

Growing up in wartime – it wasn't child's play!

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Young girls playing in 1914 IWM Q34151

This was the Home Front from 1914 to 1918 and the Defence of the Realm Act (known as DORA), a far-reaching piece of legislation that took effect within days of Britain entering the First World War.

Now, thanks to a grant of nearly £54,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the charity London Play will work with primary schools in three boroughs to explore how the draconian restrictions affected children's play during the period.

Stuart Hobley, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: "Can you imagine not being able to fly your kite? Or not being allowed to feed ducks on a trip to the park? In wartime civil liberties can be severely restricted but the effect that this has on children and their development can go unrecorded. Thanks to National Lottery players, we are able to support this imaginative project that will shine a light on the lives of young people at home whilst the conflict raged abroad."

Partnered by Half Moon Theatre, London Play will work with primary schools in Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Southwark where 150 children will become 'war correspondents' to research the wartime period with the help of archives and a local historian. The project's progress will be filmed, the details discovered will be dramatized into a series of sketches, there will be a smart phone quiz and a week-long exhibition will be held at City Hall next summer.

DORA prohibited any activity that could possibly be of value to an enemy. Nobody was allowed to talk about naval or military matters in public, or spread rumours; the public was banned from buying binoculars, ringing church bells, trespassing on railway lines or bridges and melting down gold and silver.

Particularly limiting for children's lives were laws that made lighting bonfires or setting off fireworks illegal, as was flying kites (which could be used to guide Zeppelins to their targets!). Feeding bread to horses or birds was outlawed as a waste of precious food resources.

Although playing with conkers was not illegal, the government wanted as many as possible collected for the war effort. Children were asked to gather them up and hand them in for a reward from the War Office of 7s 6d (37.5p) for every hundredweight they handed in. The conkers were used to make acetone, a vital component of the smokeless propellant for shells and bullets known as cordite.

Among the more arcane of DORA's prohibitions were using invisible ink when writing abroad and buying brandy or whiskey in a railway refreshment room.

Paul Hocker, London Play Development Director, said: "We are pleased to be able to offer this fascinating opportunity to London school children thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Children will not only gain a unique insight into the lives of their wartime counterparts, but also into their own - as they will have the opportunity to compare the very different factors which limit children's freedom to play today. Traffic and exaggerated perceptions of risk and fear are modern day barriers to play which although borne of circumstances less extreme than war, can be equally limiting for children's development."

Notes to editors

London Play is a small charity that strives to get more children in London playing out more often. In our city of 1.6m children, one child in four lives in an overcrowded home; one in five is obese; and open play space is under continual threat of development. They work on behalf of all London's children, to promote their right to play, campaign for more and improved out-of-school play services for children and young people across London, and support play workers and volunteer groups in the capital. They also directly provide more play opportunities for children by supporting residents and councils to develop play streets, building nature play areas and running events. More information is at [London Play website](#).

Further information

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