

Copy of reply from Mr J. Deacon, Local Historian:

Dear Miss Batstone,

Reference your letter of 4th August asking for information of swimming facilities available in Thetford. Your inquiry is unusual, and I must admit it has taken me by surprise. I have never given much thought to this subject previously believing it to be a 'foregone conclusion', lessons in the art of swimming, since education became compulsory, was taught to all. It most certainly was during the late 1920's when I was being schooled. And no one was excused.

Pre war Thetford was a very small town. The population was then below 4,000. Entertainment for the young was limited and not what is expected by today's young. We in fact made our own entertainment, and during the summer months, the river was one of our chief sources of entertainment.

NUNS BRIDGES SWIMMING POOL. There were a number of locations for learning how to swim other than the swimming baths - or sheds located by the Nun's Bridges. It cost money (2 pence) to enter this domain and because the town was rural, not many parents could afford such luxury for their children. However, all ages were want to use this facility at one time or another.

This location also had an attendant, it was his job to see those inside never exceeded their time limit - I believe it to have been an hour per person for his or her 'tuppence'. It did not mean this rule was strictly adhered to; if it was cold weather and not many were using the baths or sheds the attendant closed a blind eye on how long one risked dying from exposure. In my day this person was a Mr Swinger.

The swimming baths were dredged annually and designed in a manner that one end was 'shallow' and used for those not really able to swim, and the other end was known as the 'deep' end. The shallow end was never more than about three feet (1 metre) in depth whilst the deep end - used by those that could swim - could have been as much as eight feet.....The deep end had two spring boards, one bolted in to the concrete surrounds for early divers, and the other perched on a scaffolding some eight feet above the water for those that wanted to show all how brave and artistic they were in the art of diving.

Backing the baths were two communal and a number of wooden cubicles. The cubicles had to be paid for beside the entry fee. The communal ones were male and female respectively and use of them was included in the entry fee.

As children with no money, there was a way of entering the location without paying. The down stream - shallow - end towards Nuns Bridges was open to the river without surrounding undergrowth and rushes to navigate. Many of us would undress by the bridges and quietly move into the river close to the baths, then when the coast was clear, slide around the concrete surroundings projecting into the water and on into the shallow end. Sometimes the attendant caught us, many times he did not.

The swimming season opened on the 1st May annually. Swimming lessons while at school were a 'must'. No one was excused unless a mother wrote a stern letter to the school forbidding her dear child to be included in this ceremony of washing all over in river water. Come hail, rain, wind or sometimes shine, for the young males of Thetford Council School that had been taught how to swim, every Wednesday afternoon in the swimming season, they were marched from Norwich Road to Nuns Bridges, towel and swimming trunks rolled firmly under the right arm, to take part in the art of how to hide from the immediate prospect of getting wet. Especially when it was cold.

To hide was a forlorn hope - Mr Ambrose who, as navigator of a bomber, was to be killed by enemy action in 1942 - would fling open the cubicle doors, chase all who had slipped around the corrugated fencing to the rear of the cubicles from cover, line all up on the waters edge, blow his whistle, and into the water all went. Those hanging back after the whistle was blown, if it was known they could swim, would be given a firm nudge to help them on their way. I was always included in this category.

For those unable to swim, I believe it was a Tuesday afternoon they were subject to the rigours of swimming with the assistance of a car tyre inner tube. It's so long ago now I really do not remember my early lessons.

THETFORD RIVERS. The pre war rivers of Britain were not polluted as they are today. The two rivers of Thetford, during the high days of summer were always an attraction to both young and old alike. And there were many locations one could make use of.

Melford Bridge Pool, Barnham River, the Sand Hole, the Chalk Hole, the First Stauch, Whip Corner, the Second Stauch, and Two Mile Bottom are some. All had their special facilities to attract bathers.

Melford Bridge was quite deep. Some said twenty feet. This location was well upstream from the dam and only the experienced used it. Barnham River is the location still used on Barnham Cross Common. The river then was moderately deep, slow flowing, not too wide, and all used it, especially when camping out on the common.

The Sand Hole was exactly where the Blaydon Bridge at Brandon Road crosses the river. This was quite shallow and as its prefix suggests, it was sandy bottomed. This location was used by those young and unable to swim. It was here the older members of a family would teach their younger brothers and sisters to swim.

The Chalk Hole was about twenty yards up stream from the sand hole and about ten yards from the First Stauch. Here it was quite deep and fast flowing. Only the brave swam in this location for the under-tow of the stauch could suck one under. I remember 'Bonso' Smart being a victim of this under-tow, but lived to tell the tale.

The First Staunch swimming area was much the same as it is today, but cleaner by far. It was here I taught my children (5) in the late 1950's early 1960's how to survive in water.

Whip Corner is downstream of the Staunch and almost opposite the Sewerage Farm - and its wretched outfall. Then quite deep and wide, and fast flowing. On occasions, when as a youth one felt brave enough, this is where he showed his pals how strong a swimmer he was.

The Second Staunch was a place where only a few visited. Usually when hiking along the river bank from Thetford to Two Mile Bottom. As much as I remember of it, it was a foreboding place but immediately downstream from the gates it was quite deep, clean of all weeds, and not too fast running. Trees over hanging the water kept it dark and, for me, it was not an inviting place at all.

Two Mile Bottom was a place all Thetford, young and not so young visited. Here a Mr Clark kept a wooden caravan of late 1800's vintage and a spring board over the river for all to use. Here was an iron surrounded well, quite close to the river that gave marvellously cold, clear, sparkling spring water - the iron surround and well being placed by Fison who had his manure works close by, and here was the place all came to camp in.

The river was clean, slow flowing, deep in spots, shallow in others. All knew where he or she could swim in with comfort. I remember it as the place I spent most of my Summer holidays from school at. Camping out for days at a time until food ran out, then home for some more. We all walked there and back for there was no such thing as a bike to ride on for youngsters.

The war in pre war days was subject to weed cutting on a regular basis. It was only a few decades since the river had been dredged for navigable purposes.....pollution from the sewage plant and industries has killed off most of what was once the ecology of the river. I would most certainly not venture to dip my toes in it now, much less the entire body.

SPORTS CENTRE. During the late 1950's a local person, the late Mr Tom Smith, organised a public subscription to raise enough money for a new swimming pool to be built. There were a number of sites considered, all were on the west side of the river.

By the late 1960's a sum of £30,000 had been raised; then local authorities took over the raising of the monies; giving Tom Smith and his workers little or no recognition for their work.

The money raised was used to build the first stage of the Sports Centre. Ignoring the site's proposed by Tom Smith, it was the local authorities that chose Croxton Road as the place for the new centre, their reason being that it was Crown land and therefore relatively cheap to buy.

Now, I believe I have given you enough material here for you to be able to sort something out of it. If not, you must ask me for more. Of course, you can always visit me if you believe I can enlighten you on 'past' Thetford more.

Sincerely,

Jim Deacon

BATHING AND SWIMMING AT THETFORD 1922 TO 1973
SOME RECOLLECTIONS by GEORGE KYBIRD (born 1915)

1920 - 1930

Mostly paddling and bathing in the River Thet near the Bridge Tavern. Northwards from this point over the old railway bridge crossing, there was an area known as West Meadow. Following the Thet up stream through the meadow were three spots used for swimming. The first was the four foot, second was the ten foot, then at the far end was the sand hole. This is where most of the bathing was done and where I taught myself to swim. Walking out into mid stream and then striking back to the bank. This was all very fine until the farmer chased you off.

The Water Meadows down stream on the Ouse was also very popular with children living in the St. Nicholas Street district. (I never used this spot). Two Mile Bottom common was also a favourite spot. Cycling down from Thetford. The meres (Langmere and Fowlmere) were also popular, as was the Red Arches at Knettishall Heath.

1930 - 1939

Thetford Open Air Swimming Pool was opened in 1922 (see copy of the relevant page of the old Thetford Guide). I used this in the summer 2 - 3 times a week. In September 1939 I was called up into the Army and thus only used the pool occasionally when home on leave.

1956 onwards

After the war a Mr Lowndes who owned the Nunnery Estate gave the town a strip of land opposite the pool. The Council then constructed a timber bridge over the river so those who could not swim could enjoy themselves on the grass bank.

Rumour has it that around 1960 a dead cow landed up in the pool and as this caused a health problem the pool was closed. Around 1970 the Council constructed (off Croxton Road) the present enclosed heated swimming pool. I was a Council member who travelled to St Albans to inspect a pool which had incorporated the new idea of the pools water being at deck level. Thetford's new pool was on a similar design. (The notorious architect Poulson was the designer)

If any of this requires enlightenment please don't hesitate to contact me by phone: 764692.

Interview with Mr G. Kybird

The deck level swimming pool at St Albans was in a large parked area and run by an American concern called the Church of God, a magnificent pool designed by one notorious Poulson. We liked it so much that we decided to have a pool like that. It was paid for by the Council and we took on the funds that had been raised by Mr Smith and his committee, several thousand they raised, incredible really. Poulson apparently was the first chap to think of something like the deck level pool.

I used to love swimming. I was Chairman of the old river pool, the Parks and Pleasure Grounds (from 1948), when I was on the Council for thirty odd years (till 1976). Old Mr Drake, lovely old man, was the caretaker down there and also of the museum, and he used to sell chocolate bars, lovely hazelnut chocolate for a penny. Duncan's from Edinburgh, a little piece of enjoyment to have after a swim. Mr Drake didn't teach swimming. He was much too old for that, quite an old gentleman, nice old boy though.

I believe people used to swim in that area before the Council built that pool, as part of the unemployment scheme. The concreting also continued in all that area around Spring Walks. After Mr Lowndes gave us that piece of land opposite we had that bridge put over. It was a rickety-rackety bridge made of old telegraph poles lashed together. We used to use it as a sunbathing area on the other bank.

I'd moved on to Town Development Committee and no longer used the pool so much and I wasn't aware of what was going on. I know originally they put in lorry loads of sand and that was a lovely sandy bottom from one end to the other, but over the years the mud used to wash down stream from higher up and pile up, and I remember diving in and coming out the colour of coal, covered in mud. By the end of the season it got stirred up. The flat area used to be for grazing, then they dredged the river one year and all the material was used to raise the land and it was grassed.

The grown ups did use it but not so many as the young. I used to go down nearly every evening. I remember once going in early September, right at the end of the season, one Sunday. I went down and the temperature dropped to 47. Coorr! it was so cold. I think Sunday bathing before that was highly unlikely because I had an old uncle on the Council, Alderman George Squires, and he would not allow anything on the recreation ground, not tennis, nothing! So I don't think the pool could've been. But this particular morning, about 1930, I distinctly remember it. The six day working week obviously had an effect on who could use it. When I was in my teens I think you could.

The Baths sub-committee is about the Guildhall. I tell you what, anything to do with Health, Reggie Robinson of Croxton, he was Public Health Officer, and his is the bungalow on the left just before you get to the church. He could tell you about the time the dead cow got in there. I'm sure Mr Robinson would know when it closed, but I think it was shortly after the new pool was opened.

Martin's April 17th 1715 Sturgeon, 13 stone 7 and was 7 foot 8 inches long and 1 yard 2 inches about. April 1737 7 foot 8 inches long weighing 13 stone 10 and a half pounds and a yard and 3 inches about, caught in Mill pit. One in Severn, about 7 foot long, was presented to the King as a great rarity. No staunches then, straight out to the sea.

I used to paddle at the iron bridges but I don't remember anyone swimming there. It was all full of bricks and things. Paddling between the bridges for tiddlers and things.

The Chalk workings, cart loads of stuff we put down one hole. Another lot I had to fill up with solid concrete. Workings right up to Vicarage Road. The Council, with Government grants, would have had a pool as we grew larger. I don't think we'd have ever had it but for the town expansion. In 1947 the penny rate raised £65. What can you do with that, even in those days. The average wage then was about £4 - 5. The pool fund worked jolly hard.

My father was an engineer at Burrells and became unemployed in 1929 when I was 14 and I had a hard job to get a job and my father couldn't pay £100 year to teach me the trade of reporter. I swam in the pool a lot and except in very bad weather you reckoned to get down every evening after work. We would knock off at 5.30, have tea and reckon to have a half hour before getting down there. There used to be quite gangs of us. I swam right up to and including the early war years, when I was home on leave.

Williams brought those edges off Crown Lands for £100 and whopped in application to put houses up there and I fought it tooth and nail, as I knew Crown Lands would be in trouble if they had sold something for grazing for £100 and he turned it into thousands. So I wasn't very popular but we got that lovely open space there. I think the fund raisers wanted an outdoor pool.

Letter from Mr Smith to Mrs Blain

Phone 3357

MR. — SMITH.

2 NEWTOWN
HARTFORD.FEB 17th 1960.

Dear Mrs Blain, Thank you for your most interesting letter received this morning, it gives me a real lift up to really know you have somebody backing you up to the full.

I think we can see many over to our side for yesterday and today many people including business people have told me they think it's a big task but they hope we succeed and will help when they can. So once we get some money coming in and they realise it's going well, they will throw their full weight behind us.

I have not given up the idea of a covered pool, this is what I would like to see happen.

Build an out door pool first, but

have it: so it can be leased at a later date and reversed. Then instead of handing the pool over to the council run it by a public body and keep raising money. First you would have it well down but lease the water, then raise the money to cover it.

However at first we must work hard to get the thing started, and make the money roll in. The answer I think is a weekly toll: draw up they have proved very successful, and at our first meeting I hope to put all details before you and if the committee agrees to go ahead (may that is going then we can look around for other ideas, I have a few in mind).

The first committee meeting is on Thursday 2nd March 7.30 PM KINGS HOUSE

This will be your only reminder of that meeting so please look to the date.

Yours sincerely,
Tom Smith

His legacy was a pool

A THETFORD man who died last week was one of the main forces behind a fund-raising effort for the swimming pool.

Thomas Smith, aged 71, was born in the town. He met his wife, Gladys, in Dedham when he was in the Royal Engineers, and they moved back to Thetford when they married nearly 45 years ago.

In the early 1960s Mr Smith was one of the founder members of the Thetford Swimming Pool committee set up to raise money to provide a town pool.

The committee raised thousands of pounds which it gave to the local council. The efforts were rewarded in 1972 with the opening of the pool, next to the Breckland Leisure Centre on Croxton Road.

Fellow committee member Brenda Young said: "He was an inspiration to us all, he worked so hard to get the money for the pool. It's something people tend to forget about now."



★ Thomas Smith.

Mr Smith also raised money for leukaemia research following the death of his son from the illness in 1970.

As well as his widow, Mr Smith leaves a daughter, Patricia, with whom he kept a family shop in Magdalen Street for the last 18 years. He died in a crash following a heart attack at the wheel of his van.

The funeral was on Tuesday at St Cuthbert's Church.

Thetford and Brandon Times, 29th July

Average Weekly Tote Takings 1961/5			
Year	Month	Income £ . s . d	Numbers
1961	March	73.04.00	1464
	April	89.18.00	1798
	May	115.17.10	2301
	June	131.01.03	2621
	July	137.12.06	2752
	August	135.12.10	2712
	September	131.01.06	2622
	October	145.13.05	2913
	November	145.13.10	2914
	December	136.19.09	2740
1962	January	144.02.09	2883
	February	144.15.06	2896
	March	151.08.03	3028
	April	145.14.06	2915
	May	148.13.00	2973
	June	148.02.00	2962
	July	147.12.00	2952
	August	147.04.05	2944
	September	146.02.06	2923
	October	145.06.00	2906
	November	143.08.06	2869
	December	145.01.06	2902
1963	January	142.07.07	2848
	February	141.18.09	2839
	March	144.14.03	2894
	April	137.01.09	2742
	May	138.00.05	2760
	June	134.02.09	2683
	July	131.06.10	2627
	August	126.08.09	2529
	September	124.06.05	2486
	October	123.06.10	2467
	November	122.04.09	2445
	December	120.00.06	2401
1964	January	115.06.10	2307
	February	114.04.11	2285
	March	119.03.00	2383
	April	111.02.01	2222
	May	111.03.11	2224
	June	110.05.02	2205
	July	109.19.00	2199
	August	103.09.10	2070
	September	107.14.00	2154
	October	105.07.06	2108
	November	102.15.08	2056
	December	97.17.04	1957
1965	January	100.02.09	2003
	February	99.06.06	1987
	March	103.15.02	2075
	April	93.19.02	1879
	May	93.13.04	1873
	June	92.19.01	1859
	July	90.15.10	1816
	August	86.05.05	1725
	September	82.09.06	1650

Press Cuttings from the Thetford Women's Institute
Scrap Book - 1963 to 1965

'Big step' towards Thetford pool

A RECENT meeting between representatives of Thetford Borough Council and the Swimming Pool Committee was described last night as "a big step forward" in the aim to have a new open-air pool in use by 1966.

The Mayor, Mr. R. P. F. Easten, who was chairman at the pool meeting, moved at last night's meeting of the Town Development and Planning Committee that the recommendations be accepted. The committee unanimously approved the recommendations.

The new pool will be 110 ft. long by 42 ft. wide, thus making it suitable for competition swimming. It will be 3 ft. deep at the shallow end increasing to

The committee dismissed the possibility of adopting an American grid system for roads on the industrial estate, and followed the policy of other new towns — naming their streets after famous industrialists. Names chosen for three roads on the two London Road estates were Burrell, Stephenson and Caxton Way, and for three cul-de-sacs, Faraday, Kelvin and Napier Place.

11 ft. beneath the proposed one-metre springboard and three-metre diving board.

The Development Committee agreed that the Borough Engineer, Mr. W. R. F. Jennings, should proceed with preliminary work on the design of a swimming pool on these lines.

It further agreed that the plans should be submitted as soon as possible to Norfolk Education Committee with a request for a grant, and with a view to tenders being invited early in 1965 to enable the pool to be constructed in time for the 1966 season.

Mr. Jennings was empowered to employ a firm to make test borings on the site between the Little Ouse and Brandon Road to ascertain ground conditions. Mr. Easten commented that there would be no point in going ahead if the site proved to be unsuitable.

It probably be arranged to main entrance facing
The possibility of the
ed ultimately will be
the pool will be
in mid-1965

FIRST 'YES' TO BATHING POOL PLAN

PLANS for a £60,000 swimming pool on the Brandon Road received approval in principle at last night's meeting of Thetford Town Council, although there was a bid to consider moving the entire scheme to the opposite side of the river.

The scheme, outlined by the Borough Engineer and Surveyor (Mr. W. R. F. Jennings) is for a championship-dimension pool with a separate diving pool raised some four feet higher at one end.

This, he said, was because, the water table was only eight feet below the surface and to go deeper would complicate the excavations.

TWOPENNY RATE

Of the total cost, it is estimated that £30,000 will have to be met by the Council, after contributions from Thetford Swimming Pool Fund which has been raising money for a number of years, and from Norfolk Education Committee.

After considering estimated receipts and running expenses, the pool would cost the town just over a twopenny rate, said the Town Clerk (Mr. W. Ellis Clarke).

The Council approved the scheme and agreed that inquiries should be made about loan sanction, that a grant application should go to Norfolk Education Committee, and that working drawings should be prepared.

OPTIONAL ITEMS

Following this, tenders will be sought as soon as possible and the bills of quantity prepared in such a way that if tenders exceeded the estimates, single items like the diving pool or buffet accommodation can be cut out for the time being.

Members thought it would be a mistake to lower the general standard proposed. The plan was not lavish, but it would provide a pool of reasonable standard for the town.

Lord Fisher suggested they might consider heating the pool for about six months of the year so as to increase its use, but he lost a motion that they should look at the possibility of shifting the entire scheme to what seemed a better site on the other side of the river.

Eastern Daily Press
8th July, 1964

Thetford & Watton Times
8th February, 1965

Press Cuttings from the Thetford Women's Institute
Scrap Book - 1963 to 1965

Thetford talks on swim pool deadlock

A sub-committee of Thetford Borough Council are to hold a meeting with representatives of Thetford's Swimming Pool Fund Committee to try and resolve the deadlock which has arisen over the question of a site for the new pool.

At Tuesday's meeting of the Council it was reported that a letter had been received from the Swimming Pool Committee asking whether the Council could now come to a decision regarding the siting of the pool. They said they would prefer it to be built on the land adjacent to Castle Park which had originally been purchased for this purpose.

The Town Clerk, Mr. W. Ellis Clarke, stated that the Council had originally approved the siting of the pool near Castle Park and had, in fact, made a planning application to this effect. Objections to the siting were raised by both the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the County Planning Department and the Council had subsequently agreed in principle to the pool being built on land off Brandon Road.

MAP VIEWS AWAITED

In any event, it was stated no firm decision could be taken until the Minister's views on the Town Map were known.

Mr. W. McFarlane said the Swimming Pool Fund Committee were going through a rather unfortunate and difficult time at the moment. It would be a great pity if they folded up now with so much already achieved.

The Mayor, Lord Fisher, Mr. C. J. Sear, Mr. H. W. Johnson and Mr. T. J. Lamb were appointed to the sub-committee to meet representatives of the Pool Committee to discuss the site and other matters concerning the proposed pool.

POOL DECISION BRINGS APPEAL

AN appeal has been lodged against the refusal of the Norfolk County Council to issue a certificate of alternative use for land at Brandon Road earmarked for Thetford's proposed swimming pool. A public inquiry will be held next May.

Thetford Borough Council heard on Tuesday that the receiver for the G. Williams Engineering Company Ltd. has appealed against the County Council's refusal to issue the certificate for the land, which is zoned in the Thetford Town Map for recreational purposes and public open space.

The Town Clerk (Mr. W. Ellis Clarke) said the land in question is the site previously earmarked for the construction of the new swimming pool and recreational area.

The Ministry of Housing and Local Government propose to hold a public inquiry into the appeal on May 18th.

Thetford & Watton Times
9th September, 1965

Eastern Daily Press
22nd January, 1965

Introduction to Bathing at Thetford by Sarah Batstone, donated to Tales from the River

The Historical Development of Bathing at Thetford, Norfolk: from Small Rural to Expanded Town, S.A.K. Batstone, 1994.

This document, a degree dissertation, was donated by Alan E Batstone 3 May 2022. The author, his daughter Dr Sarah Batstone (1971-2021), was brought up in Thetford from age 2 and knew the river pool. She chose bathing at Thetford for an academic presentation for her Honours degree in Sport at Birmingham university. She was a keen competitive swimmer with Thetford Dolphins and was an ASA coach tutor for many years.

Mr Batstone explained that this academic piece of work, fully referenced and based largely on interview and contact with older people who knew Thetford in 1880's and on, also includes a lot of documented archive research, and would be of great interest to anyone seriously researching the river pool.

Dr Batstone subsequently went on to research the development of bathing at Thetford and Birmingham and prepared a doctorate thesis in the History Department of Birmingham University in 2000. That thesis is available online.

The dissertation examines the history of river bathing at Thetford, focusing particularly on late 19th century to 1960s/1970s, looking at attitudes, facilities, swim places, conditions, users, including collecting accounts from interviews with local people and research from archives. It looks at changes in the expanding town and moves towards building an indoor swimming pool. It also mentions the spa and public bathing needs and facilities. Included are images and a hand drawn map of bathing places to illustrate the work.

Mr Batstone and his family have expressed their wish that this work be appreciated and of use and interest. The Tales from the River project and The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme (of which the project is a part) are very grateful for this generous donation which will be extremely valuable to the project.