



The Jubilee Swimming Bath

by Margaret Prentice

Readers who drive along Limborough Road may have noticed a broken fence on the top of an embankment behind the 'Tea For Two' cafe. On closer inspection readers will find the old outdoor swimming pool which the inhabitants of Wantage, in particular the children, used until the new indoor pool was constructed as part of the Recreation Centre in 1976.

In March 1898 a committee was formed in Wantage to build a swimming pool for the town as a Memorial of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee of 1897. The vicar generously offered a site in Mill Street and promised to contribute a tenth of the cost. The committee applied to the Urban District Council in the hope that it would take over the running of the bath on completion. The council were understood to be not keen on the idea! But, when the matter was proposed by Mr Nalder, the council voted unanimously to manage the bath on its completion.

On Thursday 1st June, 1899, the Jubilee Swimming Bath was opened by the vicar in the presence of a large number of townsfolk. It had been built by subscription and the final cost was nearly £400. The open-air pool was 48' by 30' and had a water depth of 3'3" dropping to 5'6" in the deep end. The bottom and foundations of the walls were built of concrete cement and the walls of brickwork set in mortar. The top of the walls was finished with blue coping bricks. Rails ran around inside the bath just above the water level and steps were provided. There were dressing boxes for the bathers and the whole site was enclosed by a light wooden fence. Access to the pool was, and still is, by a passage between the buildings which now house the 'Good as New' shop and Anne's children's wear/wool shop.

The Abingdon Herald reported that Professor Blezard gave a number of clever performances in the water after the formalities of the opening ceremony were completed. Later several of the townsfolk took the plunge.

The pool was open daily during the summer months and was soon a popular place with the youngsters of the town. Colonel Sawyer held swimming classes for the boys on Sundays, presumably with the vicar's approval! Competitions soon became a regular feature in the Wantage calendar. On Thursday evening 20th August 1908, the boys in Col Sawyer's class held their annual competition with the Rev A. Baird-Smith, and Messrs F.W.Hanks and J.W.Kent acting as judges.

The winners were:

Swimming race(136 yards)	1. Harold Gregory	2.Eric Hanks
Best swimmer	1. Walter Liddiard	2.Herbert Walter
Rescuing life	1. Eric Hanks	2.Charles Cowley
Restoring life	1. Eric Hanks	2.Walter Richings
Diving	1. Percy Collett	2.Walter Richings

The newspaper report of the event commented on the remarkable improvement in the swimming of the boys during the year and on how well the boys who had just learnt to swim had performed, especially Percy Collett and Walter Richings. The events of rescuing life and restoring life in the cases of drowning persons had been introduced for the first time that year. Two years later, competitors in the life saving competition had to dive, fully-dressed except for their boots, from the high board into the water to rescue a dummy which had been sunk in the water.

By now the UDC was becoming more involved in the happenings at the Jubilee Bath, organising and providing the prizes for swimming tournaments. In August 1912 the council paid for the installation of a fresh supply of water. This was a great improvement: the water now being "clear and sweet"!

The swimming bath in Mill Street was in use for over 70 years and hundreds of local people learnt to swim there. Many remember the hours of pleasure they enjoyed at the pool during the summer months of the interwar years. But the pool's attraction lessened as families became more mobile and drove to outdoor and indoor pools further afield.

In 1972 responsibility for the bath was transferred from Berkshire to Oxfordshire. The Vale of White Horse District Council has a slim folder of letters and notes about the bath including a notice for the 1973 season and I expect the amendments are the proposed changes for the following year's hours of opening. It seems very archaic that in 1973 it was felt necessary to have segregated bathing. The charges were ridiculously low and in fact for the 1975 season they were doubled to 4p an hour for a child and 8p for an adult but no charge was made for a Private Dressing Box!

For many years the local schools used the bath during the first half-season. Children in the town walked to the pool but those from outlying villages like Childrey were bussed in for their swimming lessons. By the mid-1970s, the bath was being used by Wantage, Charlton, Stockham, Fitzwaren, Grove and Millbrook schools. A booking early in the week had some advantages as the bath water was cold but clean, for by the end of the week it was warm and 'pea-soupy', as one teacher remembers it.

It is not surprising that regular swimmers and school parties transferred in 1976 to the new swimming pool in the Recreation Centre. The advantages of a larger covered pool, warm clean water, good changing facilities and the other amenities of a purpose-built Sports Centre meant the demise of the Jubilee Swimming Bath. The bath never reopened after the end of the 1975 season and was declared officially closed in April 1976.

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