

Westminster Training College 'Roll of Men in the King's Forces'

*Westminster College archives, A/4/a/i
Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History
Oxford Brookes University*

This unique record lists the students and staff of Westminster College who served in the armed forces in the First World War. It is now scanned and available at <https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/58e98e9a-ba91-4ca3-8817-b640c16ff35a/1/>

Background

Westminster College was founded in London in 1851, by the Wesleyan Methodist Church for the training of teachers. Initially women and men were trained until a separate women's college, (Southlands, Wimbledon) was founded in 1872. By the close of the nineteenth century the College had been in a period of stagnation but under a new Principal, Rev. Dr. Herbert Workman, from 1902, and changes in government policy for schools, it entered a new phase of growth and development which continued through the coming decades. In 1959 the College moved from its restricted and outdated buildings in Horseferry Road, Westminster, to an extensive site on the western edge of Oxford. In 2000 it merged with Oxford Brookes University.

The College's records comprise a significant quantity of items from the nineteenth century (and property deeds relating to the Horseferry Road site, dating from 1687-1948) but the predominant holding is post-1920. It is known that some papers were destroyed by bombing in World War 2.

The book

The volume, which measures 33 x 22.5 x 4 cm [13 x 8¾ x 1½ in.] was not kept from the start of the war, though other records may have been and entered into it later. 'August 1917' is inscribed in the flyleaf, presumably marking when the 'Roll' was commenced. By then considerable numbers of Westminsterians were serving, and many already killed, injured or taken prisoner. While most were soldiers in the trenches, a number enlisted in other forces – and particularly the new air services.

The book is organised by years in which students were at the College, preceded by (academic) staff [pp.1-3] with administrative staff following [p. 325]. While most College academic staff did not serve in combatant roles, the first name in the book, Lt. F[rank] Punched did enlist, at the outbreak of war, but was captured by the Turks after the siege of Kut. He was held prisoner of war for two and a half years. Of the three administrative staff recorded, two have only minimal entries, while Pt. J.S. Neale served on clerical duties at the British War Cabinet offices in Paris.

How to use the 'Roll'

- **If you know the name of the person whose record you want to see, find it in the *Index* pages, then go to that page.**
- **If you are looking more generally, see the preceding two paragraphs for the layout of the volume.**

The first student named [p. 4] is Lt. H[enry] F[rederick] Mawbey, who attended Westminster College 1880-81. He would have been born in the early 1860s, so when he enlisted in March 1915 would have been over 50 years of age. He lived to see another war and died at

Torquay on 12 January 1942.¹ The final names [pp. 261-282] were either successful candidates for the College who served in the Forces before their courses; or, lastly, those whose places in the College only came after they were demobbed.

Three lists conclude the book. The first [pp. 327-332] is of those 'discharged or placed in Army reserve'. This correlates to the main content of the 'Roll': the earlier entry indicating their military careers. No reason is given for discharge: the presumption is that it was not dishonourable. 'Lord Derby's Scheme' [p. 333-4] was an attempt (not wholly successful) to persuade men to enlist voluntarily as reservists, while remaining in their employment, prior to conscription being introduced. Following each name is an indication of their able-bodied rating, A.1 to C.3. The final lists shows those offered for service but were turned down on medical grounds.

A total of 903 students were recorded as serving in the King's Forces in the Great War to end wars, as well as 6 tutorial staff and 3 office staff. 196 were commissioned officers (including 6 chaplains), and 314 N.C.O.s. while most were in the army, some were in the navy and some in the R.F.C. or R.N.A.S. (later R.A.F.). A number served in roles including army or navy education officers – predictably since they were trained teachers.

The 'Roll' and reality

What the volume cannot show are the stories behind and outside the bald records; both the heroism and the heartbreak. Over 100 Westminsterians died in the war; the first two on 25 May 1915, at Givenchy. Harold George Pugh [1910-12] and Thomas Herbert Dibble [1911-13], were both privates in the 23rd Btn., County of London Regiment. By the end of that year three more had died: after that then casualty rates mounted massively. Eighteen 'W's died during the battle of the Somme alone (July – November 1916). The last recorded was Harold Edwin Wakely, an air mechanic (1st class) in the R.A.F. who 'died of pneumonia after demob., 12th March, 1919' – possibly in the 'flu epidemic.'²

Two Westminsterians won the Victoria Cross. Lt. (later Major) William Forshaw (1890-1943, W 1908-10) [p. 112] won a V.C. in Gallipoli in August 1915. His actions earned him the Freedom of Barrow-in-Furness (his home town) and Ashton-under-Lyme (from where many of the men he commanded had come). He survived the war, but having taught at North Manchester Grammar School before joining up in 1914, but post-war his teaching career collapsed, he drifted into obscurity and seems to have become a photographer. He died in 1943 and is buried in an unmarked grave.

While Forshaw's career is not easy to trace, Lt. Donald Simpson Bell's short life (1890-1916, W 1909-11) [p. 125] is well documented. He became a College hero, 'one of the finest representatives of Westminster manhood in the new Army': a window in the Chapel commemorates him. Bell trained and worked as a teacher but was then signed for Bradford football club, and became the first professional footballer to enlist. Rising quickly from Lance-Corporal, he became a highly respected officer, winning the V.C. for destroying a machine-gun emplacement. He was killed five days later, shot while similarly attempting to bomb another machine-gun position. The site is now marked by a memorial 'Bell's Redoubt', near Contalmaison, in France.

What the book does not narrate are the stories of those who did not serve. The highly respected and talented musician Ralph Dunstan became a member of teaching staff immediately on leaving the College in 1879, remaining there for his whole career. Tragically

¹ Wesleyan Education Committee *Register of students* p. 108 [Westminster College archives B/1/a/3], *Wesleyan Education Committee Report 1941-42*, p. 62.

² Westminster College 'Record of Service in the Great War, 1914-19'

his only son and only son-in-law both joined up and both were killed in 1916. His only grandchild died around the same time, aged just 5 months. He retired to his native Cornwall in 1921.

John Herbert Brocklesby (1889-1963, W 1907-09) was also a talented musician, and College 'precentor'. He became one of a small group of 'absolutist' conscientious objectors who refused to undertake any work which indirectly supported the war – such as ambulance or farming. He was imprisoned and tortured by the army; sent clandestinely to France he could have been shot as a deserter if he had refused orders to fight. Following questions being asked in Parliament the group was repatriated: he was sentenced to 'penal servitude'. Beyond the war he was unable to get a teaching appointment in Britain until the 1930s.

What seems extraordinary is the loyalty and networks of students – some of whom had left many years before – who kept the College informed about their postings, promotions or injuries, and even if they were taken prisoner. News got back to the College about them, and was recorded in the 'Roll'. Did other colleges compile similar records and do they survive? After the war the College produced a 'Record of Service' and two large volumes were compiled with photographs of those who had served.