

Case Study

Purley Way Lido, Croydon 1935–79



Architects CE Boast
Cost £15,600
Size 200' x 70' and 100' x 60'
Water freshwater, 650,000g
Opened 20 July 1935
Closed 1979
On site now Garden centre

Drive down the Purley Way section of the A23 today and there seems little to arouse the imagination. Just another anonymous arterial route, leading from Croydon's curious cluster of postwar high-rise office blocks to the distant delights of Brighton and the south coast.

Yet seventy years ago there was hardly a road in Britain to match it for sheer excitement.

For Purley Way was a gateway to the world – and the modern world at that.

Completed as one of the country's earliest bypasses in 1925, the road's major landmark was Croydon Aerodrome, London's first airport, originally laid out in 1920. In 1928 the airport's growing stature was confirmed by the construction of a substantial passenger terminal, backing onto Purley Way, where it was joined by the Aerodrome Hotel.

Here at the 'Gateway to the Continent' gathered the privileged few for Imperial Airways flights to Paris, Berlin and beyond. Here came the curious in their thousands to see Charles

Lindbergh land from America, and Amy Johnson take off for Australia.

Purley Way soon became Britain's first main road to be lit by newly developed sodium lighting, suspended on cables down the centre of the highway. When the entire route was lit in 1936 the BBC staged a special broadcast to mark the occasion.

Meanwhile modern factories sprang up on nearby estates with roads called Commerce Way, Progress Way and Trojan Way. They manufactured aircraft and car parts, electrical components, adding machines, and a sparkling new drink called Tizer.

To add to the airport terminal and hotel, the Bowater corrugated box company built on Purley Way one of London's most finely articulated Art Deco factories.

Such was the hotbed of modernity into which the Purley Way Lido arrived, directly across from the airport, in July 1935.

As the Croydon Borough Council's motto had it, 'Sanitate Crescamus'. By Health We Progress.

But this was no ordinary London lido. Hailed by the local press as a 'Masterpiece of Science and Skill', it was quite different from its understated brick counterparts being built north of the River Wandle by the London County Council.

Above all, dominating the parkland setting was its main 200 foot long service building, a crisp Modernist block faced in white concrete with extensive metal framed windows and skylights.

In common with its hi-tech neighbours, Purley Way Lido brimmed with innovation, soon becoming billed as 'the electric pool'.

Lighting was installed all over; under the water, amid the swaying palms planted in the shingle beach areas (see page 22), and within the pool's two stunning Art Deco fountains (see left), whose lights changed colour at regular intervals, creating a memorable tonal effect on its green 'Cullamix' cast stone surfaces.

Unusually, but predictably in the circumstances, the water was heated, by an electric boiler. >>

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▲ Of all the London area's lidos built during the 1930s, **Purley Way** came closest to the scale and grandeur found at such coastal resorts as Morecambe, New Brighton and Weston. Photographed here in 1935 is the lido's two-storey main block

on Waddon Way, and (left) its first floor café area with stairs leading up to the roof terrace. Both the exterior and interior detailing showed distinct stylistic similarities with the Croydon Airport terminal built across Purley Way seven years earlier.

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▲ Viewed here from the south, in 1969, **Purley Way Lido** was accessed from Waddon Way and formed part of an extensive open space otherwise used as playing fields. Directly across Waddon Way can be seen the freestanding Waddon Waterworks, which presumably supplied the lido.

Set in the midst of a 4.5 acre site offering ample room for sunbathing, the pool was cruciform in plan, with a 15 foot deep diving pit forming one end of the shorter axis, octagonal fountains at each end and a children's paddling pool.

Architect CE Boast's original plans provided for a separate café

on the south side, but in the event the 200 foot long block on the north side proved sufficient.

Croydon Airport (not shown) lay a few hundred yards to the west, so that the drone of aircraft taking off and coming in to land must have been a regular accompaniment to this otherwise parkland setting.

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» It was purified, moreover, not with the usual chlorine, but with ozone, described at the time as 'the most up-to-date method in existence'.

The ozone – a condensed form of oxygen – was created by subjecting dry air to electrical stress. It was then introduced into the water through rows of jets ranged along the floor of the pool.

Apart from recreating the smell and spray of seawater, one advantage was that, unlike chlorine, ozone did not sting bathers' eyes.

All these modern features, plus the lido's generous 200 x 70 foot main pool area, convinced local councillors that Purley Way would soon be on the international swimming map.

'Within five minutes of leaving their aeroplane,' they pointed out, 'members of a foreign water polo team could be in their dressing-rooms, preparing to take part in a contest in one of the best equipped water pools in the country.'

Their hopes were not realised. But at its peak before the Second World War, Purley Way was nonetheless considered one of the leading pools of its time, able to cater for 3,000 bathers a day.

But like the adjoining airport – eclipsed by Heathrow during the 1950s – its star gradually waned. The heating system was switched off. Chlorine replaced ozone when the latter was found to damage the skin.

By 1979, the lido's final season, the total for the whole summer had dropped to 28,000.

Two years later the pool was no more. In its place, as at Mill Hill and Durnsford Road in north London, a garden centre opened.

As seen opposite, however, not all was lost.



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▲ There really is no other lido relic like it in Britain today.

Seventy years after two American Olympic gold medallists – Pete Desjardins (the 'Little Bronze Statue') and Harold 'Dutch' Smith – put on a daredevil display from its heights 'to stun and thrill the crowds' at the lido's opening, the diving stage of the **Purley Way Lido** remains instantly recognisable on the local skyline.

Yet how different its setting. Stranded amid the potted plants

and shrubs of a typical suburban garden centre, the concrete diving stage, with its three, five and ten metre boards, now serves as an advertisement hoarding.

Closer inspection of the garden centre's main block (*above in the background*) also provides a clear idea of the lido's former scale and sophistication. Indeed it is almost as if both surviving structures are merely biding their time until a new outdoor pool is recreated in their midst.

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