

Charlton Lido – Brief Historical Notes, by Andy Hoines (2004)

Opening Date	Saturday 06 May 1939
Dimensions	165' x 66' main pool, 66' x 20' children's' pool
Depth	2'6" - 9" main pool, 2' children's' pool
Original Cost	£28 000
Capacity of Pool	~450 000 gallons
Original Capacity Filtration	Entire pool contents in 5 hours
Additional Facilities Original	5 diving boards and 2 water chutes
Site Size	Approx 1 acre
Location	Hornfair Park in London Borough of Greenwich
Special Feature	First LCC lido with a children's' pool Smallest and last of the 4 LCC pools built in the late 1930's & the 13 th and last LCC Lido ever built.

Introduction

Hornfair Park in Charlton, which comprises a total area of approximately 26 acres, was purchased by the LCC in 1926. It was originally intended for house building, but it was subsequently decided to be surplus to requirements. Thus, in 1935, the LCC Parks Department paid £12000 to the LCC Housing Department and took over the site to become a public park. A further £19000 was spent on landscaping the park and providing facilities including a children's playground, paddling pool, tennis courts, bowling green and pavilion. The park was opened as "Charlton Playing Fields" in a simple ceremony in 1936. The park was renamed "Hornfair Park" in October 1948.

The timing of the opening of this new park coincided with a new enthusiasm from the LCC to provide, completely from their own resources, additional outdoor swimming pools (by then commonly referred to in Britain as a "lido") across London. One acre of Charlton Playing Fields bordering Shooters Hill Road and Charlton Park Lane was thus set aside for such a facility. The total cost of £28000 made it almost as expensive as the combined cost of the acquisition and layout of the entire rest of the park! The new swimming pool was built by a local firm, Thomas & Edge of Woolwich.

Charlton Lido turned out to be the last of the 4 modern LCC lidos completed between 1936 and 1939 prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. The onset of hostilities resulted in two further planned LCC lidos being abandoned. The LCC had been involved in the provision of other lidos in their administrative area prior to 1936, but these had previously always been partnerships between the LCC and the relevant local London Borough. Many other lidos were constructed in what we now consider London, but in the 1920's and 1930's these were mostly located outside the area covered by the LCC, in what was then administratively part of counties such as Essex, Kent, Surrey and Middlesex.

These 4 late LCC lidos at Parliament Hill, Victoria Park, Brockwell Park and Charlton represented in many ways the epitome of Britain's urban lidos. The lido concept had in effect been developed continuously in London from the earliest provision of swimming lakes in public parks during Victorian times. In the early 1900's, some more formal outdoor bathing pools were constructed in locations including Tooting Bec, Southall and Erith, which were more recognisable as swimming pools as we know them today. Further outdoor swimming baths were constructed after World War 1, but these were still relatively basic – locations included Bellingham, Millwall, Eltham and Peckham Rye. By the early 1930's more elaborate and sophisticated lidos of were being provided (e.g. London Fields and Kennington).

The 4 late 1930's LCC lidos were architecturally and structurally similar, being all solidly constructed of red brick. They all had symmetrical wings of undercover changing cubicles for males and females. The water was filtered, aerated and sterilised. Diving boards and slides were provided. Increasing space was dedicated to the leisure uses of these facilities, with facilities such as cafes and sun bathing areas gaining increasing prominence. Stout walls were constructed around the entire pool site to keep out non customers and provide

a windbreak and suntrap effect too. In addition, these pools all had deeper deep ends (9 feet or 9 feet 6 inches deep) than had previously been customary in order to accommodate diving facilities (including high 5m boards) more safely.

Some effort was made to give each of the 4 pools a unique character, however. Charlton Lido was provided with twin aerators in cascades against the corner exterior walls at the shallow end of the complex. These differed from the more traditional "wedding cake" fountains that were fitted to the other 3 lidos. Charlton Lido was also the baby of the family, having a main pool "only" 165 x 66 feet in size! It was "only" designed to accommodate more than 1700 bathers. This compared to the 200 x 90 feet pools at Parliament Hill and Victoria Park, which were designed to accommodate more than 3000 bathers at a time! In way of compensation, however, a children's pool was added for the first time in a LCC lido, although by the late 1930's this was a common feature at other lidos in the UK.

One feature that was never fitted to LCC lidos, even the last 4, which were certainly the grandest and most expensive, was heating! This was apparently considered both as contrary to the ethos of such provision as well as an unaffordable extra expense. Some non-LCC London lidos of this era were provided with heated water, including the nearby pools at Danson Park and Martens Grove.

Opening Ceremony

The lido was opened on 6 May 1939 by the Mayor of Greenwich, Councilor H Icough. 800 people gathered for the ceremony, which was presided over by Mrs Hugh Dalton, the chairman of the LCC Parks Committee. She mentioned that while some people may question the high cost of this facility, this was easily justified by the health benefits and pleasure that local people would get from the pool. The proceedings also included a trumpet fanfare from the London Fire Brigade Band and a diving display by the Greenwich Swimming Club.

Some additional unplanned drama ensued during the diving demonstration when a woman slipped and fell into the children's pool. She was fortunately not reported to be seriously injured!

The Early Years (1939-1970)

The main pool sprung a serious leak only months after opening. The pool was closed for many weeks while it was repaired. Only 4 months after opening, war broke out. The lido, along with others in London, was equipped for use as a fire emergency water supply. The lido closed for a time during the war (details still being researched). After the war, the lido was reopened to the public in 1946.

Modern Times (1970 - 1989)

The lido was taken over by Greenwich Council from the LCC in 1971, following government legislation requiring the LCC to pass to the relevant local London authority many of the parks and facilities they had previously provided. As early as 1974, funding constraints caused the traditional main summer opening season of 01 May – 30 September to be reduced to end May – beginning / mid September. The lido briefly became a skateboard park in Spring 1978 during the short-lived craze of that era. During the 1980's, great changes akin to a revolution took place to the politics and economics of local Government in the UK. London's outdoor pools started to close in great numbers, falling foul of the belt tightening forced upon local authorities. In addition, the by now aging pools were starting to require expensive major capital expenditure to remain safe to open and the operating deficits were increasing due to increasing expenses, especially staff costs and dealing with increasing vandalism. The unheated lidos also often suffered from declining revenues, as people deserted the often decaying and thus increasingly unattractive surroundings and the perceived freezing water! Charlton Lido was actually one of the last lidos in South London to be closed by the council after the final 1989 season. Unlike some other London lidos, this was not preceded by a period of serious decline with reduced opening seasons and increased admission prices. This often further deterred customers and also sometimes meant that the lidos were closed during the best summer weather.

Survival and Continued Opening (1989 - 2004)

The common fate for the many London lidos closed during the 1970's and 1980's was a period of increasing dereliction and vandalism, followed by eventual demolition or redevelopment.

It is truly remarkable that this fate did not befall Charlton Lido. Some of the reasons why this was so are suggested below:-

1. The lido was very substantial and solidly built, which meant that demolition would have been both complex

and expensive.

2. The location within the park boundaries also hindered any lucrative redevelopment of the site.
3. The changing rooms were used for changing and showering, during the winter in particular, for persons participating in sports in the park.
4. Greenwich Council was sympathetic towards retaining the lido, especially as the nearby Eltham Lido and the South East London Aquatic Centre at Woolwich Docks had recently both been closed.
5. The principal reason though, has got to be the tremendous community spirit of local swimming and aquatic organisations. The power of this force to effect monumental feats against all the odds was demonstrated with the return in 1992 of the nearby Charlton Athletic football team to their historic Valley home after 7 years spent away from their spiritual home. They also were horrified by the loss of all the other local outdoor pools and were determined to do their best to save Charlton Lido from a similar fate.

In 1990, the lido remained shut, but volunteers, mostly from associations affiliated to the Greenwich Amateur Swimming Association, in partnership with Greenwich Council, reopened the lido to the public for two Summer seasons in 1991 and 1992. New EU Health and Safety regulations prevented this approach being adopted for the 1993 and 1994 season, as new risk assessment approaches deemed this to be too risky. The pool did continue, however, in regular use by the Charlton Lido Swimming Club and other local sports clubs.

In 1995, a new dawn for the lido started. The pool was opened to the public for a limited 7 week season during the school holiday period by Greenwich Leisure limited, who also run other local indoor swimming facilities. The good weather that year saw 35000 admissions recorded. For the rest of the year, local swimming, canoeing and other groups use the pool. These organisations not only keep the pool in use, thus contributing to it's upkeep, but they also keep it's plant and equipment in working order and deter vandalism. In addition, they have also undertaken a number of small improvements to help to ensure the long term survival of the pool. The council have also considerably improved the security of the site by putting razor edged barriers on parts of the external walls to further deter vandalism.

As well as the Charlton Lido Swimming Club, which have continued to swim at the lido all year round, the pool has until recently also been used regularly by such clubs as:-

- Thamesmead Triathlete Club
- The Charlton Lido Canoe Polo Club
- The Charlton Lido Cross Channel Swimming Club

The lido has been used for several film and publicity photo shoots, including a Blazing Squad pop video in May 2003, an episode of "The Bill" in January 2004 and has even featured as a background in a gardening catalogue. Blue paint (still evident) was also applied to parts of the pool in 1993 for a film shoot.

Small grants have been received from various sources, such as the London Marathon, whose route passes the lido each year. These have financed some modifications, such as disabled access to meet legal public opening requirements.

The lido is not currently listed, although the similar Parliament Hill Lido is Grade II listed.

One big issue for long term viability is the lack of car parking, making access by car difficult and causing parking problems on surrounding residential streets. The site is, however, well served by public transport, being on several bus routes and within walking distance of several railway stations.

Current Closure

Greenwich Council has closed Charlton Lido this year because of health and safety fears. The lido is reported to need £50k to reopen for club swimming, £120k to open in the short term for public swimming - and £500k to secure its long-term future. The funding is needed for an automatic dosing system, improved aeration system and improved security.

This illustrates the problems faced by local authorities across London who cannot afford to keep public swimming pools open. The pool requires approximately £30k subsidy per year to operate as it has since 1995, with a 7week public opening season.

Anecdotes

Summer 1992. An exceptionally warm May after a cool spring saw the water turn bright green in a matter of a few days. Various tactics were employed by the relatively inexperienced volunteers to remedy this situation.

Hyperchlorination, back-flushing and constant aeration were all tried, but all to little avail! The official advice was not to swim, because of the potential health risks from the algae bloom. This was, of course, widely ignored! It was truly a magical time, swimming up and down on the warm summer mornings with one's arm fluorescing bright green in the brilliant spring sunshine! Eventually, there was no alternative but to drain, clean and refill the pool. This was not without incident itself, however, as complaints were made from nearby tower-block residents that their water pressure had become very low or had even completely died up. Refilling the pool was thus limited to overnight and during the day to minimise this little problem!

Family of ducks. A family of ducks took refuge at the lido in 1991. All the rather half hearted efforts to catch them failed, as they always kept a discrete distance from the pursuer! One day, some local kids got over the wall for a swim. One of them did manage to catch a duckling and took it home to keep as a pet. Her parents would not have this, however, as a duck is not the most practicable pet, especially when home is a flat in a local tower block! The duckling was thus returned to its family at the lido. Unfortunately, the bird's waterproofing had been stroked off, however, so the poor little thing kept sinking at first! Soon afterwards, the family was professionally relocated to a local park pond!

Updated 20 August 2004

Written by Andy Hoines from personal recollections from the time I lived nearby in Abbey Wood and research I undertook on London's lidos.

Acknowledgements to Doug Minde for some supporting information and the London Borough of Greenwich Local History Library.