

RESTORATION SPLENDOUR

Dr Daryl Leeworthy explains the history and benefits of the National Lido of Wales

Ninety years ago, in the aftermath of the General Strike and the long months of disruption to the coal industry that followed, the people of Pontypridd gathered in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park to celebrate the opening of the town's new lido. It was 30 July 1927. With its distinctive terracotta tiling evoking a warm Mediterranean feel amidst a backdrop of hills and mountains, the lido quickly became the pride of the town and a beacon of continental aquatic culture in the valleys of Wales.

The lido was built by Pontypridd Urban District Council according to the design of the council's surveyor, William Lowe. It was largely funded by a grant from the Miners' Welfare Fund, a body established by the government in 1921 to provide assistance for recreational, educational, and healthcare schemes in Britain's coalfields. Lowe was influenced by continental lidos and the contemporary interest in all things Roman. Excavations at Caerleon in 1926 had fully uncovered the famous amphitheatre there and it is hardly surprising that Pontypridd lido creates the impression of a Roman villa. Even today, its styling is unique - most of the other lidos in the South Wales coalfield were built in a pure arts and crafts style or in the simple concrete modernism of the 1930s.

Grew quickly

In 1928, Pontypridd Swimming Club was founded at the lido and grew quickly. Another great survivor of the 1920s, the club still uses the lido for training sessions in the summer months. Pontypridd SC's most famous member was Jenny James, the first

Welsh woman to swim the English Channel. She achieved that feat on 16 August 1951, when she was 24 years old. Born in the lido's inaugural year, Jenny James had a lifelong association with the lido, preparing for her long-distance swims in its open-air waters, and even working, as a young woman, as a lifeguard and swimming teacher during the summer season.

Jenny James died in 2014, aged 87, just as restoration work on the lido began.

Pontypridd's most celebrated son, the singer Tom Jones, also swam in the lido in his youth. One old resident of the town recalled seeing Jones 'swaggering around wearing white trunks with his comb always stuck inside them. The girls loved him'. The lido was an ideal place to perfect the moves that for more than 50 years have brought Jones great fame, and he has often recalled his visits fondly.

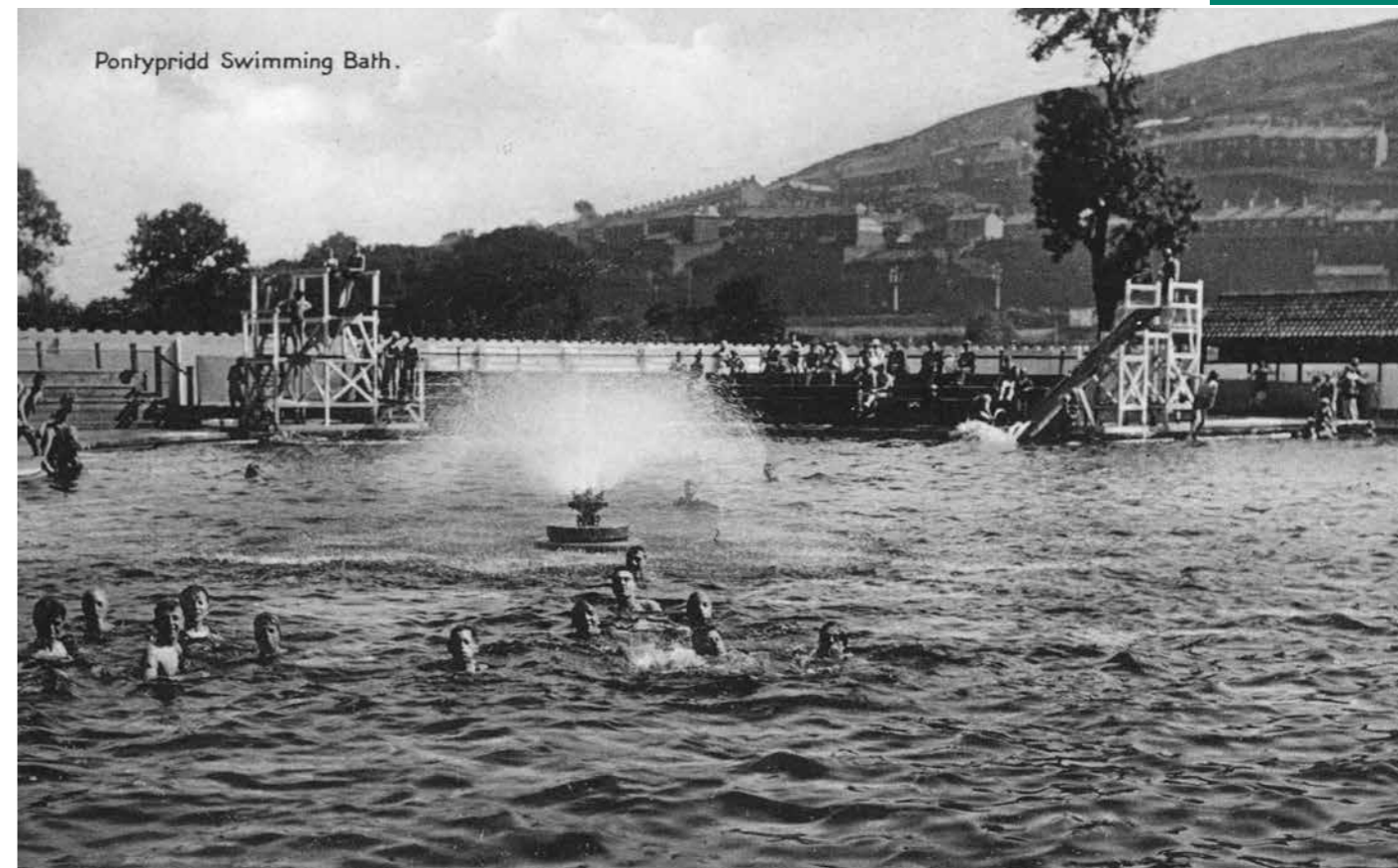
1940, the year Tom Jones was born, saw the first evacuees arrive in Pontypridd from London. Arriving in June as the Battle of Britain raged over the skies, they were met in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park by a welcoming committee that included the council chairman, Jesse Powderhill. He introduced them to the lido for the first time. It was soon a second home for many of them and became a haven from the concerns of war. On return visits to Pontypridd in the years after 1945, the lido was a welcome reminder of their time spent in the town.

Faithfully served

In this way, Pontypridd lido faithfully served residents and countless thousands of visitors for more than sixty years. But in 1991, the lido closed its doors seemingly ▶



Left: Cwm Draig Water Polo Club, Rhondda Cynon Taff's only water polo club, training hard at Lido Ponty in the summer of 2016. Above: the lido in less healthy times

Swimming Baths,
Pontypridd.

Pontypridd Swimming Bath.



The way we were: three picture postcard views of the old Pontypridd lido with plenty of spectators for the water polo and diving, whilst right, Pontypridd's Jenny James was the first Welshwoman to swim the English Channel



for the last time. Changing leisure habits and financial pressures on local authorities saw the conversion of many neighbouring open-air swimming baths in the region into indoor pools, but the lido's size and enclosed construction made this much more difficult and expensive to achieve. Instead, the water was drained, the building closed, and decay eventually set in.

By the mid-2000s, the lido had become dilapidated and the building unsafe. Despite its listed status, it teetered on the brink of either being rescued for future generations or falling down. Working alongside funding partners, including the European Regional Development Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and Cadw, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council sought to safeguard the building and restore it to its former glory. More than £6.3 million was raised in funding and, in 2014, contractors moved in.

The project followed a conservation ethos with as much of the existing fabric retained as possible. The iconic roofing tiles, which had reached their life expectancy, were replaced with the original designs; the outdoor bathing boxes that ringed the pool were painstakingly restored; and the main building of the lido brought back to life. Some of the original features, including the 1920s turnstiles and ticket hall, are talking points of any visit.

Keen to learn

A café and visitors' centre, which houses the museum and regularly plays host to school and community groups keen to learn about the lido's heritage, were built to provide modern facilities. In the museum is a unique survivor - a wallet from the early 1950s that was uncovered during the building work by one of the contractors, Dennis Lloyd. He >



From a scene of ivy-clad cubicles and cracked concrete to a lively facility at the heart of the community

‘The cold waters that sometimes dipped below zero on a cold spring day are a thing of the past, replaced by twenty-first century heated pools’

recalls the moment he found it:

‘I was repairing the brickwork in the old shower block at the Lido, removed a vent and spotted the wallet hidden behind. I opened it and out came a driver’s licence, insurance, and some 1950s stamps.’

The wallet once belonged to Thomas Herbert Sayer, who visited the Lido from Ridgeway in Newport. It seems likely it was stolen from Mr Sayer, any money removed, and hidden to disguise the crime.

The sympathetic art deco design of the modern wing complements the original building and provides panoramic views of the lido and the surrounding park. A second modern construction, which houses the lido’s

state-of-the-art heating systems, enabled the provision of indoor changing facilities akin to those found in indoor swimming pools.

Visitors can make their own choice as to whether to enjoy a true heritage experience or the creature comforts of the twenty-first century!

Clear choice

Restoring historic buildings always presents a clear choice between an absolutely faithful refurbishment that returns a building to its heyday or the provision of a modern facility that acknowledges the past but appeals to the public today. Lido Ponty was no different. The single pool, which was once one of the largest in Wales, and used regularly for water polo, diving, and other aquatic competitions, was converted into three separate pools catering for a wide variety of activities.

But the vital link to the lido’s sporting heritage has been retained. Taff Ely Triathlon Club, Cwm Draig Water Polo Club, RCT Performance Swimming Club and Pontypridd Swimming Club, continue to use the lido for training and competitions.

Conscious of its duty to the wider community, and in keeping with its heritage, Lido Ponty has been active in developing the next generation of lifeguards with dozens of local teenagers gaining their NPLQ qualifications through training courses held there. All of them have been subsequently employed at the lido, thereby overcoming one of the greatest challenges of a seasonally-operated leisure amenity. As the lido manager, Brent Bennett, reflects,

The lido has given many local young people the opportunity not only to acquire a professional qualification to embark on a career as a lifeguard, but also the opportunity to work in a fantastic heritage location and become part of the mystique of the lido, the jewel in Pontypridd’s crown.

Restoration success

Lido Ponty, designated the National Lido of Wales and managed by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, reopened to the public on 24 August 2015. It is a restoration success story.

Whether as a tourist attraction, a fun day out, a place of learning, or somewhere for serious competition and training, Lido Ponty has proven immensely popular.

The cold waters that sometimes dipped below zero on a cold spring day are a thing of the past, replaced by twenty-first century heated pools offering swimmers a cosy 28-degrees to swim and play in.

Ten thousand people passed through the historic turnstiles in the first two weeks, with more than 1,000 visitors filling the lido on a sunny summer’s day.

Five hundred intrepid swimmers even took a dip on Boxing Day last year.

And as the 90th anniversary season began, Lido Ponty looked forward to welcoming its 100,000th visitor.

It may even have been you! [E3](#)

