

## DEATH ON THE HOME FRONT

### Pam Brooke

Much has been written about the Military Service Act and the operation of Tribunals however this has mostly focused on the outcome for conscientious objectors and little has been written about those who sought exemption on other grounds.<sup>1</sup> One particularly tragic case from the Colne Valley illustrates the wide repercussions that the refusal of one man's application for exemption had on both his family and the wider community.

On Wednesday 28 November 1916, at Slaithwaite Town Hall, 62-year-old James Shaw, blacksmith and hill farmer appeared before the local Tribunal to request an extension to his son's Exemption Certificate. Charles, aged 28, he said, was his only son and worked with him in the blacksmith shop and on the farm. Depicting himself to be 'a poor talker' James presented his case in a written statement which the military representative described as 'resembling a sermon'. In response James explained that he was a regular worshipper at Pole Moor Baptist Chapel, Scammonden.<sup>2</sup>



**New Gate Farm cottage as seen today. Photo by the author.**

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Pearce, *Comrades in Conscience: The story of an English community's opposition to the Great War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Francis Boutle, London: 2014), p. 134

<sup>2</sup> *Colne Valley Guardian* [hereafter CVG], 1 December 1916

The statement gave a detailed account of the circumstances justifying exemption: his son began to milk aged nine and farmed their 14 acres of land for 23 head of cattle – including a dairy, together with six more acres under the plough for food production. He had learned blacksmithing at the age of ten and worked alongside his father in the smithy. 35 tons of iron had recently been purchased for orders of field gates, an order not possible for a man to complete alone. Anxious that the Tribunal would not think his son a shirker, James declared that ‘every man ought to do his duty today; could his son do war work in Huddersfield?’ To which Capt. Mallalieu replied: ‘No. He is too young. They won’t give any single men badges now.’ Unmoved by James’ plea, the Tribunal withdrew the certificate. ‘I’d rather you hadn’t done so,’ responded James, ‘it is hardly fair to stop a business that has been going for forty years’. ‘When told he could petition the Appeals Tribunal, he replied ‘If not successful, I would like time to sell up’.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, the business was sold, not by James, but his older brother Joseph, the executor of his estate.

Responsibility for appointing local Tribunals lay with the local authority. In Huddersfield it was the practice to submit all applications first to the Military Representative and his Advisory Committee. The full Tribunals, briefed and prepared by the Military Advisory Committee, dealt with refusals and those cases requiring extra consideration.<sup>4</sup> In 1916 the majority of applications to Tribunals were for economic or work reasons. ‘Men could be exempt if they were in work seen as essential to the war effort - such as specialist manufacturing, mining, and farming’.<sup>5</sup> Intended to be impartial, members brought with them the views they had absorbed from the patriotic press, or from friends, who urged them ‘to teach the slackers a lesson.’ Pleas like ‘people must have clogs,’ were countered by the military representative’s view ‘the Army must have men’.<sup>6</sup>

Powerless to make his voice heard, his life’s work trivialised and his inner-resources inadequate to deal with the Tribunal’s earth-shattering decision, the following morning James Shaw sent his son to Slaithwaite Town Hall for the appeal papers, locked his house door, then, after a desperate struggle, first hanged his wife from the banister rail and then himself. The terrible scene that met Charles upon his return and the effect on his sanity is almost impossible to contemplate. After cutting his parents down, Charles ran to get the assistance of Arnold Jackson who lived on a nearby farm.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Pearce, *Comrades in Conscience*, p. 161

<sup>5</sup> Matt Brosnan quoted in Chris Long, ‘World War One: Military service tribunals and those who did not fight’, *BBC News*, 9 November 2014; Available [online] at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-29954113>>

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Sackville Turner, *Dear Old Blighty* (Joseph, London: 1980)

A policeman fetched his sister Edna from Clough House Mills where she was employed as a weaver.

The following day's *Colne Valley Guardian's* headline 'A Terrible Double Tragedy at Slaithwaite' and graphic account of the incident must have further distressed readers already traumatised by unremitting War Office reports of the death and injury of their loved ones.<sup>7</sup> A further *Guardian* report captures the mood of the people:

We are living in strenuous, nerve-racking times. No sooner are we through mental shock than we are hurled into a greater. Last Thursday noon a thrill of horror went through the Colne Valley when it became known that a double tragedy had been enacted in a lonely homestead adjoining the Slaithwaite moors.

Mr and Mrs Shaw were well known in the district, described by neighbours and acquaintances as a quiet, respectable and unassuming couple – 'the father being taken up with his blacksmith business next to their cottage in New Gate, the mother attending to the home comforts of the father and a son and daughter'. No reason could be found for their terrible action.<sup>8</sup>

James and Betty had married on 23 March 1895; she a spinster of 28, he a widower and father aged 40.<sup>9</sup> James' first wife Elizabeth had died in May 1894 when their children Edna and Charles were just three and five.<sup>10</sup> New Gate had been home to James for most of his life, his parents having lived there before him.<sup>11</sup> Some years earlier he had purchased a new house in Royd Street Hilltop, a more thickly populated part of the township, but their daughter Edna's poor health caused the family to move away from the noxious smog of mill chimneys and reeking gas works and return to their former home close by their blacksmithing shop on the edge of the moors and cleaner air.<sup>12</sup>

The Shaw family were staunch chapel goers; James's brother Joseph had a family pew at Pole Moor Baptist Chapel and it is more than likely that there would have been plans to attend the popular Messiah Service which was held there on Sunday 3 December.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> CVG, 1 December 1916

<sup>8</sup> CVG, 8 December 1916

<sup>9</sup> Ancestry.co.uk

<sup>10</sup> Gravestone inscription, Pole Moor Baptist Chapel

<sup>11</sup> 1881 UK Census

<sup>12</sup> CVG, 1 December 1916

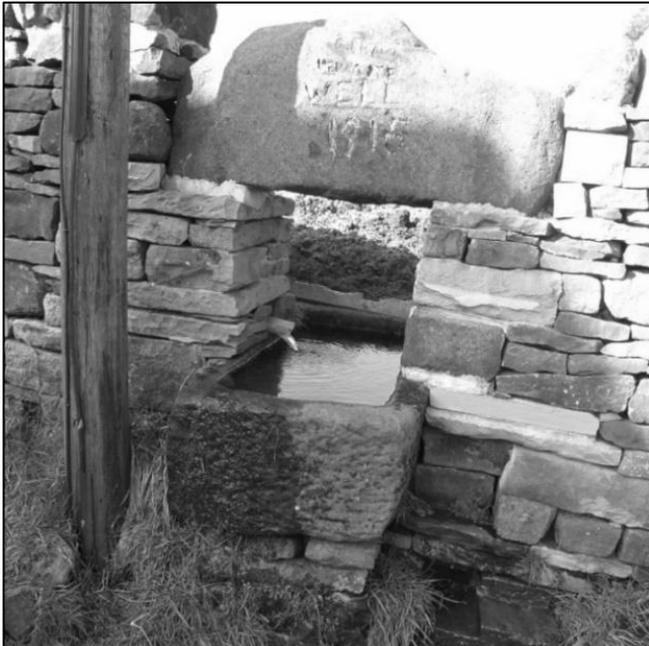
<sup>13</sup> Andrea Crawshaw and Marjorie Wilkinson, *Tabernacle on the Hill, A History of Pole Moor Baptist Chapel Scamonden 1787 – 1987* (Private, 1987); CVG, 8 December 1916

Instead, the following day, Monday 4 December, James and Betty were buried together in the chapel's cemetery in the same grave as Elizabeth, James's first wife.<sup>14</sup>

'Behold and see if there be any sorrow.

He was cut off out of the land of the living.

But thou didst not leave his soul in hell'.<sup>15</sup>



**New Gate well, adjacent to the farm buildings where the tragedy took place. It is not known if the cryptic inscription relates to these events. Photo by the author.**

How poignant the words from the Messiah must have seemed to family, friends and neighbours on that freezing, snow-covered December day, muffled up in thick shawls and scarves against the piercing cold winds that sneak year-long through Pole Chapel's bleak hilltop cemetery; silent in their respect for the deceased. Deacon David Shaw conducted the burial, surprisingly four days before the inquest and ruling of the Coroner.<sup>16</sup> At this dark depressing time when need for spiritual guidance was at its greatest the chapel was without a minister, Rev. Raikes Davies having left in October

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<sup>14</sup> James Shaw burial certificate No. 4315

<sup>15</sup> G F Handel, The Messiah Oratorio, Part Two pp. 30, 31, 32

<sup>16</sup> Pole Moor Baptist chapel burial certificate, No. 4315

1915 to support the war effort, and no replacement being found until February 1917 when Rev. Titherington accepted the post.<sup>17</sup>

Initially most Baptists had reconciled their conscience to the necessity of war.<sup>18</sup> But by the end of 1916, hostility to warfare was beginning to replace patriotic fervour; many fathers, sons and husbands had been killed in action, reported missing or wounded. On 9 October 1916, Florence Lockwood reported in her diary '80 wounded soldiers in our workhouse again,' and 'the wounded are returning from the front in such numbers it is hard to find places for them'.<sup>19</sup> Many who had not fought endured the same hardships as the soldiers, and for some the suffering had been just as great. There would have been public sympathy for the family.

## Suicides

In the year 1823 it was enacted that the body of a suicide should be buried privately between the hours of nine and twelve at night, with no religious ceremony. In 1882 this law was altered by the Interments (felo de se) Act 1882, where every penalty was removed except 'that internment could not be solemnised by a burial service, and the body may now be committed to the earth at any time, and with such rites or prayers as those in charge of the funeral think fit or may be able to procure.'<sup>20</sup> Before the Suicide Act of 1961, it was a crime to commit suicide, and anyone who attempted and failed could be prosecuted and imprisoned, while the families of those who succeeded could also potentially be prosecuted. Suicide is also forbidden by church doctrine. Up to 2017 at some Anglican churches suicides of sound mind may still not have been buried with full Anglican rites.<sup>21</sup> However, Baptists believe the Spirit of Christ leads the church locally and that worshippers should associate together to decide on their teaching.

Faith challenged by the Tribunal's decision, prayers seemingly unheard, there would have seemed no end to James's pain and it is impossible to comprehend the intolerable struggle that must have taken place in his conscience prior to taking the life of his wife, then his own. As a practising Christian he would have believed the value of life to be sacred, that to usurp God's right to determine the time of one's death the most elementary sin. Forty years a blacksmith and farmer with failing health (the inquest revealed that his post mortem had discovered a weak heart) he would have

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<sup>17</sup> Crawshaw and Wilkinson, *Tabernacle on the Hill*, p. 44

<sup>18</sup> Paul R. Dekar, 'Twentieth-Century British Baptist Conscientious Objectors,' *Baptist Quarterly*, 35:1, 1993, p. 36; Keith W. Clements, 'Baptists and the Outbreak of the First World War,' *Baptist Quarterly*, 26:2, 1975, p. 75; *Baptist Times*, 25 September 2014

<sup>19</sup> West Yorkshire Archives Service (hereafter WYAS), Florence Lockwood Diaries, KC 329

<sup>20</sup> *The Law Times*, Vol. 96, 1893, p. 408

<sup>21</sup> *The Times*, 11 July 2017

known that to continue labour intensive blacksmithing and farming without the help of his son would be impossible. When told by the Tribunal he could appeal to the Appeals Tribunal in Huddersfield, he had replied that he would like time to sell up if unsuccessful. He must have believed refusal inevitable, the future intolerable. Incapable of practising his trade alone, he would have feared destitution, of becoming a burden on others, he may have felt it his duty to protect his wife from the shame of the workhouse.

Betty's family lived at Spring Head next door to Joseph and his wife Emily, who were childless.<sup>22</sup> Joseph took responsibility for the funerals and acknowledgements and initially Edna and Charles moved in with them. Betty's death had been brutally executed. At the inquest the doctor said there was considerable deep bruising and abrasions to her skin and that great violence must have been used before she was 'strung up' and that she would have suffered a slow and painful death. The conflict of emotions between neighbours, the torn loyalties are inconceivable.

The inquest took place at 5.00pm, Friday 8 December at Upper Slaithwaite Church School.<sup>23</sup> Delayed by 45 minutes due to dense fog, it would also have been dark since lighting up time was 4.28pm and all lights down at 4.58pm because of the blackout. It lasted three hours. The jury listened to the long and searching enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the deaths. The unanimous verdict that James had murdered his wife then committed suicide in a temporary fit of insanity took only two or three minutes but was rejected by the Coroner who said there was no evidence as to the state of the man's mind.<sup>24</sup> The mind of James at the time of death – the fruit of his action, lives in the conscience of others. Providential perhaps that the church burial had already taken place!

Two months later Charles was sent to Rugeley Camp, Cannock Chase (Staffordshire), to join his new battalion and commence his military training.<sup>25</sup> There were two large camps on Cannock Chase: Rugeley and Brocton, both camps could hold up to 40,000 men at one time and trained upwards of 500,000 men. They had all their own amenities including a church, post offices and a bakery as well as amenity huts where the troops could buy coffee and cakes or play billiards. There was even a theatre. 'The soldiers were responsible for the preparation of their own food and for keeping their living quarters clean'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 1911 UK Census

<sup>23</sup> CVG, 8 December 1916

<sup>24</sup> *The Law Times*, Vol. 96, 1893, p. 408

<sup>25</sup> CVG, 5 April 1917

<sup>26</sup> Staffordshire County Council, 'Life in the camps – A soldier's perspective: Erskine Williams', Available [online] at: <<http://www.staffspasttrack.org.uk/exhibit/chasecamps/life.htm>>



**Cannock Chase Military Hospital. Image courtesy of Trevor Warburton, Friends of Cannock Chase.**

Four weeks into his training, Charles was admitted into Brindley Heath military hospital.<sup>27</sup> Built in 1916 Brindley Heath served both camps and the returning war wounded. It could accommodate 1,000 soldiers in twelve wards and specialised in war neuroses and other mental health problems.<sup>28</sup> New thinking during the First World War shaped and defined mental sickness; the term 'shellshock' was given medical credibility by C. S. Myers in *The Lancet* published in February 1915. Doctors treating Charles would have been aware of the tragic deaths of his father and step mother, his gruesome discovery of their bodies, loss of home and livelihood; they would have understood his mental anguish but were unable to heal him. Two weeks later, whilst still in hospital, he ended his own life by undisclosed means.

Uncle Joseph received a telegram informing him of his nephew's death and went immediately to the camp where, upon his arrival, he found the inquest to be in progress. The jury returned a verdict of 'suicide whilst of unsound mind'.<sup>29</sup> *The Colne Valley Guardian* report says: 'It was thought that the recent distressing tragedy had got on his nerves.'<sup>30</sup> Charles' body was brought back to Slaithwaite; he was interred on Wednesday 4 April 1917 in the same grave as his parents and stepmother.<sup>31</sup> Pole Moor's new minister, the Rev J. W. Titherington officiated.<sup>32</sup> Weather reports for that week tell of abnormal snowfalls and arctic weather conditions that have prevailed

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<sup>27</sup> CVG, 5 April 1917

<sup>28</sup> BBC, 'World War One at Home - Brindley Heath, Staffordshire: Mental Health Treatments', Broadcast on 6 November 2014; Available [online] at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02b14pv>>

<sup>29</sup> CVG, 5 April 1917

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Grave stone inscription, Pole Moor Baptist Chapel cemetery

<sup>32</sup> CVG, 5 April 1917

since last October, the temperature of 13.1 Fahrenheit (-10 degrees Celsius), was the lowest ever recorded in Slaithwaite.<sup>33</sup> On 31 March 1917, Florence Lockwood records in her diary ‘terrible weather, continual snow’. To Charles’s family, friends and neighbours it would have been a horrendous replay of his parent’s funeral ceremony. For Edna, so recently orphaned, the loss of Charles her only sibling, must have seemed like the end of the world. *The Guardian’s* description of her farmhouse home and smithy as ‘now derelict,’ could perhaps have aptly portrayed her state of mind. Her recent marriage to the farm labourer, Arnold Jackson, the neighbour who Charles had called for assistance on the night of the initial tragedy, would at least have put a roof over her head and offered some sense of security.



**Shaw family headstone with the inclusion of Charles at Pole Moor Baptist Chapel Cemetery.  
Photo by the author.**

Suicide can also have a profound emotional effect not only on family and friends, but on the whole community. This was the fourth recent local tragedy due directly or indirectly to the war.<sup>34</sup> At the end of 1916 the army were demanding more men due to the disastrous number of casualties on the Somme. In May 1917 Florence Lockwood tells in her diary of Slaithwaite women ‘full of their own tales of death and misery, standing in groups discussing their horrors.’<sup>35</sup>

The Army Council calculated that there were still 2,500,000 men of military age in civilian life and demanded 940,000 of them for the coming year’s operations.<sup>36</sup> This

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *CVG*, 8 December 1916

<sup>35</sup> *Florence Lockwood Diaries*, 17 May 1917

<sup>36</sup> Gerard J De Groot, *Blighty, British Society in the Era of the Great War* (Longman, London: 1996)

would have pressurised Tribunals into refusing applications for a second extension, the feeling would have been that the applicant had had adequate time to put his affairs in order. Furthermore, the fact that those refused had the right of appeal to the Appeals Tribunal would have removed any guilt or responsibility for unsound decisions.

The Military Service Tribunals 'intended as independent judicial bodies composed of 'fair-minded citizens,' were more likely to be made up mainly of elderly business men and other local dignitaries with little legal experience, all middle class - the majority of whom were supportive of the war, and possibly with little understanding of the economic needs of farmers and small family businesses dependant on the labour of a husband or son for their family's survival.

The consequences of the Tribunal's decision did not end with the war. Fourteen years later, on 8 December 1930, uncle Joseph was found hanging from the staircase of his home in Spring Street, Slaithwaite.<sup>37</sup> The war had taken everything from Edna and her family. It had also triggered a chain of events that not only had a disastrous impact on her family, but also affected a whole community. How far were such war related deaths on the home front mirrored across the country? The casualties of the Great War cannot be counted only in the deaths on the Somme and other battlefields.

## **Biography**

Pam Brooke BA (Hons) MA, PGCE is retired and lives in Honley. She studied Social History and English Literature at Bretton Hall (1987-90). Her studies of the First World War created an interest in war and conflict which was later reinforced by her work with refugees both in a teaching capacity and as director of a refugee group. She is the winner of the Edward Law History Prize 2018.

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<sup>37</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 9 December 1930