



MIDDLETON PARK AT WAR



How the First World War created the Middleton we know today

Middleton as we know it today was built in the aftermath of the first world war when Prime Minister David Lloyd George promised “to make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in.” The old village of Middleton mentioned in the Domesday Book mostly consisted of mine workers terrace houses and farms. The houses are still there as are the churches they worshiped in, but the farms remain in name only i.e. Manor Farm, West Farm e.t.c. Much of the local housing was constructed after the First World War. The roads to the area were poor at the time so a railway was built through the park to bring construction materials to Middleton. When the Ring Road was completed this line was converted into the electric tramway, until 1959 this tramway took commuters from this new suburb in to Leeds. The route of the tramway through the park is now a path. Middleton Park itself was created in 1920 when the Middleton Estate was sold to Wades Charity and leased to Leeds City Council to provide suitable recreational facilities for the area.

The searchlights that protected Leeds

The First World War also saw rapid development of aircraft designs, local firm Blackburns were one of many working to develop better planes at that time. On 11th June 1933 local people flocked to the clearings in the park to see Cobham's Flying Circus demonstrate their daring flying skills (which sadly led to an accident in which two child spectators were killed). Just 6 years later and aircraft were a major part of the Second World War. The clearings in Middleton Park were considered a suitable place to make an emergency landing if a plane got in to trouble over Leeds, it is not known if this happened but the clearings would have been kept clear just in case. Today miniature aircraft operators still use the clearings as an air strip for their model planes.



Middleton Park's position overlooking Leeds made it a good position for aircraft searchlights and anti aircraft guns. The construction of machinery for the war effort in the nearby engineering works would have made Leeds a likely target. Local engine makers John Fowler built large numbers of tanks in the second world war and neighboring engine makers Hudswell Clarke made tail sections for Lancaster bombers. In the north of the city Avro built a large aircraft factory close to where Leeds Bradford Airport stands.

Left - Photo taken of a searchlight overlooking London, the searchlights over Leeds would likely have been similar.

Digging for Victory

For a long time Britain has been dependent on imported food, this was a particular problem during the second world war resulting in food rationing and the government encouraging people to grow their own food with its “Dig for Victory” campaign. Any suitable land was used for growing vegetables, including land around Broom Pit that now forms part of the park. There were even vegetable plots established on the northern slopes of the large spoil heap just off Old Run Road.



Tunnels beneath our feet?

Towards the eastern edge of the park stood Broom Pit. In the war it was vital that the mines kept extracting coal as the coal was needed to keep the manufacturing industries running, generating power, pumping water, running trains. Basically at the time the running of the country was dependent on coal. From December 1943 one in ten male conscripts aged 18 – 25 were put to use keeping the mines going, these young men were referred to as “Bevin Boys” after Minister of Labour & National Service Ernest Bevin.

It was only as recently as 1901 that the requirement to have more than one exit for underground workings was introduced to minimize the risk of miners being trapped underground. There was concern that bombing raids could now destroy both shafts at a mine, trapping miners and stopping the mine's production for some time. This concern only increased beyond the second world war when the threat of even greater destruction from nuclear weapons came along. Tunnels were dug between adjacent mines and Broom Pit was connected underground to Robin Hood Pit, which in turn would have been connected to other pits. There was speculation that secret bunkers were built into the mine workings in the paranoia of the Cold War.

The POW Camp

A Prisoner of War camp had been established at Post Hill near Pudsey towards the end of the war. As this became full a number of Italian prisoners of war were processed at Post Hill then billeted at Middleton Hall. Huts were built, presumably close to the hall, for further arrivals. The POWs would be put to use locally to carry out various jobs that needed doing with so many men away fighting. A typical job in this area would be filling coal sacks, POWs might also be required to mend roads or clear snow in winter. After VE day the POWs gained greater freedom to move around outside but it was nearly a couple of years after the war before the POWs left the camps, many chose to live in the area rather than return home.



More detail about the Middleton POW camp can be found here <https://middletonlife.wordpress.com/2015/06/23/italians-in-middleton/>

Below - Map of the park today with the locations mentioned highlighted in green

