

Jellicoe Park: a green space of remembrance

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Often, war memorials take the form of monuments that symbolise the sacrifice of those that served. However, from the early 20th century, places such as parks and gardens, halls or sports facilities were also considered an appropriate way to remember those who served and died in conflict. This short essay outlines the transformation of the Onehunga Domain into a living war memorial, Jellicoe Park, after World War I (WWI). It is a companion piece to a study of the 1956 Onehunga War Memorial Swimming Pool, and does not attempt to cover the entire landscape history of the park.

Jellicoe Park is one of several early 20th century public war memorials in the former borough of Onehunga, which include the War Veterans Memorial at Waikaraka cemetery, proposed in 1909 and unveiled in 1917¹ and a Roll of Honour, designed by architect John Park and installed in the Carnegie Library in 1919 (now at the RSA). It differs from these in that it is a ‘living memorial’, one of several utilitarian memorials proposed for Onehunga and the only one that appears to have been enacted after WWI. Other proposals from the late 1910s and 1920s included four memorial workshops which would act ‘as a national tribute to the memory of the brave men of this country’ while providing ‘training and permanent work for our disabled soldiers ...’ and a 1926 proposal to beautiful Geddes Basin as a recreation facility with sports fields, a miniature lake, a beach and a saltwater swimming pool. Each of these proposals indicate that the Onehunga Borough Council (OBC) favoured the idea of utilitarian war memorials from the 1910s onwards. Useful recreation spaces were considered an appropriate way to honour and remember those people who served and died in the wars

¹ Ringer 2014a

and to look after the next generation. There is also a pragmatic element, as the creation of sports facilities and parks fits with civic improvements schemes.

[Figure 1]

The reimagining of Onehunga Domain as a war memorial park was raised at OBC meetings in 1917². It was initially envisaged being both a memorial to ‘Onehunga’s fallen soldiers and sailors’ and a recreation space for returned servicemen. Initial plans for the park included tennis courts and a bowling green, with the 1860 brick Blockhouse converted into a club house for the returnees³. In 1919, the OBC proceeded with the development of the memorial park. At that time, the historic Blockhouse was considered ‘a fitting place for housing trophies of the war’⁴ but active sports were dropped in favour of landscaped gardens, a bandstand, seating and a children’s playground.

Curiously, despite its memorial purpose, the park was named after Lord John Jellicoe, a British Navy admiral. During a visit to New Zealand in 1919 to advise the government on naval policy, he and his wife Florence made a formal visit to Onehunga⁵ (Figure 2) At a public gathering held at the domain, Onehunga mayor, John Park, reiterated plans for the memorial but proposed to ‘call the park ... after their distinguished guest’⁶. In 1923, Jellicoe returned in his capacity as Governor General to formally open the park⁷.

[Figure 2]

An unintended outcome of honouring Lord Jellicoe in this way was to almost immediately overwrite its war memorial intention. And in published reports of park plans, there was no mention of having a focal point that would act as a signifier of remembrance. It seems that

² NZH 31 Jul. 1917:4; AS 18 Jul. 1919:7

³ NZH 31 Jul. 1917:4

⁴ AS 18 Jul. 1919:7

⁵ McGibbon 1998

⁶ AS 2 Oct. 1919:7

⁷ NZH 26 May 1923:10

the creation of green space for passive recreation and children's play was considered enough in itself.

The absence of some kind of marker was perhaps felt by women in the community. In early 1922, the council received a letter from a Mrs H. Murdock suggesting that memorial gates be erected at the entrance to Jellicoe Park, with money to pay for them collected by a ladies committee⁸. Mrs Murdock's letter may have sowed a seed which took seven years to bloom, in the form of the 'Soldiers Memorial Arch' at the north west corner of the park. It was designed by John Park, previously responsible for the 1919 Roll of Honour and construction was overseen by the Onehunga War Memorial Committee. Costs were covered by a combination of Council funds, subscriptions from residents, public fund-raising, and a government subsidy. The completed arch, built from red scoria rock from the nearby Mt Smart quarry, proclaimed a simple message - 'Arch of Remembrance 1914-1918' - and incorporated a fernery at the top and sides⁹ (Figure 3).

[Figure 3]

The request for memorial gates and the eventual addition of the arch provided the park with an anchor point holding memory and remembrance in place. This perceived value of such a monument was expressed by the Honourable E.A. Ransom, Minister of Public Works in his speech at the official dedication of the Arch in 1929:

'while there was no need for those who passed through the war years to have anything to remind them of that terrible time, it was highly desirable to have memorials, such as Onehunga had erected, in order to remind the younger generation of the great sacrifice made by the men who had given their lives for the cause of humanity.'

⁸ AS 9 Feb. 1922:11

⁹ AS 29 Aug. 1928:9

There is a risk that, over time, that the 'war memorial' contracts to being the 'Arch of Remembrance' with the park as the setting, just as the war memorial at the adjacent swimming pool is the black granite plaques on the side wall. Hopefully, the narrative presented here shows how Jellicoe Park was envisaged as a war memorial landscape in the late 1910s, which was expanded with the addition of the adjacent war memorial pool in the 1950s.