

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Conscientious Objection

Before the First World War there had never been compulsory military service in Britain. Britain had a small, well-trained and experienced army, but it was clear that many new recruits would be needed.

The first Military Service Bill was passed into law in January 1916 following the failure of recruitment schemes to gain sufficient volunteers in 1914 and 1915.

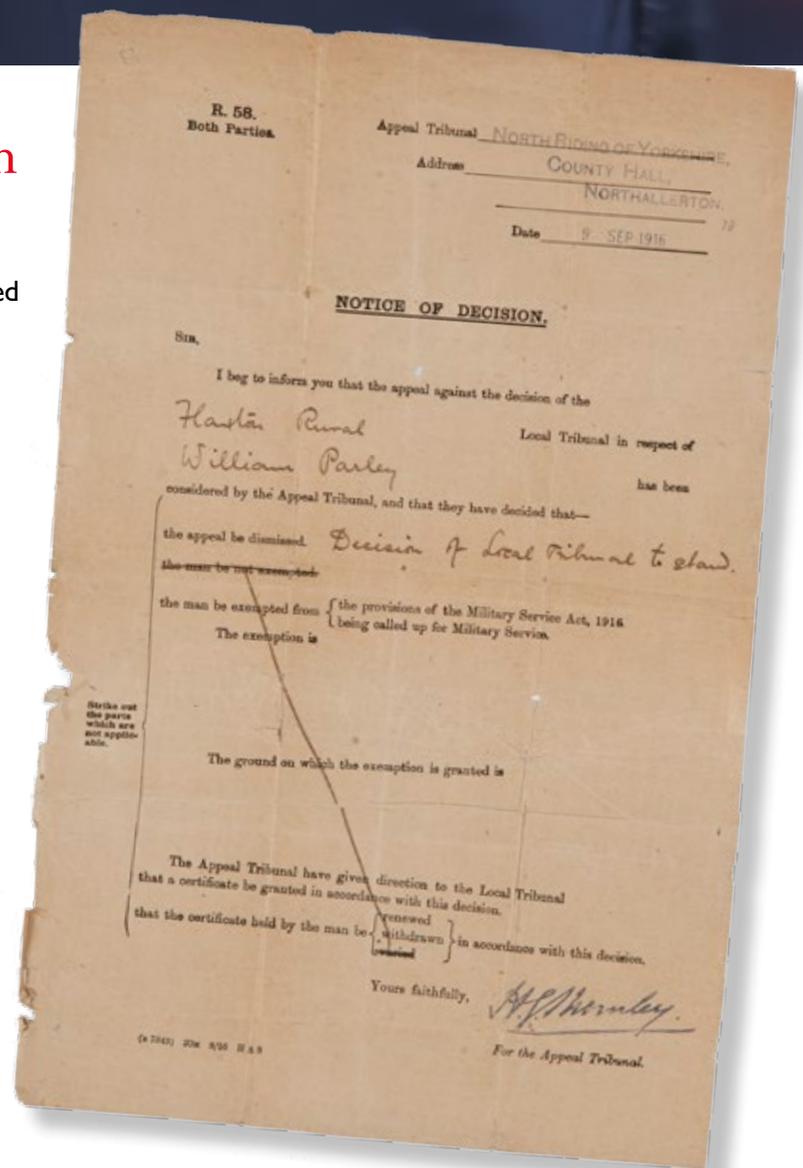
From March 1916 onwards, military service became compulsory for all single men in England, Scotland and Wales aged 18 to 41, except those who were:

- in jobs essential to the war effort,
- the sole support of dependents eg a widower with children,
- medically unfit,
- or 'those who could show a conscientious objection'.

Further military service laws were later passed which extended compulsory military service to married men, raised the age limit to 50 and reduced the number of exempted occupations.

Approximately 16,000 British men were recorded as conscientious objectors to armed service during the First World War. However, this figure does not include men who may have had anti-war sentiments but were either unfit, in reserved occupations, or had joined the armed forces anyway.

It was common for many Quakers to reject military service and as York had a large Quaker community it was also home to a significant number of objectors. In this pack you will find copies of documents from York archive's collection of William Varley's papers. The collection includes postcards, letters and other correspondence relating to his imprisonment for objection against conscription.





William Varley

- William Varley was a Quaker and conscientious objector from New Earswick, York.
- He refused to join the Army Reserve where men were conscripted under the Military Service Act of 1916.
- William objected repeatedly and then appealed but was refused an exemption.
- He was later sent to prison to serve a sentence for disobeying the command of his Superior Officer when ordered to put on a uniform.
- While in prison he continued to campaign for the rights of conscientious objectors.
- In November of 1916 William Varley accepted work of national importance and left prison to do this in January 1917.
- William refused to participate in active service, but he did not forget those at the front and firmly believed his actions would contribute to peace on earth.