

Richmond Park and the First World War

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When the First World War broke out in 1914, Richmond Park proved to be an invaluable resource for the military and the war effort in general. One hundred years on, FRP volunteers have been working at Pembroke Lodge with the Hearsum Collection of Park heritage material, to uncover and display material relating to some of the notable things which took place here at that time.

Early on in the war, army encampments were set up in the Park, including a large camp near Roehampton for volunteer rifle regiments and a depot between Roehampton and Robin Hood Gate for the Royal Naval Air Service. Out in the Park itself units were trained for battle, with the cavalry practising their charges across the grasslands. In 1916, a fully equipped military hospital was built in the Park for South African troops injured in the fighting. With access via a new gate at Cambrian Road, it was on a considerable site of some 12 acres between Conduit Wood and Bishop's Lodge. It eventually housed over 600

beds, workshops and a concert hall. As part of the war effort, the hospital performed over 2,000 operations and treated over 9,500 patients. Morale was maintained by a programme of activities such as concerts and fancy dress parties. Patients, staff and volunteers wrote and published a magazine, *The Springbok Blue*, with articles, pictures, poems and cartoons, examples of which are preserved in The Hearsum Collection. The hospital was not removed until the 1920s.

As the war progressed, German Zeppelin bombing raids terrorised Britain and the Government announced an award of £25,000 to anyone who could create a weapon against this alarming new threat. An English inventor, Harry Grindell Matthews, created an "electrical light ray" system, using selenium cells. In a secret experiment on Pen Ponds in December 1915, Matthews successfully demonstrated his invention, using a remotely controlled boat to detonate mines at a distance. Matthews won the £25,000, but the invention was never used, as other means of dealing with Zeppelins were eventually adopted.

The huge war effort meant that at home many women took on jobs previously exclusive to men. To release more soldiers to fight, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was formed in 1917, and we have evidence that a unit served in Richmond Park.

Discovering these amazing stories has been a fascinating journey. You can see more about them in a small display of pictures, photographs like the one on the left, and other items from 100 years ago in the entrance to Pembroke Lodge from August this year. You can also visit the Hearsum Collection website at www.hearsumcollection.org.uk.

