

Regent Street Polytechnic Swimming Bath

In 1881 the educational pioneer, Quintin Hogg, purchased the lease of 309 Regent Street which had previously housed the Royal Polytechnic Institution. The following year he opened what was to become The Polytechnic Institute, which expanded his previous work in the Covent Garden area of London. Hogg's Institute provided technical and trade education classes, as well as social and sporting facilities for young working men (and later women) in central London.

Hogg began to redevelop 309 Regent Street as soon as he moved in, creating classrooms, engineering workshops, chemistry laboratories, a gymnasium and, in 1884, a swimming bath for the use of Institute members. The swimming bath was 75 foot long x 30 feet wide, with a three-sided gallery. It officially opened on 23rd September 1884 and the admission charge was 6d1s.

Swimming had been one of the first sports clubs which formed part of the Hanover United Athletics Club, named after the location of Hogg's first Institute building, off Hanover Street near Covent Garden. Legend has it that until the swimmers had their own pool in Regent Street, Hogg used to walk the boys to Highgate to swim in the ponds.

The swimming bath served a dual purpose. Each winter the water was drained out and the space was used as a Reading Room. During this time, the Polytechnic swimmers had to use alternative venues such as the Davies Street Baths in Soho.

The Polytechnic swimmers began to play water polo with considerable success, producing a series of winning teams and international players, such as Bob Grey, England Captain and first winner of the Studd Trophy in 1898. The Polytechnic Ladies Swimming Club introduced the first displays of "ornamental swimming" in the 1930s, a forerunner to synchronised swimming.

The swimming bath closed, due to health and safety concerns in September 1981. In 1995 modernisation to meet the needs of the expanding University of Westminster was combined with sensitive preservation of the building's historic character. At the heart of the redevelopment was the creation of The Deep End - an impressive social space on the site of the original swimming pool designed by Sheppard Robson Architects. The remaining ironwork and tiling were retained and the name chosen to reflect the history of the space.

The Deep End, together with the former Gymnasium, was refurbished during the summer of 2012 by Robert Hudson Architects to create new social and study spaces for students.

Relevant sources available in the University of Westminster Archives

Opening and early use

The most detailed accounts of the opening and continued use of the Swimming Bath can be found in the Polytechnic magazine and its predecessor, Home Tidings. Digitized copies of these are available free of charge online. The Archive also holds a copy of the 1884 opening programme.

Photographs

The Archive holds several undated photographs of the Swimming Bath from around the 1930s, as well as various photographs showing it in use by the Polytechnic's Swimming, Synchronised Swimming and Water Polo clubs up to the 1960s. Colour photographs of the abandoned pool during the 1980s have been donated to the Archive by a former student, Donald Lush.

Financial records

Many of the Polytechnic's Balance Sheet and Accounts specifically mention the expenses and receipts of the Swimming Bath.

Refurbishment, closure and re-development (1970s-1990s)

Plans to refurbish and later to close the Swimming Bath are discussed in both staff and student magazines during the 1970s and 1980s. There is also brief mention of the plans in the Board of Governors minutes.