

CHAPTER 6.

BATHING IN THE LITTLE OUSE AND THET. RIVER BATHING - 1922-94.

Despite the 1922 extensive alterations and refurbishment, the pool with its exposed fourth side, was basically a length of river designated for bathing.

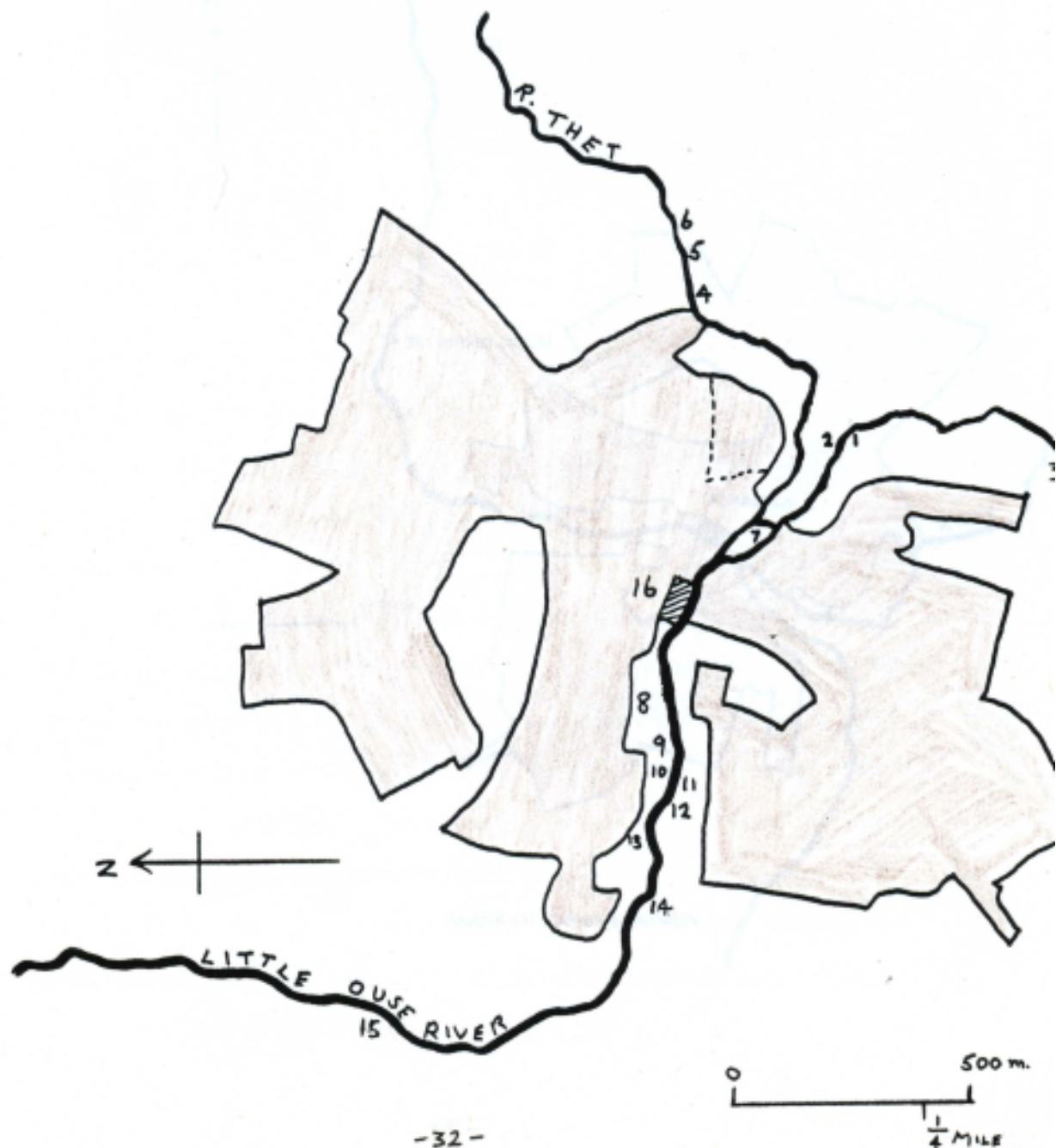
The river flowing into the deep end:



Wages were low and unemployment high so many could ill afford the luxury of its facilities, and with shorter working hours and few amenities, traditional river bathing continued. The river beds of the Thet and Little Ouse vary in depth and material - sand, gravel or chalk, often overlain mud, and width and currents. "The various bathing spots, had individual attractions and bathers knew which suited them best." (Appendix 21) See maps overleaf.

BATHING PLACES ON THE LITTLE OUSE AND THET.

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| 1. Old River Pool | 9. Blaydon Bridge |
| 2. Nun's Bridge | 10. Sand Hole |
| 3. Barnham Cross Common | 11. Chalk Hole |
| 4. Melford Bridge/Bridge Inn | 12. First Staunch |
| 5. The 'Ten Foot'. | 13. Terraces - 1970 |
| 6. The Sand Hole | 14. Whip Corner |
| 7. The Iron Bridge | 15. Second Staunch |
| 8. The Water Meadows | 16. Charles Burrell Works
(later Smedley's) |



A MAP TO SHOW THE POSITION OF TWO MILE BOTTOM
AND FISON'S WORKS IN RELATION TO THETFORD



Barnham Cross Common, about a mile above the river pool, is still used by families and seems to have changed but little over the years. The river bank of sand and gravel is worn away to form a small beach with shallow paddling area and deeper water. The author in 1978:



The oldest contact, born 1912, taught himself here. In pre-war days children camped, only returning home when supplies were exhausted. In the 1950's, "Old Gerald Symonds took his cows there for water and you had to dodge the cow pats,"¹ so it is hardly surprising the pool downstream sometimes had high faecal contamination.

The Thet by Melford Bridge was another family favourite, with a good sunbathing area, shallow and deeper water. In 1970 it was developed into a picnic area and youngsters often fish for tiddlers, but unfortunately there is now a weir. The most popular bathing place was probably Two Mile Bottom Common, where there is a sandy stretch of the Little Ouse amidst open Breckland heath. Formerly there was a spring-fed well and diving board. Employees at nearby Fisons Chemical Manure Works often swam at lunch times and after work. From before 1920, gangs of young men largely employed at Burrells, and later from Smedley's

Canneries on the same site, walked or cycled there after work. See map, page 33. Children camped in the summer and in the 1950's it was possible to hire an old wooden caravan, but subsequently people brought their own. In 1958 building of toilets was considered² but by 1960 when no action had been taken, the purity of spring water was tested because of the numerous campers.³ River Board dredging had caused the water level below the Second Staunch to fall, detrimental to bathing. The board was asked to maintain a good head of water, if necessary building another staunch below this area. Today the bank is overgrown and the river virtually inaccessible:



Many children, especially those living by the Burrell Works, spent most of their summer free-time in the nearby Water Meadows, where the bank was worn away to a sandy beach. Popularity declined about 1950 because the Smedley's effluent reputedly changed the water to bright green, orange or crimson according

to whether peas, baked beans or beetroot were being processed, and these attracted vicious swans. (Appendix 20) Sunken barges from navigation days were another nuisance and in 1962 it was decided to remove them.⁴

Downstream was the Sand Hole, safe, shallow water where older siblings taught younger ones to swim. One father recalls teaching his five children here circa 1960. About 10 yards above the First Staunch was the Chalk Hole, with a dangerous undertow so only experts swam here, sometimes having narrow escapes. (Appendix 21) In 1970 the precarious practice of diving from the staunch was prevented by a fence. That year, the south facing river bank just below the Staunch was terraced for sunbathing, and the waters edge fenced off from the main channel creating a paddling place for young children.⁵ It was never very popular with adults from the nearby Abbey Farm and Redcastle overspill estates, and has hardly been used for 10 years since a child drowned. Rather further downstream was Whip Corner, wide and deep, with eddies, where the sewage farm now discharges. The Second Staunch pool, half way to Two Mile Bottom, deep in the forest, was isolated, less popular, and in the 1930's overhung by trees:



The Iron Bridges were conveniently near the centre of town but debris and broken glass thrown into the river detracted from its attraction. Those living in the East of the town generally preferred The Thet in West Meadows, above Melford Bridge. Here, although users were probably unaware, there must have been less pollution. Good swimmers liked the Ten Foot using a rope suspended from an overhanging branch to plunge into the deep pool, where today the banks are very overgrown:



"The little ones and we all learnt to swim at an early age" (Appendix 14)

A similar rope is still used below Nun's Bridge. See photograph overleaf. There was also a safe, sandy area where a former Town Councillor taught himself to swim in the 1920's, by wading out midstream then striking for the bank.

(Appendix 22)

The rope below Nun's Bridge:



Many people have happy memories of river bathing but only vague recollections of learning to swim. Some recall experimenting and attempting to copy those who could. Others remember being restricted to family visits until about age eight when considered safe with friends. The sentiments of one Thetfordian, born about 1915, reflect those of others, "The river.....clear and unpolluted, was our summer playground. I suppose the big ones all looked after the little ones and we all learnt to swim at an early age." (Appendix 14)

Today growth on the banks encroaches into the rivers, and for much of their length they are murky and uninviting. Only in a few places is the water, "clear as crystal." Many who formerly enjoyed river bathing are adamant they would no longer do so. They blame pollution, assuming this previously non-existent whereas the Little Ouse below town was probably more heavily polluted in the past.

Although drinking water was prime suspect, river bathing may have been partially responsible for the 19th Century cholera and typhoid epidemics and others that continued until the Second World War.⁶ With the modern sewage system and strict regulations controlling industrial waste, the river must be less polluted. The fallacy stems from past ignorance and lack of confidence caused by publicity of environmental issues.

Undoubtedly fear of disease is partly responsible for decline in Thetford's river bathing. The danger of contracting Weil's Disease from river bank rats, sensationalised by local newspapers in 1987, continues to discourage people. Many families still picnic by the river but few swim. Modern youth has a wider range of leisure opportunities and is less inclined to create entertainment. Parents' increased awareness of potential dangers associated with playing in water prevents most children enjoying the river, as did their predecessors.

¹ Primary information.

² Public Health And Housing Committee, 18/5/58.

³ Parks And Pleasure Grounds Committee, 2/4/60.

⁴ Finance And General Purposes Committee, 9/62.

⁵ Housing Committee, 2/12/70.

⁶ Council School Log Books.

CHAPTER 7

THETFORD'S FIRST INDOOR POOL - 1967.

Thetford's Secondary Modern School was enlarged in 1965 to cope with the increasing population. Numbers entitled it to a second gymnasium but the Headmaster, who considered river swimming unhygienic, made an inspired request for a pool instead. The building trade slump enabled this within the original contract price. When it opened in 1967, the Eastern Region had only 16 heated, indoor pools.

Primarily the 55' by 30' pool was for the school's use. Following a pupil's drowning swimming became compulsory, with the school once winning the County Trophy for highest percentage increase in swimmers. Outside demand forced the Head to make priority decisions. Spare hours were allocated to the schools who had used the river pool, and new primary schools. The Girls' Grammar School Headmistress had to accept far less time than requested. There was a major set back in January 1973 when the pool closed for 18 months during inquiries into construction materials. After the Sports Centre Pool opened some schools continued here, but now had to transfer. The Grammar Schools no longer swam, a retrograde step from their long swimming tradition. When the pool reopened pupils numbered 700, further restricting availability to others. Initially P.E. staff gave instruction but soon a full-time appointment was made. Within a fortnight Tony Hegarty formed a club, training lunch times and after school, later Thetford Dolphins.

In the evenings a wide spectrum used the facilities: Army Cadets, Air Training Corps, Scouts, Police, Fire Service, Disabled and Sub-aqua groups, and Adult Education. The latter included life-saving, family and ladies beginner classes, giving many who missed out in their youth the chance to learn. Surprisingly some mis-used equipment, admitted non-members, abused the caretaker and had to be banned.

Two of the new schools still receive instruction at this pool, with Norfolk Proficiency Certificates, including distance swims previously impractical in the cold river, are awarded. Similar evening arrangements continue, at what is now Charles Burrell High, and are popular as it remains cheaper than the Sports Centre. Regrettably there are still behavioural problems and hirers must provide their equipment.

In 1964, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, and the Department of Education and Science proposed joint provision. This was apparently not considered, although support for Thetford Swimming Pool Fund highlighted the town's desire for a new pool. Presumably the Headmaster's need for a teaching pool was incompatible with the proposed leisure facility.¹

¹ Information mainly from unrecorded conversation with Mr D. Briggs, Headmaster, 1961-81.

CHAPTER 8

THETFORD SWIMMING POOL FUND, 1961-71.

By 1960 there was growing concern for health and safety. Thetford's pollution testing and polio scares of the 1950's, causing temporary pool closure, had focused attention on its sub-standard nature. Expectations were increasing, and some of the early overspill had used covered pools. People realised the river facility needed replacing with a pool where bathing could be enjoyed under safe, hygienic conditions. In 1960 the local branch of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) suggested to the Council that the town should raise money for this purpose.¹ The Town Clerk and Borough Surveyor reported to the Council on the implications.² It could both build and run the pool or finance maintenance of one built by public subscription. Alternately a voluntary body could raise the money and run it themselves. Following discussion with the TGWU, the Mayor called a Public Meeting on 15th February 1961 at which the Town Clerk said a small town could only afford an outdoor pool. This would cost £22,500 but, provided the public financed building, the council considered the predicted annual loss of £1,355 an acceptable burden on rates.³

The meeting agreed to adopt the second alternative - a public body building the pool then vesting it in the council. The latter would help, possibly by providing a site. The enterprise was named Thetford Swimming Pool Fund (TSPF) and a committee, including both Thetfordians and Londoners, was elected for five years to raise £15,000, with the balance to be grant-aided. However two days later the secretary, Mr Smith, wrote to Mrs Blain, fellow committee member, suggesting that having raised money to build the pool, they should continue their efforts and run it themselves, subsequently heating and covering it, and keeping it out of council control. (Appendix 23) The Town Clerk linked council and committee, and was appointed legal adviser to the latter. He recalls Mr Smith had previously written to the press, so possibly he was behind the TGWU initiative.

(Appendix 24) Mr Smith was confident that within a year a tote would be raising £75 weekly.⁴ Although this figure was never achieved the majority of money came from the tote takings. It was well organised, with door-to-door collectors selling the 1/- tickets for a small commission. Legal requirements were that 50% of income had to be awarded as cash prizes, and with other expenses about 42-44% was banked each week. Peak earnings were in 1962 when weekly profit was £55-65. (Appendix 25)

There were numerous, successful fund-raising schemes including dances, jumble sales, fetes, and waste collections, but the most ambitious was a week long Swimming Pool Carnival. The town enthusiastically supported events, joining in as they had in pre-expansion days.⁵ By December 1961, £3,000 was deposited with the council⁶ and a year later this had risen to £7,105/19/6.⁷ However site problems began very early. The committee ear-marked land adjoining Castle Park where the ground and row of cottages could be purchased for £1,350, and the council agreed to hold these until the pool could be built.⁸



The first set back was an objection by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG) that the site was too small for future conversion to an indoor pool with supporting facilities including car park.⁹

In February 1963 the council proposed a new site by the Brandon Road and sought planning permission.¹⁰

Land between the Brandon Road and Little Ouse:



Town expansion was in its infancy and the committee felt it was situated too far from most houses, whereas Castle Park was more convenient. It is likely the development plans already envisaged the two large estates which today exist in the vicinity. Mr Smith became disillusioned with the situation and finally resigned in November 1963.¹¹

By April of 1964, after just three years the fund stood at £11,000.¹² The council pledged a further £5,000 provided the balance was granted by Norfolk Education Committee.¹³ There was also possibility of a grant from the Ministry of Education. At this stage, had a site been available, building could probably have begun. Planning permission for the Brandon Road site had been given, provisoal plans made, (Appendix 26) but the land not purchased.¹⁴ The owners delayed hoping it would be rescheduled for housing. The council assured the committee they would use Compulsory Purchase¹⁵ but the resulting appeal caused further delay, prolonged by the owners going into liquidation. (Appendix 27) Almost a year later the Borough Surveyor revised plans for this site in order to meet MHLG recommendations.¹⁶ The pool now proposed was far more sophisticated than that outlined at the inaugural meeting four years earlier, and correspondingly the estimate had risen to £60,000, which the Ministry felt conservative.¹⁷ The Town Clerk now thought £30,000 could be provided by the Council, six times that offered a year earlier, but they needed MHLG approval to raise the money. (Appendix 26)

Towards the end of 1964, relations between council and committee become increasingly acrimonious. The latter felt the council were delaying but in fairness they had to comply with Government regulations and there were genuine problems. In the 1960's and 1970's Thetford was the fastest growing town in Britain,¹⁸ but tote fallings had begun to decline in 1963 and by the end of 1964 the weekly contribution was just £45. Other fund-raising efforts had also declined after 1962. Supporters, some of whom could ill afford the weekly shilling, were frustrated with nothing concrete materialising. Their generosity had been motivated by a genuine desire to provide the town, especially children, with a safe, hygienic replacement for the river pool. The Committee felt open to ridicule and abuse,¹⁹ and in endeavour to boost fading support the revised Brandon Road "Lido" plans were released in March 1965. However it was to no avail as the public were aware of the worsening national economic situation and increasingly tight Government

restrictions on expenditure, especially for leisure facilities. The tote eventually closed in the following September when the fund totalled £15,500.²⁰ In four and a half years the small town had achieved its original aim, indicating the strength of its desire for good bathing facilities. At the final draw the entire week's takings was used for prizes, perhaps to soothe the ill feeling.

Negotiations continued into 1966 without real progress. The receivers of the Brandon Road site continued to appeal against the Compulsory Purchase order. The committee were asked to reconsider the Priory Park site, north of the river, that had previously been rejected. They reluctantly agreed provided the pool could be built sooner,²¹ so Mrs Blain, who already felt there was lack of council co-operation, resigned. Thereafter the committee were effectively in abeyance and the building of a new pool became solely a council matter. The sites of Thetford bathing facilities and proposed sites are on the map overleaf.

Even had the citizens' pool been built, massive injection of council funds would have been necessary to meet increasingly demanding health and safety regulations. The facility envisaged was not heated so of limited use. Open air Lidos were popular in many parts of the country during the 1920's and 1930's but most did not reopen after the Second World War! However the final total of £21,767/10/5 was a marvellous achievement for a small town, and was subsequently contributed towards the current local authority facility.

THETFORD - SWIMMING POOLS,
PROPOSED SITES & SPA

Pools

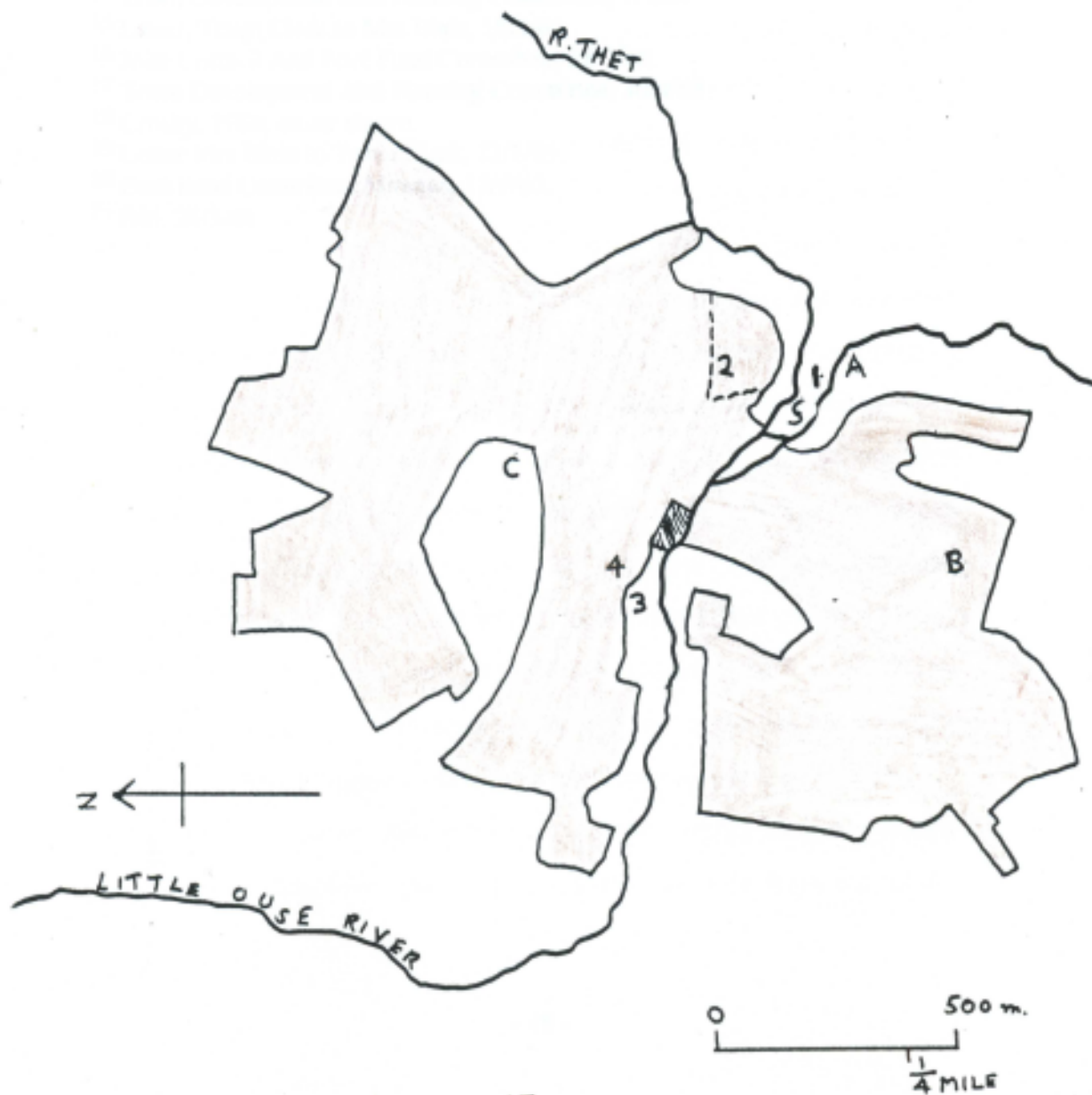
- A. Old River Pool
- B. Secondary Modern School (now Charles Burrell)
- C. Sports Centre - Recreation Ground

Proposed sites

- 1. Sir William Gentle Field
- 2. Castle Park
- 3. Brandon Road
- 4. Priory site

Spa

- S. Pump House and Baths



- ¹ Finance And General Purposes Committee, 13/9/60.
- ² Town Clerk's and Borough Surveyor's letters to Finance And General Purposes Committee, 30/11/60 and 1/12/60.
- ³ Swimming Pool Fund Committee Minutes, 15/2/61.
Thetford And Watton Times, Downham Gazette And Journal, 17/2/61,
"Thetford Will Go Ahead With Swimming Pool."
- ⁴ ibid.
- ⁵ UEA Archives video.
- ⁶ ibid, 17/1/62.
- ⁷ ibid, 27/3/63.
- ⁸ ibid, 20/6/62.
- ⁹ ibid, 7/1/63.
- ¹⁰ ibid, 7/2/63.
- ¹¹ ibid, 2/12/63.
- ¹² ibid, 6/5/64.
- ¹³ Council Pool Sub-committee, 4/64.
- ¹⁴ Town Development And Planning Committee, 7/7/64.
- ¹⁵ Letter, Town Clerk to Mrs Blain, 18/1/65.
- ¹⁶ Joint Council And Pool Fund Committee, 28/1/65.
- ¹⁷ Town Development And Planning Committee, 30/4/65.
- ¹⁸ Crosby, 1986, cover sleeve.
- ¹⁹ Letter Mrs Blain to Town Clerk, 13/1/65.
- ²⁰ Pool Fund Committee Minutes, 15/9/65.
- ²¹ ibid, 28/3/66.

CHAPTER 9

SPORTS CENTRE POOL.

In April 1966 when the TSPF committee effectively went into abeyance the town population was growing rapidly and it was obvious amenities should include a covered, heated pool. At a council meeting in December 1966 the Town Clerk reported pool construction plans now had to be agreed with the Regional Sports Council, who favoured indoor facilities. He queried whether to press for the planned outdoor amenity or to switch to an indoor one.¹ In October 1967 the opening of the school indoor pool highlighted the need, already demand exceeded availability.

After discussion with the MHLG the Council decided to proceed with the second alternative at the long established Recreation Ground.² By July 1969 it was planned to link the proposed pool with sports hall and adjacent Youth Centre.³ Although there were no site problems, some complained it was too far from the centre of population. Interestingly now the town has fully expanded, most of Thetford's best school and club swimmers are those who live nearest the pool. In the November a delegation from the TDPC inspected a pool near Doncaster, built by Poulsons, architects and quantity surveyors widely experienced in economy budget work.⁴ Although the economic situation with backlog of capital works meant the Government was unlikely to approve loan sanction yet, Poulsons were appointed to prepare provisional plans. Preliminary costing estimated capital cost at £107,000 with running profits forecast. The detailed proposals were received in April 1968.⁵ Negotiations with the MHLG continued and planning permission was granted five months later. In October the Regional Sports Council accepted the plans into Category A - urgently needed. Thetford was not included in the less than half of their category A pools given Government approval for finance in the coming year.⁶ The Town Clerk immediately reacted, stressing Thetford's special case as an expanding town, and he believes the townspeople's efforts swayed the

balance. At last, in May 1969 the MHLG said Thetford would receive priority in the financial year 1970-71.⁷

Norfolk Education Committee who had long promoted school swimming granted £46,625, more than a quarter of the cost, and the Department of the Environment contributed £3,716 per annum for 15 years to help Thetford's expansion needs, with the council authorised to raise loans to meet the deficit. When building finally started in April 1971 the TSPF Committee handed over the monies raised, now £21,767.10.5 including interest.⁸ Construction was delayed by unforeseeable problems. The head of Poulsons was imprisoned on corruption charges and they ceased operating soon after work commenced. Various firms took over different aspects making progress complicated, and Thetford Construction Company who continued the building shortly went into liquidation and work halted. Another local firm Carters, and their Thetford associates Boughtons, finished the work.⁹ After a ten year struggle, the pool costing £170,000 represented good value for money and officially opened on 12th July 1972.

During the rapid leisure expansion of the 1960's and 1970's swimming was a growth sport and in the period 1970-77 recreational loan sanctions became more readily available and 394 pools, including Thetford, were built.¹⁰ Less than two years after it opened, Dereham, a smaller Breckland town, had an indoor pool and it seems likely that Thetford's fund-raising efforts only slightly advanced provision. Although TSPF Committee members were invited to the opening and the townspeople's, "magnificent efforts" mentioned in the programme, some felt the council had "hijacked" their pool taken a disproportionate share of the credit.¹¹ Bitterness persists at the lack of recognition which could have been avoided by mention on the commemorative plaque, but they appear to have forgotten that had they succeeded the pool was to have been vested in the Council.

The pool, encompassing the new deck level design concept viewed by council members at St. Albans, compared very favourably with contemporary

provision.¹² The main 25 metre, four laned pool, and small learner pool have graded depth. Public changing accommodation was cubicled and segregated but in 1992 reconstructed into unisex individual and family cubicle, the only significant change to-date. There are also communal school changing rooms. Water capacity was considered suitable for 264 bathers but today's stricter regulations would not permit this.¹³ The small viewing gallery necessitates most spectators at functions being seated on the wet poolside. The MHLG objected to expensive diving facilities, so in this respect the new bath was inferior to the river pool.

The pools cater for the complete school age and ability range. During term time village and Thetford are instructed and tested for A.S.A and County Proficiency Awards by a teacher employed by NEC. Additionally the Sports Centre itself has always run classes for all ages in a variety of disciplines. The demand continues despite National Curriculum resulting in more children now receiving school swimming lessons. Anglia Water recently declared Thetford, "The best place in East Anglia for teaching children to swim," and donated equipment worth £1,000 as part of the "Lesson of Life" campaign to encourage more children to swim, sponsored by the A.S.A.¹⁴

Thetford suits serious swimmers. The town has clubs in most aquatic disciplines - competitive and synchronised swimming, water polo, sub-aqua, and a disabled group - with oscillating fortunes. Thetford Dolphins was affiliated to the A.S.A. in 1971, one of only five in Norfolk at the time.¹⁵ Mr Culey, President and three times Mayor, instigated the annual triangular Links Gala with Thetford's twin towns, Hurth - Germany and Spikenesse - Netherlands, which both underwent similar expansion schemes.

Most were very pleased with their new facility and appreciated all year swimming. It was often crowded with villagers as well as townspeople. Swimming is a sport for all and a pre-war City of Birmingham swimmer with two young sons was pleased to have good facilities for a sport his family could share. With rivers flowing through the town and knowing the antics of boys, he was anxious they

swim well. Some people considered it an expensive luxury, whilst others missed the outdoor freshness of the river pool and were disappointed not to get the much grander Lido they had anticipated following publicising of the revised Brandon Road plans.

As a leisure facility it has been less successful, being more suited for serious swimming than pleasure bathing. Thetford's response to changing trends was to run aqua discos and purchase rafts and inflatables for fun sessions. In recent years these have declined in popularity and once during the 1993 summer holidays a single bather came. The remaining equipment lacks the sophistication now expected. Recently a giant inflatable structure suitable for deep end swimmers was purchased whereas the same outlay on small equipment would cater for far more. Nearby Diss, a similar pool, has an excellent range with packed fun sessions after school.

Since the late 1970's, leisure pools with increasingly superior attractions have spread rapidly, and nearby Bury St. Edmunds was revamped two years ago. The comments of one Thetfordian with teenage children are apt, "The new pool's all right.....but it's not what I'd call a leisure pool. My kids used to go there but as they get older it loses its appeal. They'd rather go to Bury with the water chutes there - ten goes for a pound. Much more fun than Thetford! All you can do there is go up and down." (Appendix 20) The current public sessions swimming are frequently under used although Adults Only sessions are comparatively popular and a number of OAP's, including a TSPF committee member and fund supporters, take advantage of early morning concessions.

Since implementation of Compulsory Competitive Tendering, Thetford's charges have risen considerably with few concessions and, with car ownership commonplace, Bury represents better value. Thetford clearly has a growing replacement need. At the next meeting, Monday 28th February 1994 the council is to consider whether to spend £100,000 mainly on replacing the filtration and chlorination unit or re-development into a modern leisure pool costing between

£850,000 and a million according to exactly what is provided - see article overleaf, Eastern Daily Press, 25/2/94. It is hard to see how the "economy pool" can be converted without detracting from serious swimming. Furthermore it is questionable whether with economic depression authorisation of expenditure will be automatic, or an acceptable burden on council tax. Could this be the onset of another ten years struggle?

- 1 Borough Council Minutes, 20/12/66.
- 2 Town Development And Planning Committee, 25/10/67.
- 3 *ibid.*, 22/7/69.
- 4 Public Health And Highways Committee, 9/1/68.
- 5 Pool Sub-committee report to the council, 9/4/68.
- 6 Town Development And Planning Committee, 15/4/69.
- 7 *ibid.*, 3/6/69.
- 8 Thetford Swimming Pool Fund Committee Minutes, 26/4/70.
- 9 Program of pool's official opening, 1972.
- 10 Gratton and Taylor, 1991.
- 11 Primary information.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Program of pool's official opening, 1972.
- 14 Thetford Times, 30/12/93, "Sponsor Wants Young To Take The Plunge."
- 15 The Use Of LEA School Pools...., 1971.