**Walter Ashworth (1884-1952) – the power of science and art**

Walter Ashworth was a conscientious objector in World War One. As a man with artistic training he was able to seek out work of national importance that led him to work on the earliest moving prosthetic (artificial) limbs, which were needed because of the increasing numbers of amputees returning from the conflict.

**Before World War One**

Walter decided not to work in his family’s shoe making and selling business in Rochdale, in the northwest of England and instead became an art student in London. In 1911 he graduated and became an art master in Ipswich, where he later married Alice Healy. They had a daughter, Joan, in 1914

**Decision to become a Conscientious Objector**

Walter began discussing becoming a conscientious objector early in 1916 when conscription (being drafted into the military) became law. His wife’s family was opposed to this decision, including her sister, Mary, who considered it selfish, and her father, who would not speak to him about it as he considered it a duty. After many talks with Walter, Mary later realized he was sincere in his ‘refusal to kill.’

As with all conscientious objectors, Walter had to go before a tribunal to decide if he would be granted CO status. A friend wrote a letter to the tribunal stating that Walter had spoken against war in every shape and form and that he knew he was ‘a deep objector to war.’

He was exempted from military service with the condition that he work on a farm which was considered work of national importance. However, the farm could not guarantee his employment, so he appealed to do other work of national importance, which was to make artificial limbs for amputees returning from the war.

[](http://scienceandsociety.co.uk/results.asp?image=10626232)

**Hobbs-type artificial left hand, Europe, 1918 Image and text courtesy of Science Museum / Science & Society Picture Library – http://scienceandsociety.co.uk/results.asp?image=10626232**

Walter found work in Balham, London, designing arms with moving fingers that were said to work ‘marvellously well.’ He worked with a man named Hobbs, who was employed as a contractor at Queen Mary’s Hospital in Roehampton, England. That institution was established in 1915 to deal with the growing number of amputees returning from WWI. The design for the limbs was improved during WWI, during which over 41,000 British servicemen lost one or more limbs.

By 1919, Walter had returned to teaching and, in 1926, he became Principal of the Art College in Coventry. He painted in oils and watercolours and was a war artist in Coventry during World War Two. His watercolours painted during the war are in the Herbert Gallery in Coventry and include street scenes and the hospital and cathedral after the bombing. Several of his oil paintings are in the Herbert in Coventry, including a self-portrait.

In a letter he wrote to Radford Art College in 1944, he thanked them for purchasing some of his paintings of Coventry in WWII and said: “I hope the pictures will have some permanent value to the citizens of Coventry in years to come….It may be that someone someday will wish to write a history of this tragic period, and for this purpose such illustrations would be useful.”

Walter died in Coventry in 1952, aged 69 and his wife Alice died in Kent in 1958, aged 71.

*References: Website Documenting Dissent and Herbert History Centre Archives, Coventry*