

Imprisoned for pacifism

Ormond Burton

b. 16 January 1893

d. 7 January 1974

The day after the Second World War was declared in September 1939, Burton and two others condemned it before a crowd of 200 outside Parliament. Under emergency regulations only hours old, expressing such views was unlawful and all three were arrested. Burton was visited in gaol by the deputy prime minister, Peter Fraser, who was worried that Burton, a returned soldier and a charismatic speaker, might attract the nucleus of a large and embarrassing anti-war movement.

Burton rejected Fraser's plea to desist and resumed speaking in Allen Street. He was arrested and fined three times in the next four months, and after a large meeting in February 1940 at Pigeon Park was sentenced to a month's hard labour. On his release he went straight back to the speaking podium and was imprisoned for a further three months.



*A teacher, father,
gardener, and pacifist,
motivated by faith and
allegiance to the church*

The first Sunday that we were turned out into the exercise yard the natural thing for us to do was to hold a service. Among other things we sang a hymn. Absolute consternation! A jangle of keys! The door flew open and the Chief Warden rushed in with the air of a man about to quell a dangerous insurrection. Nothing like this had ever happened before - a group of men coming together to worship God without official sanction.

Burton was jailed at Mount Crawford prison with a group of other Christian pacifists, including Basil Dowling, who had been appointed Chaplain at Scot's College after postgraduate study at Cambridge University. They were part of a group who took turns speaking from a soapbox at Pigeon Park on Friday nights. The Christian pacifists at Mount Crawford were kept together as a group for work gangs and in the prison yard. Burton later comments that he was still not sure whether it was thought that we would corrupt the other prisoners or they us.'

After the war Burton was barred from teaching because he refused to sign a new oath of allegiance to the Crown unless a rider was added stating that the oath must not conflict with his duty to God. He returned to teaching in 1924 after being allowed to include this conscience clause.