



Embargoed until 00.01 2 March 2016

Conscription 100 Years On – Discover stories at Lives of the First World War

“Those living in 2016 will be the best judges of whether you did right or wrong at this time”

One hundred years ago, on 2 March 1916, conscription was introduced in Britain for the first time. All unmarried men aged 18 to 41 were compelled to join the Armed Forces. A century later, Imperial War Museums (IWM) need the public to help complete and remember the life stories of every soldier who was conscripted on our permanent digital memorial, [Lives of the First World War](#).

Before the First World War military service was not compulsory in Britain, and the Army had relied on volunteers. Despite huge numbers of volunteers joining up in the early stages of the war, millions of men were not yet in uniform, and by summer 1915 recruitment was slowing down. The Military Service Act came into effect in March, making it compulsory for all unmarried men in England, Scotland and Wales aged 18-41 to fight in this global conflict. Two months later in May, the Act was extended to include married men and as the war continued into 1918, when Britain experienced even more manpower shortages, the upper age limit was increased to 50.

This meant that the majority of the adult male population of Britain were expected to fight unless they qualified for exemption. In turn the act led to around 16,500 men objecting to joining the armed forces and registering as Conscientious Objectors on religious, moral or political grounds.

Over the course of the First World War more than 2.5 million men were conscripted. Their stories and experiences are recorded on *Lives of the First World War*.

- Private **William George Holmes*** was initially rejected from the army when he went to enlist in 1914. At the request of his three brothers who all served in France, William stayed at home to look after their mother. In 1916 he was conscripted. His mother attempted to get him out of the Army after his brother Augustus was killed, but was unsuccessful. William was wounded in 1918 and invalided out of the Army. <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/lifestory/1946409>
- **Gerald Braithwaite Lloyd*** was one of four Quaker brothers from Birmingham. His brother Alan was awarded the Military Cross for his actions in the Battle of the Somme, and his two other brothers both served in France with the Friends Ambulance Unit. Gerald left his job in a factory when it started to make munitions for the war effort. He faced a tribunal after the introduction of conscription and was granted exemption from military service on the condition he work for the YMCA. <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/lifestory/7647181>
- Private **Eric Thomas Potten*** was keen to join the war effort in 1914 but was refused due to his important job as a railway clerk. He was conscripted in 1916 and served in the Tank Corps, taking part in the Battle of Cambrai. During the battle, Eric and two others were sent across the battlefield to collect munitions and machine guns from a British tank disabled by German forces. <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/lifestory/3562178>

- **William Edmund Harvey*** was a Quaker MP and social reformer from Leeds who was largely responsible for ensuring the 'conscience clause' was included in the Military Service Act, thus enabling men to be exempt from military service on conscience grounds. He also undertook relief work with the Friends War Victim Relief Service in France, helping refugees whose livelihoods had been destroyed due to the fighting.
<https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/lifestory/7658171>

Diane Lees, IWM Director General said: 'On the centenary of conscription, *Lives of the First World War* will help people to learn and remember the First World War by sharing the personal stories of those who were conscripted and their experiences on the front line, as well as the experiences of conscientious objectors.'

Matt Brosnan, Historian at IWM said: 'The Military Service Act was hugely significant in being the first time that Britain introduced conscription. The Act symbolises how, by 1916, the First World War had become a total war, with mass mobilisation required to fight a war on such a huge scale. 1916 was also the year of the Battle of the Somme where nearly 20,000 British men were killed on the first day and in the 141 days of battle more than one million men from both sides became casualties. Virtually every British citizen would be affected by the war in some way.'

Lives of the First World War was launched in 2014 to mark the beginning of the First World War Centenary. Since its launch, nearly one million facts have been added and over 7.6 million life stories of the soldiers, sailors, nurses and airmen who served have been discovered, remembered and shared.

Did you have a relative who was conscripted? Can you help us complete the stories by uploading photos, linking to evidence and adding stories? IWM wishes to commemorate each individual British and Commonwealth soldier. Help us to piece together more life stories, remember and share your First World War connections on www.livesofthefirstworldwar.org

Ends

For further information, interviews or images please contact:
Faye Jackson, Press Officer - fjackson@iwm.org.uk 020 7416 5420

IWM historian Matt Brosnan is available for interview.

Eric Thomas Potten's son, Geoffrey Potten is available for interview. Please contact the IWM press office for further information.

*Case Studies

[Private William George Holmes](#) British Army, London Regiment

William George Holmes was born in Clapham, London in 1895 to Emily and John Holmes. He had four brothers and five sisters and from 1908 onwards, after the death of his father, he worked as a cashier at the Army and Navy Stores.

In his memoirs William recounts how he went to enlist soon after the declaration of war was announced. Seeing a poster on the wall of the window at work that called for volunteers, William and around 20 others joined a group of about 250 males.



(© IWM Q47875) Troops of the 12th Battalion, London Regiment (William's regiment) passing through a village on the Villers-Cotterets road on their return from the lines, headed by their band, 6 April 1918)

According to William:

'Only the tallest and strongest were taken and the rest of us told to go home and await further posters'.

Three of William's brothers were enlisted, with one deemed unfit for service:

'Well, my eldest brother (he had been driving taxis for a firm based in Acton) had already been commissioned – as a driver – and sent to join the Supply Column in France. Another brother, John, had joined the 17th Lancers for a period of 7 years – and was then in India. They were of course at once sent back to France. While a younger brother, Arthur, (he joined up underage) and was sent to the RAMC [Royal Army Medical Corps]. My brothers said "Bill you must stay home and look after mother" (she was a widow) until they conscript you. Another brother Alf (married) was found unfit for the Army. So of course I did stay at home until I was conscripted for service!'

On 30 June 1916, William was conscripted:

'One day I had a notice to say, 'Report to so and so', which I of course did. I said goodbye to my Mum. There were I suppose about 20 of us. They took us into a room, took all our clothes off, and we put on the uniforms. And we were taken by lorry down to Salisbury Plain, a place called Wildon [for training]'.

While William was preparing to be sent to France in October 1916, his older brother Augustus was killed in Belgium:

'I was finishing my training at Salisbury Plain when (a week before we were due to go to France) my brother Gus was killed. My mother tried to get me out of the army but was not successful'.

William joined the 12th Battalion, London Regiment and served on the Western Front until May 1918, when he was wounded in the stomach by a German sniper. He was discharged from the Army on 13 September 1918 as he was no longer medically fit for service.

(IWM Documents.14277 and [IWM Sound Archive 8868](#))

The Lloyd Brothers: [Second Lieutenant Alan Scrivener Lloyd](#), [Gerald Braithwaite Lloyd](#), [Ronald Llewellyn Lloyd](#), [Eric Ivan Lloyd](#)

The Lloyd family were Quakers who lived in Birmingham with family connections to Lloyds Bank. As Quakers they held pacifist beliefs, but these were to be tested by the First World War. Gertrude and John Lloyd had four sons and one daughter: Gerald born in 1886, Alan born in 1888, Eric born in 1893, Ronald born in 1894 and Joan born in 1898.

Before the First World War Gerald worked as a warehouse manager and Alan worked as a farmer and had travelled in South America and East Africa. Both Eric and Ronald were studying at university. In 1915 Gerald married Nancy Keep and they went on to have three children. When the factory he worked in began making munitions to aid the war effort he left his job to work for the YMCA. After the introduction of conscription in March 1916, Gerald faced a tribunal in August of that year and was granted exemption from combatant service provided he continue his work with the YMCA.



(©Vivian Cockcroft. IWM Documents. 20535) Alan Lloyd during the First World War

'Never mind if you feel a prig & if you look a fool before the rest of the world, those living in 2016 will be the best judges of whether you did right or wrong at this time.' (Gerald Lloyd, 1916. Library of Birmingham, MS 4039, Lloyd Family Papers)

Gerald's younger brother Alan married Dorothy Hewetson in 1914 and in October 1915 they had a son, David. Despite being brought up a Quaker, Alan served with the Royal Field Artillery in France, rising to the rank of Lieutenant. Alan's unit moved to the Somme in June 1916 in preparation for the major British offensive that began a month later.

At the advent of the extension of conscription to include all married men aged between 18 and 41, Alan wrote to his wife Dorothy on 1 May 1916:

'It makes one annoyed out here to think of all this bleating of married men and shrinking of single men and general unwillingness at home to really take their coats off and get on with it.'

At the end of July 1916 Alan's battery moved to a position north of Montauban opposite a quarry to support their Division's operations in Delville Wood. Just after midnight on 4 August an attack was made in the wood. German artillery fire cut all communications and Alan worked back from his observation post to mend the telephone wires. On the slopes of Longueval Ridge, he was hit by a shell and killed. His body was taken back to Bécordel-Bécourt where he was buried. Alan was posthumously awarded the Military Cross. His citation in the London Gazette reads: 'For most conspicuous gallantry as forward observing officer. He laid his wire to the most advanced infantry trench, and, from thence, under heavy fire, directed the fire of his battery until the enemy battery was knocked out.'

His wife Dorothy received letters of condolences from Alan's comrades including one from Gunner John Manning who was with Alan when he died. Shortly after his funeral, John placed a sign on Alan's grave which read: 'He died as he lived brave and fearless a true British hero'. The sign is now on display at IWM North.

Alan's younger brothers both supported the war effort in a non-combatant capacity, in line with their Quaker upbringing. From December 1914 until June 1915, Eric served as a dresser in the Friends Ambulance Unit. From October 1915 he was attached to the French Army as an ambulance driver. Ronald, the youngest of the Lloyd brothers, also served in the Friends Ambulance Unit in France. After October 1916 he too was attached to the French Army as an ambulance driver.

The Friends Ambulance Unit was an unarmed medical unit staffed mostly by men of Quaker faith who were conscientious objectors to the First World War. It operated throughout the war and cared for over 277,000 sick and injured servicemen from the British and French forces. In addition to ambulance convoys, they also ran ambulance trains, hospital ships and set up eight hospitals.

After the war Eric married Antoinette Roux in 1926 and they had two children. He died in 1957. His brother Gerald died in 1969 and Ronald in 1990.

(IWM Documents.20535)

Private Eric Thomas Potten **British Army, Tank Corps**

Private Eric Thomas Potten was born in May 1898 to Emma and Henry Potten in Belfast. His father worked as a congregational minister at the Whiteabbey Congregational Church in Belfast, and the family moved to Chesterfield before the outbreak of the First World War. Eric had an elder sister named Kathleen who worked as a nurse during the war.

At the outbreak of war aged just 16, Eric was keen to join the Army but was refused due to his job as a railway clerk:

'I wanted to join up. Your friends were joining up you see, but I wasn't allowed to join because of my job on the railway.'



(©Geoff Potten – Eric Thomas Potten in 1917)

Eric was eventually conscripted in November 1916:

'I got a note to go and report to the drill hall at Derby. They asked me if I had any preference for anything I wanted to go in, and I said the tanks.'

He served as a Private in the British Army's Tank Corps. At the age of 19 Eric took part in the Battle of Cambrai in a tank named Foggy where he was a machine gunner. The Battle of Cambrai was the first large-scale use of tanks in battle, with 476 tanks assembled for the attack. The tanks, combined with effective artillery fire, shocked the German soldiers facing them, with 8,000 of the defenders taken prisoner. Eric said of the battle:

'We thought we had got a winner. The Germans were so surprised that they stopped in their dugouts – they didn't know what was happening.'

By the end of the first day the British tanks and infantry had advanced by five miles. Eric describes what he saw as the tanks crossed the Hindenburg Line:

'Never before have I seen such massive barbed wire as that in front of the Hindenburg Line, our first objective. The wire in places was 50 yards deep and 10 feet high. The enemy was evidently surprised at the ease with which the tanks crushed it. They resisted strongly with machine gun fire, but when the tanks crushed it, which they thought were impregnable, they became demoralised, and only a few strong points resisted. We took many prisoners and over the whole period 8,000 were taken prisoner.'

After resting that evening, Eric's tank was sent into action at Bourlon Wood with another crew, where it was disabled. Eric and a few other men were sent to collect the machine guns and ammunition:

'That night, I, with two others, were sent to find it and bring back the machine guns and ammunition, - a very eerie job, lit by gun bursts and star shells.'

Eric survived the war without injury and returned to Chesterfield. His father was working as a Minister, and it was in his father's church that Eric met his future wife Edith. Eric married Edith Lack in 1929 and they had two children: a daughter Margaret born in 1931, and a son Geoffrey born in 1934.

Edith worked as a primary school teacher before her marriage to Eric. After the war Eric worked for British Rail until retirement.

Eric died in 1997 at the age of 99 and his wife Edith died only a year later in 1998.

Geoff Potten, Eric's son is available for interview. Please contact the IWM press office for further information. ([IWM Sound Archive 11042](#))

[Thomas Edmund Harvey](#)

Conscientious Objector

Thomas Edmund Harvey was born in Leeds on 4 January 1875 to Anna Maria and William Harvey. He had two younger brothers, John Wilfred Harvey and William Fryer Harvey, and a younger sister Helen.

The Harvey family were one of the more prominent Quaker families in Leeds in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before the outbreak of the First World War Thomas worked at the British Museum until 1904 before beginning a political career as the MP for Leeds. He married Alice Thompson in 1911.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 Thomas openly declared his opposition to war. In November 1914 he went to France with the Friends War Victim Relief Service to help refugees who had fled their homes. Along with other Quakers, Thomas helped to build huts for residents at Sommeilles whose homes had been destroyed in the fighting. On his return to Britain he reported on the conditions for refugees and continued to visit France regularly.

Thomas rose to prominence during the First World War as the MP who was largely responsible for ensuring the 'conscience clause' was included in the Military Service Act of 1916. As a married man aged 41 Thomas was not affected directly by the act when it was initially passed, however the clause meant that men could be exempted from service on the ground of conscience if a Military Service Tribunal found in their favour. In this case they would take up work of national importance. If a man was refused exemption they could appeal, if a man's appeal was rejected he could end up in a cycle of arrest, court martial or imprisonment.

Thomas served on the Pelham Committee which oversaw the work of national importance the conscientious objectors undertook. He stood down before the 1918 General Election but remained politically active, presenting a petition to parliament in 1924 urging the abolition of the death penalty. In 1937 he was elected for the Combined English Universities seat as an Independent Progressive Candidate and served throughout the Second World War until his death in 1955.

Notes to Editors

- The Imperial War Museum was founded in 1917 when the First World War was still being fought to ensure that future generations would understand the toil and sacrifice of those who participated in the conflict.
- Over the Centenary (2014-2018) *Lives of the First World War* will grow to become the permanent digital memorial, accessible to millions of people regardless of their location.
- *Lives of the First World War* will be maintained and preserved by IWM beyond the centenary as a research tool for future generations.
- *Lives of the First World War* is being delivered in partnership findmypast Ltd.
- It is **free** to discover, remember and share information on *Lives of the First World War*, including uploading pictures and adding family stories.
- Subscription is only necessary if visitors wish to research using premium data sets that currently exist behind pay walls, or if they want to access special features such as creating their own Communities.
- To support the permanent digital memorial and access premium genealogy research records visitors can become a Friend of *Lives of the First World War* for £6 per month or £50 a year.

Imperial War Museums is not seeking original copies of letters, photographs or diaries. We encourage people to keep these in family collections for future generations and to upload and share their digital images on *Lives of the First World War*.

IWM

IWM (Imperial War Museums) tells the story of people who have lived, fought and died in conflicts involving Britain and the Commonwealth since the First World War. Our unique Collections, made up of the everyday and the exceptional, reveal stories of people, places, ideas and events. Using these, we tell vivid personal stories and create powerful physical experiences across our five museums that reflect the realities of war as both a destructive and creative force. We challenge people to look at conflict from different perspectives, enriching their understanding of the causes, course and consequences of war and its impact on people's lives.

IWM's five branches attract over 2 million visitors each year. [IWM London](#), our flagship branch, marks the Centenary of the First World War with new permanent First World War Galleries and a new Atrium with iconic large object displays. Our other branches are [IWM North](#), housed in an iconic award-winning

building designed by Daniel Libeskind; [IWM Duxford](#), a world-renowned aviation museum and Britain's best preserved wartime airfield; [Churchill War Rooms](#), housed in Churchill's secret headquarters below Whitehall; and the Second World War cruiser [HMS Belfast](#).

About the First World War Centenary

2014 - 2018 marks the centenary of the First World War, a landmark anniversary for Britain and the world. IWM is marking the centenary by leading a vibrant, four year programme of cultural activities across the world including. For more information visit www.1914.org

Houses of Parliament

The UK Parliament will deliver a range of commemorative events over the centenary period to highlight the role Parliament played during the conflict.. This includes displays such as the poppy projection on the Clock Tower, a Parliamentary talk series focusing on various aspects of WW1, a dedicated Twitter feed @ParliamentWW1 and a publication on Parliament and WW1 to be released in the summer of 2016. More information can be found on the [Parliament and WW1 site](#).

The history of the First World War and UK Parliament are interwoven, with the decision to go to war voted on by the House. Numerous Acts of legislation were passed from 1914-18 that significantly altered the direction of the war and led to far ranging social changes. The Military Services Act 1916 was just one of these, conscripting over 2.2 million men into the army. Parliamentarians and House staff were not immune from this and as they departed for battle, women took on new roles in the workforce. One such example is that of the [Girl porters](#) in the House of Commons who became the first women employed by the House who were neither cleaning or kitchen staff. Read more about their story as part of our [Parliamentary profiles](#) series.

About Findmypast

Findmypast (previously DC Thomson Family History) is a British-owned world leader in online genealogy. It has an unrivalled record of online innovation in the field of family history and 18 million registered users across its family of online brands, which includes Mocavo, Genes Reunited, The British Newspaper Archive amongst others.

Its lead brand, also called Findmypast, is a searchable online archive of over two billion family history records, from parish records and censuses to migration records, military collections, historical newspapers and lots more. For members around the world, the site is a crucial resource for building family trees and doing detailed historical research.

In April 2003 Findmypast was the first to provide access to the complete birth, marriage, and death indexes for England & Wales, winning the Queen's Award for Innovation. Since that time, the company has digitised records from across the globe, including major collections from Britain, Ireland, Australia, and the United States.