

Miss Sylva Boyden, the 'famous English airgirl' lands in Richmond Park in 1919

by Robert Wood

As part of the Friends' History Project, working in collaboration with the Hearsam Collection, volunteers are researching notable stories from the history of the Park. They have recently discovered an exciting escapade in a French newspaper cutting recently acquired by the Collection. It revealed that almost 100 years ago Richmond Park was the setting for a feat of pioneering skill and daring when, at the tender age of 17, Sylva Boyden became the first woman in England to jump from a great height and use a packed parachute to land safely.

Further research revealed that Sylva had come to the Park to watch the Royal Flying Corps test a new parachute, and quickly determined to have a go herself. To get permission she lied about her age, claiming to be a mature 21, and giving her grandmother's name to avoid recognition. She clearly had a talent and made three successful balloon jumps that day with a 'Guardian Angel' parachute.



This redoubtable pioneer went on to become one of the first women to make parachute jumps from aircraft and became known as the 'famous English airgirl', following an interview by the New York Times. She appeared in RAF pageants and air shows in Britain and

Europe, often as the only female participant. During her career she made some 150 jumps, driven by the thrill of the experience, and by the desire to demonstrate the need to make life-saving parachutes compulsory equipment on aircraft.

Further such stories from the history of the Park can be found at the Hearsam Collection website: www.hearsumcollection.org.uk