

Women Playing Rugby in the Early Twentieth Century

In Victorian Britain (1837-1901), men and women had clear, separate spheres that they could occupy in society: men took on more active roles in the workplace and women were expected to stay at home and see to domestic duties. This idea of fixed social roles for men and women carried on into the early 20th century until the outbreak of World War I.

The Great War (August 1914-Nov 1918) initiated significant social changes for many women. Women weren't allowed to serve on the frontline as soldiers but, with many men fighting abroad, women were able to learn new skills and take up traditionally male jobs, such as doctors, mechanics, and working in munition factories. Women were also able to be more socially mobile in their leisure activities during war years, playing traditionally masculine sports like rugby and, consequently, disrupting the Victorian gender order.

Women played a number of rugby games as fundraisers for war-related charities which were both popular and well received. For example, Cardiff Ladies faced Newport Ladies on 15th December 1917. The game raised impressive ticket sales, with the women's charitable efforts dismissing concerns of unfeminine behaviour; if the games could be trivialised as an exhibition or charity match, women were not seen as a threat to the conventionally male rugby pitch. However, more serious competitive women's rugby in the form of organised leagues and championships was still a long way off in the UK. As soon as the Great War ended and the men returned home, support for female players vanished.

Maria Eley, who played on the Cardiff Ladies rugby team as a young woman, recalled at the age of 106:

[Written by Dr Lydia Furse, Historian and the World Rugby Museum](#)



'We loved it. It was such fun with us all playing together on the pitch, but we had to stop when the men came back from the war, which was a shame. Such great fun we had.'

While the presence of women's rugby in the UK lessened post-war, women in France began playing a version of rugby throughout the 1920s called barrette. The twelve-a-side game used a slightly smaller pitch than a standard rugby union pitch, but still involved fast-paced running, tackles around the waist, and scrummaging. The French Rugby Federation (FFR) banned male rugby clubs from hosting barrette matches in 1923; however, the ban was ineffective at stopping the game as women played at female-only sports clubs with their own pitches. Barrette developed into a national championship by 1927, but disappeared during the 1930s when these women's sports clubs struggled financially during the Western economic depression. By 1941, the French government banned barrette and other women's sports which it considered 'unwomanly'. Women were once again forced to sit on the side-lines.

What opportunities did WWI give to women?

Were women free to continue playing rugby after WWI?

What made women's rugby more socially acceptable during war years?

How did Maria Eley feel about her rugby playing days?

What is barrette? Why did it stop?