

Swimming club took first dive into the Avon 100 years ago

WHEN the first members of Chippenham Swimming Club took the plunge it was not into the heated waters of tiled pools. It was into the often murky depths of the River Avon. And mixed bathing was strictly taboo.

But that was 100 years ago, and from those humble, but enthusiastic, beginnings the club has become one of the strongest in the west of England.

The club, which is holding special centenary celebrations over the next few months, starts its summer season next week with confidence. Last

year it could boast over 700 junior members and over 100 adults.

Secretary Mr Vic Walker has been compiling the history of the club. It was on August 14, 1877, that a group of swimming enthusiasts met at the Bear Hotel and formed the club under the presidency of the Rev. J. Rich.

FIRST SPORTS

One of the first events organised was of water sports in the River Avon at the Pack Horse field, a point behind the public house in London Road.

These took place on August 30 and the programme included a 25-yard race for boys under 15 years with a first prize of 5s. and a second prize of 2s. 6d.; a 100 yards handicap race for men for a set of carvers as first prize and an umbrella as second; a half-mile open race for men for a prize of 30s.; walking the greasy bowsprit for a leg of lamb; a 300 yards handicap race for a cricket bat as first prize and a silver pencil as second; distance diving with a silver travelling flask as first prize and a bronze medal for second; 50 yards handicap race for boys with prizes of 7s. 6d. and 5s. and a clothes race for a silver tankard.

possible for a learner to stand with his head and shoulders above water.

But outside the tiled area the depth varied from five to some 15 feet in the deepest parts.

It was at the annual meeting in March 1898 that Mr Joe Buckle was elected secretary. Joe, a well-known figure in the town, was a restless worker for the club and his drive and business ability proved an inspiration to everyone who served the club with him.

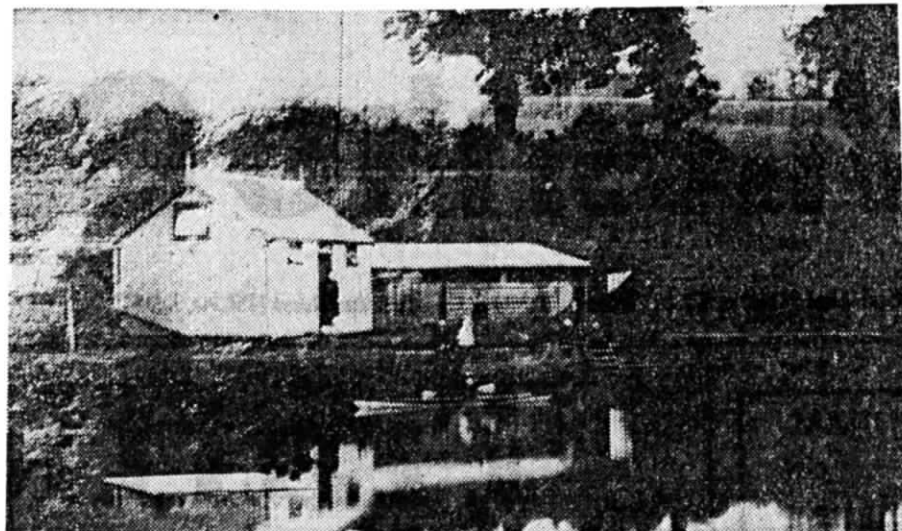
A report for the 1899 season shows that the problems facing the club were too much water at times and not enough at others.

WATER FLOW

When the river was in flood the water often reached three to four feet up the walls of the dressing rooms. This not only put a stop to club activities, but when the river fell there was always damage to be repaired, and a vast amount of debris to be cleared.

Lack of water was usually caused when repair work was being carried out below the bathing place, such as at Collen's flour mill which stood near the Town Bridge at the bottom of Monkton Hill.

The control gates at the weir



The original bathing place on the River Avon, which was used by members of Chippenham Swimming Club, which is 100 years old this year. Mixed bathing was forbidden. To the left are swimmers on the raft, which the club bought in 1904 as a resting place for those attempting to swim the width of the Avon.

dinner was held and the club also bought a raft which was anchored by chain to a tree. It served as a resting place for those attempting to swim the width of the river.

In 1907 the club rented an adjoining piece of land from a Mr Fry, who farmed at Hardens Farm, for 10s. a year. This meant the club now had a 75-yard stretch of water.

Wires were then stretched across the river to carry the water polo goals.

At the club gala in July, 1908, events included a polo match between Wiltshire and Gloucestershire and the Wiltshire county schoolboys team races.

Chippenham Town Band attended and everyone must have had a good time, for the refreshments ordered by the



The pool was being re-open-

Ducks were offered as prizes for two other contests.

The prizes were presented at an event in the Town Hall on September 18 when speakers referred to the large number who had taken part in the sports, including swimmers from Bath.

At the first annual meeting in February 1878 the committee decided to seek funds to erect a bathing place. In August an agreement was signed with the land owner, Mr C. Uncles, to rent eight perches of the river bank at 10s. a year, plus rates.

A boundary fence was put up at the cost of £30 and a changing hut was built at a cost of £20.

DR H. M. JAY

The club thrived and at the annual meeting in May, 1882, the name of Dr H. M. Jay appeared in the club records for the first time. He and his family later did much to forward the cause of swimming in Chippenham.

As there was a great need for additional changing accommodation, Dr Jay said he was prepared to put towards the estimated cost of £27 the £11 12s. 5d. which he and his four daughters had raised. Later he covered the balance with a cheque.

At that time there was no mixed bathing. A timetable was drawn up for the club's season which lasted from May to October, allocating certain times to ladies and girls and to gentlemen and boys. The timetable covered the hours from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays and 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sundays.

TILED RIVER BED

The club decided to grant free membership to those who could not afford it. The committee considered 63 applications in June 1882 and it is recorded that 41 free tickets were granted and the remaining applications were considered able to pay.

That year the club spent £30 on building a retaining wall at the edge of the river, and in 1897 a fund was opened to tile part of the river bed to form an enclosure for learners. The proceeds from the club's annual sale and gala were devoted to the fund.

The fund removed a great deal of risk for learners and inspired confidence. It was

the control gates at the weir would be fully opened, while the gates upstream at Kellaways Mill, near Sutton Lane, and those at Hazeland Mill, on the River Marden, would be closed. The only water that passed the bathing place was the trickle which ran over the weirs. This happened in 1899 when the club had low water for three weeks.

In 1901 Joe Buckle was succeeded as secretary by Mr E. Shorland. Until then the club had been affiliated to the Amateur Swimming Association through the Southern Counties Association, but now membership was switched to the Western Counties Association which was covering a number of clubs in the west.

At the annual meeting in 1904 it was reported that there had been no competition during the season for the schools' shield. The secretary had been in contact with Mr W. Bryant, headmaster of the British School, who felt that if the schools were allowed to have use of the bathing place once a week for practice it would encourage the competition. The club agreed.

During that season a big effort was made with life saving classes, with the result that ten members gained proficiency certificates and nine instructor's certificates.

That year there was also a record membership of 200 males, 22 females and 184 scholars.

BOUGHT A RAFT

Free tickets were also issued to a number of boys and girls who visited the town from London by arrangement with one of the London Fresh Air Clubs.

These trips were organised to give children from central London the opportunity of getting out into the country and enjoying a change of air.

During the early years several attempts had been made with varying success to get a club water polo team under way. By 1904 the prospects looked bright, as the club arranged a match against Weston-super-Mare.

In those days players paid 6d. a match and the club met travelling expenses after taking the gate money. Apparently the club had several good games that year and played Weston in the Western Counties Championships.

That year the first annual

committee for the day included ten bottles of Scotch whisky, two dozen large soda waters, a dozen lemons and nine gallons of beer.

Because so much work had been put into establishing the club its financial position had never been bright, but in the annual report of 1914 the committee is recorded as having been extremely pleased that the balance had risen during the season from £10 8s. 5d. to £14 15s. 4d.

ANOTHER RECORD

This was due to another record membership of 256. Half of these were children under 16, and as there were 300 free tickets issued it meant that some 400 youngsters were able to enjoy swimming.

It was also reported that 55 boys and four girls had gained their learner's certificates that season.

As this was the first year of the 1914-18 war, free use of the bathing place was granted to the troops. About 50 older club members and five committee members had joined the Forces.

After the war the club continued to thrive and improvements were made. A 25-foot high, three-stage diving board was built by the committee — part of it still stands. In 1935 the club opened concrete dressing rooms which now form part of the Chippenham Sea Cadet headquarters.

POLLUTED

In 1946 the club sought a loan from Chippenham Borough Council to rebuild the wall retaining the bank which had collapsed into the river. Following an inspection and tests it was found that the water was polluted and the bathing place was closed down altogether.

Despite this, the club never died. A nucleus of members kept it going and visited clubs in neighbouring towns, such as Devizes.

The club sprang back into full life again when the borough council opened its £50,000 open air pool in Monkton Park on May 28, 1960.

Since then it has gone from strength to strength and its officials have played an important role in promoting the sport in Wiltshire and further afield.

The pool was being re-opened yesterday (Wednesday, May 18) for the season, and the club holds the first of its Tuesday club nights next week.

In addition to the club nights, there are life saving classes at the pool every Sunday, and the club has the use of the pool for an hour on Monday nights for diving tuition and water polo practice. On Thursday and Sunday nights it holds training sessions at Corsham indoor pool.

During the past winter the club has been holding sessions on Mondays at Calne indoor pool.

CENTENARY EVENTS

The first of the centenary events takes place on Saturday, June 4, when a plaque will be unveiled on the club's old dressing rooms at the Sea Cadet headquarters.

Then members will form up in Long Close and march in procession along Cricketts Lane, Wood Lane and through the town to the car park near the Monkton Park pool.

For the youngsters there will be refreshments in the Liberal Hall and in the evening there will be an inter-club gala.

On the actual centenary day, Sunday, August 14, a service is being held in St. Andrew's Parish Church followed by refreshments in the Church Hall.

A centenary ball is being held in the Neeld and Town Halls on November 11.