

## Ely Urban Tribunal

The Military Service Act came into force on 2nd March 1916; this deemed all men between 18 and 41 to have enlisted, whether or not they had attested under the earlier Derby Scheme. *(The Act specified that men from 18 to 41 years old were liable to be called up for service in the army unless they were married, widowed with children, serving in the Royal Navy, a minister of religion, or working in one of a number of reserved occupations. A second Act in May 1916 extended liability for military service to married men, and a third Act in 1918 extended the upper age limit to 51.)*

Applications for exemption from the Act had to be made to local tribunals. Ely Urban Tribunal served Ely, Prickwillow, Adelaide, Stuntney and Chettisham; other nearby villages on the Isle of Ely were served by Ely Rural Tribunal, which also met in Ely.

Very few men were granted total exemption from service. Delays to enlistment were given for just a few reasons e.g to allow employers to find replacements for key workers, for small employers to recruit workers to run their business for them, or for farm labourers to help with the harvest.

Almost inevitably employers were asked whether women workers could take on the job of the man for whom exemption was requested – on the Prickwillow farms other farmers soon complained to the Tribunal that Mr **Clarke** and Mr **Hiam** had already employed all the available women in the vicinity. The military representative on the Tribunal was also under instructions from the Army to automatically challenge the exemption of any men under the age of thirty. A “conditional exemption” meant that if the man left his current employment his exemption from service was rescinded.

It is noticeable how several of these young men who were called-up had been left running small family farms while the rest of their brothers had gone to the Front – despite the importance of agriculture, this was not enough to save them from being drafted. Family circumstances or the upkeep of small family businesses, were not seen as reasons for exemption. It was possible to apply more than once for an extension to an exemption (unless the Tribunal ordered you not to return) or to appeal against the Tribunal’s unfavourable decision. The Military Authority was also able to appeal against the Tribunal’s decision if they believed it had been too lenient. It was noted that Ely Rural Tribunal issued more complete exemptions than the Urban Tribunal, possibly because they were dealing with more “starred” agricultural workers who were in reserved occupations.

As well as showing the fate of individual men, the accounts of the Urban Tribunal allow us to see how depleted local industries, especially agriculture, were as employers complained about how few men they had left. Inadvertently, they also bear witness to the increased role of women as these were recruited in to fill the employment gaps.

The newspaper records that members of the Ely Rural Tribunal had been offered bribes to let men through, and even threatened with being shot – it is possible that the same happened to members of the Urban Tribunal.

Any appeals from the two Ely Tribunals were taken to the Appeal Committee for the Isle of Ely which normally met at County Hall in March or Wisbech, but occasionally met in Ely itself. If an appeal went forward to this committee the person concerned could not be expected to enlist in the interim. This and other local Appeals Tribunals were soon swamped with cases and it became common for men to turn up for an appeal hearing, only to be sent home at the end of the Tribunal’s working day

with their case unheard and adjourned. (The Appeals Tribunal's sittings were often determined by local railway timetables, as the committee members wanted to get home on certain trains and would not overrun.)

From mid-1916 some men's exemption became dependent upon their joining the VTC (Volunteer Training Corps) which took on local duties such as guarding bridges and railway lines. Very soon the Ely Urban Tribunal received a letter from the County Commandant of the VTC, Colonel Harding, to insist that if men were told to become members of the VTC they must be made to enrol properly and take up those duties – not simply turn up for drill, as most were doing! By early 1917 so many farm workers from Prickwillow had been told to join the VTC that it was deemed to be necessary to create a new Prickwillow Branch.

Occasionally men tried to avoid conscription entirely; in June 1916 **Charles Leonard Cross**, a small farmer from Queen Adelaide, was arrested and brought before Ely Police Court. He had not even opened his call-up papers when they arrived, so had missed his opportunity to appeal to the Urban Tribunal for exemption. He was accordingly held in custody as a deserter until someone from the Suffolk Regiment came to collect him. (He was also fined £3, to be taken from his first Army pay.) When he reached the barracks he walked straight out again and went back to his farm, where he was again arrested as a deserter! Of course he was taken back to his designated regiment.

In October 1916 a national notice was issued that no more agricultural workers should be called up until January 1917 because they were needed for the autumn harvest; those employed in milk production could not be called up before 1st April 1917. This had a significant effect on the decisions of the two Ely Tribunals, as many of the cases they were hearing were related to agriculture. Similar orders were issued in July 1917 – any agricultural workers called up could not be given an enlistment date until after the harvest was in at the end of September, and should not be told to join the VTC. In addition, the War Agricultural Executive Committee was able to withhold men from the Army, despite the rulings of the Tribunal, by issuing a voucher under Order R144 to show their work on the farm was the equivalent of National Service.

As well as "starred occupations", where men were not liable to call-up because of the importance of the work they were doing, men began to be categorised following their medical examination. In the accounts of the Ely Urban Tribunal late in 1916 the newspaper began to record a man's classification if appropriate. The following categories were established: A: General Service.

B1: Garrison Service Abroad.

B2: Labour Service Abroad.

B3: Sedentary Work Abroad.

C1: Garrison Service at Home Camps.

C2: Labour Service at Home Camps.

C3: Sedentary Service at Home Camps.

D: Unfit at the moment, but could be fit in six months (this was divided into D1 for those at Command Depots, D2 for those at Regimental Depots and D3s who were awaiting treatment.)

These classifications related to the following physical standards:

A: Able to march, see to shoot, hear well and stand active service conditions.

A1: Fit for despatching overseas, as regards physical and mental health, and training

A2: As A1, except for training

A3: Returned Expeditionary Force men, ready except for physical condition

A4: Men under 19 who would be A1 or A2 when aged 19

B: Free from serious organic diseases, able to stand service on the lines of communication in France, or in garrisons in the tropics.

B1: Able to march five miles, and see to shoot with glasses and hear well.

B2: Able to walk five miles to and from work, see and hear sufficiently for ordinary purposes.

B3: Only suitable for sedentary work.

C: Free from serious organic disease, able to stand service conditions in garrison at home.

In contemporary usage, a 'Category Man' was used as a term for anyone assigned to a category below 'A'.

Particularly relevant to the Ely Urban Tribunal's deliberations was the setting up of a national substitution scheme for farm workers. Under this scheme the Tribunal could direct that men fit to fight would only be exempted from service until their employer could obtain either a C2 or C3 man to substitute for them on the farm. It was promised that these substitutions would be like for like, e.g. a ploughman would not be sent to take on the role of a dairyman. However, here problems arose when farmers were told that, if their substitute worker came from out of area, they were to persuade the wives and families of men who were at the Front to move out of free tied accommodation to make way for the new man. This placed a heavy financial burden on the wives of serving men, who suddenly had to find a new home (which may not even be in their home village) and pay rent. Farmers were also bitter when they heard that the scheme was not retrospective, so that, even although they had lost key workers, they could not apply for substitutes. Even worse, once the "substitutes" began to appear in the district many farmers found them unsatisfactory as workers – they accordingly went to the Appeals Tribunal to try and retain their original men.

In 1917 the Appeals Tribunal began to remove the star classification of some of the farm workers who appeared before them, who were thereafter no longer protected from call-up. When doing this the Urban Tribunal and the Appeals Tribunal appear to have taken into account the total number of workers left on any farm – they were working from government figures of men per acre, which in the eyes of local farmers were far too low. The government totals meant that, naturally enough, some small farmers failed to challenge the call-up of their workers in order to keep their own sons on the farm filling the available places. It was a manoeuvre which attracted unfavourable comments in the letters pages of the newspaper and, eventually, at the Urban Tribunal itself.

In May of 1918 central government gave the Tribunals official notice that they should speed up their judgements because of the needs of the Front. Adjustments to the grading system meant all men graded 1 or 2 were liable for imminent call-up and all previous conditional exemptions could be challenged. Men over the age of 41 could expect to be placed on garrison duty, at home or abroad, to free up younger men for the Front. From this point forwards nobody could be exempted for more than three months at a time except under exceptional circumstances. Beginning with the Urban Tribunal at the end of May 1918 the National Service representative began requesting the review of all past conditional exemptions; even those men who had official certificates of protection from their representative bodies suddenly found their conditional exemptions were being removed.

The speeded-up system was now:

- If young men were placed in Grades 1 or 2 and intended to go to the Tribunal they must send in their form within seven days of the grading appointment; Grade 3 men could wait until called-up but at this point only had 7 days to appeal to the Tribunal. (These timings still held even if the man had not attended when summoned for grading – so this could not be used as a delaying tactic.)
- Men will be given three days' notice of their Tribunal hearing
- Any appeal against the Urban Tribunal's ruling had to be lodged within 2 days; if it was an appeal against the Appeal Tribunal then they had to get permission to appeal.
- Men who currently held a time limited certificate of exemption had to reapply at least two weeks before the certificate expired.

Comparing this with earlier practice, these timings, in theory, look much faster.

The members of the Ely Urban Tribunal were all senior figures in the local community and would have known, even employed, many of the men who appeared before them. Men known to have taken on this role included: the president -**William Cutlack** of the Grange, Littleport, a brewer, maltster spirit merchant and mineral water manufacturer ; **Lancelot H Luddington** who was a farmer and the military representative; **William Theobald** a retired timber merchant; **Henry Downie (sen.)** a fruit grower; **Frank L Harlock** a retired brewer; **Thomas W H Clarke** a farmer; **Walter Teverson** a farmer; **William E Stockdale** a farmer; **Robert Buckle** a carrier for the leather factory; **Cole Ambrose** major landholder and farmer, and the official agricultural representative; **James L Luddington** of Audley House, Littleport, farmer. **Henry Tansley Luddington**, a farmer from Littleport, also acted as military representative for the Urban Tribunal until forced to resign due to a partial loss of eyesight in June 1918. His role as National Service representative was taken by Lieutenant **Kenneth de Havilland Ollard**, a solicitor from Wisbech, who soon made himself unpopular with the other Tribunal members due to his rigorous application of government directives.

There was some overlap of personnel with the Tribunal for Ely Rural District which consisted of **J L Luddington, T Peake, W E Stockdale, A F Richardson, A Drake, J P Giles, F W Everett, W W Vye, M Kerridge, P A Davies**. Their military representative was **H T Luddington**.