Case Study
Putney Pool and Dryburgh Halls, Wandsworth

Opened: March 1968
Address: Dryburgh Rd, SW15 1BL
Architect: Powell and Moya
Cost: £535,000
Peak: main; L-shaped 33.3m x 42' plus diving bay 42' 6" x 34' 6"; teaching pool 42' x 24'
Owner: Wandsworth Borough Council
Operator: DC Leisure
Listed: unlisted

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New here is a rare treat; a 1960s pool designed by one of the great architectural partnerships of the post war era, Powell and Moya (who were responsible for the famed Skylon at the 1951 Festival of Britain), and, moreover, one of the few pools in London still to have its diving boards in use.

Located within a residential area and set back from Richmond Road by a sunken car park and garden in front (above) – so as to preserve the trees on the site – Powell and Moya’s original design consisted of five linked, mainly white rendered concrete and glazed blocks. Entry is from Dryburgh Road, which, because of its slope, brings visitors onto the first floor of the complex. From here, to the left a corridor leads to a function suite and meeting rooms, known as Dryburgh Halls, raised on stilts above the car park (above left). A second block to the left contains a teaching pool at ground level, while at the rear of the site is another block for the plant and boilers, linking onto a railway line linking Clapham Junction with Richmond. (Pools on the Park, see page 242, is three miles westwards.)

But the largest and most interesting of the blocks at Putney is that of the main pool, also at ground floor level but with a first floor gallery running along two sides, one of which has its original laminated seats for 368 spectators. As can be seen opposite, the pool itself is L-shaped, thought to have been the first of several of this type built during the 1960s.

Cheaper to construct and operate than a separate diving pool (as existed at Crystal Palace), such an arrangement made it possible for diving to take place while the main 33.3m axis of the pool was in use. (Note that such was the British ambivalence towards metrication that although the pool’s length was metric, its width and depths were still in imperial measures.) Also of interest in the ceiling of the pool hall, formed by a series of reinforced concrete V beams. Not only do they look fine, as they appear to float above the glazed infills above the side walls, but they conceal within them roof lights and ventilation services that can be easily serviced from the flat roof above.

Had Powell and Moya’s original design been left intact, the Putney Leisure Centre, as it is now called, may well have been listed. But in the 1980s the corner of the L-shaped pool hall was infilled by a clumsy, glazed extension which formed a gallery at pool level and a fitness suite above. Its eight extra facilities are much appreciated, but the extension has undoubtedly compromised the clean lines and almost ethereal transparency of Powell and Moya’s original design, both from within and without, and meant the sacrifice of a courtyard and several trees, around which the whole composition of five blocks was centred.

A second courtyard and a roof terrace have been similarly covered by other extensions over the teaching pool and entrance block. In the grooves – Putney’s 5m diving board sits neatly under the apex of the roof’s V beams. One 3m and two 1m springboards complete the set. To shed extra natural light but without creating glare, the V beam on the left, glazed screens looked out onto the garden beyond.

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