

Exciting Times for Tooting Bec Lido

By Janet Smith

Lidos and councils are like oil and water. They don't mix. Lidos cost money to run, and councils have more pressing things to spend ratepayers' cash on. So, Wandsworth Borough Council, in south London, has taken everyone by surprise by announcing it's to spend £500,000 on Tooting Bec Lido. Built in 1906, it is one of the country's oldest open-air pools.

A general refurbishment will go hand in hand with a number of striking new features. A sunbathing lawn is to be created by removing some of the seaside-style cubicles from the western side of the pool and landscaping part of the surrounding embankment. Thirty more cubicles, complete with brightly coloured doors, will be built on the opposite side of the pool, bringing the total to just over 100.

But faint-hearted dippers hoping that the water might, at long last, be heated will be disappointed. Those who feel the cold (the temperature in the pool is now around 40F/5C) will, however, be able to take refuge in a new sauna and jacuzzi.

The most controversial change is the re-siting of the entrance, which will be moved from the deep end of the pool - where it has stood since 1906 - to the shallow end, where there is a wide terraced area and a cafe. The Council argues that this will create a safer point of arrival, in line with Health and Safety guidelines.

But the new entrance will be emblazoned with a stainless steel sign and surrounded by flagpoles, clearly announcing the presence of the Lido to people walking across Tooting Common. It's this visibility that worries local groups, such as the Balham Society and Friends of Tooting Common. They point out that part of the original agreement, signed by the Council more than 90 years ago, was that the pool should not "detract from the natural beauty of the Common".

Zal Davar, Chairman of the Tooting Management and Advisory Committee, which liaises with the Council about the Common, says he's "hugely enthusiastic" about keeping the Lido going but fears the new, more visible entrance will "impinge on the Common where people go to get away from urbanization."

He also questions how thoroughly the Council did its homework. "Part of the plans are back to front", he says. "The sunbathing area is on the side that is shady for most of the day. The Council didn't go into it fully enough beforehand."

The Council stresses that it did consult with local groups and made some modifications to the original proposals - reducing the size of the sunbathing area and increasing the number of screening trees - before planning permission was given.

From the beginning, Tooting Bec Lido, or Tooting Bathing-Lake as it was first known, attracted controversy. There were many in Edwardian Tooting who thought such a large swimming-pool (100 x 33 yards) was simply dangerous, and others who objected to the "riff-raff from slumland" bringing dirt and squalor to the pool.

The project was the brainchild of a local Church of England clergyman and former Mayor of Wandsworth, the Reverend John Hendry Anderson. He did much to help the poor and suggested building the bathing-lake as a means of providing work for the unemployed.

After more than 2 years' behind-the-scenes wrangling, a novel scheme was agreed: The London County Council, which then owned Tooting Common, would provide the site for the pool; the recently formed Borough Council would pay all the building-costs; and the Central Unemployed Body for London (where the good Reverend

chaired the Works Committee) would provide the labour-force.

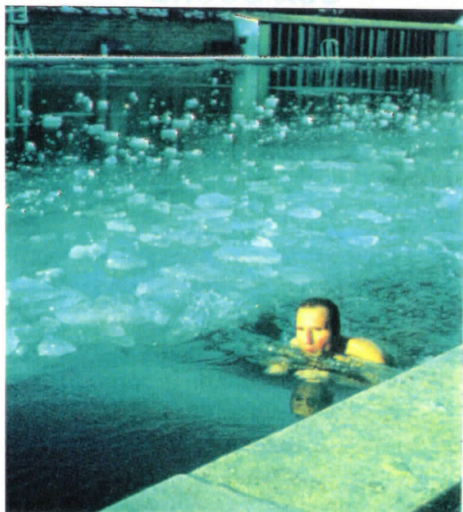
The documents were signed by all the parties at 5.00 p.m. on Tuesday, March 13th, 1906. Within days, clearing work had started and on July 28th that year, a little over 4 months later, the bathing-lake was opened to the public amid much civic celebration and pride.

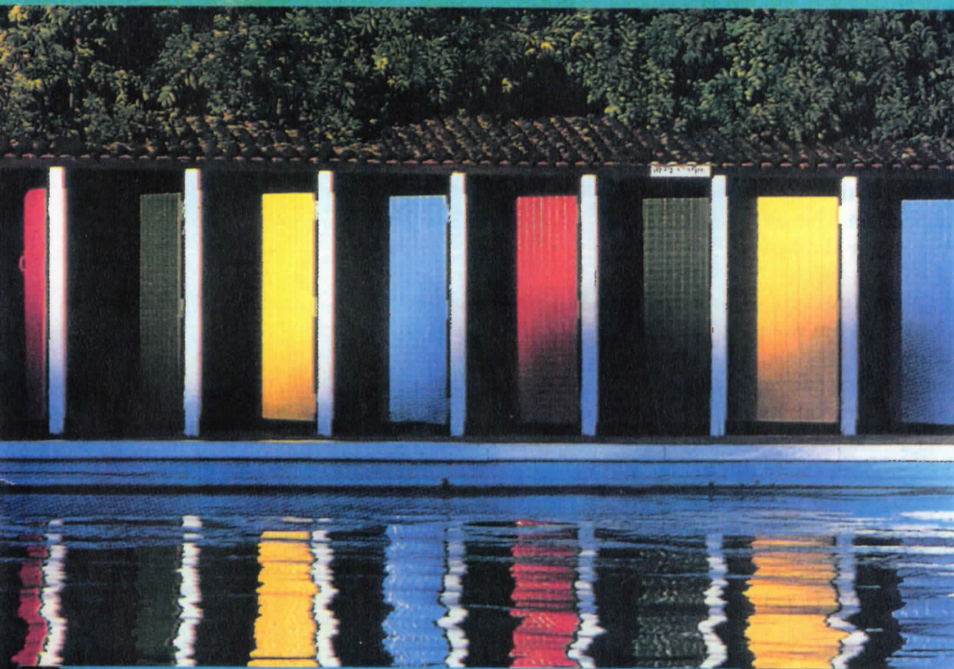
Some 400 men had helped to build it. They were paid 7 old pence an hour (25 shillings or £1.25 a week) - 1d more than the going LCC hourly rate because of the heavy excavation work. Their hours were from 7.45 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., Monday to Friday. These conditions were seen as exceptionally generous, but some of the malnourished workers nonetheless fell by the wayside.

At the opening ceremony, the Reverend Anderson told the huge crowd that he hoped the bathing-lake would be "a benefit to the public for a long time to come." He can scarcely have imagined that 94 years later, his pool would still be such a popular local facility. Last summer, between May and September, 31,426 tickets were sold - despite the poor weather.

Among the most ardent users of the pool are members of the South London Swimming Club, who swim there all the year round, whatever the weather and whatever the temperature. The club is nearly as old as the pool itself. It was formed in August 1906 by a group of swimmers who happened to meet there. Their aim was to encourage people to learn to swim and to teach life-saving, but they also organised races, first of all between themselves and then against local clubs.

The SLSC still meets at Tooting Bec Lido and still holds weekly Sunday races and an annual Christmas Day race. There is no doubt that the club, which now has about 500 members, has played a crucial part in keeping the Lido open. Throughout the





**Tooting Bec Lido
contains 1,000,000
gallons of water**

Nineties, it ran the pool on behalf of the Council during the winter months, employing lifeguards and looking after the site.

The Club welcomes the fact that the Council is now putting "a significant amount of money" into the refurbishment. Bob Pattison, the Club President, who's been swimming at the lido for more than 40 years, says: "We're pleased that while other councils are closing their lidos, Wandsworth Council are keeping Tooting Bec Lido open. They clearly recognise the value of the lido to the local community and want to keep it going for as long as possible."

As well as being popular with local people, the pool is also a favourite haunt of long-distance swimmers and triathletes. The extraordinary 100-yard length cuts down on turns and builds up stamina. Thirty-two year old Tammy Marlar who, with a group of 5 friends, trained at the Lido for a recent Channel crossing, is in no doubt that the size of the pool and the coldness of the water helped them to success.

Another chapter in the life of Tooting Bec Lido is now beginning. In October, a new contractor, DC Leisure, took over responsibility for all the Council's leisure facilities. The building work, approved by the Council's Planning Committee in October, is expected to be completed in time for the summer.

As the Council's Public Services Chairman, Councillor Guy Senior, puts it: "These are exciting times for the Lido and for the thousands of people who use it each year. These changes will significantly improve its facilities and are likely to attract even more visitors to this very popular and much-loved outdoor pool."

Janet Smith is a freelance journalist and the author of Tooting Bec Lido, a history of the pool.

Further information can be obtained by telephoning the Lido on 020-8871 7198.