

A walk in their shoes

Design your own WWII
conscientious objector walking tour



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Introduction

Welcome to this walking guide produced by Quakers in Britain.

The guide uses a groundbreaking new database and map of World War II conscientious objectors to help you plan a walking tour between the homes they lived in. You might be a school or local history group looking to explore the history of WWII in your area, or a peace group seeking to mark International Conscientious Objectors Day or commemorate an anniversary connected to WWII in an alternative way.

Whatever your reason for picking up this guide, we hope it will help bring alive some of the forgotten stories of WWII, as well as of conflicts today. As you visit these addresses, you might want to imagine the conscientious objector who once lived there coming out through the front door on their way to stand in front of a tribunal, setting out to take part in alternative service, or perhaps heading off to prison.

When we think about conscientious objectors – known as COs – our minds typically turn to the First World War. There were around 16,000 British COs during that conflict. It may be a surprise to learn that there were over 60,000 British COs in WWII, including around 900 women. This amounts to about 1% of all conscripts. Estimates of the number of COs believed to have been imprisoned vary from around 1800 to 6000.

But what exactly is conscientious objection? Who were these men and women who refused to take up arms? What were their reasons for choosing not to fight? What forms of persecution and punishment did they face for doing so? And do conscientious objectors exist today?

This guide will help you discover the answers to these questions and more. Turn now to the instructions to plan your walk into the world of the CO.

Then after the walk, consider putting yourself into the shoes of a conscript. Would you choose to fight or not to fight?

The WWII CO database and map

During WWII, more than 60,000 British men and women registered as conscientious objectors. However, these individuals have largely been erased from the public consciousness. Often COs do not fit into the story most frequently told about Britain's role in WWII – that of a country uniting to fight an evil foe. This lack of awareness is compounded by a dearth of available data on the conscientious objectors of WWII. A large proportion of the official documents, mainly tribunal records, were destroyed in the 1960s.

Now, work is being done to address this. Barry Mills, a Quaker peace campaigner from Prestwick in Scotland, has used newspaper and other contemporary sources to unearth the records of 11,000 WWII COs, and work is ongoing to recover even more.

These records have been used to create a database of COs and a map (www.conscienceww2.uk/map) of where they lived during the war. The aim is to build a better picture of the numbers, demographics, motivations and wartime experiences of conscientious objectors. In this way, we hope to raise awareness of this group and help give them their rightful place in the national story of WWII.



Do you have a CO story to share?

Perhaps a relative or someone you know or knew was a CO in WWII. If so, please share their story with us (first seeking their permission if they're still alive) so we can add them to the database and map. There's a very simple form you can fill in here:

www.conscienceww2.uk/share-a-c-os-story.



Any information, no matter how incomplete, is welcome.

Important notes

This guide has been compiled to enable individuals or groups to walk between the former addresses of WWII conscientious objectors. Walks are offered for groups and individuals at their own risk and no liability can be held by Quakers in Britain nationally or locally.

The task of plotting all the COs onto the map is a huge one and is ongoing. Currently, the areas in England and Wales that have been mostly thoroughly researched show far more COs in them than others. However, in time, we hope to be able to make it possible to organise a walk in every region of the country.

Using this guide with a school or youth group

It can be interesting for young people to explore the emotional and ethical dilemmas COs face, drawing on the history and reflecting on their own values.

Quakers in Britain has advice on adapting this guide for use in schools or in other settings with young people. It contains curriculum-appropriate activities to do in the classroom around conscientious objection and links to more peace education resources.

You can find it at: www.quaker.org.uk/teaching

Instructions

1. Have a look at the map of WWII COs

At www.conscienceww2.uk/map click on the CO pins in the map to read more information about each conscientious objector.

If you know the names of particular COs you want to include, you can search for them by following the link on the webpage above. You can also use this map to search for COs by gender, belief (Christian, Jewish, Agnostic etc) and denomination (Quaker, Brethren, Jehovah's Witness, etc).



2. Choose up to five addresses of COs' former homes you'd like to visit on your walk

Make a note of the information given about each CO you want to include. For example, you might want to read out their name, age, occupation, reason for objecting and what happened to them as a result. Stories about selected COs can be found by clicking the 'Sharing a CO's story' tab here: www.conscienceww2.uk/home.

The addresses you choose could form a circuit or a line, perhaps from one station to another. Think about how people might get to the start point (and away from the end point if your route isn't circular).

You'll find information about:

- rail services at www.nationalrail.co.uk
- bus services at <https://bustimes.org>

Some of the addresses given may show the street name but not the number. In rural areas, they may only show the village from which the CO came. In this case, choose an appropriate spot to stop – perhaps the place of worship, pub or village hall the CO may have frequented.

See **page 7** for a sample route you might take in Manchester.

You could use this to inspire your own walk.



3. Plot your route

You can do this on your phone or tablet using a mapping app such as the one offered by Ordnance Survey or on a traditional paper map.

Make your route fit the amount of time you'd like to spend and the distance you'd like to walk. If the places you'd like to visit are spread out, you may be able to incorporate a bus or train journey into your walk.

4. Head out

If leading a group, make sure everyone knows where and when you're going to meet, how far you're going to walk, and how long you expect the trip to take.

Check the weather forecast before you go and don't forget to take this guide and your map with you. For further advice, see 'Things to consider when planning your walk' on **page 6**.

5. During your walk

At each stop on your walk, read the information from the map about the CO who lived there. Then read the accompanying information that follows in this guide for each stop (Points 1 to 5). Pause for a moment to consider what you've just learnt before heading to the next stop on your trip.

6. Ending your walk

Reflect on what you have experienced during your walk.

Here are some questions you might like to use to begin your reflection:

- What do I think about conscientious objection?
- What have I learnt about the people whose stories I've heard? Do I agree with the decisions they made? What sacrifices are they likely to have made to stay true to their principles?
- Should everyone enjoy the right to be a conscientious objector in all circumstances?
- If I were conscripted, what choice would I make? And would I be able to stick with it no matter what?

Things to consider when planning your walk

Risk Assessment

If leading a walk for others, please do a risk assessment to ensure everyone stays safe. The Ramblers have produced a useful checklist here:

bit.ly/RamblersChecklist.

Respecting residents and other road users

Remember that all addresses given on the map are private houses and, of course, no longer the homes of the COs. Please don't disturb their occupants or disrupt access in any way.

Plan places to make your stops where your size of group can gather safely without disrupting others. Plan places you can all safely cross any busy roads.

Accessibility

Think about how you can plan the walk to meet your group's access requirements. You might consider:

- How long does the route take to walk? Is it on the flat or up/downhill? Will there be places to sit and rest?
- Is the route accessible to wheelchair users or people with pushchairs?
- Will there be toilets on the route? Are they accessible?
- Will people be able to hear you (for instance, near a busy road)?

If you are leading a walk, give as much information as you can to help people decide whether it will be accessible to them. Provide details so people can get in touch with you to discuss their access requirements.

Opportunities for reflection

Consider spending a minute or two in silence immediately before you start your walk in order to quieten your mind and focus on the subject of the trip.

You might also look for somewhere you can go at the end of the walk to discuss and reflect on what you've learnt. This might be a café or a park where you can enjoy a picnic.

Sample route (Manchester)

You can either walk this route yourself or use it as inspiration for your own route.

A major industrial hub during WWII, Manchester was home to a great many conscientious objectors spread across the city.

How to get there:

Nearest rail station: Manchester Oxford Road or Deansgate (both 1.1km/0.7 miles).

Buses from Oxford Road: 85/86/250/263 to Cambridge Street (250m to start)

Point 1 (START): Frank H Templeton (19), Upper Medlock St

Electrician who had worked in munitions factories. Christadelphian who 'could not be associated with the world'. He was awarded conditional CO status.

Point 2: Edwin Lang (32), Warwick St

A piano tutor. At his tribunal he stated that 'German domination was less evil than war,' and that he would join Royal Army Medical Corps.

Point 3: Norman William Squire, 189 Moss Lane East

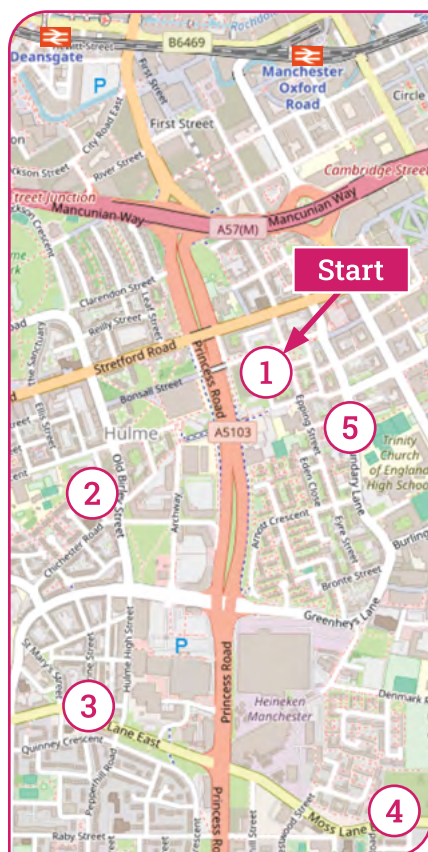
Was awarded the Military Medal in the First World War. Became a Quaker between the wars. A tribunal allowed him to continue his work as a farmer.

Point 4: Frederick O'Cora (23), 26 Fernleaf St

An atheist and 'shoe rounder'. Stated at his tribunal that 'men should not be herded like sheep and shot'. He was ordered to do non-combatant work but vowed to appeal.

Point 5: Thomas Dobbins (25), Boundary Lane

Warehouseman. Attended a tribunal in Manchester on 5 June 1940. His application to become a conscientious objector was rejected. He may have appealed.



Background map: www.openstreetmap.org/copyright

Point 1. What is conscientious objection?

A conscientious objector is anyone who refuses to do military service, or sometimes to contribute to war efforts even through civilian service, because their conscience or religion prevents them. Conscientious objection usually stems from a belief that killing or violently harming others is morally wrong, even if your country demands it or it is supposed to be for the greater good.

Although it's a term that is often associated with World War I, there have been conscientious objectors since at least Roman times.

Before the 20th Century, there are examples of pacifist religious groups being exempted from the obligation to serve in militias, such as the Mennonites in the 16th Century Dutch wars of independence.

However, during WWI Britain became the first country to recognise the right of individuals to claim conscientious objection in law. Three Quaker Liberal MPs campaigned for a 'conscience clause' in the 1916 Military Service Act which introduced conscription (compulsory enlistment in the armed forces). This clause allowed individuals to object to military service on moral or religious grounds and apply for alternative service instead.

After WWII, the right to conscientious objection was recognised in the developing international human rights system. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.' The United Nations says the right to conscientious objection is inherent in Article 18.

There are now many countries around the world where the right to conscientious objection is enshrined in law. However, when war breaks out, that right is often ignored by the authorities. A recent example is the Ukraine War, where both Russia and Ukraine have persecuted those who have objected to joining their militaries.

There are large numbers of COs taking stands in many countries today, often suffering persecution as a result (see Point 5. COs today). Every year on International Conscientious Objectors' Day (15 May), people around the world organise events and activities to stand in solidarity with those who oppose and refuse to fight in wars, past and present.

A deeper dive: find out more about International Conscientious Objectors' Day at www.quaker.org.uk/conscientious-objection.

Point 2. British Conscientious Objectors in WWII

At the beginning of WWII, conscription was introduced for all men between the ages of 18 and 41. Anyone who wanted to avoid being conscripted on grounds of conscience had to put in a formal application. A tribunal would then decide on their case.

These tribunals were composed of people who held important roles in the community, such as magistrates or councillors. Though some were sympathetic, accepting nearly all applications, the majority appear to have been hostile. These took the view that COs were simply trying to get out of doing their duty to their country. Often they would give 'conditional' verdicts, proposing some alternative service. This might be as a fireman, farm labourer, or as a non-combatant in the Royal Army Medical Corps. However, some COs – known as 'absolutists' – viewed such activities as taking part in the war effort and refused to have anything to do with them.

The experience of British COs in WWII differed from the previous war. For a start, the very concept of 'conscientious objection' had been established. That meant that there was a little more understanding among the general public that those who did not want to fight weren't simply cowards. The sending of white feathers to COs – an accusation of cowardice – had been common in WWI but was not so much a feature of the later conflict.



That didn't mean that becoming a CO in WWII was easy. The authorities were fearful that conscientious objectors' anti-war or anti-killing sentiments might become widespread and impact conscription numbers. Court records from the era have mostly been destroyed but it appears that anything up to 6,000 COs received prison sentences because of their stand. Prison terms tended to be given to 'absolutists' or those whose CO applications had been rejected and who still refused to join the armed forces.

In prison, conditions could be very harsh. Several COs commented that they were treated worse than the 'everyday' criminals whose prison corridors they shared. One 'absolutist' CO named Alex Bryan described his time in Manchester's Strangeways Prison in an interview with the Imperial War Museum:

'The discipline was strict. Talking was forbidden almost everywhere. Officers spied on one and I went about in fear lest I should unwittingly break some unwritten rule. Even during exercise periods talking was forbidden... Day after day the same things happened at exactly the same time. At 4.30 in the afternoon we were locked up for the night. I was not even able to sleep comfortably always. Five nights in succession I was disturbed by the wail of the air-raid sirens. I had experienced air-raids before but never had I felt quite so afraid as I did in prison...'

Aside from the risk of losing their liberty, COs often found themselves ostracised in their home towns or villages, and were often refused work both during and after the war. If this were not tough enough, many COs reported losing friends or being completely cut off by close family members. The life of the conscientious objector could be a lonely one.

However, some COs were respected and well-treated. Myers Galpern was a Glasgow Town Councillor who objected to the war on moral and pacifist grounds. He was successful in applying for an unconditional exemption from military or alternative service, and his career after the war went from strength to strength. He became the first Jewish Lord Provost in Scotland, a Labour MP and eventually a life peer.

A deeper dive: listen to Alex Bryan talk about his time in Strangeways Prison here (Reel 4): www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80004706

Point 3. Why did people become COs?

During WWII, the prevailing attitude in Britain was that Nazi ideology had to be defeated and that that could only be achieved through force. However, there are numerous reasons why people chose to swim against the tide and become COs.

Some did so because of their religion.

Prominent among this group were Quakers.

Since 1660, when some of the first Quakers made a Peace Declaration to Charles II, objection to war has been a core aspect of the Quaker faith.

When Britain entered WWII, a large number of Quakers (also known as 'Friends') declared themselves to be COs. Many were fined or imprisoned for their stance. Others served with the Friends Ambulance Unit and Friends Relief Service, which helped both military and civilian victims of the violence in the UK and overseas.

One 20-year-old Quaker named Christopher Lake was conscripted in June 1940. After seeking out non-combatant roles in his regiment, he came to the conclusion that 'to be faithful to what I believed to be the true conception of the Christian way of life I should not continue to serve in the Army in any capacity whatsoever'. To force the army to discharge him, he went absent without leave – and ended up serving a prison sentence in Leicester Gaol. He was eventually discharged on the condition that he devoted himself to medical or farm work. He chose the latter. However, his non-Quaker father refused to speak to him for the next 14 years. He was also shunned by his fellow villagers.

Many other COs had non-religious grounds for refusing conscription. Their reasons were diverse. The CO map and stories contain a whole range of arguments put forward by COs at their tribunal hearings. G. Humphreys from Birmingham, for example, was a person of colour and said he would not fight for a country that did not recognise racial equality. His mother said she would rather he go to prison because racial discrimination was as rife in the army as anywhere.



There was also a small number of British fascists who did not want to fight because they saw Hitler as their ally.

But the most common reason given by COs was the desire not to kill. For instance, Bill Barnes from Somerset said he was not prepared to kill another human being. Jack Trickett from Lancashire said he didn't want bombs dropping on his family, nor did he want to drop them on anyone else's family. Meanwhile, Herbert Woodhurst, a warehouseman from Colchester in Essex, said he was 'helping the country by refusing to fight' – a conclusion he'd come to having seen his father die in 1921 from the effects of gas poisoning in WWI.

A deeper dive:

You can read more about Christopher Lake's story (bit.ly/QuakerCOs), Friends Ambulance Unit (<https://fau.quaker.org.uk>) and the Friends Relief Service (www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/301).

Point 4. Women and conscience

It may come as a surprise to learn that not all British conscientious objectors in WWII were men. In 1941 all women between 18 and 60 were obliged to register for war work, with conscription starting that December. Unmarried women from 20 to 30 had to choose between working in a factory (often making weapons) or serving in the armed forces. By 1944, seven million British women were directly involved in the war effort. Some 900, however, refused to take part – a decision that led to many of them being sent to prison. This is the story of one of them.



Kathleen Lonsdale

As well as being a renowned scientist in the fields of chemistry and physics, Kathleen Lonsdale was also a Quaker pacifist. As a result, she refused to register to become a fire-watcher and was sentenced to a one-month prison sentence in 1941.

She said later of her decision:

'I have sometimes been asked what were my reasons for deciding on that refusal to register for war duties that sent me to Holloway Jail 22 years ago. I can only answer that my reason told me that I was a fool, that I was risking my job and my career, that an isolated example could do no good, that it was a futile gesture since even if I did register my three small children would exempt me. But reason was fighting a losing battle. I had wrestled in prayer and I knew beyond all doubt that I must refuse to register, that those who believed that war was the wrong way to fight evil must stand out against it however much they stood alone, and that I and mine must take the consequences. The 'and mine' made it more difficult, but I question whether children ever really suffer loss in the long run through having parents who are willing to stand by principles.'

Kathleen made quite an impact on prison life while inside, holding Quaker meetings, comforting fellow inmates, and challenging the prison authorities on the conditions endured by the prisoners. Once released, she wrote a pamphlet entitled *Some account of life in Holloway prison for women* to highlight the lot of those held there.

A deeper dive:

- You can read more stories about women who became COs in WWII here: bit.ly/WomenCO
- Watch *Unknown ravens*, an award-winning 20-minute documentary about three sisters in Herefordshire who became COs: www.semabasharan.com/portfolio/unknown-ravens.
- Secondary school teachers may be interested in a lesson plan based on the film here: bit.ly/RavensLesson

Point 5. COs today

There have been countless examples of men and women who have refused to fight in the many armed conflicts that have happened since WWII. In the Vietnam War, for instance, nearly half a million men in the United States applied for conscientious objector status, around a third of whom (170,000) were successful.

More recently, the war in Ukraine has exposed just how fragile the right to conscientious objection can be. Both Russia and Ukraine maintain that right on paper. However, in practice neither side has upheld it. Instead, there are countless reports of men in both countries being picked up off the streets and obliged to join the armed forces. With no possibility of being exempted from service, tens of thousands of men have fled both countries to avoid being forced into it. One of those men is a young Russian named Sasha.* This is an excerpt from his account of his experiences:

'On a cold morning of 30 September 2022, I stood in a Moscow metro station, my heart racing as two police officers approached. Their eyes fixed on me as they asked for my documents. I was to be taken to a police station for 'document verification' but I knew what it meant – my name had been placed on the recruitment list, and the life I once knew was slipping away, caged by the relentless grip of a system I could no longer escape.

What followed were hours of terror. I was taken to the mobilisation centre, surrounded by police with no chance of escape. Before I knew it, I was on a bus filled with recruits, heading into the unknown. Once at the training centre, I refused to accept my situation. I tried to appeal the decision of my mobilisation, hoping to be granted alternative civil service instead. I filed a formal request, but it was ignored. Despite my efforts, I was deployed.

I've always considered myself deeply empathetic. From a young age, I understood the power of kindness and how it could transform not only others but also myself. As a teenager, watching documentaries on WWII deeply affected me. I promised myself I would always offer a helping hand to those in need and never hurt anyone intentionally.

Even during deployment, I tried to hold onto my beliefs. I was

surrounded by brutality, oppression and injustice, but I refused to become a part of it. I offered whatever kindness I could. I helped people where possible and treated them with empathy and respect, even when everything around me felt hopelessly dark. However, despite these small acts of kindness, the mental strain of being part of something I fundamentally disagreed with was unbearable.

I managed to escape Russia. Now, I live in Georgia. The experiences I've endured have reshaped my life and goals. I am now dedicated to ending this unjust war and working toward a future where Russians can live freely and happily, without fear or oppression. I feel a profound empathy for those still trapped in Russia, forced to surrender their moral beliefs just to survive. My hope is for a future where such choices are no longer necessary.'

In Ukraine, the Quaker conscientious objector and peace campaigner Yuri Sheliashenko (left) has been charged with 'justification of Russian aggression' simply for calling for peace. He faces up to five years' imprisonment if found guilty.



In Israel, teenagers Tal Mitnick, Sofia Orr and Ben Arad made public declarations of their refusal to take up arms and served several months in prison in 2023 before their right to conscientious objection was recognised. These COs form the crest of a wave of Israeli women and men who refuse to fight in Gaza and the West Bank.

But there are also conscientious objectors in many countries that hit the headlines far less often. These include Thailand, Burma, Singapore, South Korea, Greece, Cyprus, Northern Cyprus and Finland.

In Europe, there have been calls for the return of National Service and conscription for both men and women. It's a policy that may become reality soon in Sweden, Latvia and Switzerland.

Wherever war breaks out or threatens to, the right not to take up arms is too often lost in the clamour for violence.

**Name changed to protect his identity*

A deeper dive

Here are some useful links if you'd like to explore this topic further:

1. Interview with Quaker CO Don Saunders (4:44):

bit.ly/DonSaundersCO

2. WWII Quaker COs talk about the things they found hardest about remaining a pacifist (18:06): bit.ly/PacifismCOs

3. WWII Canadian Mennonite COs (9:35): bit.ly/MennoniteCOs

4. A review of books for children on COs in both world wars:
www.quaker.org.uk/cos-childrens-books

Three books that deal with conscientious objection in WWII are:

- *Run rabbit run* (2015) by Barbara Mitchelhill
- *Klaus Vogel and the bad lads* (2013) by David Almond
- *In the mouth of the wolf* (2018) by Michael Morpurgo and Barroux

5. Peace Pledge Union website: www.ppu.org.uk

6. War Resisters' International website: www.wri-irg.org/en

7. Website of New Profile (Israel): www.newprofile.org/en

8. Website of Movement of Conscientious Objectors to military service in Russia: <https://stoparmy.org/en>

9. An interactive activity for children based on the story of Austrian WWII CO Franz Jägerstätter:

www.quaker.org.uk/documents/the-importance-of-disobedience-assembly.pdf

Take Action

If you'd like to take action to support the right to conscientious objection, you can find lots of ideas here:

www.quaker.org.uk/conscientious-objection

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