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Parliament Hill Fields Lido

833/FN/002 - HISTORICAL REPORT FOR PAUL VICK ARCHITECTS

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Introduction

The Parliament Hill Fields Lido is a popular and significant urban outdoor swimming venue at the southernmost tip of Hampstead Heath, within Parliament Hill Fields. It was opened in 1938 and has remained in continuous use since, part of the rich history of public swimming on the Heath which includes the three Victorian-era bathing ponds to the north. It was designed and built at the height of lido popularity in Britain, and is a rare survivor. It has been Grade II listed since 1999.

The primary significance of the Parliament Hill Fields Lido rests in its remarkable survival and the place in the community that it has held for many decades. It is one of a very small number of lidos in the UK which have remained in continuous use since first opening, having been successfully maintained and updated for over 80 years. The secondary significance of the Lido rests in its utilitarian Art Deco style, and particularly its enclosed form. It is typical of municipal projects of the time, and recalls several lidos which have since been demolished.

Building Description

The Parliament Hill Fields Lido sits within Parliament Hill Fields in Gospel Oak, on the south-east corner of Hampstead Heath. The entrance to the lido faces south east, and is surrounded on all sides by footpaths, with a carpark to the south. It is overlooked from the east by Lissenden Gardens, an early example of purpose-built mansion flats in London.



Figure 1 - An Aerial view of the Lido and its surrounds. © 2024 Google Earth: Airbus, Maxar Technologies.

The Lido sits low into the surrounding landscape, and has always been overlooked by the surrounding properties. The London Borough of Camden has stated that “the large expanse of the modern flat roof of the Lido (albeit a listed building) is already a visual intrusion on the Metropolitan Open Land.”¹ The Lido has had a flat roof of similar design since it was built in 1938, unlike some other examples of Rowbotham and Smithson lidos elsewhere in London.

¹ 2017/5886/P: Full Planning Permission for the Installation of roof-mounted solar panels on the existing metal roof of Parliament Hill Lido Building. 20.12.2017.

The Lido complex largely retains its original, utilitarian Art Deco styling, with some significant modifications made since its opening in 1938. The complex is on a rectangular plan, with a main entrance block and two blocks either side facing south west, sheltering walls around the pool deck itself, and a cafe block facing north. All the blocks are single storey, flat-roofed structures, with parapets shielding the flat roofs from ground-level view.



Figure 2 - A view of the Lido entrance from the southwest of Parliament Hill Fields. Photographed by Christine Matthews. © CC-BY-SA-2.0

The Lido complex is built in stock brick, mostly in an English bond pattern. The principal elevation features the main entrance through a flat arch, and three small slit windows on either side. Above this entrance are the words "Parliament Hill Fields Lido," with the City of London Corporation coat of arms above. This entrance is accessed via a staircase, although a side entrance to the right, up a ramp with modern stainless-steel railings, now provides primary access to the lido for bathers. The two blocks on either side of the main

entrance contain offices and changing rooms; the male changing room is in the west arm and the female changing room is in the east arm. The east block above the female changing room has a number of solar panels on its roof.



Figure 3 - A wide image of the pool deck exterior from the northeast corner. © 2024, Paul Vick Architects

The pool deck surrounds a large pool, 61m x 27m, filled to deck level, and an aeration fountain in a 'wedding-cake' design to the west end of the deck, now surrounded by a modern glass partition and decorative mosaic. The north-west and north-east corners of the deck contain staged seating or steps, and in the north-west corner there is an octagonal 'splash pool' for young children. There is also a small children's slide entering the main pool nearby.

Grade II listed since 1999, the lido is:

"...included as the most sophisticated of the thirteen lidos constructed by the LCC between 1909 and 1939. No other British city attempted so comprehensive a programme, and Parliament Hill Fields is considered the best representative example of the rectangular pools enclosed by high walls found in urban locations."²

² List Entry 1113025: [Parliament Hill Fields Lido](#). English Heritage.

A Brief History of the Lido

Public swimming has a long history in the UK, and Lidos form a significant part of the leisure architecture of the country. London's history of outdoor bathing is particularly notable – ponds, lakes, and the Thames were regularly used for bathing before the opening of the “first formalised public outdoor swimming pool”, the Peerless Pool in Finsbury, in 1743.³ The Parliament Hill Fields Lido's near neighbours, the Hampstead Heath bathing ponds, are one of London's most famous outdoor swimming venues. They were originally dug as reservoirs for the city, but have formally been used for bathing since the 1880s.⁴ Bathing for leisure became established and within reach of the middle classes around this time, and by the early 20th century, “leisure as well as lengths” was an important part of British life that had spread to several cities.⁵

Lidos reached their heyday in the 1930s, with more than 160 being built across the UK, as well as a range of other outdoor swimming ponds and tidal pools (some dating to the 18th century). In London alone, there were at least 60 open air pools by 1951.⁶ There are now around 120 active lidos in the UK,⁷ most of which are historic lidos which have been the subject of restoration campaigns. In that it has been in continuous use since its opening, Parliament Hill Fields Lido is an unusual survivor. As foreign travel became more affordable from the mid-twentieth century, many lidos fell into decline, and in the 1980s and 1990s, many dilapidated lidos were lost across the UK.⁸

The London County Council (LCC) undertook a significant lido-building programme in the 1930s, which resulted in 13 lidos being built, of which Parliament Hill Fields was the twelfth. Following the First World War, there was a renewed British drive for public health, combined with a drive for investment and construction of housing and new public assets.⁹ Physical

³ Smith, *Liquid Assets*, 2005: 12.

⁴ Davies and Corney, *Taking the Waters*, 2012.

⁵ Beanland, Christopher, 2020: *Lido*. 2.

⁶: Smith, *Liquid Assets*: 26.

⁷ [The Big Lido List](http://TheBigLidoList.allthelidos.co.uk), allthelidos.co.uk. Accessed 22/08/2024.

⁸ ‘[What's driving Britain's lido renaissance?](#)’, National Lottery Heritage Fund. Accessed 22/08/2024.

⁹ Ashton, 2020: *Practicing Public Health*.

exercise and open spaces in cities played a key role in this drive, all of which coalesce in London's extensive lido-building programme.

Construction of the Parliament Hill Fields Lido began in 1937, and it opened on 20th August 1938, having cost £34,000,¹⁰ - the most expensive of the 13 London County Council lidos. There was some protest from local residents of Gospel Oak at the time (and a petition sent "by residents on the Highgate side"¹¹), but the LCC answered these concerns by stating how popular their existing open air swimming pools had been, and that the Lido "would not interfere with the general amenities for Parliament Hill or Hampstead Heath."¹²



Figure 4 - The main entrance to the lido taken shortly before it opened, 1938. © Architectural Press Archive/ RIBA Collections, photographed by Charles Borup.

¹⁰ 'Construction of the Lido', <https://parliamenthilllido.org/the-construction-of-the-lido>. [Accessed 21st November 2024].

¹¹ 'Parliament Hill Lido Scheme: Unsuccessful Protest by Tenants' in *St Pancras Chronicle*, Friday 18th March 1938, p.10.

¹² 'Parliament Hill Lido: The L.C.C. Regret -', *St Pancras Gazette*, 3rd December 1937, p.5.

The Lido was designed by architects Harry Rowbotham and T. L Smithson. Rowbotham and Smithson worked for the London County Council during the interwar period, and were the team behind several other London lidos, including Brockwell and Victoria Park. Both of these lidos were very similar in design to Parliament Hill Fields. The Victoria Park Lido, opened in 1936, was built on an almost identical plan to Parliament Hill Fields, although with pitched rather than flat roofs. It was demolished in 1990, and has been replaced by a car park. Brockwell Lido, however, survives.

More lidos were planned by the London County Council, but the arrival of the Second World War put a halt to the building programme. Following the dissolution of London County Council, the Lido's ownership passed first to the Greater London Council in 1965, and then in 1986, to the London Residuary Body after the dissolution of the Greater London Council. The City of London Corporation took the Lido on in 1989 along with the rest of Hampstead Heath,¹³ and retain ownership and responsibility for the Lido today. The significance of the Parliament Hill Fields Lido lies not in its design or architecture necessarily, but in that it has remained in continuous use since 1938, and remains a community hub. It is estimated that over 100 lidos have been lost in the UK in the same period of time.

The Lido has been a focal point for sport and community for over eight decades, hosting many swimming competitions as well as hosting lessons and coaching. Not long after opening, female coaches were hired and women were permitted to have swimming lessons at the Lido¹⁴ It has been and remains home to a number of swimming associations, and has been a popular training pool. Judy Grinham, a member of the Hampstead Ladies Swimming Club, trained and raced at the Lido before going on to win a Gold Medal for Britain in the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, for the 100m backstroke, as well as further Gold medals at the Commonwealth Games and European Championships.¹⁵

¹³ Hoines, 2005.

¹⁴ Women Coaches for Lido Now! In *St Pancras Gazette*, Friday 9th September 1938, p.1.

¹⁵ '[Judith Grinham](#)', TeamGB.com. [Accessed 21st November 2024].

Another famous swimmer to train and compete at the Lido was Susan Halter (née Zsuzsa Nador). Halter competed for Hungary in the 1948 Olympic games in London, in the women's 100m freestyle – the following year, having settled in London, she swam in the London County Council swimming championships at the Lido.¹⁶ She had first come to London in 1944, a Jewish refugee who had escaped Nazi imprisonment after the invasion of Hungary.¹⁷

There have been a number of tragic incidents at the Lido. In 1939, 15-year-old Matthew Fitzgerald died while diving at the Lido. A regular use of the Lido, Fitzgerald was found by the coroner to have had a pre-existing condition which caused his death following the dive into cold water.¹⁸ In 1976 a young boy, Enrico Sidoli, was murdered at the Lido. Following an altercation, he was held under the water until he went into cardiac arrest; attempts were made to resuscitate him, and he spent 11 days in hospital before succumbing to his injuries. His murder has never been solved.¹⁹

¹⁶ 'Swimming Gala' in *Chelsea News and General Advertiser*, Friday 8th July 1949, p.8.

¹⁷ '[London 2012: My Olympic Experience](#)' in *The Telegraph*, 7th August 2012, online. [Accessed 21st November 2024].

¹⁸ 'Highgate Boy's Dive to Death' in *St Pancras Gazette*, Friday 4th August 1939, p.1.

¹⁹ '[Enrico Sidoli: £20k appeal goes on in search of 1976 heatwave killers](#)' in *The Islington Tribune*, Friday 27th July 2018. Online. [Accessed 21st November 2024].

Material Changes to the Lido

A number of significant refurbishments have been made to the Lido over time, not only for general maintenance, but also to improve safety, accessibility, and sustainability in line with changing standards.



Figure 5 - The pool deck before the opening of the Lido, 1938. © Architectural Press Archive/ RIBA Collections, photographed by Charles Borup.

Between 1951-53, war damage to parts of the Lido building was repaired along with the parts of the pool deck paving and boundary walls.²⁰ In the 1960s, the changing rooms were reduced in size, partly due to a continuing decline in popularity of the Lido.²¹ The Lido originally had a number of diving towers and boards, though these were mostly removed in the 1960s and

²⁰ Parliament Hill Lido Plans. 1951-53, plans. LCC/PK/CON/01/P681.

²¹ ['The Lido: Changes over time'](#), ParliamentHillLido.org. [Accessed 21st November 2024].

1970s due to safety concerns.²² The last diving board was removed in 2003, as the pool's maximum depth was 2.6m, less than the 3.2m recommended by the guidelines of the Amateur Swimming Association.²³ One of the original diving boards was at one point converted into a Lifeguard Tower, and is known as Alwyn's tower, after the late Lifeguard, Alwyn John.²⁴



Figure 6 - View of the pool deck from the north-west corner looking towards the entrance, showing the children's splash pool, fountain, and main pool, as well as patio surrounds. © 2024, Paul Vick Architects.

In the 21st century, a significant refurbishment took place in 2004-5, which cost £2.8million. The paddling pool was replaced, ramps added to the entrance and the cafe to improve accessibility, and improvements were

²² Smith, *Liquid Assets*.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ ['The Lido: Changes over time'](https://parliamenthilllido.org/), ParliamentHillLido.org. [Accessed 21st November 2024].

made to the filtration system, much of which had been original and was beginning to fail.²⁵

The largest change made in this renovation, however, was the stainless-steel tanking of the Lido - believed to be the first such tank on an outdoor pool in the UK.²⁶ This significantly reduced the depth of the pool, from 2.6m to 2m at its deepest point, and so too the volume of water, improving the efficiency of filtration. This was also improved by the addition of surface-level filters.



Figure 7 - Image of the male changing rooms. © 2024, Paul Vick Architects.

The changing rooms have been altered over time, as shown by figures 7 and 8. The beams visible today above the changing rooms are understood to have been installed in 1995.²⁷

²⁵ Smith, *Liquid Assets*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Structural Assessment of Parliament Hill Lido for new PV panels on the Male Changing Room Roof for Sykes and Son Ltd. Ref 23405, 16th January 2024.



Figure 8 – Male changing rooms before the opening of the Lido, 1938. © Architectural Press Archive/ RIBA Collections, photographed by Charles Borup.

From 2014-15, the cafe block to the north was renovated, and opened to the north to serve customers from Parliament Hill Fields and Hampstead Heath as well as those inside the Lido itself. A sauna was also added to the Lido for use in the winter.²⁸ Also in 2014, storm damage to the Lido necessitated the replacement of the security fencing atop the boundary walls. The new security fence is made up of stainless steel 'fins' installed in 2015, designed by Peter Morris Architects.²⁹ In 2018, a series of solar panels were added to the east block of the complex.³⁰

²⁸ ['The Lido: Changes over time'](#), ParliamentHillLido.org. [Accessed 21st November 2024].

²⁹ ['The Whistling Wall - Parliament Hill Lido'](#), Peter Morris Architects, [Accessed 21st November 2024].

³⁰ 2017/5886/P: Full Planning Permission for the Installation of roof-mounted solar panels on the existing metal roof of Parliament Hill Lido Building. 20.12.2017.

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National Lottery Heritage Fund, <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/>

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