

PRESTON OLYMPIC POOL

My name is Debbie Wright (nee Cairns) and these are some memories I have of the Preston Olympic Pool, St Georges Road Preston, now a car park next to the TAFE.

My father, Peter Cairns, was the manager of the pool from the day it opened until he retired in 1986, and we lived right next door with a gate adjoining the house and the pool. Our address was 97 St Georges Road Preston, and it was the only house between the pool and Cramer Street. The house still exists. My family consisted of my parents (Peter and June Cairns), myself, and my younger brother Paul.

The Preston Olympic Pool - its correct name - opened around November 1964. It may have been 1963 or 1965.

It consisted of four pools.

The 10 ft diving pool was closest to the road and it had one 3 metre diving board, and two 1 metre diving boards. It was for the use of the diving boards only, no general swimming was allowed.

The main pool was an Olympic sized pool with eight lanes, 50 metres in length, 25 metres wide. The deep end was 5 ft deep and the shallow end was 3 ft 3 ins deep. Running right along the deep end was a 3ft wall for diving/jumping off. There was a slide at each end of the pool.

Further back was a learners' pool. It's depth was 2ft 3ins at the shallow end and 3ft at the deep end. Steps went right across the shallow end. I'm unsure of its dimensions, but I'd say it was about 20 metres long, 10 metres wide. It had a slide at the deep end.

Beside this, although separated by grass, was what we called the babies' pool. This was irregular in shape (say kidney-shaped) and ranged in depth from ankle deep to knee deep. Of particular interest at the time were six to eight pictures in tiles on the bottom, things such as a fish, a bird, balloons, etc. This always created great interest and was one of the first decorations along those lines seen by everyone.

Near the babies' pool was an area with tables and chairs (multi-coloured wooden slats with white painted iron legs) and a kiosk. The kiosk was run independently, and was leased off the council each year. The Cox family ran the kiosk for many years.

In this area near the kiosk was also the women's change rooms. The men's change rooms were around the corner alongside the main pool. The change rooms were the same design: quite large, rectangular in shape, toilets and showers at each end, and the middle section with lockers and long benches.

The change rooms were around the corner from each other, and in the middle was the entrance with ticket box. Approaching from the car park, there were two sets of - I'm guessing - a dozen steps, and in the middle a ramp for prams/wheelchairs. The ticket box was fairly small, with turnstiles either side and a gate. Initially, the main purpose of the ticket box was to give change for people to put in the turnstiles. I

don't know what the entry was at first (pre decimal currency) but for many years it was 5 cents for children and 20 cents for adults. At the end of the day there were mountains of 5 cent pieces to count! People could also buy a sheet of about 20 tickets - which worked out less in cost - and give these to the cashier and then pass through the gate. These sheets were pink for juniors and green for seniors, and were perforated tickets that were torn off.

Lockers, I'm pretty sure, were 25 cents, including a 20 cent deposit. So when the locker key was returned the person was refunded 20 cents. Most people returned their locker keys, there was never a great problem.

The first aid room was also in this entrance area, and a store room.

Immediately behind the ticket box was a flight of stairs which led up to my father's office and the staff room. The manager's office was designed so that every part of the pool could be seen from up there; two sides were windows. The end window on each side opened onto a small balcony on which were kept pot plants. Still upstairs, but behind the office, was the staff room which had a small kitchen and table and chairs.

Turning right after entering the pool complex was the men's change rooms, then next was the filter room. This was quite big and noisy and was always kept locked. Of course, only staff could enter the filter room. Inside here were two enormous metal filter tanks which combined held the equivalent of all the water in the pools. They made a lot of noise and were always running. I have no idea of the technicalities of how the water filtration system worked.

All these buildings I've just mentioned are still there, and I think the only thing missing are the stairs leading up to the office and staff room. It would be interesting to see what's up there now.

That's about it for the physical description.

The opening hours were 9 am - 6 pm Monday to Saturday, and 1 pm - 5 pm Sunday. In hot weather, and if there were enough people to warrant it, then it would remain open, at the discretion of the manager, until 9 pm. Sometimes 7.00 or 7.30 depending on the number of people and temperature. We got many phone calls on hot days asking what time the pool was closing.

During the '60s and '70s the crowds, on hot days, were enormous. Sometimes there was barely enough room in the water. Particularly during the '60s, these crowds would continue well into the night. By far, most of the people were kids. Kids would walk to the pool, without their parents, stay all day, and go home for tea. All they needed was a towel and a bit of money. On these really hot days/nights they'd often come back after tea with their families. Families often came in the hot evenings, as well as the weekends of course. I'd say that the vast majority of people walked to the pool. There was a car park, which of course on really hot days was full, but during the '60s and '70s most people who attended walked.

The reason the pool opened at 1 pm on a Sunday was because the Preston Swimming Club had the use of the pool that morning. They would have races, use the loudspeaker, and they had quite a large membership. I'm unsure of the days, but

there was about two nights a week that the Club used the pool from 6 pm until 7 pm as well. The normal pool staff, such as manager and attendants, did not have to be in attendance when the Club was there. On a hot Sunday, though, there would be a long queue of people waiting at the front gate for the pool to open to the public at 1 pm, and when the kids got in they'd just dump their towels and jump straight in to cool off.

My dad was known as Pete by everybody. He was able to joke with the kids, they would joke with him, but when he told them off he was taken notice of. He was well liked and well respected. The rules of the pool were: no running, no throwing, no pool toys (floaties, balls etc), no climbing on shoulders in the pool.

Of course everybody tried to run at some time, and usually paid the price by stubbing their toe on the rough concourse. The concourse was especially roughened to prevent slipping, but if you weren't careful you'd get a stubbed toe! 99.9% of the people visiting the first aid room were with a badly stubbed toe. They'd get a dab of Mercurochrome, be told they'd be okay, and off they went.

I must mention the diving pool. This was in the days when all the boys, and some men, did bombs. And boy - some of the splashes! They'd bomb off either the low or the high board, and the splashes were huge! You could stand or lie by the edge of the pool and get wet all day without going in. Nobody minded - the pool wasn't for general swimming - they just did their bomb, got out, and did another one. Sometimes, on a really busy day, the water level would go down because of the loss of water, but that was easily made up again by the next day.

In the main pool there were no swimming lanes set aside like there are these days - everybody had access to the whole pool. If you wanted to seriously swim (train) you'd join the swimming club, or come on a colder day when there were few people, or take your chances with other people there. Also, it meant you could swim across if you wanted, and not have to swim 50 metre lengths. In my opinion, much better than today's systems.

There were a couple of long-term pool attendants who not only worked with my father, but became personal friends. Ken Buckman was about my father's age and he was an attendant for about as long as my dad was there. Paul Nicalou started a few years after him, and was about ten years younger, but he and his family also became friends. My brother became especially friendly with his son and daughter who were more his age. So with my father and the two attendants that was the staff, but during the summer school holidays another person was employed, and this was usually a younger man.

The ticket box cashier was Mrs Phyllis (Phyl) Graf. She, I think, lived in Stone Street, Preston, and walked to work. She worked Mon to Friday 9 am to 6 pm. She was there from the opening in 1964 [?] until I'd say the mid '80s. My mother, June Cairns, relieved for her at the ticket box during her lunch hour. My mother also worked in the ticket box on the weekends, and at nights if the pool was open after 6 pm. She probably copped the worst of it being there on weekends and nights. She was great friends with Mrs Graf, they got on very well.

The season ran from late October, or early November, until perhaps mid March. For many years the pool was open on Cup Day and Dad would broadcast the Cup

through the loudspeakers. A crowd would gather around the speakers listening to the race, it was a great atmosphere. That, apart from the odd announcement, was the only time speakers were used; music was never played.

My father and the attendants would start working at the pool a month or so before it opened for the season to get things ready. The pools had to be drained (they were left full during the winter, unfiltered, and became very dirty); the tiles of the pools had to be cleaned; the concourse had to be cleaned; the changing rooms had to be cleaned; the pools had to be refilled with tap water and the filters started up again. My dad always timed it right so on opening day the water was perfect. Then, at the end of the season, there was another couple of weeks of I think only my dad doing what had to be done to wind things down.

Our house, 97 St Georges Road, was owned by the council and was part of Dad's employment. Therefore, when he retired in May/June 1986 my parents had to leave the house. However, this was the house I grew up in from the age of about five until I left home in 1980 at age 22.

After Dad retired in 1986, I think Paul Nicalou became manager. However I also think this was only for a few years because of course by this time (late '80s) the numbers had dwindled markedly - for all sorts of reasons - and the decision was made by Preston Council to close the Preston Olympic Pool and demolish it.

The old pool

The Preston Olympic Pool replaced the original Preston Baths, almost on the same site. My memories of this are hazy because I was under five when we lived there. I know that our original house was 91 St Georges Road, which was also council owned. In fact, we still used 91 as our address, even though when we moved it was to no. 97 - a bit confusing. However, 91, 93 and 95 St Georges Road had to be demolished to make way for the new pool. I was always told that our old house (91) was pretty much on the site of where the filter room was built.

The old pool was a single pool, deep at one end, shallow at the other. I think it was built during the '20s. The houses in that area were certainly that old. Separating the shallow and deep ends were two fountains and a platform. The fountains were actually the water inlets (as opposed to water coming in through inlets in the bottom of newer pools). I do remember one major rule: don't sit on the fountains!

When we first came to Preston in 1960 (I was two) Dad was an attendant, and the manager was Mr Askill. Mr Askill retired when the old pool closed for good (perhaps 1962) and Dad applied for, and got the job, as manager of the new pool to be built. I'm unsure of the geography of where the old pool actually was, but I presume it was beside no. 91. There was a summer when there was no pool at all during construction. Mrs Graf was cashier at the old pool, my mother worked as cashier at weekends, and this arrangement remained when the new Preston Olympic Pool opened.

97 St Georges Road, Preston (also commonly referred to as no. 91)

I'll mention a couple of interesting things about this house - it may be of interest to anyone reading this in future.

As I mentioned, this property was owned by the Preston Council for use by the manager of the Preston Olympic Pool. Although it does not appear so now, the house was built in the 1920's and was timber with a classic Californian bungalow verandah at the front, and a bay window (the lounge room, the window on the right as you face the house). It originally consisted of a kitchen, dining room, lounge, and two bedrooms. When my family moved in in the early-mid '60s my brother and I had to share a bedroom.

The house was renovated in I'd say 1967-68. The kitchen was converted to a third bedroom, and a new kitchen added to the back. Also, the entire house was made brick, the bay window removed, and the original front verandah removed as well. The bricks were placed in front of the weatherboards: in other words, behind the bricks you see today are some 1920s weatherboards that have been covered up since the '60s. This double-walled construction made it a very well insulated house. It remained cool for quite a long time in hot weather, but then also took days to cool down after a change in weather.

The house had very high 10 ft ceilings, with some lovely plaster work. Of course plaster board was not used in its original construction. The plaster in the dining room, lounge room and bedrooms was of a rough finish - I'm sure it has a proper name - and in my bedroom (the original second bedroom with its window facing south) was particularly rough and sharp to the touch. The main bedroom, lounge and dining rooms all had beautiful ceilings and cornices. They did not have a ceiling rose where the light fitting was, but rather, the whole ceiling was decorated. The front lounge room was my favourite; I used to lie on the floor and look at this sunray pattern radiating out from the centre, and the shadows created on it. The house remained as I've described it until 1986 when my father retired; it could be anything now.

I note there is an addition to the house on the north facing wall, jutting out; I have no knowledge of what this is or when it was done.

I do hope this description of the Preston Olympic Pool, St Georges Road, Preston, and the manager's house, as it was, is of interest.

Deborah Wright (nee Cairns)

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