

A test of faith

My great grandfather, Tom Pym, had his resolve tested many times working as a chaplain working in the front line. Perhaps, the toughest test was on one cold night in March 1917, when he consoled a 19-year-old soldier condemned to be shot at dawn for desertion.

Tom described that harrowing night in a letter to his wife Dora, "Bill was taken out of the cell and told he had to die the next morning. I saw him through the night and took him to [his death] in my arms at 5am."

It's hard to imagine how my grandfather must have felt in those moments. He recalled that as the last hour approached the young man cried out to him "What's the time now, sir? How's the time going, sir?"

In his letter Tom describes the young man's death. "Pinioned and blindfolded; life didn't leave his body at once".

Tom went on to recall that that in the end the doctors had to finish him off - but they weren't very quick about it.

By the end of the war Tom wanted to channel his experiences into changing the church. He said that he wanted to do "anything to get the church ready for those poor chaps when they come home".

He was part of a wider movement of Army chaplains, who recognised how out of touch the established church had become with the soldiers at the front.

By the end of the war Tom wanted to be part of a church which instead of looking after the interests of the privileged few was there for people from all walks of life.