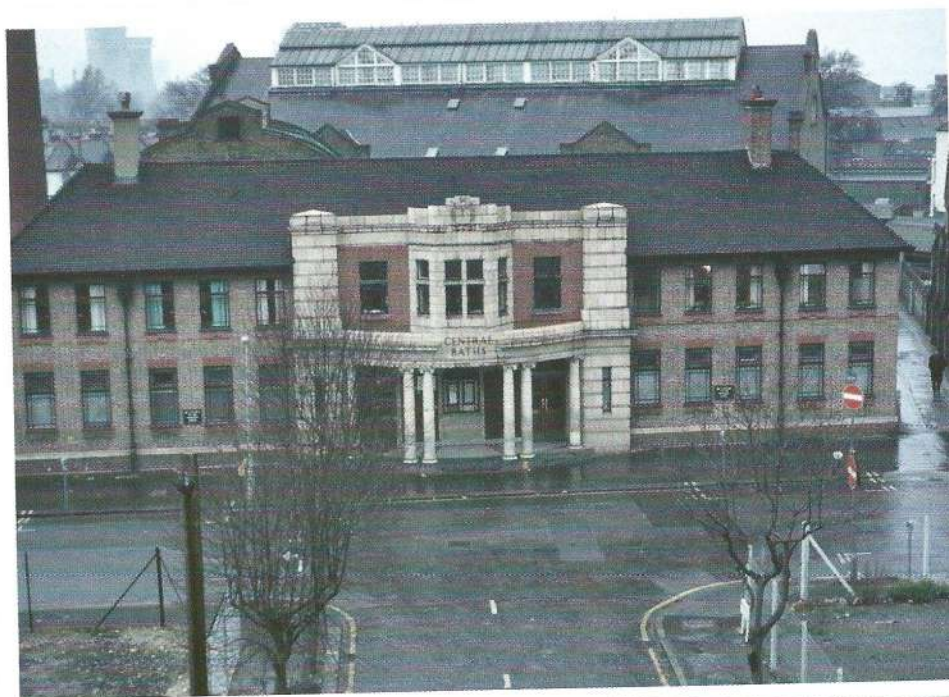


# THE SWIMMING SIXTIES

Masters coach and former Croydon Amphibians swimmer and water polo player **Tony Pearce** remembers a decade when swimming captured the mood of an era



The beginning of the Sixties... Bill Haley and the Comets had come to England and it was as if we were waiting for The Beatles to arrive. In swimming then, there were only two age groups - junior (16 and under) and senior (over 16). Swimming was still waiting for age groups for children to arrive.

While attending a Surrey county swimming training course, I had learned all about Amphibians Swimming Club. They had been runners up in the men's 4x100 medley relay at the nationals. Swimming the strokes at the famed Derby Baths in Blackpool were Ron Fairchild (backstroke), Ian Watson (breaststroke), John Cardwell (butterfly) and Roger Rollings (freestyle). They were then the club's big heroes indeed.

I had gone as far as I could with my club, Gorringe (Park School) Swordfish Swimming Club in Mitcham. For me, it was time to move on. So, I got on my bike and pedalled all my way to Croydon. Homework done. Check battery lights in working order. Bicycle pump on. Hope I don't get a puncture. Where's my padlock? Oh no, it's going to rain again.

Once there, the statuesque Town Hall clock acted as a beacon for the winding downhill

*'Although run down in appearance, Croydon Central Baths with its grandiose, white-pillared entrance, still had a certain ambience'*

Scarbrook Road to Croydon Central Baths, the home of Amphibians Men's Swimming Club. It was also Croydon Ladies' Swimming Club. Single sex swimming clubs were the norm then.

Although run down in appearance, Croydon Central Baths still had a certain ambience - the grandiose, white-pillared entrance, through wooden doors, past the matriarch in the cash desk, to a foyer leading to no less than three swimming pool entrances.

## Nice badge

Two pools - one indoor 25-yard and one derelict outdoor pool either side of which a long corridor led to the main 33.3 yards pool. The Amphibians noticeboard on the wall. What a nice badge, I thought. As was the welcome into the pool from the club's secretary, Edgar

Warner. His overall official club attire included a smart cream coloured jacket with a predominant Amphibians club tie. I was a bit nervous at first, but his firm handshake, to me, was a welcoming assurance. Family.

He then introduced me to the swimming coach. His name was Harold Judd. Harold reminded me of the Charles Atlas advertisement. I wasn't even going to think about kicking sand in his face. He had obviously been a swimmer in his heyday. To me, then, he really looked the part of what a swimming coach should be. Inspiring. It was then that I made my mind up that one day I was going to be a swimming coach.

To me now, that has to be the irony of all time. Harold had a young assistant coach - a young Amphibians swimmer just starting his swimming coaching career, Bobby Brown. Bobby went on to become the club's coach and was also the father of TV illusionist Derren Brown. With both Harold and Bobby, I was in good hands. I had no chance as a sprint freestyler, as there were too many good swimmers around with such inherited wealth. But they spotted that I had potential as a backstroke swimmer. At that point, I should have turned to distance freestyle, but that's another story.

## County record

However, I eventually broke the Surrey county junior backstroke record at the Croydon Central Baths, where admittedly I had a home advantage. There seemed to be no official requirement for backstroke flags then. But the roofing infrastructure at the deep end and the suspended water polo goal at the shallow end were timely reminders that the wall was coming. We were coached then to touch with one hand for a bucket-type turn in order to keep on the back the whole time.

When I became a senior, I was swimming for Surrey and swam the backstroke leg for the Amphibians medley team winning the Surrey county title. I still have that medal along with all the others in an old black case in a corner somewhere. I discovered it some while ago. The medal is rusty now. Leading off with my backstroke leg, being the young newcomer, I had to get as good a start as possible - a real responsibility, as the others were to follow. TEAM: Together, Each of us Achieves More.

Ian Watson swam the breaststroke. He was an exponent of swimming breaststroke with his head up as, at that time, some part of the head had to be above the surface of the water. Unlike the other strokes, this was just the beginning of where the rules of competition were dictated by the advancement of the biomechanics of the stroke itself. In those days, although one evolved from the other, breaststroke was breaststroke and butterfly was butterfly.

Then followed John 'Ginger' Cardwell, a City of London policeman, who swam the butterfly. To me, he was a colossus. I vividly remember one particular training night, when the weather was so cold outside that a pool air condensational mist came off the water.

Big challenge training swim - 10x100 yards + 10 per cent on PB with full (partial) recovery. The physiological aspects of the modern





Left: Tony Pearce (rt) at a 1986 seminar with former ASA education officer John Verrier and ISTC East region secretary Carol Buykx; opposite page: Croydon Baths in their heyday; below: the clocktower at Croydon Town Hall



controlled interval method (CIM) of training were beginning to come into being in club sessions. The sight of Ginger emerging from the mist at the deep end, particularly when swimming butterfly, was some spectacle.

#### Drop-dead sprinter

Then there was Roger Rollings on the final freestyle leg. He openly boasted that he never trained, and to everyone's knowledge, he didn't. That's how he used to psych out his opponents - the archetypal 'drop-dead sprinter', considering he utilised throwaway turns. What a super talent he was.

He was also a tremendous character who put a smile on the face of swimming. On the podium at the Blackpool nationals, he received his medley relay medal while smoking a celebratory cigar.

After swimming training, there was water polo. To learn water polo after swimming was considered compulsory in those days. In fact, a lot of swimmers wore water polo caps even when swimming training and competing in races. It was almost as if the two disciplines were one.

Amphibians had three senior and, at one time, two junior teams. The water polo balls were like large, heavy medicine balls. Nurtured by both Geoff Porter and Pat Stone, I quickly graduated to Surrey county training, where I eventually played water polo for Surrey juniors.

Unlike in swimming, 'junior' was under 18. It was normal in the game then that the opponent would literally go for the man first even before thinking about gaining possession of the ball. You grew up pretty quick when you started to play water polo.

*'He was a tremendous character, who put a smile on the face of swimming. On the podium at the Blackpool nationals, he received his medley relay medal while smoking a celebratory cigar'*

At this point, I probably should have carried on as a water polo player. I didn't, but that too is another story.

#### Iconic

By the end of the 1960s, The Beatles had come (and just about gone) and so had peace, love and the iconic Woodstock Music Festival. It was then that age group swimming for children emerged, run by their parents. Swimming today is a child of the children of the 1960s and their coach an old hippie they have for a pal.


Amphibians and Croydon Ladies amalgamated. While either training or competing, caps and goggles became essential attire. The beginning of the 1970s was the end of an era. Croydon Central Baths was demolished with, by all accounts, the promise of a bigger and better replacement. And then from the rubble, like a phoenix, arose a giant car park (previously referenced in two reminiscing articles last year - Ed).

But something else happened. Swimming for adults - masters swimming - evolved. Yes, you can now be your own age group parent. Today's swimming club is not only about retaining

young swimmers through to adulthood, it is now through the generations.

When Croydon Amphibians won the Surrey County Masters Swimming Championships recently, I was not surprised.

What I experienced over half-a-century ago was a very special time in swimming. It caught the mood of an era. And, of course, as time goes by and the older you get, the faster you swam as a kid. But what I have really learnt is that although everything changes, somehow everything still seems to manage to remain the same. Baffling.

A while ago, I took a trip down memory lane, travelling through Croydon to the spot where the Croydon Central Baths formerly stood. And I found that the giant car park was still there. 

• Tony Pearce is head coach of Barnes SC's seniors and masters squad. In 2012 he won the US Southern Pacific 1500m freestyle masters long course championship. He was also a water polo finalist at the 1998 World Masters Games.

# REFLECTIONS