

James Baldry Saunders
1877 – 1935

By Christina van Melzen
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I first came across reference to James Baldry Saunders in David Boulton's book *Objection Overruled – Conscript and Conscience in the First World War* first published in 1967 and republished in 2014.

When I read the details of Field Punishment No. 1 – inflicted over 60,000 times during the war – I wondered if I could carry on. I did and so met one J.B. Saunders from Halesworth in Suffolk, near to the Old Independent Chapel at Walpole with which I have been involved for the last twenty-five years.

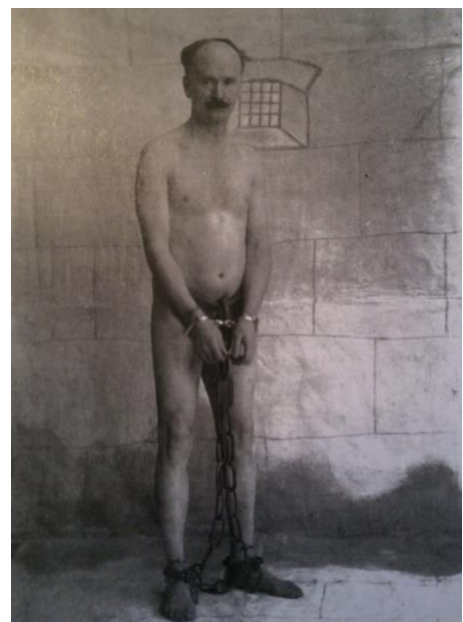
James, known as Jim, had volunteered in 1914 as a dispatch rider but had been turned down. However by the time conscription was introduced and he was called up in April 1916 he had totally changed his mind about the war and did not present himself. He was arrested in May for failing to report for duty after notice from Military Authority under the Military Service Act 1916 and fined £2. He was then sent to a training camp in Scotland. Whilst there he was given permission to get married but was refused any leave. On the 5th of August he went AWOL. He returned to Suffolk for his fiancée Hilda Aldridge, they then went underground in Essex and married a few weeks later. On the couple's return to Walpole he was arrested and sent back to Scotland where he was court-martialled for desertion and sentenced to 12 months imprisonment.

In Barlinnie prison he was given 21 days Field Punishment, he was repeatedly held in close confinement and beaten. He managed to get word to his wife, she

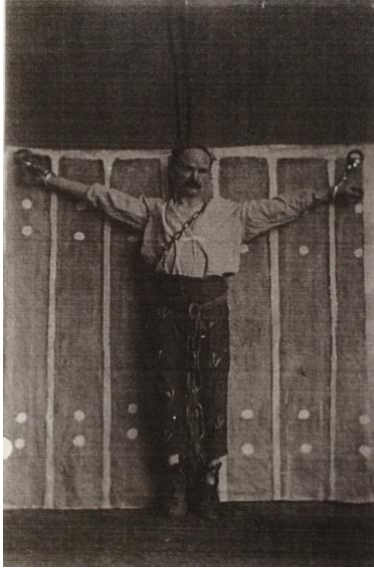
set wheels in motion and by contacting some Quakers in her local area word was sent to R. Barclay Murdoch, the Quaker Chaplain at Barlinnie. He then applied to the Commandant for permission to visit J.B.Saunders and was refused for the reason that Saunders was a non-conformist not a Quaker, and that Barclay Murdoch's permit only allowed him to see members of the Society of Friends. He argued to no avail. He then contacted a colleague from one of other free churches who received the same negative response. They then alerted the War Office but Saunders was moved and quickly shipped out to Egypt. On his arrival in Alexandria he was again court-martialled for disobedience and sentenced to six months hard labour.

In August 1917 he wrote to his wife from Mustapha Camp, Alexandria. Clearly it must have been smuggled out, as it escaped censorship, presumably by one of the 'friends' he refers to in the letter, without whom I strongly suspect that he would not have survived.

"You remember I said that I would face the music. You may believe what I say that I am not afraid of anything the military can do. I have been in chains and handcuffs, crucified to a tree in the broiling sun nearly every morning and evening, for five months I have had bread and water and solitary confinement. I refused to do any work whatsoever, so leave you to guess what five months alone in a cell, doing nothing is like. Seven times I went down with dysentery, and seven times I managed to get on my feet and face the music. I fainted and had to be driven away in a barrow. This tropical sun and the chaining up nearly drove me mad.



I stuck it, and finally got bowled out, and was sent to 19th General Schools Hospital for seventeen days. I was offered RAMC work. I refused it, and asked to be sent back to prison to do full six months. I left hospital next day and was doing seven days No.1 Punishment, chained up in the sun etc when suddenly I had the chains taken off and I was released. They have discovered that they cannot break me. They failed in Barlinnie, and I intend them to fail here. I am determined to sacrifice all rather than give in. Many times I thought I should hang in the sun and die. I pleaded with the sentry to shoot me.



I cannot tell you the misery of it..... I'll die fifty times rather than endorse the wicked thing. I have several friends here. If I am flattened out, they can do it in jail. They can have my body; my mind I will destroy rather than allow the military cult to take it. I was flooded for weeks in my cell with water, two buckets of creosol were thrown in and I was gassed. I was naked for several days and nights in chains. I had to lie on the concrete floor. However, I believe the doctor stopped these horrible proceedings.

To chain a man up in the tropical sun is illegal ... if my letters suddenly cease I shall be in prison in Gabarree. Don't misunderstand me. I am determined to do nothing out here."

Having read this letter I felt pretty sure that he would not have survived. David Boulton told me later that it was one of the worst cases he had encountered. I also found out that bets were being taken in the Officer's Mess as to how long it would take the governor to break Saunders. However, he did survive and tracking down his story became something of an obsession for me.

I put some feelers out among local historians and discovered that there was a James Baldry Saunders living in London Road, Halesworth in 1911, but that research into Halesworth men in the First World War had not found any record of his enlistment or service. I wondered if there was family still around and a search of the electoral roll produced 39 people with the surname Saunders in Halesworth in 2014. Where to start I wondered.

Then I had an amazing stroke of luck. As I said earlier I am involved in looking after the Old Independent Chapel at Walpole just two miles from Halesworth and I remembered that we had some Saunders graves in our burial ground. I scratched around and found a fallen stone commemorating one Frederick Baldry Saunders who was born in 1884, it had to be his brother as it was not unusual at that time to give boys their mother's maiden name as a second or third forename.



By now word had spread and information started to arrive from all sides. I made contact with Jim's grandson, and a friend of many years turned out to be his niece. I now have copies of photographs, of the coroner's report into his death and the report of his funeral service from the Halesworth Review & District News, which took place in the chapel on the 16th of February 1935. The graves are unmarked but we now know where he and his wife Hilda lie.

I could now fill out his story. His grandson told me that after the death of his first wife Jim went to Australia for a year or two working in construction. He was back in Walpole when war broke out and volunteered as a dispatch rider but was turned down, possibly because of his age. However by the time conscription for men of his age was introduced in 1916 he had become utterly opposed to the war. His brother-in-law Reginald Aldridge was killed in France and the family later had these words inscribed on a memorial to Reginald on the family headstone in Walpole churchyard and on his grave in France: "Oh Lord, scatter those people who delight in war." (Psalm 68 v.30).

After Jim's release he was visited by one of those 'friends' (presumably one of the guards) from Egypt and together they reconstructed and photographed the torture which Jim had undergone. Including the 'Crucifixion' which took place during May, June, July and August 1917.

Jim and Hilda had two children, Mark and Margaret. Hilda looked after the smallholding and Jim took up his old trade as a builder. Sadly having survived all

that he had gone through he died from a tetanus infection following a fall during building work at Darsham in 1935.

At the annual ecumenical service in the old chapel in June 2018 the names of all those young men who never returned from war to the twin villages of Walpole and Cookley were read out, movingly followed by the name of James Baldry Saunders with a tribute to a man who heard a different drummer.



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