

WOKING'S WATERS IN 1910-11

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Compared to other parts of the country this area has been fortunate to have not been flooded this year, but as the photograph of Old Woking in 1910 reminds us, it is probably only a matter of time before disaster strikes parts of our area again.

The floods of 1910 were not the first (not even the first to be caught on camera), and they were certainly not the last, but over a quarter of a century would pass before any serious attempt to alleviate flooding in the Wey Valley would be made.

Records from the 17th century, when the Wey Navigation was built, show local farmers making claims against the Navigation Company for flooding of their fields. But one cannot help wonder how many of those floods were the fault of the construction of the man-made sections of 'canal', and how much was just the fact that much of this area was (and always will be) part of the natural floodplain.

The farmers of the area knew and accepted that, as did most locals when it came to building new homes, but by the early part of the 20th century with outside developers moving in to the area, much of the local knowledge was forgotten - or (as now) simply ignored!

When not in flood the River Wey was very much a friend rather than a foe to the local population with places such as Walsham at Pyrford and Triggs Lock at Sutton Green being favourite places for locals to go swimming.



The High Street at its junction with the lane to Woking Mill was under water, but the houses of Moorhatch were just about dry.

Apparently the local Swimming Club used to meet in Woking Town Centre before cycling off to one or other of these favourite bathing sites. I was told many years ago by a former member that if the men were swimming at Triggs Lock then the ladies would head to Walsham (and

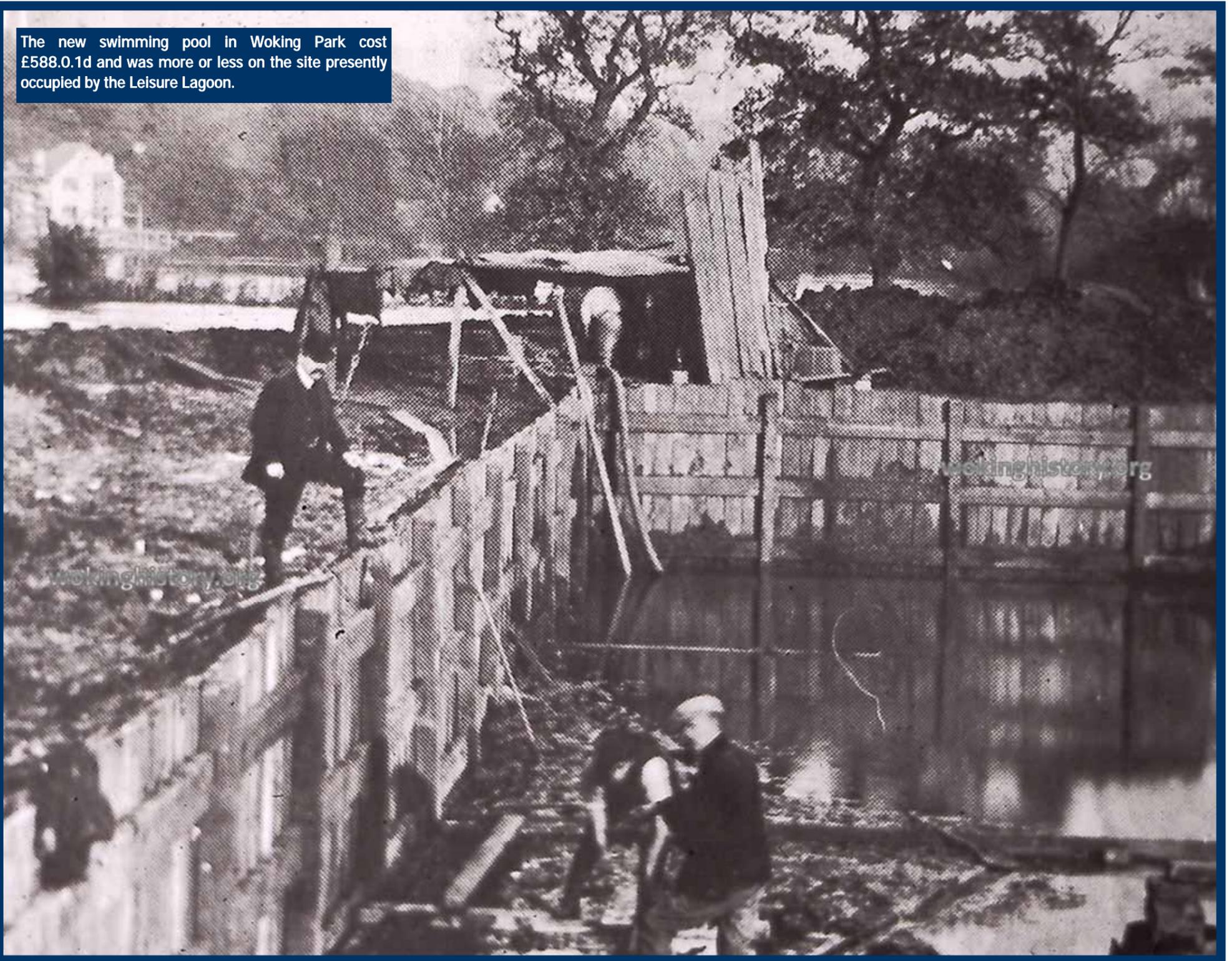
vice-versa) – the etiquette of Edwardian bathing obviously being that at least a few miles had to separate the sexes if so much flesh was going to be on show!

It is clear, however, that not everyone was

Members of the local swimming club congregate at the junction of Chertsey Road & Commercial Road.



The new swimming pool in Woking Park cost £588.0.1d and was more or less on the site presently occupied by the Leisure Lagoon.



quite so worried about such matters if a letter to one of the local papers in 1909 is anything to go by. Apparently some boys as old as thirteen or fourteen were bathing in the Basingstoke Canal 'without proper costumes' with some girls of the same age had 'no costumes or clothing whatever'!

'I am sure you will agree with me' wrote E Thomas of North Road 'that this sort of thing is not only undesirable and also unpleasant to passers-by, but it is not conducive to pure

thoughts and healthy minds in those who indulge, or the young lives who day by day witness these things'.

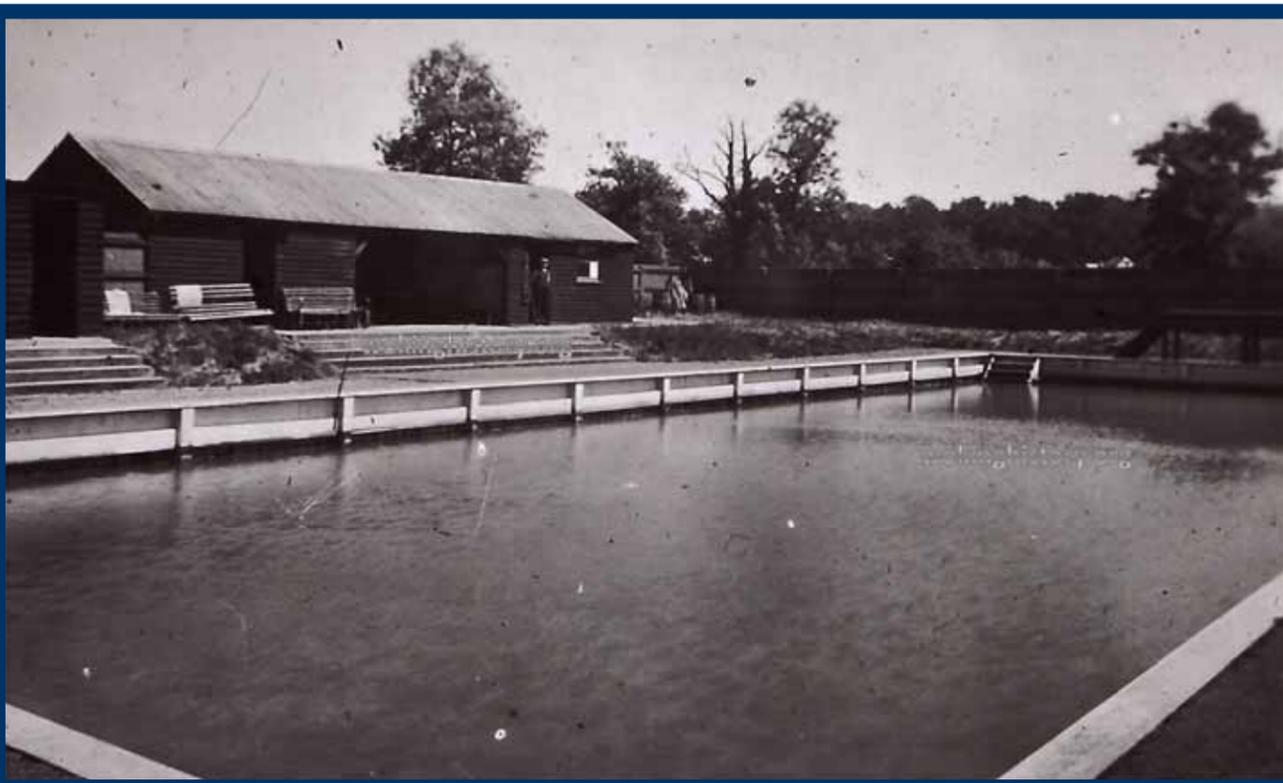
The construction of a swimming pool in Woking Park in 1910 changed all that, although from a sanitary point of view it may well be that it was more hygienic to continue to bath in the river or even the canal. In fact the water for the pool was simply pumped at the start of each season direct from the nearby Hoe Stream into the 'hole' that was the pool, giving the bathers a

distinctive 'tan' from the iron-stained water that flows from local heathland into the stream above Mayford.

The new pool, 40ft wide by 100ft long, was simply lined with old railway sleepers (which probably also gave their own 'hue' to the water), with a simple wooded hut acting as a changing room and a wooden fence around the perimeter – to prevent members of the public from seeing the swimmers.

A letter to a local newspaper the following year no doubt caused outrage amongst some by suggesting that some of the male members of the Swimming Club could give instruction to the ladies 'providing no objection was offered by the fair sex'! They pointed out that the practice 'has been followed at Walton with most excellent results. There at any rate mixed bathing has no terrors. Through the whole of last summer large numbers of ladies and gentlemen were to be found in the Thames bathing together, and the ladies were so keen that many of them, I believe, actually kept it up during the winter'.

In the end Woking Council decided that two mornings a week were sufficient time to set aside for 'ladies bathing' in the new pool, without (I assume) the benefit of any male instruction. Mixed bathing may be alright in Walton, but this is Woking for goodness sake!



THE DARTNELL PARK BOAT CLUB & THE PUBLIC PUNT HOUSE (THE BEGINNING OF THE BYFLEET BOAT CLUB)



Last week I mentioned about Dutch oil-tycoon F C Stoop setting up the Birchwood Tenants Company to build the workers housing at Birchwood Road in West Byfleet, but I also touched upon his previous development on the Dartnell Park Estate.

Part of that development included a tennis club, and on the Wey Navigation a boathouse for the exclusive use of the inhabitants of the estate. On the first floor of the boathouse was the clubroom opening out onto a wide balcony overlooking the waterway and stairs leading down to the boat house beneath with decking in front. Here initially there were punts for hire, but as more and more private boats started to be moored at the site, Mr Stoop decided to approach the owner of the land on the opposite bank (Byfleet's other great benefactor, Mr H F Locke-King), to see if he could buy the land for a separate boat house to accommodate the public hire punts.

The original boathouse on the Dartnell Park side of Parvis Bridge has sadly not survived, but the new one, completed in 1911-12, has fared better, as after the First World War in gratitude to the those who helped to fight for his native country, he started a boat club for the less well-off villagers of the area – eventually leaving the boathouse to the Parish Council for public use.



THE SALVATION ARMY CITADEL, BUILT IN 1910



In 1901 a radical army of men and women decided to march against the established church (not to mention the law) by holding illegal open-air meetings in the streets of Woking. At the head was Captain Prestage who was arrested at one such an event on the corner of Commercial Road and Chertsey Road (where the Swimming Club cyclists would later be photographed). At court he was ordered to pay a fine for what was really a minor misdemeanour, but when he refused the authorities were left with no alternative but to seize his belongings. The only problem was that he had given away all his possessions, so a brief spell in prison was the only solution. On his release he was paraded around town as a hero and the local Salvation Army had made its mark.

They soon settled down and converted a small tin hut in West Street (then called Ellen Street) into their first barracks or 'Citadel', before selling it a few years later to Christ Church to be used as a men's club and for Bible classes. They used the money to partially fund their new Young People hall and Citadel on the corner of Clarence Avenue and Church Street, built in 1910 at a cost of £1,500.

Here they stayed, until the 1970's when redevelopment of the site (more or less where Bejam's used to be, and now at the back of

Burger King in The Peacocks) forced them to move to the corner of Stanley Road and Walton Road.

Redevelopment of that site has forced the Army out of town, to their new hall in Sythwood.

