



Joseph: a lesson for us all (Pt 2)

David Hewitt shares his reflections on a local strike with lasting impact

I have already written about “Joseph”—the man from Thornton, near Blackpool, who was sent to fight in the Great War by the Central Tribunal (*NLJ*, 20 January 2017, p 22).

That tribunal sat in Westminster and was chaired by the fourth Marquess of Salisbury, and he and his colleagues decided that Joseph was simply a hawker of fruit and veg. But their decision was controversial, because Joseph said he was actually a market gardener and a committee of councillors in Thornton had taken him at his word.

The Thornton councillors made up a “local tribunal”, of which there were more than two thousand during the war, and after conscription was introduced, in early 1916, it fell to them to decide whether men might be given an exemption from military service.

It wasn’t that Joseph didn’t want to fight—he had, in fact, already enlisted for military service—he just didn’t want to fight *right now*. He had a wife, and two children who were little more than babies; his parents had recently died, within a few weeks of each other; and now, whatever it might be, he was forced to ply his trade alone. But all of that made no difference in Westminster, where the temporary exemption Joseph had been given in Thornton was promptly taken away.

The councillors decided that something had gone badly awry, and, having looked at the Westminster records, I think they were right. I believe that the Central Tribunal was influenced by evidence which hadn’t been heard in Thornton. There, Joseph spoke

openly about his work, and about his land and the money he had spent on it. But he didn’t go to the hearing in Westminster—he said he couldn’t afford the trip—and he didn’t get to hear what was said about him there. I think the new evidence came from a military representative, but it’s clear that Joseph wasn’t able to challenge it. Within weeks, he was on his way to the Western Front. All of this caused consternation in Thornton, and the councillors decided they must take firm action.

“Whatever we think about what they did & said, the councillors of Thornton cannot be considered uncourageous”

On 26 June 1917, at a meeting convened specially to consider Joseph’s case, one councillor said the way he and his colleagues had been treated was “shameful”, and he added: “I don’t feel like sitting on the tribunal any longer.” Another councillor said: “To come here, wasting our time, and then to be treated in this way by someone who knows nothing of the circumstances is simply abominable.”

After the meeting, a letter was dispatched to Lord Salisbury, indicating that the

Thornton tribunal would “stand adjourned until the man has been released from the Army or a satisfactory explanation is forthcoming”.

There followed a flurry of correspondence, between the tribunals in Thornton and Westminster, of course, but also with the Local Government Board. That was the body which supervised the activities of local councils, and on 24 July 1917, one of the board’s redoubtable inspectors—a solicitor named William Elias—came to call.

The surviving records say little about what happened when the government inspector met the striking councillors. What we do know is that there was “considerable discussion”, followed by a vote of thanks to Mr Elias, and that a few days later, the Thornton tribunal returned to work. By then, a sizeable backlog of cases had built up.

The councillors are not entirely without blame—they abandoned the strike, even though their demands had not been met, and the exemption they gave to Joseph was much less generous than ones they gave to other men. It was less generous, indeed, than exemptions the Thornton tribunal gave to other men who worked on the land. One such man received eight exemptions over a period of almost three years, and he was, as a result, kept out of the army altogether.

And the stance the councillors took was not unique. Earlier the same year, the local tribunal in Clayton-le-Moors, near Blackburn, went on strike, and its strike came to end after an intervention by the self-same Mr Elias. That strike was much shorter than the one in Thornton, however, and it wasn’t about a man who had been put in harm’s way. It was begun in protest at an exemption granted to a man the councillors of Clayton-le-Moors thought should have been sent to fight.

But whatever we think about what they did and said, the councillors of Thornton cannot be considered uncourageous. Although they continued to sit until the end of hostilities, and although they heard many more claims for exemption, they never again made an order that would send a man straight off to war. Faced with a matter of great local concern, the councillors chose to act and they did so assertively, even though their strike would bring them into direct conflict with Lord Salisbury and the state whose might he embodied. In a time of war, in a country used to fighting, that is surely no small thing. **NLU**

Dr Hewitt is a tribunal judge and a writer. His book about this case – *Joseph, 1917* – is published by Matador and costs £8.99. Further details may be found at joseph1917.wordpress.com.