

Memories of Hampstead Heath Lido

Leeroy Murray learned to swim at the Lido, and taught his children to swim there.



Here he recalls its heyday:

“My two brothers and I watched with amazement as an old boy jumped in, dropping like a stone to the bottom of the lido’s deep end. Once at the bottom his shimmering body, frog like, swam all the way to the shallow end. We ran along the pool’s length following him anxiously wondering how he could hold his breath for so long. This was in the early 1950s. He set a record which for many years we would try to better.

Living in Savernake Road next to Gospel Oak School in those years gave us easy access to the Heath and the lido. So I’ve been a user of the Hampstead Heath Lido for over 50 years.

The furniture adorning the pool was by today’s standards plentiful. Situated at the centre of the deep end was a two-storey 3-pronged diving tower which included one springboard for the fancy divers. Jumping off the top board into the immense chasm of water equalled today’s thrill of bungee jumping, I’m sure. For us boys the challenge was to do a ‘bomb’ and create the biggest splash catching as many unwary dry landers as possible. All that remains in 2004 of that colossus is the stump of a life guard’s tower. Two springboards of different heights were also situated to the right of the tower alongside the pool. Now there are none. Opposite the springboards was an adult-sized slide rushing you into the water at top speed, a thrill especially if you were having trouble getting into the water on a cold day. Moving to the shallow end there were two children’s slides at opposite sides of the pool, whilst now we have one small slide allowing young children to be caught by their waiting parents as they splash into the cool waters.

The cafeteria was a beehive of activity, especially for us kids forever wanting ice lollies, Wall’s ice cream, Mars bars and packets of crisps. On cold days it was cups of hot Bovril. Chairs and tables were spread along the veranda overlooking the pool, rather like on an ocean liner. We would scramble for the

front tables if vacated by adults thus allowing easy viewing of budding Charles Atlas's flaunting their swimming prowess and of their admiring girl friends. Luckily the cafeteria is still open in 2004 albeit in its limited way.

The fountain was great fun being open and fairly easy to climb up. We could sit on the top causing huge sprays, watering the sweltering mums sunbathing close by. Now it's barred up and out of bounds, probably for good reason. And the flower beds running along side the pool are now buried under paving slabs and wooden benches. In today's economic climate they're probably too much of a nuisance to maintain.

The Lido was our second home during the summer holidays. Often, because of our circumstances, we hadn't the 'thru pence' entrance fee so we had to 'bunk' in by climbing over the wall or squeezing through the revolving bars of the exits of which there were about 5 at that time. This probably wasn't a good idea in retrospect, our actions obviously contributed to the current fortification and apparent lack of funds for proper maintenance.

In our teens both my brother and I became swimming captains for our Houses at Haverstock School. Our main training ground was the lido where we would swim lengths of this gigantic pool emulating those we had watched over the years.

My two daughters were 3 and 5 when they were first introduced to the lido. They learnt to swim there, in the shallow end. My story continues because I now have a new family of 3 young boys, the eldest has cerebral palsy. Knowing that I can bring the boys to the lido is a wonderful privilege. In the summertime, we escaped the great heat of the city and played in the vast expanse of the lido's cool water. I again had the opportunity to teach my boys to swim in the shallow end, as my brothers and I were taught. The depth is just right for learning to swim because for a child it's deep enough to 'doggy paddle' without causing panic. I also helped my eldest son practice walking. The water lightens his weight allowing him to push against the water and if he falls he does so without hurting himself. As my children grow in confidence they'll be able to swim further towards the deeper end where their feet won't reach the floor. And maybe at some stage they too will enjoy the early morning swims.

For all the people that made it possible for us to swim at the Lido I am immensely grateful. Over the years, I've enjoyed the friendship of many of the lifeguards admiring their professionalism and way they do their work without becoming too frazzled. Being able to swim long lengths and aspiring to win an Olympic gold was my dream and was founded in Hampstead Heath's community pool, the Lido. I now leave the realisation of that dream to my children."

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