

Shobdon Hardening Centre

In 1928, two years after losing his job, William Heard went to a work camp. Even though he was still a young man, this was his second experience of unemployment, and had lasted for two years when an official at his local Labour Exchange encouraged the one-time steelworker and coalminer from Ebbw Vale to go for a period of 'reconditioning' Shobdon, deep in rural Herefordshire. As he recalled it, he jumped down from the truck, and was sent to stand in a line to collect clothing ("heavy nailed boots, a pair of corduroy trousers, and some kind of shirt"), then stood in another line to pick up cutlery. After that, Heard was allocated a hut to sleep in, and then set to work. "Some were allotted to do one particular thing, some another; it was anything to harden yourself. I always came in for the woodcutting". He hated it.

Heard had been sent to spend a few weeks in what was then called a 'testing centre'.

The main purpose of the centres – which functioned from 1929 as Transfer Instructional Centres (TICs) and from 1931 as Instructional Centres (ICs) – was to harden young men through heavy manual labour. In 1929, when Heard entered Presteigne TIC after a further period of unemployment, the Ministry had eight camps, with a combined intake of 3,518 men. By 1938, long after Heard had found a job as a hotel porter in Oxford, the Ministry was operating 29 camps with a combined intake of 23,772. Like Heard, the vast majority of trainees were young men, drawn from those parts of Britain that were known as the 'distressed areas'. All had been unemployed for some time, and if they stayed the course – many did not – they spent the next three months grubbing up roots, chopping down trees, breaking stones, digging ditches, and preparing rough roads. By the end of the 1930s, after preparing rough pasture and moorland for the Forestry Commission, they had laid the foundations of some of Britain's most beautiful landscapes. Around 200,000 young unemployed men entered one of the work camps belonging to the Ministry of Labour. How many young men went into other types of work camp is anyone's guess: Britain was covered by a network of labour colonies, training farms, summer camps and alternative communities, all of which involved young men living in tents or huts, and working on the land.



Men named in photograph :-
Dick Williams , Walter Thomas, Jack Davies, Patsy Connors, Dai Martin