

West Kirby Baths

Many readers will have happy memories of West Kirby Baths which closed in the late 1960s. Heather Chapman tells us more...



By 1900 the West Kirby Swimming Club had been formed. The club held swimming races in the Marine Lake during the summer months swimming to and from boats and barges. Two trophies they competed for were donated by local men: The Thacker-King Shield was donated by Dr Thacker King (who lived at Sandfield House on the corner of Dee Lane and Grange Road) and the Sandlea Cup was donated by William Alfred Jones who lived at Sandlea House. William Alfred Jones was a local councillor and was instrumental in the development of West Kirby. He operated the Sandlea Pavilion on the corner of Dee Lane and the promenade, and built the shops between the old public hall, (the public hall burnt down in 1932 and the Tudor cinema was built on the site) and the railway station.

Locals saw the Marine Lake as a large swimming pool but the Council quickly provided two changing barges, one for ladies, one for men, moored some distance apart. The new council rules forbade swimming in the lake after 9.00am, unless swimming from the changing barges. Of course there was a fee for the boatman to row the swimmers out to the changing barges from which they could swim.

The Hoylake Baths opened in 1913, when plans were well under way for a swimming baths in part of West Kirby Marine Lake. West Kirby Baths were built to a clever architectural design gradually adding the stages. In 1913 the first part of the baths to be built was the large glass shelter house on the promenade with the curved concrete wall in front of it. The shelter formed the centre of the main design. This attractive shelter house was a regular meeting place for people, who could admire the views during the winter months and were protected from the weather. During the 1950s this was the baths cafe, situated to the right of the turnstile and office when you entered from the promenade.

The next stage was the building of the concrete apron which shelved towards the water with steps on either side.

The ladies changing rooms were the next thing to be built to the side of the shelter house, and then the men's changing rooms were added on the other side of the shelter house. Each wing also had shelters facing the promenade.

The baths continued to be built during World War 1 and the ladies changing rooms opened in 1915. At this time the swimming bath was not roped off from the Marine Lake, but the swimmers and sailors had a good relationship, having annual galas including sailing and swimming events. The men's changing rooms were added shortly afterwards and the swimming baths were a popular attraction in the village. West Kirby had developed into a seaside resort welcoming holiday makers and day trippers. In 1920 a floating diving platform was added.

The swimming pool was refurbished in 1930. The new addition was a large concrete island on which stood firm diving boards and a water chute (a springboard was added at a later stage). This procedure required the lake to be emptied and deepened in the diving board area. The bath was enclosed with rope attached to wooden posts.

The swimming club continued to thrive. 'Mad night' was the last night of the season when the men would dress up, perform comedy acts, rampage through the ladies' changing rooms and throw any lady they could find into the water.

At a later stage the swimming pool changing rooms were refurbished, the wall alongside the apron extended, and 'arms' added on either side. Springboards were added on each arm and the water in that area was six feet deep.

I had a very happy childhood growing up at West Kirby Baths. I took great delight in passing through the turnstile saying "Contract, please". The pool staff were like extended family and during inclement weather we were allowed to make dens in the cubicles. We also played cards and huddled under blankets when it was cold. Auntie Trixie was in charge of the cafe and had strict rules. The chief lifeguard was Gordon Norman, and later Joe Evans, and the baths superintendent was Mr Dutton, who was also the superintendent of Hoylake Baths.

The high tides brought the jellyfish season and the lifeguards used to scoop them out of the water and ladle them into the wire bins. Swimmers were not allowed into the baths during the very high tides, when the water often crept up the apron to the changing rooms. Some strong swimmers were allowed in after the tide had turned. It seemed very exciting to run down the flooded apron and suddenly reach the hidden water's edge

The swimming club race night was Monday. The races took place regardless of the weather. When it was very windy, tarpaulins were added to the side wall for extra protection. Nobody had a warm up – they just dived straight into the cold water. The pool was 64 yards long. The youngest group, the Shrimps, swam half a length. The pool was divided by tying a rope from the warning "six foot deep board" to the side of the pool. My reward was 7d from my father for a mug of Oxo (3d) and a packet of crisps (4d, with the little blue salt bag). Races of a longer distance were from the baths to the sailing club wall and back. The longest distance race was in the other direction, from the baths to the promenade shelter near Albert Road and back.

