Park Gardens

Stroud's Living War Memorial

IN MEMORY OF
HERBERT SIDNEY PARK
KILLED IN FRANCE ON 26TH OCTOBER 1917
THIS LAND
WITH FENCES, GATES AND THIS PLATE WAS PRESENTED BY HIS FATHER
SIDNEY B PARK
TO THE TOWN OF STRoud FOR USE AS
PLEASURE GARDENS
OCTOBER 1927

1914 - 1918
TO THE FALLEN
“AT THE GOING DOWN
OF THE SUN AND IN
THE MORNING WE WILL
REMEMBER THEM.”
1939-1945

Chas Townley
The Wooden Cross
Cyril Winterbotham

Not now for you the glorious return
To steep Stroud valleys, to the Severn leas
By Tewksbury and Gloucester, or the trees
Of Cheltenham under high Cotswold stern.
For you no medals such as others wear -
A cross of bronze for those approved brave -
To you is given, above a shallow grave,
The Wooden Cross that marks you resting there.
Rest you content, more honourable far
Than all the Orders is the Cross of Wood,
The symbol of self-sacrifice that stood
Bearing the God whose brethren you are.

Cyril Winterbotham is one of the Gloucestershire War poets whose poetry was first published in the “5th Gloster” – the regimental trench newspaper established by the Padre - Rev George Helm - who later became Vicar of Stroud. Winterbotham's last poem – The Wooden Cross – was submitted for publication the day before his death on 27 June 1916.
Park Gardens

Herbert Park is just one of nearly 200 Sons of Stroud Parish who gave their life in the First World War. Herbert for his part in the war that wasted a generation fought in the Ypres salient in Belgium but died in France as a result of a training accident.

In October 1927, ten years after the death of his only son in the great war, Sidney Park gave Park Gardens to the town. The official ceremony to hand over the park was held in March 1928. The official presentation was a big event with hundreds of locals turning out. The chief guest being Sir Frank Nelson then the MP for Stroud.

In presenting the park to the town Sidney saw it as an event where sorrow and joy were closely intermingled. For him the park was “a garden of remembrance, a memorial to those who had made the great sacrifice” and expressed the great hope that “many young and old might in years to come in visiting the gardens find health, rest pleasure and enjoyment”

In keeping with the political chant of the Council “not a penny on the rate” (even though rates had doubled since the war) the costs of laying out the gardens as a public park were left to a public subscription. At the time of the official handover Mr W H Harper, Chairman of the newly appointed Parks Committee was able to report that £600 of the £1000 need had been promised. Some had been large donations like the £150 from the Stroud Traders Association (which included the construction of the shelter) or a more modest £5 to pay for one of the seats. Other contributions had been raised by collections.

Within less than 2 months of the park being presented to the town concerns about what we would today call anti-social behavior were being being raised, with the suggestion that the Council needed to employ a park keeper.

The first use of the park for a public meeting was in July 1928 where the first woman elected to the UDC – Margaret Hills - was one of the key speakers in support of a “No More War” campaign.

As originally built the park did not contain a cenotaph. Whilst there are many war memorials in Stroud's churches and grounds it took many years of wrangling and controversy (what else would you expect in Stroud) for a civic memorial to the war dead to be constructed.

In 1920 the UDC first approached the owners of the Subscription Rooms to erect a memorial on the forecourt, rejected even when the Council offered to purchase the land. Sims clock was next thought of as a suitable place for the names of the war dead to be inscribed on the plinth. For reasons which are unclear the plinth has the carved borders but no names. So it was 17 years on from the end of the war Stroud at long last had a cenotaph.
Herbert Park was born in Stroud on 3 June 1894. Aged 6 at the time of the 1901 census he was living with his parents Sidney Benyon Park (aged 40) and Ellen (aged 48) and sister Margaret (aged 9) at 21 Lansdown, Stroud.

Herbert Park attended Wycliffe College in Stonehouse from 1904 to 1910 first as a day boy and later as a boarder at Haywardsfield. Wycliffe At War records that “He never did much at games” He was a member of Literary and Debating Society and is recorded as being a leading speaker in debate on reform of the House of Lords in December 1909. In his last year at school he was a senior – what we would call today call a prefect. He left the school after taking London Matriculation (the equivalent of A levels today).

Herbert and his parents were members of Bedford Street Congregational Church. He was one of 97 members of the Church who served during the First World War. 16 members of the Church in the words of the time “paid the supreme sacrifice”. All who died and served are recorded on the Church War Memorial. During his time in London he attended Westminster Chapel, a large church 200 yards away from Buckingham Palace. This church was founded by Congregationalists in 1840, and Herbert became the general secretary of the Sunday School.

In January 1913 he was appointed a clerk in the Civil Service, working in the National Health Insurance Audit Department. On his death his chief at the Civil Service wrote “I held
him in high esteem, both for his character and abilities as well as for the good work he did in my department of the service"

The Civil Service were reluctant to release him but eventually in 1916 he joined the Artists Rifles. Famous members of the Regiment include William Morris, Noel Coward, Barnes Wallis and the war poet Wilfred Owen. During the Great War the regiment acted as an Officer Training Corps with more than 10,000 recruits being commissioned as officers.

He was commissioned into the Border Regiment on 4 March 1917 and joined the 1st Battalion whilst they were in a rear training area at Candas (about 50km South West of Arras) on 9 June 1917. The regimental diary records Candas as being "comfortable, clean little village, beautifully situated". On 26 June the regiment moved up to the front line to the North of Ypres where they remained until 7 July. This was probably Herbert's first experience of life in the trenches.

He wrote about his first experience up the “line"

“These days, chiefly spent in strong posts and pill-boxes, were most interesting and instructive, and I found that I didn't get “get the wind up” nearly as much as I thought I should. All the time I seemed to be helped and buoyed up"

On the 31 July - the first day of Passendale - the Regiment supported the Guards Division making roads in the area of Boesinghe, north of Ypres. On the 12 August the Regiment moved up to the front line. On the 15th they began to move off in preparation for the second phase of the battle during which they assisted in an advance east of Ypres. When they were relieved on the 17th the 18 days of battle had reduced the battalion by 181 officers and men killed, wounded or reported missing. Seriously understrength the Regiment moved to the rear training area at Bailleumont.

It is unclear when Herbert took on responsibility as battalion bombing officer. This is assumed to be a reference to the Mills Bomb, which was the main hand grenade used during the Great War and with some modification remained in service from 1915 to 1972.

In January 1916 one commentator stated “ The casualties among the bombers are necessarily very great. It is absolutely essential that every Officer, NCO and man in the ranks should be instructed in how to throw a Mills Bomb.” Its inventor William Mills was knighted in 1922.

On 26 October 1917 Herbert was out teaching a group how to use a bomb, when according to the Regimental Chaplin “ the wretched thing went off spontaneously (undoubtedly due to a defect in the make) and killed him and the man who was actually holding it.” The soldier killed with him was 31 year old Private Richard McCulloch of Whitehaven, Cumbria. As an officer, Herbert's next of kin - his parents - would have been notified by telegram. Mcculloch's widow Mary would have had to wait until the other ranks death notice form to arrive by post.

The last resting place for the victims of this training accident is a French parish burial ground in the village of Bailleulmont between Doullens and Arras, which contains graves of 34 war casualties. As the regiment was out of the line a full ceremonial funeral with the whole Battalion paraded was held.
The Park Drapery Business

Sidney Park came to Stroud in 1886 to work in the King Street drapery business of Mr Opie Rodway, some years later he took over the business from his employer. He continued to run the business on this site until about 1920 when the site was sold to the Midland Bank who re-developed the site for a new banking hall. There are a number of photographs which feature this shop. Sidney and Ellen's early married life was spent living above this shop.

After his marriage to Ellen Birt in 1889 Sidney took over his father in law's business in the High Street (now the site of the Cheltenham and Gloucester and Clarks Shoe Shop). This is variously described as a drapery and a tailors trimmings shop. Park continued to operate this shop until his death.

Stroud's newspapers describe the business as being Sidney's (not unusual for the time) but is its likely that Ellen was an active partner in the business. In 1871, aged 19, she was working for her father and her occupation is given as “assistant in the business”, suggesting that she was more than an ordinary drapers assistant.

The Councillor

Sidney joined the Urban District Council in 1921 at a time when the Journal described them with derision as “City Fathers”. Perhaps it was a reference to the Council being a men only club until Margaret Hills topped the poll in 1928. More likely it was a reference to the delusions of grandeur of trying to become a Municipal Borough. At that time the UDC was responsible for highways, street lighting as well as being responsible for health, housing, building regulation and of course Parks and Gardens. Park became chairman of the Streets and Lighting Committee at a time when the streets of Stroud were lit by gas until no later than 11pm. During the 1920's Park also oversaw the regulation of buses.
The Park Family and their homes

Sidney Park was born in Walsall, Staffordshire in 1861, where his father John had a drapery business. In 1886, at the age of 25, he came to Stroud. In 1889 Sidney married Ellen Birt, the daughter of a Stroud draper and it appears that their first home was above Sidney's drapers shop in George Street.

Sidney and Ellen had two children, Margaret was born in 1892 and Herbert in 1894.

The 1901 census records the family as living at 21 Lansdown with one domestic servant. 21 Lansdown was part of a terrace of middle class housing built by the Mid Gloucestershire Conservative Workingmen's Benefit Society (now known as the original Holloway Society) in honour of the Society's founder, George Holloway.

The family later moved to Highmead, Field Road, a house that had been purpose built for the family.

Sidney Park died in October 1928 and his wife Ellen died in 1931. Herbert's sister Margaret married Netlam Bigg in April 1929, sadly they did not have any children.

Margaret and Netlam founded the Stroud Arts Festival in 1947 and were key figures in the Stroud arts scene throughout their lives. Their continuing legacy – largely from the sale of Highmead – invested through the Margaret and Netlam Bigg Trust. continues to support the Festival and other arts events in the Town.
A visit to Bailleaumont on the 90th Anniversary of Herbert Park's Death

At first glance Bailleaumont Communal Cemetery looks like any other French village burial ground. As I walk in I can see the three ranks of 34 well tended graves each carved with the regimental insignia, rank and name of each soldier.

Next to the hedge at the end of the middle rank lies the grave of 2nd Lieutenant Herbert Park. On Friday 26 October 2007, 90 years to the day of his death I am standing in front of his grave. On his grave is written the latin inscription “MORS JANUA VITAE PRO CHRISTO ET PATRI” which roughly translated means “Life taken by death for Christ and Country”. For someone who lived a Christian life this is unsurprising. Next to him lies the grave of Richard McCulloch he man killed with him with the inscription “Missed by his wife and children”.

Standing there I revisit some of the unanswered questions I have about his death and the grief that his family suffered. He was a civil servant on the start of a glowing career, a strong contributor to his community and an active member of his church.

In front of the grave we place two simple wooden crosses, it took some time to think what to write on a cross to someone I have never met and hardly know even though I use his park more or less every day. In the end all I write is “A Son of Stroud”