

Roath Park in the Great War by Anne Bell

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At Roath Park the first effect of the war was the abrupt absence of military bands to provide musical entertainment. This was felt immediately – on August 13th 1914 (nine days after the declaration of war) the Chief Parks Officer reported to the Parks Committee that "*owing to the War crisis the Royal Irish Rifles and the 2nd Battalion Border Regiment bands had cancelled their engagements with the Corporation to give musical performances in the parks*". Military bands had been very popular in the City's parks for more than a decade, but for the duration of the war they were available only rarely. Entertainments continued at Roath Park in the form of professional concert parties.

Concert party performances (also known as Pierrot shows) were first introduced at Roath Park experimentally in 1911. They took place on a temporary stage built alongside the bandstand, shown below in a postcard view from c.1916.



In 1915 concert parties became the entertainment of choice in the absence of the military bands, and professional groups were engaged for every evening over a period of four weeks. In the summer of 1916 the *Western Mail* reported that "*Roath Park is becoming a centre of social life in Cardiff. The entertainments there provided are drawing citizens together ...*" (*Western Mail* 26 July 1916). By 1918 there were twelve groups of entertainers engaged to perform over the summer season, and after the war such groups continued to be the main musical entertainment at Roath Park. The war hastened the move away from band performances, also leading to calls for a new concert pavilion which would replace the bandstand from 1921 onwards.

Wounded soldiers from local hospitals were admitted free of charge to performances in the parks, and some concerts were held specifically for war related purposes. In June 1915 the Council agreed that a concert could be held at Roath Park "*to raise money for comforts for the troops*". This was the first of a series of such events held in the park at no charge to the promoters.

There were other special arrangements for servicemen. They were able to bathe in Roath Park lake free of charge, as agreed by the Parks Committee in June 1915. In June 1916 the YMCA was given permission to place a tent at the lake, to provide refreshments free of charge to wounded soldiers. The following image from a postcard posted in 1917 shows this tent on the western side of the lake.

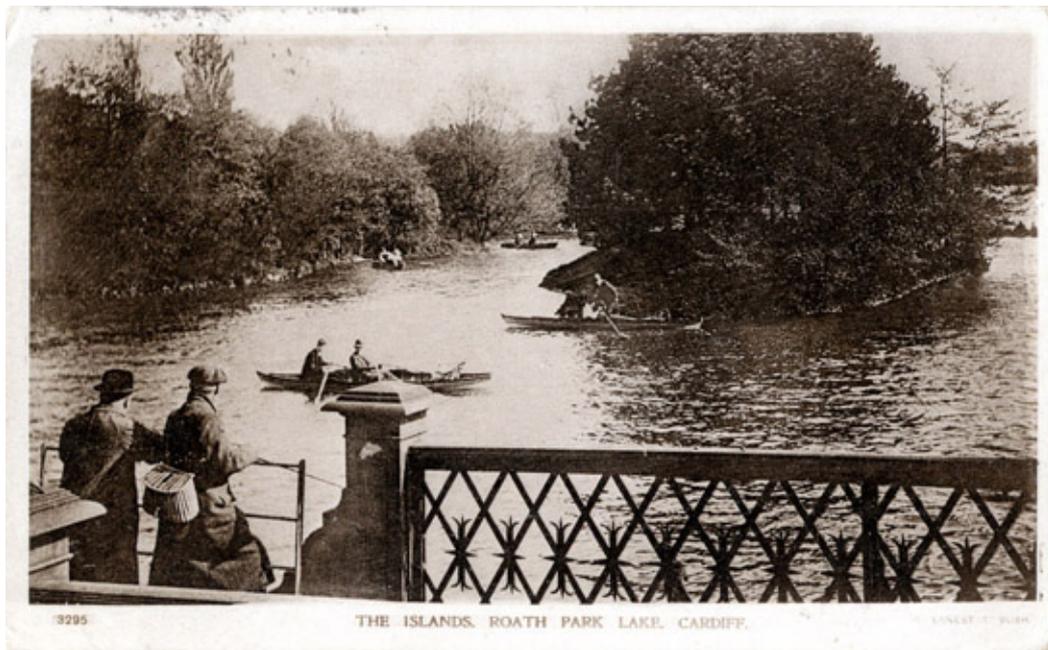


By far the greatest change in all the City's parks resulted from the Government's Cultivation of Lands Order of December 1916. This empowered local authorities to designate land for food production, either to be cultivated by the authorities, or to be allocated as allotments for people to grow their own fruit and vegetables. Accordingly, the nursery at Roath Park grew cabbages and leeks in the spring of 1917, instead of the bedding plants usually produced for the City's parks and gardens. By this time there were allotments in the Recreation Ground and at Llandennis Gardens.

In March 1917 the Parks Committee decided that flower beds in the parks should be used to grow vegetables and other garden produce. At Roath Park the Chief Parks Officer was to select areas in the Botanic Garden to grow vegetables, and also to designate a bed to be cultivated as a model allotment. The following summer vegetables which were ornamental as well as of food value were a feature of the Botanic Garden. Bedding plants were still to be seen in the Pleasure Garden, but in general all other flower beds of sufficient size were growing food crops. Even the southerly slope of the Promenade was used for this purpose.

There were other very visible changes in the park. Many of the lawn areas were left to grow long in order to be cut eventually for hay, of which there was a serious shortage. The Chrysanthemum House, the large greenhouse in the Botanic Garden, produced tomatoes rather than flower displays in the summers of 1917 and 1918. In the border fronting the Chrysanthemum House was the model allotment, created to give guidance to the many people who were new to allotment cultivation.

As might be expected, the normal care and upkeep of the park was interrupted. There was a lack of experienced workmen in the Parks Department, a total of 35 employees having joined the army, mostly in the early stages of the war. This and a shortage of materials made it impossible to carry out normal maintenance tasks. In Roath Park the most southerly bridge in the Botanic Garden had to be closed because it was considered unsafe but could not be repaired. In the lake the regular accumulation of mud brought down by the brook could not be cleared. The 1916 postcard image below shows rowing boats at the north end of the lake. By the end of the war it was no longer possible for them to pass between the two most northerly islands, owing to the accumulation of silt.



Boating continued during the war, as did other recreational activity where possible. Opportunities for bowling were actually increased, in that the Roath Park green opened earlier than usual, at 10.00 in the morning, so that people involved in night work could still take part. The image below from a 1917 postcard shows play on the bowling green, with Ty Draw Road in the background.



Other sports were drastically reduced. The Chief Parks Officer reported in February 1916: “*There has been a big decline during the last season in the playing of games in the parks, as was, of course, to be expected. Cricket and football were reduced by quite one half, and the players have been mainly juniors. The effect on tennis and bowls is shown by a fall in receipts from £486 in 1914 to £298 in 1915. Bathing receipts were reduced from £162 to £119*”. By the spring of 1917 organised games were stopped almost entirely in all the parks because much of the ground was turned over to food production.

Two captured German guns were briefly on display in Roath Park after the war. This was the outcome of a the Parks Committee's request in February 1915 "*that the Corporation. make application to the War Office with a view to the presentation by the Government of guns captured in the present War, with the object of placing them in the parks of the City*". A reply received the following month stated "*that the Army Council had decided to defer the question of the distribution of trophies until the cessation of hostilities, when the claim of Cardiff would be duly considered*".

After the war the Committee had had a change of heart, and as A.A. Pettigrew observed, "*the guns had at first been looked upon as associated with the men who had captured them, and as memorials to esteem on that account. But they were now coming to be regarded rather as ugly and barbarous emblems of warfare itself.*" Reminded in November 1921 by the Town Clerk that there were six guns stored at City Hall awaiting positions in the parks, the Parks Committee decided to place two each in Victoria Park, Roath Park and Splott Park. Pettigrew wrote that "*the Chief Officer [i.e. himself] in his wisdom placed the two Roath Park guns on the grass plots fronting the refreshment house; but there was a protest at next Council meeting, and they were removed- to the workmen's yard, where they now [1932] remain forgotten!*"

This article is based on the account of Cardiff's parks in wartime given by A.A. Pettigrew in volume 6 of his history, *The Public Parks and Recreation Grounds of Cardiff*. This unpublished work is kept in the Cardiff Library Local Studies Collection. Pettigrew was Chief Parks Officer from 1915 until his death in 1936.