

## Brian Filkin

### Thinking before the war:

#### For Pacifism--

When I was a school boy, I can remember knowing there was likely to be a war that would call on me to take part. I thought I would have to be prepared for very rough physical treatment if I refused to do what I was told to do. I used to try myself: I would suffer cold in winter that I could have avoided because I wanted to be able to bear it. I thought that sometime I might be taken as a sort of military prisoner.

When war was declared my wife, Lily, and I felt everything was finished. We couldn't really bear the thought of what was going to happen.

#### Deciding Action—

In prewar days we had been members of IVSP (the International Voluntary Service for Peace). These were people who were pick and shovel workers from all nations who worked together for social good. I had been quite sure that I would join the Friends' Ambulance Unit if war came. When war and conscription did come however, I found myself becoming aggressive almost in my determination to do nothing that would be of help in the war situation.

When the time came for my call up, I went down to Selly Oak labour exchange and for the first time I found I had to declare my situation in public in front of all the other young chaps who were coming along talking about whether they would go into the airforce or the navy and doing their natural boasting and so on. I had to say "Where can I register as a conscientious objector?" I felt as though the world stopped for a moment and listened to what I was saying. I felt I had already made a tremendous declaration. I was politely treated and was able to go into another room and sign separate papers

### Experiencing War in Birmingham

Our neighbours in Birmingham were very good. We shared a homemade air raid shelter in the back of our houses. Eleven houses were backed by some waste land which had a old cellar in it. We worked together to make that into an air raid shelter. All of us were people who were on reserved occupations: there was the warden and his family, people to do with the church and people like ourselves, all involved. There were several women amongst us and when we heard the sirens going they used to take their knitting with them. They would knit furiously when we could hear bombs coming. In some ways they were good times when we were in that shelter all together.

We went out our with the warden in turn to give him company as he did his rounds. Every night at that period there were air raids. Some were passing over; some were on Birmingham.

#### Confirmation of My Pacifism

I can remember going out with the warden and two other people one night. We were used to hearing bombs whistling and knew that they were not likely to be landing near us but on this occasion the whistle was very local and we all knew it was coming very near. We all tried to get beneath one another on the ground. The bomb went off. Bits of turf and stones and things fell on top of us as we were crouched down.

That night that bomb killed a little girl in the road next to us—it was personal to us as it had been so near. She was in bed. Maybe the man who had dropped it had a little girl in bed somewhere in Dresden and maybe he was a very nice fellow with a lovely daughter and would have loved the child that he killed. It seemed to build up a sense of war being so utterly abominable. It confirmed us in feeling you could be justified in saying "no" to doing what was called your duty and what was demanded of you.

## The Tribunal—Choosing to be a Conscientious Objector

Then the time came then when I had my first tribunal... It was in Birmingham in one of the law courts. We were allowed to take our minister with us to talk for us or somebody of that kind. I chose not to do that. The tribunal was in a big room; the tribunal, the chairman and about four or five other men, sat at the front. We were called to the table by name and in turn. The young man who went before me was working at the Austin areofactory making aeroplanes. He was given an enormous telling off by the tribunal because he was asking for exemption as a conscientious objector while he was making the very things that would kill people. The chairman stood up on his feet and waved his arms and sent him away.

Then they called me next. I thought they must be in a good mood. I found them in fact quite fair. I was able to be honest with them. They questioned me about my religion. They enjoyed getting people onto a religious reason for objection because then they could ask difficult questions that called for clever answers, but I wouldn't have any of that. I said that it was not on a religious basis that I was appealing. They asked if I was a Quaker. I said, no, I had been married at Quakers so that I had a link with Quakers but it was not as a Quaker that I was objecting. Finally the chairman asked me if there was anything I wanted to say to them.

I said, "Yes, will you please either give me complete exemption and put me on the register of conscientious objectors, or will you please take me completely off it. I don't want to bargain with you with reasons."

So the chap looked at me and he looked at his colleagues and said "Sincere?" and they nodded. He looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, but I can't give you complete exemption but I'll give you exemption on the grounds that you continue doing what you are doing." I was working with Cadburys.

That was honest enough so I went away and went back to Bournville. One day there came a letter for me from the ministry of labour and it said you are not doing work of sufficient national importance and either you must find work of greater national importance or we will find it for you.

### Finding new work

I was called to the ministry of labour in Small heath. I had to go over to see the manager. He said, "You have our letter?"

I said, "Yes, I have."

He said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

I said, "Well, if I do anything at all I shall choose to go on the land. I have to eat food; I must be prepared to produce it and that I will do."

### Working on the Land

I knew a good farmer that we camped with. He got me a job with a farmer in his area. I left Cadburys and I went to work there. He was a good farmer in that he farmed well, but he was totally unused to dealing with people. We started off saying, "Where will we live?"

He said, "Well, I haven't got a cottage at the moment. The cottage I have got has a lady living in it, but if you start now and live in a tent, we'll see."

So Lily and I lived in a tent in this farmer's field and I worked about 11 hours a day. He was an absolute villain as far as dealing with people was concerned. He saw nothing but the farm. The farm was everything. The first day I was there it was hay time. He put me up on a hay wagon. I was completely unskilled. He gave me a short pike and lifted the hay to me. I was to build it onto this hay wagon which is a skilled job if it is going to

stay on the wagon. There were two horses on the front. I tried hard and worked hard and at the end of the day I was terribly tired. I had built this thing and I was on top of it, about fifteen foot in the air.

I said to him, "How do I get down off this?"

He answered, "You put your pike in the saddle of the horse and slide down it."

I did that, landed on the horse, slipped off the horse onto my back on the floor, picked myself up.

He said, "They're very quiet, aren't they, the horses?"

I said, "Yes, I'm very glad they are."

He said, "You wouldn't think they bolted last week. My sister's in bed with broken ribs because she was on top like you."

That's the way we started. Never-the-less, I worked very hard and didn't mind working hard. I felt somehow that the work was some sort of justification of my position. I had to work hard. I was prepared to be made to work hard if it was work my conscience would let me do.

After I'd got his hay in and his corn in and I'd trimmed his hedges all down the lane and I'd ploughed his land with horses, all of which I had never done in my life before, it was October. It was cold and we were in the tent.

The farmer said, "The harvest is in now and there is not a lot of work"

I said, "We were in your tent all through your harvest in the hope that you were going to give us a cottage. You've got a farmhouse here which is only half full. You and your sister are living in half the farmhouse and the other half is empty. Let us move our furniture in and we'll live in the other half."

"Can't have two women in one house,"

So I said, "I'm sorry but I can't go on like this."

### Running a hostel for C.O.s working on the land

Lily and I went to see the man who was in charge of the Worcestershire scheme for conscientious objectors working on the land. He was a lot more interested in Lily than he was in me because he was just going to open a new hostel and he wanted a warden there who could cook, but he said I could work on the land from the hostel.

So we went.

At that time farmers who were not farming well enough to please the government were turned out of their farms. The government took the farms over to make them more productive.

We were sent, Lily and I, in advance of any men going there to one such farm at Plough's Top. The farmhouse was the old vicarage. This farmer had been turned out but he was living with his wife in one room of the house somewhere. We had to make our own way to this farm. Nobody was there to greet us, but we were supplied with cleaning things—mops and buckets and all that sort of thing—to get this place ready as a hostel for the people who were going to work from there.

## Preparing the house

We went in there and it was horrible. We walked into the big kitchen, opened the cupboard doors and the mice ran all over the shelves. We set about. We had about three days before the men came. So down on our knees we went, side by side to scrub the floors and all that sort of thing. We worked extremely hard. When we got into our camp beds at night we could hear the rats were gnawing the wood at the back of our bed heads. We knew that somewhere in this house was a farmer who had been turned off of his farm and was not likely to be very fond of us.

In fact the farmer turned out to be very friendly. We discovered that he was going out with his tractor and working for the government on other people's farmland and being highly paid for it. So he was much better off than he was when he was trying to make a living off his own farm.

## Food shortages

All together we started in a very tough position. Lily had to cook one meal a day that would be substantial enough to keep us going because at that time had no special rations. We had only our ordinary individual personal food rations. We had to hand everything over to Lily who did the cooking because she had nothing else. Lily did a magnificent job in producing one evening meal, but in the day we had to take food out to eat while we were working on the land. We had to eat where we were working and we had nothing to take. We went out most days with raw beet root and dry bread and that was our food apart from the meal that Lily got for us when we got back at night. For the work we were doing (we were digging ditches and that sort of heavy work) it was really insufficient. We were in dire trouble actually. The men who were on the farm, the usual hands, used to come with boiled eggs and ham and stuff which they normally produced for themselves. We had to watch that being eaten while we were hungry. But we had his job to do.

In the early days we had a Yorkshire man who, because we were so hard up for food, tried to get several men in the hostel to pool their sugar and to buy carrots and make carrot jam and marmalade. The terrible thing was, if the jam went wrong all the sugar was wasted.

## Working with horses

I was called by the farm manager to look after two horses there. They were two magnificent shire horses. I had to look after the horses and to work with them, all of which I enjoyed because I learned to love the horses and I was young and I suppose I was strong. It was fun.

One was a black mare who was absolutely lovely, a lovely temperament. I loved this horse. We used to spend our time working, but when I had my lunch I used to lean up against them and talk to them. When I got back in, I had to groom them. This mare was an affectionate sort of animal. She would nudge me and push me when I was grooming her and I would tell her off and she would roll her eyes. I used to wear a baret and while I was bending down brushing her legs, she would bend down and take my baret off with her lips. She would lift it up in the air out of my reach. It was astonishing how much companionship she gave.

It was always hard work. At six am it was dark and cold and sometimes wet. I was walking down past the stables with a clanking bucket to get water for the horses to start with. They would call out to me as I was walking past. Then we went out to work. The men and animals had to work just as hard as each other. I think a sort of relationship built up because of this.

## Running a hostel at Bockleton

However, after a time we were moved from that hostel and put in charge of a hostel at Bockleton. From that hostel men had to go to all of the outlying farmers in Worcestershire and Herefordshire. Those farmers were people who treated us badly. They were the people who thought they could whip us up and treat us badly because we were conchies and deserved everything we got. So we got the filthiest jobs working in weather that

ordinary farm workers wouldn't be asked to work in, picking potatoes in mud and so on while the rain poured down and all that kind of thing. Finally Lily was expecting our first baby, so she had to say "I'm sorry, the time has come when I can't go on."

Lily went off and I was put in charge of the hostel which then had forty men in it. We took turns so that particularly unpleasant farmers were shared equally by the men who had to work for them. I went out to work for them too. There was one particular farmer who was a neighbour of the Bockleton hostel who drove his horse into me and my bicycle and that sort of thing—he wanted to punish me.

### The war's end

In 1946 I was released from agricultural duty. We had no money, no clothes. We had difficulty getting our house back from the people who had rented it from us during the war. When we got back into the house, it was in a terrible state with paper hanging off the wall and rubbish in the garden. We had a very long haul back. I'd got to make a place for bringing up a family from absolutely nothing.