

A right to refuse military service came during WW1, when Britain introduced conscription with the Military Service Act of March 1916. The Act allowed for objectors to be exempted, to perform alternative civilian service, or to serve as a non-combatant in the army's Non-Combatant Corps, according to the extent to which they convinced a Military Service Tribunal of the quality of their objection.



Around 16,000 men were recorded as conscientious objectors, with Quakers, traditionally pacifist, playing a large role: 4500 objectors were sent to do 'work of national importance' such as farming, 7000 were ordered non-combatant duties, but 6000 were forced into the army, and when they refused orders, they were sent to prison. Tribunals were notoriously harsh towards conscientious objectors, reflecting widespread public opinion that they were lazy, degenerate, ungrateful 'shirkers' seeking to benefit from the sacrifices of others. Conditions were made very hard for conscientious objector prisoners — ten died in prison, and around seventy died elsewhere as a result of their treatment. Many objectors accepted non-combatant service, for example working in the dangerous role of stretcher-bearers.

HARRY'S PAIN

When a Balsall Heath shoemaker gave the war the boot

Harry Payne (1884 – 1890) built up a large shoe repairing business in Birmingham. He left school in Northampton at the age of eleven. As Northampton had a surfeit of boot makers Harry thought Birmingham would be a good place for a business instead. He found a small house with a shop in Longmore Street, Balsall Heath. He got married, to Kate Amos, on 26th February, 1908, and on the same day moved to Birmingham and took up residence. They made a success of the business, and the following year they were able to take on a "benchman". By 1914 the business was well established with three shops and full time employees. The Paynes now had three children, Annie, Margaret and John. The family attended Moseley Road Methodist Church.

In 1914 Harry supported the aims of going to war but he saw bayonet practice taking place in a park and thought that it could not be Christian to do this, even to a German. He went home and talked it over with his wife, and decided that whatever the consequences, he would never enlist. The time came when he was called up and in 1916 he went before a tribunal and declared that on Christian grounds he would not assist the war effort. His petition was rejected and he replied acknowledging that it was in their power to put him in the army, but it was beyond their power to make him fight. He was drafted but he refused to obey orders and was sent to Winson Green Prison. He served his time and was not released until January 1919.

He decided he would try to run the business on Christian lines. He introduced profit-sharing and paid holidays, new shops were opened, and in 1924 the firm became a private limited company, Harry H. Payne Ltd. His daughter Annie Payne married Harold Burnett, who ran the Boys Brigade at the Church, and Harold eventually joined the Company and became a director. He helped organise Payne's charitable work and was secretary of the Harry Payne Trust, founded in 1939 to support local charities.