WWI – My Choice Not to Fight. Ernest Merchant.

Ernest Merchant of Handsworth Church, Birmingham recounts his memories as a Conscientious Objector during World War I. The account below has been compiled from various manuscripts, letters and devotional talks that he gave over the years. It is the work of his daughter, *Doreen Bull.*

1. Before Prison Life

The Advent truth came to me early in 1914. I came to the Seventh-day Adventist Church out of curiosity to see those strange people who kept Saturday for Sunday. I was dissatisfied with my life and my church – I had prayed – what little I knew about prayer – for some light in the darkness. Little did I think it would come from these weird people. I was baptised in September 1915.

A tract had been handed down by someone. I started to attend church and young people's meetings. I attended the Battersea Conference in the town hall and while there, war was declared on August 4, 1914. Brother Conradi, the German representative, left the conference platform and got the last boat back to Germany, taking with him his secretary, Brother Spicer, who sadly died in a German prisoner of war camp.

Never shall I forget being on top of a horse bus – stationary – we could not get through Trafalgar Square – thousands of people were shouting that night 'We want war!'

My work at that time was of a secret nature – my employer was a millionaire. I had a unique office – armchairs and carpet. I went to him and told him about Sabbath. I remained away from work and he told me I must take the consequences. My family were very upset.

I wanted to meet my obligations paying my way at home, and during the next week cycled and visited 114 places looking for work. The question was asked, 'Why don't you join the army?' and any mention of the Sabbath and not working ended the interview.

At last I was offered a temporary job, but before every Sabbath for many weeks, he would call me into his office and by threats and bribes, said I could stay one more week – yes, one more week – it was very wearing. He asked, 'Who do you think is going to keep you if you live with these ideas?' Just then a sparrow alighted on his garage, and I said that the God who keeps the sparrows will keep me.

Many years later when I had my first 14 HP car I went to the park in the town and another man parked alongside me. We both got out together. 'Merchant, I believe?' he said to me, 'is this yours?' I said, 'Yes', and he then commented, 'Is that God of yours who keeps the sparrows still keeping you?'

I met a young lady at the youth meetings, and there were times when we were walking together and she had to go on ahead or get off a tram to save herself being bullied as I was not in the army, of military age, and no arm-band on, showing I had joined up. This young lady later became my wife when the war ended – she married an ex-prisoner from Dartmoor.

In the early days of the war there was no conscription – young men were expected to volunteer. A visit was made to the homes of those who did not do so. Eventually conscription was started but no compromise for conscientious objectors.

Tribunals were at last set up.

I was one of the first to go to such a one, and the North England Conference President came with me. In front of six men my case was heard and dismissed.

I had five calling-up papers and threw them all away. I was threatened with arrest, but I had been ill and had German measles. I mentioned to the authorities that the fact I had German measles proved my genuineness as a conscientious objector.

Later a non-combatant corps was formed and I applied for the medical corps, but it is mandatory to carry a rifle and no Sabbath privileges. If I stayed in anyone's home they could be fined £100.

A Brother Tonks who started the Coventry Church was a dentist, and he agreed to employ me by going from door-to-door – smile widely when it was opened – and notice the person's teeth. If they looked in poor shape – recommend Mr Tonks. This job did not last long for Mr Tonks was called up.

I then got a job on a farm. I had never ploughed in my life, the farmer tried me out. I was over two yards outside the furrow – but he thought I tried hard and took me on. However, I am allergic to wheat dust and had to leave.

I then saw a boot repair shop. I got a library shoe repair book and using my last bit of money repaired the shoes of my lady friend who paid me for doing so. Leather patching was also possible with a machine – I saw one for sale – the lady brought down the price but I had no money. I prayed. God put it into the heart of my parents to give me long-overdue 21st birthday money at that time. I still needed five more shillings. I prayed. The next Sabbath I hung up my coat in Handsworth Church and when I put it on at the end of the service to go home, there was five shillings in the pocket.

Another calling for the army came. To save my family being embarrassed by possible arrest, I gave myself up. Officers ordered all of us Cos to get into line and march. I refused and said I was a civilian. I was told, 'I tame lions here' – the adjutant was called – then the captain, then the chaplain. I refused to march. From Birmingham station we were taken to Warwick and told to march along the street. I refused and sauntered along the pavement. Two officers offered to help me escape, but I told them I had promised to go to Budbrook Barracks outside of Warwick. There a khaki suit was offered – I refused. At the Barracks every morning we had to march before the Commanding Officer – the COs sauntered along.

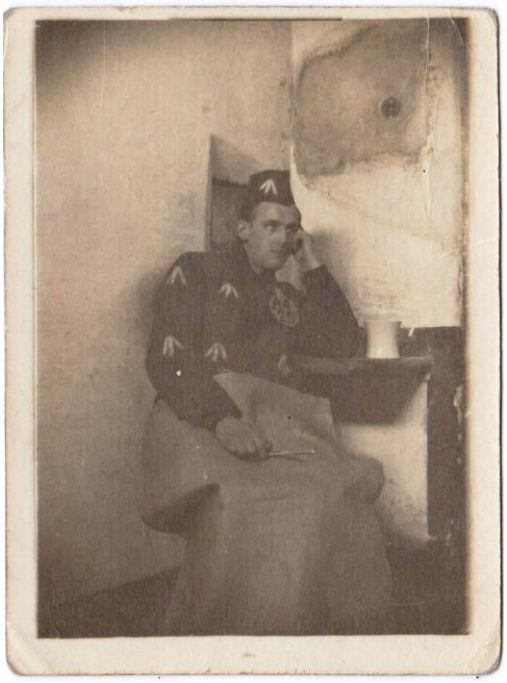
It was here that court martials were held for the COs and I was sentenced to six months hard labour at Wormwood Scrubs prison in London, together with a group of other COs.

Then began my first experience of prison life.

2. Life in Prison 1. Wormwood Scrubs

As Conscientious Objectors (COs) from Birmingham we were taken to Budbrook Barracks outside of Warwick. With Court Martial, we were sentenced to go to Wormwood Scrubs Prison in London. As the sentence was read out, we left the parade ground singing 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow.'

I arrived at Wormwood Scrubs, and while a bath was provided on arrival, all my clothes were taken away and replaced with prison clothes covered with broad arrows.



No writing material was allowed, so John Bunyan could not have written Pilgrim's Progress or the Apostle Paul write his prison letters in the prisons of my day.

First there was a month in solitary confinement. In every cell the commandments were on the wall – including 'Thou shalt not kill'.

During the six months in Wormwood Scrubs there was an outcry in Parliament that men willing to do work of national importance were wasting their time in prison. Officials came to interview some of them. Questions would be asked. 'What are you?' Reply given. I'm a nihilist – I would wipe you all out and all your class'. Another would say he was a Plymouth Brother and ask, 'Are you saved?' Another, 'I'm an individualist – I did not ask to come into this world. I don't when I shall go out.'

Many were the varied reasons why the men were COs.

The prisoners were taken to the mail bag room to sort the mail – a room with a balcony on which soldiers marched and kept an eye on those below. There was also a clothing room, where convicts went to prepare clothing for those who had completed their term, and were to be discharged and clothes were provided. It was a strict ruling that prisoners did not speak to each other.

One day a man was there who was crying. I asked him what was wrong, and he told me he was discharged, but did not know when he would go. I was able to tell him I had prepared his clothes ready the previous day. For speaking to him I got one week of solitary confinement – bread and water only – one more week added to the six months sentence – no letters from home.

The old prisoners knew how to avoid punishment and speak to one another without being found out. Grow a beard and moustache – never look at the person you are talking to and go on with your work. Another way of speaking to each other was to go to church – to litany. If you saw a pal near you, 'chanter' out to him and he would reply while the chanting went on. There was a warder at the end of alternate rows – but they could not tell what we were doing – just chanting, maybe.

The rough food gave me giant urticarial-swellings all over and I had to see the doctor. One day a Quaker – a tall, impressive man of 6ft – was there. He had on a cap which the warders snatched off his head. 'Take off your cap when you come to the doctor and say 'Sir'.' Mr Overs stood his full height and in a stentorian voice said, 'How can ye believe ye who receive honour one of another.' The words of Christ to the Pharisees and the warders were as dead men – I sensed the spirit of God in the place.

Release

At last our time came for release from Wormwood Scrubs. We were to go on work of national importance. We were taken to Paddington Station, dressed in civilian clothes and accompanied by warders.

The train came in. It had large lettering on it: SHIPWRECKED MARINERS.

An old lady came up to me and asked where we had been shipwrecked.

I said to her, 'You would be surprised' and walked away.

The train took us to Plymouth. There we went on to Princetown and to Dartmoor Convict Prison.

A new experience was about to begin.

3. Life in Prison 2 - Dartmoor

Dartmoor Prison was a forbidding place for the worst of convicts. Built in 1806 for French prisoners of war, Napoleon's soldiers being joined years later by many of the sailors captured in the bitter war with America in 1812. In 1850 it became a prison for British convicts.

It was a desolate moor – 23 miles from north to south – 20 miles from east to west – bleak and wild, with broken masses of granite – owned by the Prince of Wales, hence Princetown being the nearest town.

It was to this grim prison some 110 Cos were taken from Wormwood Scrubs, including several Adventists.

The granite walls were 4 feet wide at the base and ten feet high, the galvanised cells nine feet by three feet.

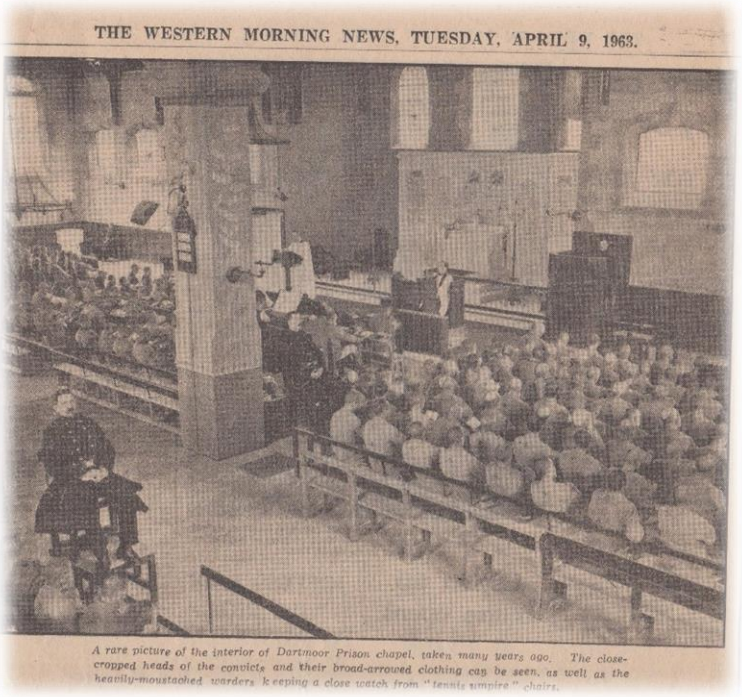
All convicts there were offered release if they joined the army, and thus made way for a place for the conscientious objectors.

Dartmoor is a pleasant place in the summer, but had the full force of Atlantic gales in the winter, with heavy snow. I worked in the quarry – breaking stone – that is, if you could find any under 2 feet of snow.

I worked on the farm – fancy 110 men in one field, turning over hay with their hands – of course, we could not be given pitchforks – we were treated like convicts who might kill the warders, then escape.

Eventually I became ill, and was put on what was termed the invalid party – painting the kitchen by night. The kitchen was about 40 feet high and we had long ladders. The Jews and SDAs and a few others worked a full day on Sunday – thus able to store up a half day. Others worked a half day on a Saturday.

When these half days had accumulated to 3–4 days we would apply to the prison governor for say, three days leave. We were permitted to go to Princetown (where all the warders lived) but not to any other hamlet or village.


THE WESTERN MORNING NEWS, TUESDAY, APRIL 9, 1963.

A rare picture of the interior of Dartmoor Prison chapel, taken many years ago. The close-cropped heads of the convicts and their broad-arrowed clothing can be seen, as well as the heavily-moustached warders keeping a close watch from "tennis umpire" chairs.

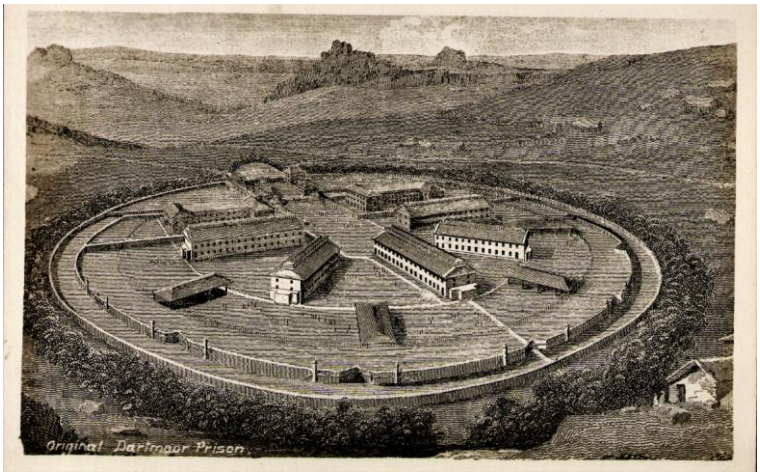
When men had leave granted they would get in touch with the painting party—they had the ladders. They would walk seven miles across the moors to Tavistock and catch the early London train. They would say, 'Meet us here exactly at midnight in three days' time.' So, in three days, usually at midnight, we would meet them at a certain place along the wall. Many times have I sat straggled over the prison wall, helping to let down the rope over the wall, when they left or when they returned.

Why did men escape for three days? Why did the painters risk ten years imprisonment in Portland gaol for helping them?

Looking back, I can only think that we were tired of looking through iron-barred windows, warders in uniforms, awful weather, useless work. We did it to prevent mental breakdown – no figures have been printed on how many men had mental breakdowns from our prison system.

Going back to midnight escapes. I remember one occasion when we were just about to hoist the ladder when we heard footsteps. We dropped the ladder and ran for cover. We thought it was a warder. Don't mention heart palpitations! The footsteps got nearer and nearer. Imagine our surprise to see in the moon light a fellow prisoner—he tripped over the ladder — he could not sleep and thought he would take a walk. I suppose we had relative freedom in that our cell doors were never locked. He helped us put the ladder back up against the wall for our midnight rescue.

To save me going mad, I thought I would save up some time and apply to the Governor for leave off work and go 60 miles up country to see my grandfather. The Governor granted me time off – he did not know my plans to leave prison.



I went into Princetown - there were some Quakers living there who were very kind to the COs. I borrowed a bicycle and cycled 26 miles over the moors to Exeter. At the station were two military policemen. I carefully took my ticket, waited for the train to come in, and then took a run for it, passing the police. I had left the bicycle with a friend who ran a health food shop. I walked through the fields to my grandfather's house – what thrills I had – he welcomed me. He could not understand where I had come from. I dare not tell him. The thrills of freedom were soon to subside. Next door was a schoolmaster who kept an eye on my ageing grandfather. He asked very awkward questions and made my life unpleasant. In two days I thought it best to pack up and return to prison.

When I got to Exeter, snow had fallen. I rode my bicycle for a short time, but the snow was two feet deep and pushing it over the hills does not end up in laughter. Never was I nearer to losing my life. Once you lie down in the snow from exhaustion, that is the end of the chapter. In that desolate moorland – no houses – I did once see a shepherd's cottage with a light in the window. Should I give myself up? Would they be friendly? I could not take the risk of 10 years in Portland prison. I would press on. All through the night I walked in a blinding snowstorm – some 20 miles. Many men have lost their lives on Dartmoor in such conditions. It was always arranged with the Adventists that if one of us did not turn up by 7 o'clock in the morning, after some exploit, they would all come through the prison gate, take off their identity aluminium metal tags, bring mine with them, and come to find the missing member. Imagine my surprise when I saw them coming towards me in Princetown. I joined the group. As we neared the prison we put on our metal tabs and walked through the gates. I was exhausted and spent the rest of my days of leave in bed.

Many exploits like this could be told. One CO was wealthy – he was a newspaper correspondent for the French newspaper Le Matin. By accumulating leave, he went some 500 miles to Leeds to a Labour conference. He spoke from the platform – no one knew he was a prisoner. He managed to go to London several times. He was very much into politics. When he returned from such trips, Comrade Norman would put up a poster advertising a lecture, 'The Flowers and Fauna of Dartmoor'. We all knew it would not be that. We would meet in the big room, and with two prisoners near the doors to watch for warders, he would tell us of what was happening in the government of our country and in the war.

Adventist Conscientious Objectors in Dartmoor Prison

Another story. One afternoon, one of our gang in the fields had an exciting idea. In Princetown was a hotel called 'The Prince of Wales'. In bold letters on the door was a notice, 'No teetotallers or COs served here'. Our friend Payne from the council in Banbury had a brother who was in the cutlery business in Sheffield. He got his brother to write to the manager of the hotel to say that he would like his representative to visit the hotel and stay the night, and he would arrive on

the 6.30pm train, and would the hotel arrange to have a car waiting for him.

So Payne had some leave, went to Plymouth, got the train as arranged, and at 6.30pm arrived, dressed with top hat and civilian clothes, and the hotel car was waiting for him. Those of us in the know waited by the station to see this happen. He stayed the night, and later told us he sold the manager enough cutlery to pay all his expenses. He left the next morning, back to Plymouth, changed his clothes, and returned to live in prison.

My lady friend I had met at Young People's meetings sometimes stayed with the Quakers in Princetown. The church at home would send parcels of food to me. They always arrived smashed flat – cakes in crumbs. Postal people would see they were addressed to COs on Dartmoor, and in kindness we will say, were less careful than usual. She decided she would register the parcels in the hope they would arrive intact, but all in vain.

The sparse interior of a CO's Prison Cell

I had read a book about George Muller and his orphanage and that through the grace of God people sent him money and never insured it. So we decided that instead of insuring the food parcels we would put the money into the church offering. After that decision, never was another parcel received all smashed. Ever after that experience with the Lord, I never insured anything I had, except my car – as required by law.

Many were the various opinions and thoughts among all the COs on Dartmoor – many were the discussions we had together – many the topics, including religion. We were happy that two of the other COs became convinced of the advent truth we loved so much.

We were confined, yet we had a degree of freedom. Our work was scarcely work of national importance. Some warders were brutal, some more understanding.

Is one really imprisoned? The Apostle Paul says, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom, freedom of spirit is great gain.'

We had freedom to worship, we had Bibles. Sometimes on Sabbath we would walk 15 miles to Plymouth to the church service, but must return in time to work on Sundays.

The time had come for our release six months before the war ended. The only criteria was to find work approved by the Home Office. So our ways parted. Brother Knight, Brother Throssel, Brother Beavon and others – we went our separate ways but remained in contact for a long time, having shared many experiences together.

4. Life After Prison

Released six months before the War ended we needed work of National importance. In Handsworth was a man who had a baker's shop who I knew. He was sympathetic to the church but had never kept Sabbath. He wrote for me to be released from Dartmoor to help in baking and the Home Office approved.

I returned home with a free travel pass via London. I went to the Adventist Sanatorium as I was ill, and had treatment for a few days. I suppose I was under the Good Samaritan Fund, for when I was presented with the bill for one pound and ten and a half pence for laundry, I told them I could not pay it and would send it on. I arrived in Birmingham with four pence in my pocket.

A CO's Prison Cell looking towards the door

The baking job was five shillings a day – it was not enough to live on. I asked the baker if he could give me two days off each week and I could go selling from door to door. I recall with pleasure the copies of Daniel and Revelation I sold in the Handsworth District.

This arrangement was short-lived. I had a letter from the Home Office stating I was not fulfilling their conditions, and I had seven days to find other acceptable work or return to Dartmoor. Man's extremity is God's opportunity — I had come to what is called 'wit's end corner'. I looked in the newspapers and saw an advert for painters and decorators. The whole church was praying for me. I knew nothing about painting.

There was a church member in Bearwood who had a business – and I asked him for work, but he could not afford to take me on. I asked for just one day. 'I will pay your fare, meet me in the Bull Ring at 5am tomorrow morning and I will take you painting.' This I did. The next day I applied for the job advertised and had an interview. The man asked, 'Where have you been working?' I gave him the name and address of where I had worked one day. I was taken on – and promised Trade Union rates of pay. Under the Defence of the Realm Act every man had to have a note from his employer that he was doing work of National Importance. I wanted to send it to the Home Office.

Then a miracle – he wrote the note stating the type of work and signed his name. Then he put a PS. 'Trade Union rate paid.' If that had been put in the letter the Home Office would not have approved. Could I get some scissors and cut off that PS? I walked into the local market stall – the florist stalls were not open, but in the middle of one of them was a pair of scissors. I cut off the PS. The letter could now be sent to the Home Office. I started work on the Monday – no experience – copying what the man next to me did. On Wednesday the boss came to me and shouted that I come off the plank. 'I don't have criminals working for me.' The Home Office had advised him I had been a prisoner, but not for the right reason. He had been sent a long form to fill in. I told him I was a CO and refused to kill my fellow man.

He shouted, 'I fill up forms for margarine and sugar, I refuse to fill up any more forms. Get out of here.' I said to him, 'I am good at filling up forms – I will do it for you.' He was dumbstruck! I asked him to just sign it and I would complete it. One question was, 'Is his behaviour good?' I put 'very good'. I am sure that form was filled up in a satisfactory way and I sent it off to the Home Office.

I had not asked for Sabbath off work yet, and Friday came. At lunch time I went and knocked on his office door – with fear and prayer mingled together. A voice said, 'Come in'. I said to the boss, 'I don't usually work on a Saturday morning'. Instantly he replied with a lot of swearing – 'I suppose you will please yourself'. I said, 'Thank you very much sir,' and hurriedly left his office. I went to the foreman and told him I had seen the boss and he had told me to please myself, and I would not be working on Saturday and I would be leaving early that afternoon. (It was winter time and sunset was early.) The foreman said, 'I suppose Aston Villa is playing away?' I did not reply but left the office and the foreman in silence.

I did not belong to the Trade Union and one day, while painting standing on a nine inch wide plan above running machinery, a trade unionist threatened to throw me down into the machinery below. It would have meant certain death. He had been drunk the night before and had some hangover. I told him that if he threw me down I would certainly not be able to join his union, and him with that spirit – I would not join. Then 32 men went on strike because of me working with them. The boss came to see me. In future I would have to work up at his house. He went and told the men and the strike was stopped. I was out of their way.

The Lord is always on time. The next morning at the boss's house I was in the shed putting on my working clothes. I saw a man I knew– he was Harry Wilson, a church member, but he had not kept the Sabbath during the war. He knew the painting trade well, and I was able to learn a lot from him. He asked if I kept Sabbath and when I told him I did, he said he wished to keep the next Sabbath with me. He said he would speak to Bill, our boss. Bill had brought him up as an orphan and had him living in his home and had taught him the trade. Time passed and the war ended.

I was a painter and decorator when I got married. We had a Quaker wedding as we had appreciated so much the help the Quakers had been in Princetown, to the COS and to my girlfriend who stayed with Quaker families when she came to visit when I was in prison on Dartmoor.

Later I bought an old van, and started up a small business – an Army and Navy stores – buying from sales of ex-army equipment! I see through the years, despite my mistakes, the hand of God. Never would these experiences have come to me if I had not become a Seventh-day Adventist, and I praise him for all His benefits.

The children of God can say:
'Our times are in Thy hands
Whatever they may be,
Pleasing or painful
Dark or bright
As best may seem to Thee.'

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For more on Seventh-day Adventists in World War 1 visit http://adventist.org.uk/ww1 or watch the documentary, A Matter of Conscience.

Document compiled by Dr Doreen Bull. Edited by Victor Hulbert.