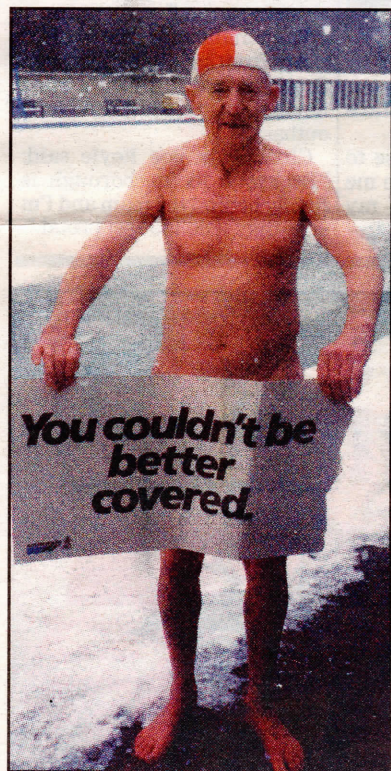


Eccentricity and health have always gone hand in hand at Tooting Bec Lido. SARAH HALLS celebrates 100 years of swimmers taking to the waters of Wandsworth's very own oasis.



There's no business like snow business: A group of men find the Lido an ideal place for a snowball fight.

A dip into lido's history



Above: It takes more than a touch of snow to put some swimmers off, as Maurice Connor – who died in 2003 – was keen to prove.

Below: Two keen swimmers rake up the leaves before a dip.



Cleanliness is next to Godliness.

Not an adage most people in Tooting agreed with, if the state of the water in the lido was anything to go by when it opened in 1906.

Tooting Bec Lido, or Tooting Bathing Lake as it was originally known, was built by 400 men in little over four months.

It opened its doors to the public on Saturday, July 28, and at first the waters were crystal clear.

But that soon began to change. Janet Smith, who has written a history of the lido, says: "Originally it had no filtration and the water was filthy. It was just a stagnant pool of water and because people didn't have many baths in those days you can imagine how dirty it got."

"The bottom of the pool at the shallow end was so slimy with algae that you couldn't stand up."

The state of the pool was so bad, one disgusted swimmer wrote a letter to the Wandsworth Borough News about it: "I bathed there on

Friday at 8am and to my disgust on picking up my costume from the side I found that it was covered with vermin.

"The water in the baths is very dirty and the gutter round the sides was full of excretations [spit]. Since my experience of last Friday I have seen some of the bathers and can quite understand the condition in which I found the baths."

The author went on to suggest there should be days when people were charged to get in and days when it was free. In fact, the lido remained free until 1931, when adults were charged 6d and children 3d.

Women, however, got a bit of a raw deal when it came to swimming. They were only allowed to bathe on Tuesday mornings, which did not fit in very well with their schedules.

They got a petition together to the council to ask if their bathing time could be moved to Wednesday afternoons, as that was a half day in Tooting, but the council refused.

The issue finally resolved itself in 1931 when mixed bathing was allowed for the first time.

Since then men and women have happily cohabited at the lido and it has even facilitated some marriages (see page three).

What seems remarkable is the fact Tooting Bec Lido might never have existed at all if it hadn't been for the high rates of unemployment in 1906. Like many other lidos built a bit later in the 1930s, it was first thought of as a solution to unemployment.

According to George Hurley, former editor of the Balham and Tooting Gazette, a procession of unemployed men called at the rectory to see Reverend John Anderson and pleaded for his help.

Mr Hurley said Rev Anderson then persuaded London County



Janet Smith has written a history of the lido. Deadlinepix FK1049

Council to build an open air swimming pool on Tooting Bec Common as an employment scheme.

The pool, which is 300ft long, 100ft wide and 7ft deep, was built entirely by hand with spades and wheelbarrows. The spoil from the massive hole was heaped around the pool to shield it from the rest of the common and planted with trees and shrubs.

The men were paid 7d (about 3p) an hour for a 43-hour week, giving them a weekly wage of 25 shillings (£1.25).

Now it is home to enthusiastic outdoor swimmers throughout the year. Last year it hosted the UK's first ever cold water swim-

ming championships. Keen swimmers have even been known to break the ice to get in for a swim.

Lido user Lizzy Hearne, who got married by the pool on Saturday, said: "You get totally addicted to the cold water. It's such a buzz."

But for those of us who might not be quite so eager to jump into the ice-ridden depths, the summer is coming and with it (hopefully) warmer water.

□ An exhibition about the history of the lido is currently on at Wandsworth Museum.

Anyone who has memories or old pictures of the lido can contact Janet on 020 8767 4331 or email her on janet@tootinglido.fsnet.co.uk.