Even the most hardened cold-water swimmers stand on the edge of Tooting Bec Lido and nervously eye the pale blue winter water. It looks inviting but, no matter how many times you have been in before, you know that the first few seconds of immersion will take your breath away. Sometimes you wonder what you are doing there.

The 100-yard unheated stretch of the lido has inspired a tradition of cold-water swimming since it opened in 1906. The South London Swimming Club (SLSC) held its first Christmas day race that year. Cosseted modern living means that most people see this pastime as a fetish for the slightly weird. However, scientific evidence and lido tales show that cold-water swimming is not just a pursuit for masochists — it is actually good for you.

Swimming in cold water may help combat natural decay. Studies of year-round swimmers have found that regular exposure to cold changes the body's chemistry. Among the possible, but as yet unproven, benefits could be protection against heart disease. 'Modern life has a deficiency of stimulating factors such as cold, heat and physical stress and this results in poor resistance to disease,' says Dr Werner Siems, a biochemist at Herzog-Julius Hospital in Berlin who has studied the effect of cold on the human body. He's sure regular plunges boost the body's immune system.

Certainly, the feel-good factor experienced by many winter swimmers at the lido backs this up. Véronique Dochain, who swims every day of the year at the lido, enthuses: 'Cold water is an anti-depressant — it revives my spirits as well as invigorating my body. It has a rejuvenating effect.'

A more recent convert, Inez Claus, also believes in the lido's magical properties: 'I wasn't ill at all last winter. Being outside like this has to be healthier than sitting at home by a radiator.'

One of the great things about the lido is the mix of different people who swim there. The lido transcends age, race or class. Last year, the men's Christmas Day race was won by Harry Barker at 11 years old. He's the youngest person ever to have won the Christmas cup. He describes his cold water feat: 'I had a glow straight after the race that lasted for the rest of the day.'

"You wake up with a bang. It's the finest cure for a hangover."

Dr Ray Anderson

Continued overleaf
In 1959, the Tooting Bec Winter Swimming Club was formed by a small group within the SLSC. It was for those who wanted to keep fit by running, swimming and weightlifting. They still meet every day, about midday, and swear by the lido’s benefits. Dennis Smith, a bank manager aged 65, has been swimming at the lido for more than 30 years: ‘The lido brings people together. You can be on social security or a bank manager, and you all swim together – it’s a shared experience.’

But swimming in the cold is not for the faint-hearted. Tales of bravery go back decades. At a club dinner in 1932, the SLSC captain, William Law, proposed a toast to ‘all those who went swimming last Wednesday when their towels froze.’ Twenty members rose to their feet to respond.

In the first century BC, the Romans cultivated the cold-water bath as a cure for stomach problems and headaches. Emperor Augustus became passionate about cold baths when his physician, Antonius Musa, recommended them as a cure for an abscessed liver. When Augustus survived the painful ailment, Musa became rich and his cure became fashionable.

Professor William R Keating, who studies cold-water exposure, sees little health risk in cold-water swimming unless a person takes it up at an old age. He says: ‘Shorter exposures to cold may make people more resistant to it, but there are risks. People who swim in the cold may suffer heart attacks. So it is not advisable for older people, unless they have been doing it for a long time.’ Professor Keating believes that the benefits can be great: ‘It can stimulate mental processes, produce hormones which make the body able to cope with physical stresses and increase the level of mental awareness and a feeling of well-being.’

This is the word from the medical world but lido enthusiasts have been saying much the same since 1906 when the SLSC was founded. Despite askance looks from the uninitiated, winter swimmers are not fools or masochists. The tradition of cold-water therapy has been practised for centuries as a way of rejuvenating mind, body and spirit. Cold-water swimming is about more than just taking an invigorating dip – regular chilly plunges can actually enhance your life.

Helen Oldfield

A message from the lifeguards

Enjoy your winter swims, but please help us to ensure your safety:

- do not swim near to the side of the pool and not into the middle (except for Sunday morning races)
- do not swim in poor visibility - we can’t see you if you get into trouble
- leave the pool if the weather turns nasty (eg thunder and lightning)
- wear a costume at all times - it might even keep you warmer!

Winter season ticket

Do you fancy giving winter swimming a try?
Winter season ticket — £45
Valid until 31 March 2002
Contact SLSC membership secretary on 020 8672 1416

Is there a doctor in the pool?

We asked James Le Fanu, a former Tooting GP who is now a columnist for the Sunday and Daily Telegraph, for his medical opinion on cold-water swimming:

The officially recognised oldest woman in the world at 113, Amy Holmes, from Bury, Greater Manchester is a poor role model for all those younger than herself. Not only did she carry on smoking till the age of 84 but apparently still knocks back a ‘daily triple’ of four bottles of stout. There is, however, one aspect of her life that would have counteracted the deleterious effect of all those fags and booze – the fact that she took cold baths till the age of 94.

The benefits of cold baths – which would be similarly enjoyed by the members of the SLSC – were vigorously promoted back in the 1920s by Dr Simon Baruch of the curiously named Knickerbocker Hospital in New York. ‘The patient is lowered into the bath. He gasps and shudders but gentle reassurance in resisting his natural desire to escape this dracontious treatment cannot fail to quiet him.’ He claimed his therapy could cure pneumonia, chronic rheumatism, neurasthenia and even tuberculosis of the lungs.

The impressive hardiness of regular cold-water swimmers derives from the phenomenon adaptability of the human organism to extremes of temperature. In the deserts of central Australia, the nocturnal temperature can fall below freezing but this does not prevent the indigenous Aborigines from sleeping naked on the ground.

The major Arctic expeditions of the early part of the 20th century provide further evidence of this cold adaptability. During an expedition to Cape Crozier to collect the eggs of the Emperor Penguin, Birdie ‘IG’ Bowers slept soundly in temperatures below -20°C while his companion suffered ‘a succession of shivering fits which I was quite unable to stop and which took possession of my body.’

And the reason for this extraordinary resistance to cold? To the fascinated horror of his companions Birdie Bowers would strip naked in the freezing Antarctic air and douse himself with buckets of icy water and slush. Even the cold-water swimmers of Tooting Bec Lido may balk at such measures – but with luck, like Mrs Holmes, they will make it to 100 – and beyond.
watergates

By Gordon Macniven, chief leisure facilities officer for Wandsworth Borough Council

In April, Wandsworth Council began work on a series of much-needed improvements at the lido costing over £500,000. The original plans, which included a jacuzzi and sauna, have been scaled down due to a huge increase in the cost of building index during the past year. So far, achievements include a refurbished and modernised café, and a grand glazed entrance area is now being built at the shallow end of the pool. This will provide easier and safer access for those in wheelchairs and prams, and also help to advertise the lido’s presence. The work should be complete in November so this year’s traditional Christmas swim will be in a ‘new’ environment. We are currently renewing the 1996 planning permission so that further improvements can be made in and around the existing entrance area but this depends on funds being made available. There are no specific plans for the old entrance at present.

The ultimate cold water swim

On Christmas day every year since 1906, the SLSC has held races at the lido.

The Mayor of Wandsworth presents cups to the winners of the women’s race (one width) and men’s race (two widths). All are welcome – it’s a great antidote to all the festive eating and drinking.

How other lidos are faring… By Janet Smith

ARUNDEL LIDO, WEST SUSSEX
www.arundel.org.uk/towncouncil/issues

This lovely heated open-air pool at the foot of Arundel Castle last opened in 1999. Arun District Council has off-loaded the site to Arundel Town Council which is offering a development partner a 124-year lease at a peppercorn rent. The land was originally given to the town by the Duke of Norfolk in 1957 to mark his eldest daughter’s coming of age. He stipulated that there should always be a public swimming-pool on the site – and that still applies.

BROCKWELL LIDO, SOUTH-EAST LONDON
www.thelido.co.uk

Now renamed the Evian Lido after the mineral water company dived in last May with £100,000 of sponsorship money saving the pool from closure. This has been spent on repairs, poolside decking, sunloungers and palm trees. In return, Evian has its logo painted in big letters on the bottom of the pool. It’s keen to put more money in next year, keeping the dynamic duo of Patrick Castledine and Casey McGue in business and Brockwell bathers in the liquid equivalent of clover.

GUILDFORD LIDO, SURREY
www.guildford.gov.uk/pages/leisure/sports/lido

Had a facelift in 1998 thanks to a £900,000 injection of cash from Guildford Borough Council. This has gone on shortening the pool from 55 yards to 50 metres (making it Olympic size), tiling the pool and improving the surrounding sunbathing area. There are also plans to build a new entrance, changing-rooms and gym. This would cost the council a further £1,000,000 but lido manager Tim Hall thinks it’s ‘highly likely’ to happen.

HAMPTON OPEN-AIR POOL, MIDDLESEX
www.hamptonpool.co.uk

Under threat due to the extensive repairs needed both to the pool and the changing-rooms. The directors of Hampton Pool reckon they need about £1.2 million. Their initial application for Sports Lottery money was turned down because of a policy not to fund open-air pools, but they kicked up such a fuss that they’re being allowed a second shot. Over the summer they organised a Splash for Cash sponsored swim. To find out how you can help, ring the organisers on 020 8255 1116.

HILSEA LIDO, PORTSMOUTH
www.portsmouthleisure.co.uk

Failed to open this summer. Portsmouth City Council said this was due to ‘health and safety concerns brought about by the age and depth of the main pool’ (the children’s pool did open). Hilsia Lido was built in 1935 and is a wonderful example of 1930s architecture.

Pells Pool, Lewes, East Sussex
www.pellspool.com

Britain’s oldest open-air pool - opened in 1860 and paid for by public subscription. This could have been its last year after Lewes District Council - the trustees of the pool - pulled the plug on funding. A massive local protest led to the Pells Pool Community Association being set up, and they now run the pool with Lewes Town Council, the new trustees. Sophia Clark, one of the organisers, is upbeat: ‘Revenue this year has been much better than in previous years, but we are constantly looking at secondary sales to raise money.’
**Fixtures list 2001 – 2002 winter season**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st place - 4pts</th>
<th>2nd place - 3pts</th>
<th>3rd place - 2pts</th>
<th>1pt for all other swimmers</th>
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<td>Races start at 9.30 am unless otherwise specified.</td>
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- **23 September – 23 December**
  - Autumn points
  - 2 widths until water below 40 F., then 1 width (33 yards)

- **25 December**
  - Christmas day races
  - 1 or 2 widths
  - 10.30 am

- **26 December**
  - Boxing day ice bucket
  - 1 width
  - 10.00 am

**Fixtures 2002**

- **1 January 2002**
  - Bob Willis cup
  - 1 width

- **31 December 2001 – 31 March**
  - Winter points
  - 1 width

- **7 April – 19 May**
  - Spring points
  - 1 width

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**Obituary**

**Bob Fitch**

Bob’s fellow early-bird swimmers, looks back on the life of a lido stalwart:

On a sunny summer’s morning, Bob Fitch was laid to rest in Wandsworth Cemetery. St Paul’s Church, Furzedown, was overflowing with family, neighbours and all his friends from the SLSC. The large group of club members was led by SLSC president, Finbarr Martin, who paid a warm tribute to Bob’s long service to the club - shared with Doreen over the past 53 years – especially his successful campaign carried to Wandsworth Council to prevent the lido being closed during the winter months.

His warm personality was especially useful when he and Doreen ran the Bec Swimming Club for ten years, where he encouraged countless swimmers to improve their technique. Bob will be greatly missed by a lot of people who will retain many happy memories of a fine character of Tooting and its lido.

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**News in brief**

- If you would like to swim during the winter months there is a training session on Monday nights from September to July at Clapham Manor Pool, Clapham Manor Street. The children’s session is from 7.30-8.30pm and adult training from 8.30-9.30pm. Cost for employed adults is £12 a month (£3 a session). Come along and get fit this winter.

- A successful end-of-season triathlon was held at the lido on 30 September. Thirteen triathletes – many of them non-club members – took part. The event was won by 32-year-old Nick Bamford in 41 minutes, 51 seconds.

- Richard Jackson has generously donated a silver cup to be awarded for consistent performance in the summer races. Congratulations to the first winner – Cyril Wood with 15 points.

- Club member, Charles Bacon, who died last year at the age of 91, has left £250 to the club. It is proposed to spend the money on a bench.

- Betty Freddi will continue to edit her monthly newsletter for circulation at the pool. Next edition – January.

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**Questions and answers with DC Leisure**

- **Q. Can we organise our own social events — including catering — at the lido?**
  - A. A new contracting catering manager for all our leisure sites has now been employed, and we hope to arrange a meeting with him and the club soon.

- **Q. Can you exempt us from paying any hire charges (£55 per hour) — in view of the club’s long association with the lido?**
  - A. We are always willing to discuss this on a case-by-case basis.

- **Q. Is there any chance of letting us have our early morning swimming time back before the pool opens to the public?**
  - A. We will be speaking to the council with regard to this and will try and come to some kind of arrangement that will suit both parties.

- **Q. The club would like to help with lifeguarding. Can you organise training courses?**
  - A. Brian Lodge (former lifeguard at the lido) will be running a training course in December at Holborn Leisure Centre. Anyone interested should speak to Nick Kirmatzis.

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**SLSC committee 2001–2002**

- **President**
  - Finbarr Martin

- **Vice president**
  - Vacant

- **Treasurer and membership secretary**
  - Doreen Fitch

- **Secretary**
  - Lucy Scott

- **Press officer & archivist**
  - Janet Smith

- **Social Secretary**
  - Hamid Hoslavi

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**One hundred yards contact details**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Telephone</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
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**Book review**

**Here Comes the Sun**

Author: Ken Warpole
Published by: Reaktion Books
Price: £22 (paperback)

The Landscape and Heritage Trust has reported that since the early 1980s Britain’s parks and leisure facilities have been dramatically under-funded. Ken Warpole recently published his testament to the political idealists and visionary architects of the early 20th century who strove to remake the city in the image of a utopia, ordered utopia.

Here comes the sun documents the response of northern European reformers, planners and architects to the prodigious spread early last century of new institutions and buildings in Europe.

Worpole shows how life in the open was considered an essential liberation from overcrowding in slums and how public spaces became sought-after commissions for early modernist architects. It is the spaces in between the buildings that Worpole is concerned about and, having taken us through the planning and building of the connective tissue of the modern city – parks, promenades, open-air museums, public squares – we are rewarded with Summer in the city: the cult of the lido.

This chapter introduces the historical context, architectural design, funding and public uses of the 1920s and 1930s British lido (‘city beach’). A description of pools includes Saltdean, Finchley, Ruislip, Victoria Park and Jubilee Pool. Worpole charts the evolution of the lido from a place of recreation to one of competitive sports from its heyday in the 1900s, 1940s and 1950s through to its last momentum and funding during the later part of the last century. SLSC members will be disappointed to find that Tooting Bec Lido is not mentioned. Ending on an optimistic note, Worpole gives a glimpse of the plans for the proposed Thames Lido.

Here comes the sun is beautifully produced. It is a must for those interested in social history and the birth of modern democracy as reflected in urban planning. Since this is the context within which the lido was born, lido lovers may well find this book of interest. For those simply wanting to indulge their passion, the chapter dedicated to lidos is certainly informative and compelling – but it may not warrant the cost.

Valentine Schmidt