

Case Study

Open Air Pool, Stonehaven 1934



Architect RR Gill
Size 165' x 60' (main pool)
Water Heated seawater, 290,000g
Opened 2 June 1934

Stonehaven Open Air Pool, near Aberdeen, is one of dozens of small pools whose value as a liquid asset far outstrips its modest architectural merits.

It is also the most northerly lido in the country (if one excludes the Trinkie Outdoor Pool at Wick, a natural seawater pool.)

Opened in 1934, after a Poll of Householders had been held in the town, Stonehaven's pool has undergone a series of upgrades over the years.

During its first season, when the water was neither filtered nor heated, only 20,000 bathers turned up, although a further 60,000 paid to watch them shiver. With surprising speed, Stonehaven Town Council installed a filtration and sterilisation system, as well as heating. As a result, the number of bathers more than doubled and the total number of tickets sold over the season exceeded 100,000.

In more recent years the opening of an indoor leisure centre nearby appeared to have sounded the death knell for the pool, especially when attendances dipped to only 13,500 in 1992.

Perched on top of an incline a few hundred yards inland from the North Sea, the pool at Stonehaven is accessed via a boarded walk from the town's harbour. Once through the turnstile a high wall protects swimmers from the chill winds that can and do blow in from the sea. Not on this sunny day in the late 1930s however, by the looks of it.

Its jolly appearance today therefore represents a remarkable turnaround in its fortunes.

When Aberdeenshire Council took over responsibility for the pool in 1994 they deemed its running costs of £90,000 a year too high a burden for ratepayers and mothballed the pool for a year. Two dozen supporters soon banded together to form the Friends of Stonehaven Pool, and the fightback began.

First came a survey which showed that the number of visitors who cited the lido as their sole reason for coming to Stonehaven was in the region of 45,000. Closure of the pool, argued the Friends, would be an economic body blow to the town.

The campaigners also stressed the health benefits of taking exercise in warm, salty water.

Victory for the Friends came in instalments. In 1997, they undertook to carry out the day-to-

day maintenance of the pool and were able to offer the voluntary services of plumbers, welders, joiners and electricians. This alone saved the Council around £20,000.

Eventually an official partnership agreement between the Friends and Aberdeenshire Council was signed in May 2000.

Under this agreement, Aberdeenshire Council provides a capital budget for the pool and pays for lifeguards, while the Friends take responsibility for marketing and routine repairs.

William Munro, Area Manager for Aberdeenshire Council and himself a keen swimmer, recalled, 'I had great confidence that a partnership with the Friends could work, but it has exceeded even my expectations.'

'We now have partnerships with a number of other community groups. We provide them with small grants, and find it has engendered a much greater level of



civic pride. But Stonehaven Pool is the flagship.'

According to Mary Mitchell, Chairman of the Friends, the financial situation has improved too. The pool costs around £30,000 to run each season and needs about the same number of people going through its doors.

After the hot summer of 2003, however, the pool made an exceptional profit of £27,000.

One of the Friends' best initiatives has been the revival of the pool's traditional midnight swim, held every Wednesday throughout the summer from 10pm until midnight or later.

When I succumbed to the offer of a 'swim under the stars' in 2001, I was astonished to find a long queue. Some swimmers had travelled from Aberdeen, others from Dundee, over 50 miles away, just for the pleasure of a nocturnal dip. For many this was a regular weekly fixture. There was a mix of ages – and in one case, three generations of one family – though teenagers were in the majority.

Music played over the pool's loudspeakers as we swam in a party-like spirit. Multi-coloured bunting wafted in the late night breeze.

A people's pool in every sense, and, as we shall learn in Chapter Eight, one of many such success stories in Britain today.

Come rain or shine, the water at Stonehaven stays heated to a luxurious 85° F – just one reason why the Scottish Tourist Board classifies the pool as a four star attraction. The lively colour scheme helps too.

