

Making a splash at Christmas

Stephanie Debere dives in to Tooting's famous watering hole

“Who's for whisky in their coffee?” someone calls from the throng at Tooting Lido. Members of the South London Swimming Club have just braved icy water for their weekly Sunday morning race, and even the toughest outdoor swimmers need to warm up somehow.

The word “Lido” comes from the Italian for “seaside”. During summer, Tooting Lido resembles just that, with people sprawled round cooling blue water. A far cry from the shivering bodies that clamber out after winter races, breath condensing in front of them. The races are relaxed and open to all. Handicapping allows swimmers of all standards to compete in the club's league.

The SLSC runs London's largest outdoor pool on behalf of Wandsworth Council during winter, so that it does not have to close off-season. “We even crack the ice!” laughs Cyril Woods, a regular for over sixty years. “We clear a lane, then go in one by one, just to get our league point. People think we're mad, but it's so invigorating”.

Around fifty people out of a 500 strong membership turn up on Sundays and a core of a dozen swim daily at dawn, whatever the weather. The Lido sits on Tooting Common, surrounded by trees, with a discreet exterior that is easy to miss. But once inside, visitors face a hundred-yard stretch of water, flanked by brightly painted changing cubicles. It is a sanctuary from the bustle of the world. By the entrance, a blackboard shows the water temperature – 36 Fahrenheit for last year's Christmas Day race!

The Christmas race attracts as many bewildered spectators as enthusiastic swimmers. Refreshments are served afterwards, and trophies presented amidst great jubilation. Yvonne Woods, the winner of last year's ladies' race, has also swum here since the '30s. “You couldn't see your feet in those days, the water was so murky,” she recalls. “You slithered along the slimy bottom!”

“We joked that you never left with the same set of clothes you arrived in,” says Cyril. “There was an open shed with tarpaulin along the front instead of changing cubicles. Boys on one side, girls on the other.”



Above: Mrs Rose Merritt braving the ice in the early '70s

Water filters and cheerful cubicles may have arrived, but some things haven't changed. Megan Willis, whose young daughter is the fourth generation of her family to swim here, calls it “a haven, where different sectors of the community, who wouldn't normally meet, have the chance to share something in common.”

Megan is currently working closely with Wandsworth Council formulating a bid for National Lottery funding to develop the Lido. A '30s'-style water sports pavilion is proposed, with a roof terrace, a heated paddling pool, and club facilities for groups such as canoeists.

Below: Tooting Bec Lido by Janet Smith

“We must ensure the Lido maintains its role into the 21st century, and avoids the fate of other outdoor pools

that have closed, as public funds are squeezed,” says Megan. London once had nearly thirty lidos; Tooting is one of only ten remaining. Many summer swimmers, as well as the winter ice-breakers, are determined that a Lido of such contemporary and historic value should not close.

“We hear in early 1997 whether our bid is successful”, says Megan. “If so, the club must still raise £250,000 of the £2.5

million development cost. A working party will co-ordinate fund-raising.”

One member already raising money is Janet Smith, author of a book tracing the Lido's history since it opened ninety years ago, and many of the colourful characters who have swum

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here. “I'll never forget the first time I saw the Lido – a fantastic expanse of water in front of me,” says Janet. “No one had written anything about it, so I began my research out of interest. Only later did it acquire the fund-raising role.”

“We must keep the Lido alive,” Janet insists. “The pleasures of swimming outdoors are incomparable, and the social side is enormous fun.”

The swimmers' camaraderie is displayed every Sunday, even more so on Christmas Day. They are used to amazed onlookers – everyone is welcome, and those who arrive, curious as to how anyone could put themselves through such a chilling Yuletide dip, soon understand: the swimmers' good cheer is infectious. As one succinctly puts it, “The Lido is more than a pool, it's a community.”

Tooting Bec Lido by Janet Smith is available from local bookstores, price £5.95, or by calling SLSC direct on 0181 871 7198 (postage and packing included in the cover price). ■

