Conscription stripped the COs of their human rights and put them under the control of the Army. The Tribunals set up to handle exemptions were their only means of redress. Leaving the Tribunal, men had to make a difficult and personal moral choice. None knew what lay ahead of them and all were aware of the unsympathetic if not wholly hostile social climate as the death toll mounted in the trenches.

Many conscientious objectors however received no exemption and were immediately handed over to the army. The hierarchical and punitive military system was ill-equipped to deal with men on whom punishment, brutality even the threat of being shot had no effect.

By the middle of 1916, thousands of COs were in prison and the system was breaking down. In an attempt to remove these difficult and stubborn men from prison, but still keep them under control the government devised a new system - the Home Office Scheme. Under the scheme, COs who agreed to strict rules and who agreed to carry out punishing and pointless labour - Work of National Importance - would be allowed out of prison into camps. In the camps they would have a greater degree of freedom, but would often be living in conditions as bad as those in prison while carrying out often back-breaking labour with inadequate clothing and poor tools.

HOME OFFICE SCHEME

The first Home Office Scheme centre was Dyce in Aberdeenshire. There, COs worked in a granite quarry. In terrible conditions, Dyce became a scandal when one young CO, Walter Roberts died and the camp was soon closed down. The largest centre was Princetown, Dartmoor. The prison there was converted to house around 1,000 COs and ran from 1916 to well after the war had ended. Men at Dartmoor worked at a variety of occupations from agriculture to construction and stone breaking.

For many COs the Home Office Scheme was a compromise. It offered better conditions in exchange for "useful" work unconnected to the war. Many COs took up the offer of the scheme, some to ease the sufferings of prison, but others wanted to be useful employed. In the end the badly organised Scheme made some COs feel that it was a complete waste and they willingly returned to prison.

Conscientious objectors were only a small fraction of the majority of men who did not go into the army

NON-COMBATANT CORPS and others

Men who took up Non-Combatant Service (NCS) did not have an easy time. These men accepted conscription only if they would not, as a soldier, be forced to murder anyone. NCS men were given a guarantee that they would not have to use or even handle weapons. Exemption from Combatant Service proved to be a problem for both COs and the Army. Men who accepted it found themselves as non-combatants in a killing trade. The Army, unhappy with 4,000 COs in the ranks, put them into separate divisions – the Non-Combatant Corps (NCC).

NCC men had to wear uniform and obey military orders but they could not be ordered to carry, transport or use weapons. Most remained in Britain but some were posted to France providing labour and logistical support for the army. Being in the NCC was often difficult and conditions were harsh. Their position as non-combatants in the army created disputes which often turned into work-strikes, disobedience and punishment.

ABSOlutists

Some men refused to compromise with the military and came to be known as "Absolutists". They would not fight or support soldiers in any way. Any work that would allow or help another man to fight and kill was as unacceptable as killing. They objected to the war and to the system that forced men around the world to kill each other. Their stand set them against the system and both the army and government treated them harshly.

They had a difficult time in the army where they were expected to follow orders and submit to military rule. When they refused, they swiftly found themselves facing a court martial and long prison sentences.

Conditions in prison were harsh for all prisoners at that time. Absolutist COs whose only crime was to refuse to kill other men faced years in cold, damp prisons doing hard labour in solitary cells on very meagre diets.

When their harsh sentences ended, they were released, only to find themselves again called up as soldiers. They would again disobey orders and be sent back to prison. Not knowing when it would end, this pointless and hard cycle slowly took its toll on the health of many Absolutist COs.