

The Rom Skatepark, Hornchurch

Britain's first listed skatepark

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based on research by **Simon Inglis**, author of *Played in London - Charting the Heritage of a City at Play* (English Heritage 2014) and **Dr Iain Borden** (author of *Skateboarding, Space and the City: (Berg 2011)*, with additional notes from English Heritage Listing report (2014)



■ Britain's first listed skatepark

During the course of researching *Played in London – Charting the Heritage of a City at Play* (English Heritage, 2014) it became apparent to author Simon Inglis and the Played in Britain team that skateboarding had well and truly come of age in London, and was worth further study as part of London's overall sporting heritage.

Most buildings are not considered for listing until they are at least 30 years old. In London, of the 75 skateparks found to be in use (both public and private), we found five that were around 35 years old. Of these, the one at Meanwhile Gardens in Westbourne Green had been completely redesigned. Two others, in Kennington Park and Stockwell, were interesting, but had been modified. This left two that really stood out, both designed by the respected team of Adrian Rolt and G-Force. These were the **Rom Skatepark** at Hornchurch, Essex, and the **Harrow Skatepark** at Harrow Leisure Centre (originally called 'Solid Surf'), both opened in 1978. What made these skateparks stand out was that they were true to Californian precedents in their design and form, were mostly intact and were still highly regarded by users of all ages. On further examination the Rom Skatepark appeared to have more original features, and to have been better preserved. Indeed it was described in reverential terms by skateboarders from across the country and by those from abroad who deliberately sought it out. One skateboarding magazine described 'the Rom' as 'the Stonehenge of skateboarding'.

This report is a summary of the Played in Britain findings, which in turn formed the basis for the listing proposal, submitted to English Heritage in May 2013 and approved in September 2014.

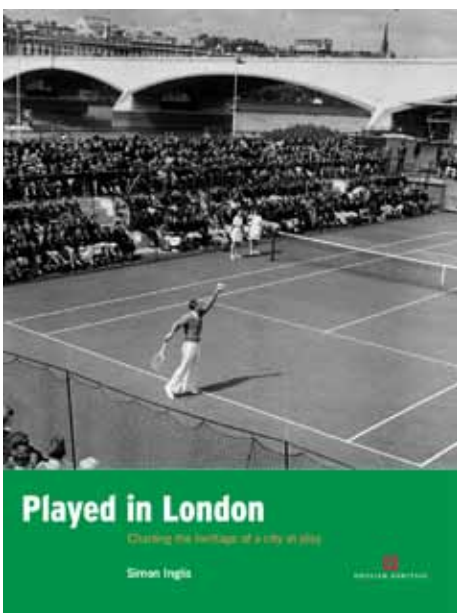
An official announcement confirming the listing was made by English Heritage on October 29 2014.

By gaining Grade II listed status, 'the Rom' becomes the first skatepark to have been listed in Britain. Indeed there is only one other skatepark in the world that is similarly listed. This is the 'Bro Bowl', in Tampa, Florida, entered onto the US National Register of Historic Places in October 2013 due to its historical and cultural significance.

'The Rom' becomes the sixth building to have been listed as a result of research carried out for *Played in London*. For details of the other five, see below. For further enquiries, or to reproduce any of the material in this report, please see page 12.

Simon Inglis

Played in Britain series editor (October 28 2014)



■ To read the full listing description of the Rom Skatepark, as published by English Heritage, [click here](#).

■ For details of the five other sports buildings listed by English Heritage as a result of *Played in London*, [click here](#).

■ To download a brief report on London skateparks from *Played in London* (published Sept 2014) click below.



■ The early development of skateboarding and skateparks

Skateboarding originated in the surf culture of southern California, where teenagers in the 1950s and early '60s adapted roller skate wheels and lengths of wood to create increasingly sophisticated wheeled surfboards. At first, skateboarders confined themselves to the streets and sidewalks of the public domain (as they would in London at the Southbank Centre). Then from the mid 1960s other spaces were colonised, particularly the oval and kidney-shaped swimming pools found in the gardens of the Los Angeles elite, and the vast concrete spillways and drainage features of the Californian coast. These in turn influenced the design of early, purpose-built skateparks in the USA from about 1973 onwards, leading to the first major skateboarding craze worldwide.

Skateboarding reached the UK in the summer of 1976, and scores of skateboard venues appeared over the next two years. Britain's first commercial skatepark was a private venture, Skate City, on Abotts Lane, off Tooley Street, opened on August 27 1977. Less elaborate than contemporary American skateparks, Skate City offered three bowls of varying difficulty and some indoor wooden ramps. It was not a commercial success, however, and was demolished October 6 1978.

Skateboarding was officially recognised as a sport by Sports Council in September 1977. A month later BBC's Nationwide launched first televised National Skateboarding Championships.

By mid 1978, skateparks were being built both by commercial operators and local authorities. Those designed by **G-Force** and **Adrian Rolt** and built by **Skate Park Construction**, built using **Shotcrete** (pressurised concrete), were deemed superior in technical terms, using standardised elements drawn directly from America.

Skateparks designed by G-Force / Adrian Rolt included the newly listed **Rom Skatepark**, the Solid Surf at Harrow (a council facility, extant with modifications), the Mad Dog Bowl at Elephant & Castle (closed) and The Barn at Brighton (closed).

Rolling Thunder, claimed to be largest indoor skatepark in Europe, was created inside old railway carriages in a former fruit & veg market in Brentford. It covered 40,000 square feet and cost £80,000 to fit out. Although popular, it closed in 1979 owing to contractual issues.

Concerns over insurance, liability and health and safety were responsible for many early skateparks closing during this period, both in Britain and the USA.

■ Early skateparks surviving in Britain

There are now believed to be only six skateparks in Britain from the early period.

1. 1978 Rom Skatepark (the best preserved), a commercial skatepark, listed Grade II in 2014
2. 1978 Solid Surf skatepark, Harrow, set in the grounds of a sport centre; much as originally built but with its Performance Bowl infilled
3. 1978 Stockwell skatepark, Brixton, London, set in a public park, since modified
4. 1978 Southsea skatepark, Southsea, originally a 1950s roller rink, modified for skateboarding c.1978, modified further 1990, though still with some original features
5. 1978 Kennington Bowl, Kennington Park, London, set in a public park, modified
6. 1981 'Rock 'n Roll' skatepark, Livingston, Scotland, a commercial park, modified.

■ The Rom Skatepark in Hornchurch

Opened as a commercial venture on August 15 1978, Rom Skatepark is situated on a two acre / 8,000 sq m site occupying a corner of the Hornchurch Cardrome. The listed element of the skatepark covers an area of approximately one acre / 4,000 sq m.

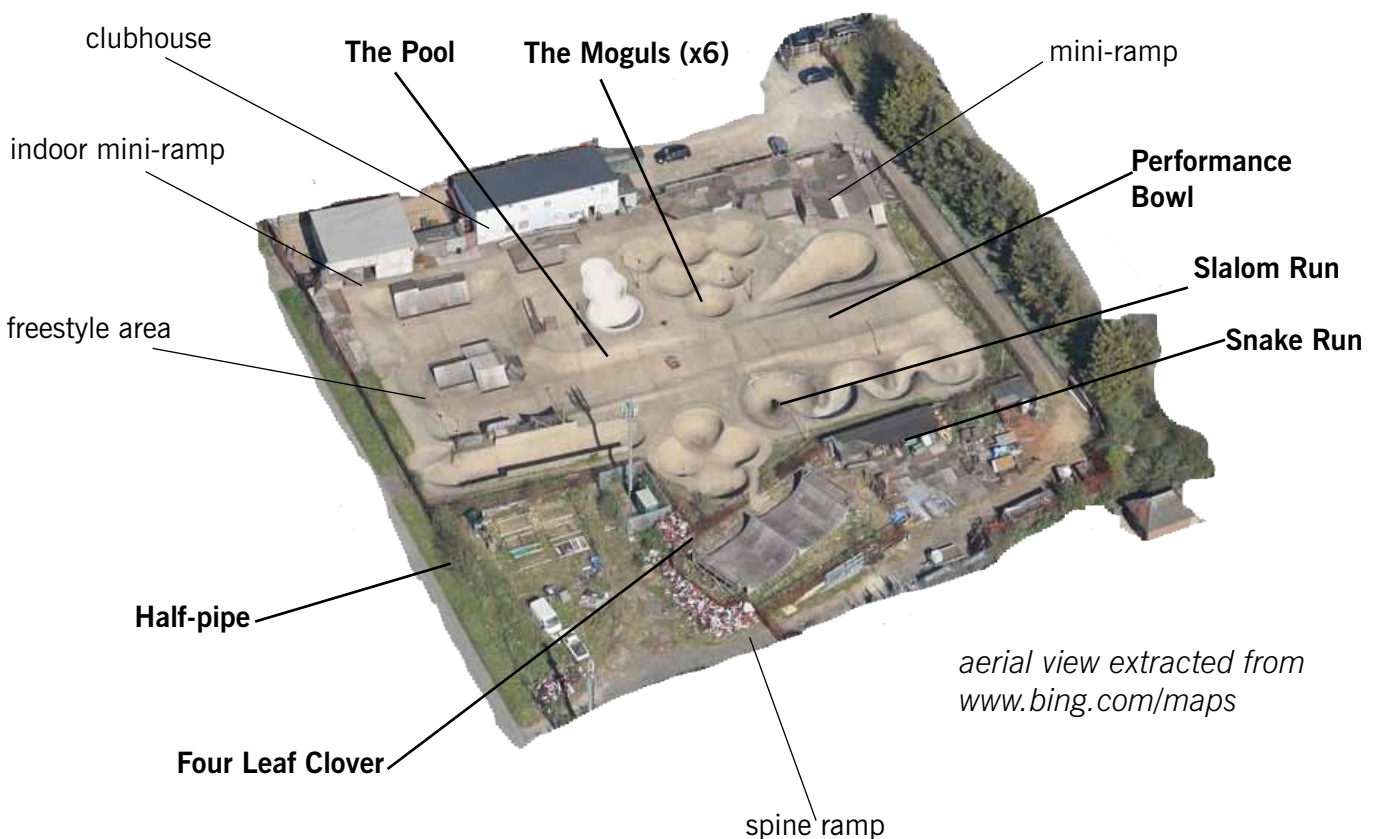
Rom Skatepark is named after the adjacent River Rom, not as a shorthand for Romford.

For contact details, see page 12.

Costing around £100,000 to construct, 'the Rom' went out of business after only a year. Since then, under the management of the Greenwood family it has enjoyed fluctuating fortunes. Although struggling at times, its recent revival is largely owing to its focus on providing a safe, family atmosphere, and to the new sport of BMX riding, which now attracts around 80 per cent of its users. In August 2013 the park celebrated its 35th anniversary. It has in the meantime received many a visit from top skateboarders and riders, including Tony Hawks and Lance Mountain, details of which are posted on the skatepark's website, www.romskatepark.com.

Of all the surviving skateparks from the early years, the Rom Skatepark is deemed to be the best preserved, with more original features. **Seven** original Adrian Rolt / G Force features in Shotcrete remain in use, as shown below in **bold**. None has been infilled. One has been modified: the Half-Pipe has had a section of wall removed.

Various timber ramps on steel frames and above-ground ledges are later additions and are all moveable. These features and the outbuildings *do not* form part of the listing.





■ **The Pool** is a standard Adrian Rolt / G-Force design, and was based on the keyhole pool at Skateboard Heaven in Spring Valley, California (which was itself based on the San Diego 'Soul Bowl'). It is one of the earliest examples of an American skatepark 'classic' created in Britain, and indeed Europe.

The Pool measures up to 6.7m in diameter x 2.75m deep, with run in of 2m at approx a 25 degree gradient. The Shotcrete shell, lined by 'marbelite' (*Skateboard* magazine, November 1978), was described as being 'lumpy' – a flaw blamed on poor weather when it was being laid in the summer of 1978. There remains evidence of surface cracks and staining inside the bowl and of deterioration around its outer edges. However, these defects do not appear to affect its usability and are easily repaired.

Right: The inner rim of **The Pool**, is lined with blue mosaic tiles, in homage to the Californian pools in which skateboarding started. The edge is lined by a hard concrete lip; an important feature in skateboarding manoeuvres.





■ **The Moguls**, viewed from the east. These consist of six interlinked craters arranged in a triangle, a popular form in the early years of British skateparks, being especially suitable for beginners.

The crater diameters vary between 5.5m - 6.0m, depths range from 1.6m - 2.0m, 'with interconnection points that stand out as large shoulders' (*Skateboard*, November 1978)

Surface cracks can be seen on the craters, but these do not appear to have deteriorated substantially over the years and are not an impediment to either skateboarders or bike riders.



■ **The Performance Bowl**, viewed from the south east (above) and east (below). The design was based on a Californian prototype, the 'Vertibowl' at Skatepark Paramount, where the sunken section was extended by a vertical 4.5 foot wall rising above the ground on one side. The Rom Bowl is up to 9.0m diameter, up to 4.0m in depth, with a 1.2m 'showing of vertical' on the south side but no above ground wall. It is slightly smaller in scale than the Performance Bowl at Harrow Skatepark (also 1978, by Adrian Rolt / G-Force), which has since been infilled.





■ **The Slalom Run**, viewed from the west end, forms the central east-west axis of the park.

It is an uninterrupted ramp, descending at gradual incline, with curved banks in the central section and a rising ramp at the western end. Later features, such as the timber ramps on the left, allow users to run across the Slalom Run and integrate it into their various manouevres.

The Slalom Run was apparently formed using spoil extracted from the excavation of the Performance Bowl, and may therefore be considered a more pragmatic addition to the park, rather than a direct borrowing from Californian models.



■ **The Snake Run** runs parallel with the Slalom Run and is the park's most complex design feature, with a deeper channel and tighter curves.

Above is the Snake Run viewed from the west. On the left it is viewed from the east.

Note that while the Shotcrete surface is generally in good condition there are a few surface cracks, and some areas where more serious deterioration has been patched.

Some users of the park consider that the Shotcrete surface requires them to use skateboards fitted with softer wheels, whereas at more modern skateparks with smoother surfaces a harder wheel is preferred, allowing a different range of manoeuvres to be performed.



■ **The Four Leaf Clover**, viewed from the south, with the clubhouse in the background. This is similar to the Moguls, but with four, slightly larger and deeper interconnected craters.



■ **The Half Pipe** (seen left, from the eastern end) is a long narrow sunken area with vertical walls at the mid point. Apparently one or both of these walls were originally 4.5m tall, but they have since been lowered for safety, for ease of access and to allow the floor of the Half Pipe to dry out more quickly.

The lowering of the side walls in the Half Pipe is believed to be the only substantial alteration to the original design of the Rom Skatepark, and is an alteration that appears to have been common at other skateparks since the 1970s, owing to injuries sustained when skateboarders tried to complete over-head flips between the walls.



■ This view shows **the Freestyle Area** from the north west corner of the skatepark. The assorted timber and steel frame ramps and ledges placed around this area are all moveable and do not form part of the listing.

■ Below, the view from the clubhouse, looking south, with **The Pool** (white) in centre, and **The Moguls** on left.



■ Additional notes

The concourse area of the Soutbank Centre in London, in use by skateboarders since at least 1977 and subject to a recent successful campaign to save it from redevelopment, was not considerable listable as a designed skatepark, being an area of the public domain which happened to have been colonised by skateboarders (in the tradition of early pioneers in California and Florida).

The Rom Skatepark dates from 1978. Here is a list of other skateparks from outside the UK, known to have survived from the early years.

United States of America

- 1976 Derby, Santa Cruz, California – public park, largely rebuilt 2012
- 1977 Kona, Jacksonville, Florida – public park, highly regarded
- 1978 The Bro Bowl, Tampa, Florida – public park, most intact and only one listed
- 1978 Sandy Hills, Maryland – a commercial park

Canada

- 1977 'Seylynn Bowl', North Vancouver
- 1979 'Chornick Park' skatepark, North Kildonan County, Winnipeg

Netherlands

- 1978 'Het Hulsbeek' skatepark, Oldenzaal

Australia

- 1976 'Albany Skate Track', Albany, Western Australia

■ Sources

- Borden, I *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Berg, 2001)
- Inglis, S *Played in Londfon - Charting the Herrtage of a City at Play* (English Heritage, 2014)
- Pennell, H *Skateboarding London Topics No 24* (GLC Intelligence Unit, 1978)
- Romford Recorder* various, 1978
- Skateboard!* Number 15, November 1978
- various skateboarding websites

■ Contacts

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