

Topic 3

Walter Tull – An Officer and a Sportsman

Walter was born in Folkestone in Kent, in April 1888. His mother was called Alice and was White his father, Daniel, was Black and the son of an enslaved man who arrived in Britain from Barbados in 1876. By the time Walter was six both his mother and father were dead and as a result he was sent with his brother to an orphanage in London.



A portrait of Walter Tull taken during his time in the military, c1914-1918.

Walter was always a very keen sportsman and a talented footballer. In 1908 he joined Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. He was the first Black professional outfield player in Britain. Arthur Wharton - who also held a world record for the hundred metres sprint - was the first ever professional Black footballer; he played in goal for Preston.

As a Black person in a White society, racism and discrimination were a problem for Walter; but on the football field he was usually treated with respect, his ability making it obvious that he was the equal of his White team mates and opponents. However newspapers often described Walter as a “darkie”, referring as often to his skin colour, as to his footballing skills! One paper came to his defence in 1909. The ‘Football Star’ reported that when Walter played in a match in Bristol some spectators:

“... used language lower than Billingsgate’s “

(Billingsgate was a London fish market, noted for swearing among the people who worked there). The reporter went on to say:

“Let me tell those Bristol hooligans that Tull is so clean in mind and method, as to be a model for all White men who play football.”

Was this the first ever mention of racism at a football match in a newspaper?

Walter’s response to the racist abuse is not noted, but it seems he continued to play, ignoring the taunts.

In 1910 Walter moved to Northampton Town Football Club, but his football career came to an abrupt end in 1914 at the outbreak of the World War I. He joined the 17th (1st Football) Battalion of the Middlesex

Regiment, a regiment made up of men with a talent for football!

During his training Walter was promoted three times. By November 1914, he had reached the rank of Lance Sergeant. He was sent to France, but returned home soon afterwards as he was poorly; suffering from what is sometimes called 'shell shock'.

Once he was well again, he was sent back to France and fought in the Battle of the Somme. His courage and ability resulted in the recommendation that he train to be an officer. There were army laws at this time preventing Black men - 'any negro or person of colour'- training to be an officer. Despite this, Walter was allowed to do so and became the first ever Black officer in the British Army; the first Black officer to lead White men into battle.

Walter was sent to the Italian Front and he was mentioned in despatches for 'gallantry and coolness' under fire. He was also recommended for a medal called the Military Cross. He was never to receive it.

Walter was transferred with his battalion, back to France, to fight in the Somme Valley. On the 25th of March 1918, Walter was killed by machine gun fire while trying to help his soldiers to retreat. Walter's body was never found, even though his men risked their own lives trying to recover it from no-man's land. He was one of the many thousands of young men killed fighting for 'King and Country' in World War I and like many of his comrades in arms he has no known grave.

Today Walter is remembered as a talented sportsman, a brave officer, a soldier, and a 'trailblazer' for Black people in Britain. The Walter Tull Foundation works in his name to promote equality and to challenge racism, discrimination and prejudice.

Why do you think Walter received abuse on the football pitch?

Could a similar thing happen today?

How did Walter show his courage on the football pitch and on the battlefield?

Why was he a trailblazer?


Key
Questions

Isaac Hall – ‘The Bravest Man I Have Ever Met’

Until 1916 in Britain men had never been ‘forced’ to fight in wars by an act of parliament. The armed forces were mainly volunteers and when conflicts arose, men (not women) were asked to fight. In the first two years of World War I over a million men and boys volunteered.



Despite his bravery, there are no known photos of Isaac Hall.

In 1916 when the Government realised that they needed more troops, due to the huge numbers of soldiers being killed in Europe, they passed a law that said that all men aged 18 – 41 must join the armed forces, whether they wanted to or not. This requirement to fight is called conscription and was common in other countries, for example Germany and France.

Some men refused from the start to join the armed forces. Most of these were pacifists, who thought it was wrong to kill; many of them held strong religious beliefs, usually Christian, although some were Jewish and a few Buddhist. Some men who refused to join the armed forces did so because of their political views. They refused to kill for a government, or for ‘King and Country’. In all about 16,000 men refused to fight, they became known as ‘Conchies’, or COs, which was short for their official title - Conscientious Objectors.

One of these ‘Conchies’ was a man called Isaac Hall. He was Black African Caribbean and the grandchild of a man who had been enslaved on a sugar plantation in Jamaica. He came to Britain just before the war to work as a carpenter. When war was declared he tried to return to Jamaica, but he was not allowed to leave and in 1916 he received his call up papers, requiring him to join the armed forces.

Isaac didn’t know where Germany or France was, he had never even heard of most of the nations that were fighting each other and had no idea why they were at war. He had very little education, but he did know the Bible. Isaac was a Christian and took very seriously the commandment in the Bible that says ‘You shall not kill.’ As a result, he refused not only to fight, but to do any work that might support the war.

He went before a tribunal as a Conscientious Objector and his application was turned down, he was told he had to fight. The tribunal told him he was ignorant, unlettered and had no right to any opinion! But Isaac had opinions and beliefs and he wasn’t about to kill anyone if the Bible said he shouldn’t. He refused to join the army and as a result he was arrested.

He was taken by force to an army training camp and when he refused an order to march with the other soldiers, he was dragged around the parade ground, face down until he was unconscious. When he was ‘fit’ he was court martialled and sentenced to two years hard labour for disobeying orders. In prison he refused to do any work that might help the war effort. As a result he was placed in solitary confinement

and given only bread and water. This pattern was repeated time and time again and Isaac became seriously ill.

Prison Quarry, Princetown.

Kingsway Real Photo Series, S8172, Prison Quarry, Princetown, c1914-1918 © Peace Museum.



Isaac might have been very badly treated and very ill as a result, but he still believed it was wrong to kill another human being and he didn't waver. A Quaker, Joan Fry visited Isaac in prison and was so appalled at the state of the conditions in which he was kept and how poorly he was, that she called in the help of a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) called Alfred Salter. He was so shocked at what he found that went to the Government and told them of Isaac's treatment.

He said

"I was horrified at the spectacle of a living skeleton—a gaunt, bent, starved, broken man, a coal-black man with ashen lips and sunken eyes. But he was broken only in body; his soul and spirit were as resolute as ever."

and reported that one of the prison guards had said to him

"Isaac Hall is the bravest man I have ever met."

One Government representative after listening to Alfred's report of Isaac's experiences said

"If half of what you have told me is true it makes me ashamed of being an Englishman."

Conscientious Objectors were often discussed in the Houses of Parliament. As a result of Alfred Salter's report, questions began to be asked about Isaac, his treatment and his state of health.

One MP asked the Home Secretary if:

"It is the fact that Isaac Hall, a coloured man from Jamaica, is imprisoned at Pentonville as a Conscientious Objector; if so is he is treated exactly like others of the same sort; and is it a fact that he had no opportunity of appearing before any tribunal?"

The reply was 'Yes' and that he had refused all work that might help the war or war effort and so was imprisoned.

On the 17th January 1918 Mr Snowdon (an MP who lived near Keighley) asked about the condition of the health of Isaac in Pentonville Prison.

Forty eight hours later, because of all these 'questions' Isaac was admitted to hospital and then eventually released. He lived for nine months with members of the ILP in Bermondsey, in London, until a place on a ship, back to Jamaica, could be found. Isaac left Britain and returned home. He had suffered terrible treatment, but had obeyed what he thought the Bible commanded and refused to kill, remaining true to his religious beliefs.

? Key Questions

Was Isaac's choice not to fight in the war right?

Why do you think Isaac was treated so badly?

Why do you think the guard described Isaac as the bravest man he'd ever met?

What choice would you have made?