced war as barbaric, immoral and un-Christian, and declared,

If war comes again I will have neither part nor lot in it. I will denounce it and oppose it until my mouth is stopped, so help me God.⁴⁹

He concluded by inviting those present who 'could echo in your hearts the pledge that I have publicly made' to rise in their seats. In what was described by the local paper as an 'amazing scene', almost the entire congregation of eight hundred did so. Many of those who were lobbied afterwards to sign a pledge immediately after the service formed the core of the Lewes branch of the F.o.R.⁵⁰

Officially inaugurated by Rev. Percy Bartlett, General Secretary of the F.o.R., in February 1934, the structure of the branch was formal but flexible, with a regular subscribing membership of up to 200 until the outbreak of war, and elected office-holders, although different members chaired and spoke at meetings. In less dramatic circumstances a branch of the P.P.U., with Pat Collins as secretary, was formed in July 1935, after a highly successful Peace Rally at Lewes some 2000 people organised by Frank Hancock, at which Dick Sheppard was the principal speaker. This branch however, had only a muted impact.

In the view of those principally involved, the pacifist emphasis was overwhelmingly Christian, for in Rawling's view,

Most important of all, the philosophy of pacifism claims to be completely and fundamentally Christian. It makes its appeal to the eternal principles of justice and mercy proclaimed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵¹

The aims of the group were many. Common to all was the belief that

peace was both desirable and attainable, contingent upon a framework of social and economic justice within which a spirit of reconciliation could take place. Activities of the group were determined by members' reasons for joining; contact with like-minded people, reinforcement and elucidation of pacifist ideals, mutual support, greater impact on the community, or all four. Immediate objectives were expressed as in Hastings in common pacifist activities, local and national, such as public meetings, witness, protest, demonstration, argument, discussion and education.

The strength of the Lewes F.o.R. lay not only in the talent of its leadership and the network of contacts available to them, but in the social and cultural background which ran parallel to pacifism. Where Rawlings' ideology was obsessional Christian socialism and pacifism, his secular passion was the theatre. In his view the potential of the theatre for social integration and benefit was unequalled, since it 'offered to all, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, a liberation of the spirit, a quickening of the imagination and an understanding of human nature that can be attained by no other means.'⁵² Under Rawlings' inspiration the Lewes Players, founded in 1929, became in 1937 the successful Little Theatre Club with its own premises. The triangular relationship between theatre, church and pacifism was not exclusive and for a few years ideological differences were unimportant.

The possibilities for effective pacifist action in Lewes were extensive, not least because of the general popularity of 'peace' in the 1930s. However, as the movement gathered strength, its development met with official nervousness and hostility, expressed principally through the Borough Council and the local Member of Parliament from 1936, Admiral Beamish. Indicative of the Council's attitude was their decision in 1935 to cancel the annual Armistice Day service on the grounds that the previous service had been a meeting for political propaganda.⁵³ The Editor of the *Sussex Express* however, gave considerable, sympathetic coverage of all peace activities.

Nonetheless, 1936 and 1937 were the highpoints of the Lewes peace movement, since the effect of the Peace Rally was to establish a network of contacts throughout Sussex. By the end of 1938, however, with the departure of Hancock and Holder, and John Brewer's move to Eastbourne, although he kept in touch with his Lewes colleagues, the task of bearing the public banner of pacifism in Lewes had fallen exclusively on Rawlings' shoulders. It was axiomatic that he should enter the war/peace fray on every possible occasion, but he was at variance personally and ecclesiastically with received

opinion and the established church in Lewes. St. Michael's congregation declined as Rawlings refused to compromise. 'If I kept silence on this matter I should consider myself damned.'⁵⁴ He did, notwithstanding, have the support of his bishop, George K. Bell, of Chichester. On another matter, Bell had written to Rawlings in 1939 that 'a Christian must put loyalty to Christ before allegiance to the State.'⁵⁵ In contrast, the Society of Friends was counselled by Brewer to keep a low profile. In the Lewes and Chichester Monthly Meeting Newsletter in July 1939, he urged them 'to strive after moral convictions, not logical conclusions and not to share in anything spectacular just now.'⁵⁶

War was catalytic to the Lewes Peace movement. With the polarisation of assentors and objectors, the sectarian withdrawal of the Church and the Little Theatre into near pacifist enclaves was caused less by the restructuring of norms within pacifist circles than the resignation of most of those who rejected pacifist views. They both, therefore, acted as a focus for pacifist interest in the neighbourhood. As one pacifist put it, 'It was the only thing for people who felt like we did, because we weren't really acceptable anywhere else.'⁵⁷ A corollary of this situation was the isolation of individual pacifists who adhered to neither institution. A striking example was George Elphick, a member of the non-pacifist Southover Parish Church and a pre-war secretary for a short while of the Lewes F.o.R.

The case of George Elphick and his objection to compulsory fire-watching in 1941, involving a record nine prosecutions by Lewes Borough Council and five prison sentences, has been covered by Denis Hayes.⁵⁸ It is also detailed in a pamphlet Rawlings wrote for the Central Board for Conscientious Objectors as a plea for tolerance.⁵⁹

Elphick, was a skilled carpenter and joiner, a member of Southover Parish Church Council, whose Vicar frequently disagreed with him, an enthusiastic bellringer and a man of impeccable character. Yet, by late 1943 he could with some justification, describe himself as the most hated man in town, although Rawlings suggested he had 'earned the respect of all lovers of freedom by his steadfast refusal to be persuaded, bullied or ridiculed into doing what he believes to be forbidden to him as a pacifist and a Christian.'⁶⁰ The basis of Elphick's pacifism was contained in the first two Commandments, for he was guided by a fundamental Christian determinism and surrender to the Divine Will. 'Many years ago I had decided that my loyalty to what I believed to be the Will of God must whatever the cost come before my loyalty to the State.'⁶¹

When, in May 1941, Elphick was required to register under the Civil Defence Duties (Compulsory Enrolment) Order, 1941, he

complied, estimating that his acknowledged c.o. status as exempt from military service, would also exempt him from other compulsory duties. Since there was no provision in the Order for conscientious objection, he was duly summonsed to appear at Lewes Police Court for failure to report for duty to fire-watch. His objection was the 'motive behind the Act . . . to assist the prosecution of the war.'⁶² Four prosecutions and three prison sentences later, public concern was aroused. Rawlings and others protested in the *Sussex Express* that 'men of proved integrity like George Elphick are imprisoned . . . for liberty of conscience.'⁶³

Not until a national campaign had been launched on Elphick's behalf did the 'cat and mouse' procedure end. The case was finally concluded with a compromise judgement in August 1944.

For a similar offence Pat Collins was prosecuted and imprisoned only once.⁶⁶ Rawlings himself had originally registered for Civil Defence duties, but in June 1944 himself refused to do fire-watching 'in protest against persistent attempts to coerce a man whose integrity of conscience was beyond question.'⁶⁷ On Elphick's discharge, Rawlings resumed his duties on 7 August 1944.

A second issue which ran concurrently with the Elphick case concerned Rawlings directly. The bitter consequences that accrued to Rawlings resulted not from his own initiative but from the wholehearted public support he gave to Bishop Bell in the latter's outspoken and courageous condemnation of saturation bombing of Germany, an act which damaged Bell's career irreparably. After Bell's speech in the House of Lords on 9 February 1944, pleading for humanity towards the German people, Rawlings organised a petition signed by 25 members of St. Michael's congregation wishing 'to express their gratitude to your Lordship for your courageous protest.'⁶⁸ Reaction was swift. The question of Rawlings' internment as a subversive under Regulation 18B was raised in the House of Commons but quashed. Secondly, the Borough Council removed the traditional Assize service from St. Michael's to St. Anne's Church, where the Vicar, Rev. C.S. Ensell, had long been a vociferous opponent of Rawlings.⁶⁹ This move struck a harsh blow at Rawlings' identification with, and pride in, his church.

In assessing the Lewes Peace movement up to 1945 two questions arise: firstly, how far the movement was distinctive in general and local terms; and, secondly, the extent to which the pacifists could claim a measure of success. Lewes was not unique in nurturing an active pacifist group in the 1930s, but what gave it a singularity of character was its size, the dominant personality of Rawlings and the fact that the movement survived in wartime.

The aims and effectiveness of the group were a function of the individual's interpretation of pacifism, and to some extent the age of members. One member quoted Hancock: 'What we have to do is to go on, struggle, struggle, perhaps we go forward two steps, but we always slip back at least one.' But in her view, 'they knew perfectly well that the chances of any kind of success were very very slight. Well, when you're young that isn't good enough.'⁷⁰ In absolute terms the contribution of the group to international peace was negligible. Yet members realised three distinct achievements: firstly, a self-directing, cohesive social unit that existed as much for its external object as for the sympathetic socialisation within the group; secondly, a vehicle for the private and public transmission and exchange of ideas; thirdly as provocation to established orthodoxies and procedures.

The living testimony to the strength and endurance of the Lewes peace movement comes from those members who still have what Freud called the 'constitutional intolerance' to war, an 'idiosyncrasy in utmost magnification',⁷¹ and look back together with affectionate nostalgia to a time when peace seemed possible. 'Those days were fun, weren't they?'⁷²

Notes

¹ E.J. Bowen, *The British Propaganda Effort in World War I* (M.A. thesis, University of Sussex, 1982). National average 12.39%; Horsham 18.02%; Lewes 21.91%.

² F.W.S. Crisp, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949* (1977), pp. 103, 480. Chichester returned a Liberal member in 1929, defeated in 1931.

³ *Peace Pledge Union*. Founded May 1936 from signatories of a Peace Pledge after appeal by Rev. H.R.L. (Dick) Sheppard in the press on 16 Oct. 1934. Journal, *Peace News*.

⁴ *League of Nations Union*, for example. Founded October 1918. Largest and most influential peace society after the mid-twenties.

⁵ J.W. Graham, *Conscription and Conscience* (1922) (Kelly, New York ed. 1969), pp. 172-3.

⁶ Peter Liddle's 1914-1918 Archive, Sunderland Polytechnic. Percy Horton papers.

⁷ John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (Oxford 1970), p. 83.

⁸ Religious S(ociety) o(f) F(riends), Brighton. Lewes and Chichester Monthly Meeting papers. Brighton Preparative Meeting Minutes 1914-1918.

⁹ Horton papers. N.-C.F. Brighton, Book 1. Register of Members' Appearances before Local Tribunals.

¹⁰ Horton papers. 3 Aug. 1916.

¹¹ Horton papers. N.-C.F. Brighton, Book 1.

¹² Horton papers. N.-C.F. Brighton, Book 2. Proceedings before Appeal Tribunals.

¹³ Horton papers. Ibid.

- ¹⁴ John Rae. *Conscience and Politics*, p. 57, describes the composition of and instructions to tribunals as ambiguous and confusing.
- ¹⁵ Horton papers. Letter undated, ca. 8 Aug. 1916.
- ¹⁶ Horton papers. Letter 9 Aug. 1916.
- ¹⁷ W.J. Chamberlain, *Fighting for Peace* (Garland 1971 ed.). D. Boulton, *Objection Overruled* (1967), J. Graham, *Conscription and Conscience*, op. cit., for example.
- ¹⁸ Horton papers. N.-C.F. Brighton, Book 2.
- ¹⁹ *Tribunal*, No. 41, 4 Jan. 1917, p. 2.
- ²⁰ J. Graham, *Conscription and Conscience*, pp. 111–126, relates this incident in some detail.
- ²¹ *Tribunal*, No. 141, 16 Jan. 1919, p. 1.
- ²² Horton papers. Letter 5 May 1917.
- ²³ Horton papers. Letter 1 Nov. 1917.
- ²⁴ Horton papers. Letter 26 Nov. 1917.
- ²⁵ Horton papers. Correspondence, Percy Horton – Lydia Smith.
- ²⁶ Horton papers. Letter 10 Nov. 1917.
- ²⁷ *Labour Leader*. 11 Jan. 1917. *Tribunal*, No. 41. 4 Jan. 1917.
- ²⁸ Horton papers. Letter 11 Aug. 1916.
- ²⁹ R. Richmond, *Peace by Negotiation and the Fellowship*. *Tribunal*, No. 43, 18 Jan. 1917, p. 4.
- ³⁰ Imperial War Museum. Department of Sound Records. Anti-War Movement 1935–1945. Kenneth Fletcher Wray.
- ³¹ I.W.M. Wray.
- ³² I.W.M. Wray.
- ³³ I.W.M. Wray.
- ³⁴ I.W.M. Wray.
- ³⁵ I.W.M. Department of Documents. Hastings Peace Group Scrapbook. Handbill.
- ³⁶ I.W.M. Wray.
- ³⁷ I.W.M. Wray.
- ³⁸ R. Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence* (1935), (revised ed. 1960).
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ⁴⁰ *Peace News*. 25 Dec. 1937, p. 4.
- ⁴¹ *Hastings Observer*. 13 Mar. 1937, p. 23.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 5 Feb. 1938, p. 7.
- ⁴³ I.W.M. Wray.
- ⁴⁴ I.W.M. Wray.
- ⁴⁵ B. Wilson, ed., *Patterns of Sectarianism* (1967), p. 43.
- ⁴⁶ Mrs J. Brewer, *John Pritchard Brewer: August 1891 – June 1971*. Cyclostyled appreciation.
- ⁴⁷ E(ast) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice). Lewes Divisional Labour Party. General Committee Minutes, 9 June 1936.
- ⁴⁸ Rev. Leyton Richards. Secretaru of F.o.R. 1917–1918.
- ⁴⁹ K. Rawlings, *Our Debt to the Dead*. An Armistice Address. 11 Nov. 1934.
- ⁵⁰ [*Sussex Express*, 16 Nov. 1934, p. 6.
- ⁵¹ St. Michael's, Lewes, *Parish Magazine*, Nov. 1936.
- ⁵² Lewes Little Theatre Club Newsletter. Sep. 1952.
- ⁵³ *Sussex Express*, 29 Mar. 1935, 20 Sept. 1935, 4 Nov. 1935.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 Mar. 1938. Report on St. Michael's annual parochial meeting.
- ⁵⁵ Letter., 25 Sept. 1939.
- ⁵⁶ S.o.F., Brighton. Lewes & Chichester Monthly Meeting Newsletter, July 1939.
- ⁵⁷ Jack Kenward, Interview, 24 May, 1983.

- ⁵⁸ Denis Hayes, *Challenge of Conscience* (1972), pp. 318-324.
- ⁵⁹ C(entral) B(oard) for C(onscientious) O(bjectors). *Catalogue of Conviction*. The case of George Elphick, June 1944. (Unattributed but written by K. Rawlings.)
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3, quoting Elphick's Statement to the *Tribunal*, 27 June, 1940.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 5, quoting Statement to Court, 2 Dec. 1941.
- ⁶³ *Sussex Express*, 12 Feb. 1943.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 May 1942. C.S. Briggs, Essex, to Editor.
- ⁶⁵ C.B.C.O. *Catalogue of Conviction*, op. cit., pp. 8, 9.
- ⁶⁶ *Sussex Express*, 18 Dec. 1942.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1944, Copy letter K. Rawlings to Lewes Town Clerk. See also C.B.C.O. *Bulletin*, No. 54, August 1944, p. 27.
- ⁶⁸ *Sussex Express*, 18 Feb. 1944.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3 Mar. 1944, suggested; 7 July, implemented.
- ⁷⁰ Rowena Bingham. Interview 22 Apr. 1983.
- ⁷¹ Gregory Zillborg, *Sigmund Freud* (New York & London 1951), p. 99.
- ⁷² Molly Gilbert. Interview 24 May 1983.