

Brockwell lido is one of south London's best-loved social amenities, but its future is under threat. By **John Cunningham**

Sink or swim

One of London's few remaining lidos, which has managed to survive by adding artistic and educational activities to the basics of fresh air and swimming, is facing a crisis that could bring the closure "within days" of a recreational asset in public use since the 1930s.

The Brockwell Park lido is owned by the south London borough of Lambeth and affectionately — and ironically — nicknamed Brixton Beach by its landlocked users. It is run by two former council sports staff, Casey McGlue and Paddy Castledine, who formed a partnership to manage the facility when the council off-loaded the responsibility in 1994.

The operation is now in trouble. McGlue says: "We've debts of £75,000 and will have to close within days if the council doesn't help."

However, the council, dominated by Liberal Democrats and Conservatives since Labour lost control in local elections in May, appears anxious to avoid further financial commitment. Four council sports centres are already franchised to a leisure company and one possibility is that a developer will be allowed to build a private health club on part of the Brockwell site, using the rent as a cross-subsidy for the lido.

Lidos were developed between the first and second world wars in the spirit of improving the nation's health. At one time, almost every town of any size would have such a facility. But the indoor swimming pool, the municipal sports hall and now the private health club have undermined the lido's appeal. By 1991, there were just 120 lidos left in the UK; now there are fewer than 50.

Lambeth says that it is reviewing the future of Brockwell lido. It is in discussion with user and amenity groups about options set out in a consultant's report. Ominously for McGlue and Castledine, the issue is presented on the council's website as: "Brockwell Lido: an opportunity for businesses."

McGlue fears that officials and councillors favour the health club option, which, he maintains, could jeopardise community involvement. "The whole reason people love this space is that it's not like a private health club," he says. The best solution, he feels, would be for more holistic facilities to raise income. This alternative will become stronger if GPs at a nearby practice decide to move into the buildings surrounding the pool.

The two partners have brought people back to the pool — up to 4,000 a day during heatwaves. To compensate for rainy days, they have filled

some of the rooms with classes for yoga, meditation, and other therapies.

The lido has become the base for a company, Whippersnappers, which has a full programme of classes and projects in music and the arts for the under-5s, as well as outreach work in schools and nurseries. "It was thanks to Paddy and Casey that we were able to start up here," says the company's director, Caroline Burghard.

While re-growing its community roots, however, the lido's financial future has rarely been stable. The inescapable reality is that the heart of the facility is an open-air pool, dependent on fickle weather.

The lido costs some £250,000 a year to operate. A council subsidy, which started at £39,000 a year, has since tapered to zero. Bottled water company Evian promised a £100,000-a-year sponsorship for two years, but the second-year contribution has been cut to £10,000.

McGlue and Castledine say that in only three years under their management have summers been good enough to make a profit. They are worried that Lambeth will not extend their lease when it expires in October next year, even though councillors and officials have praised their efforts.

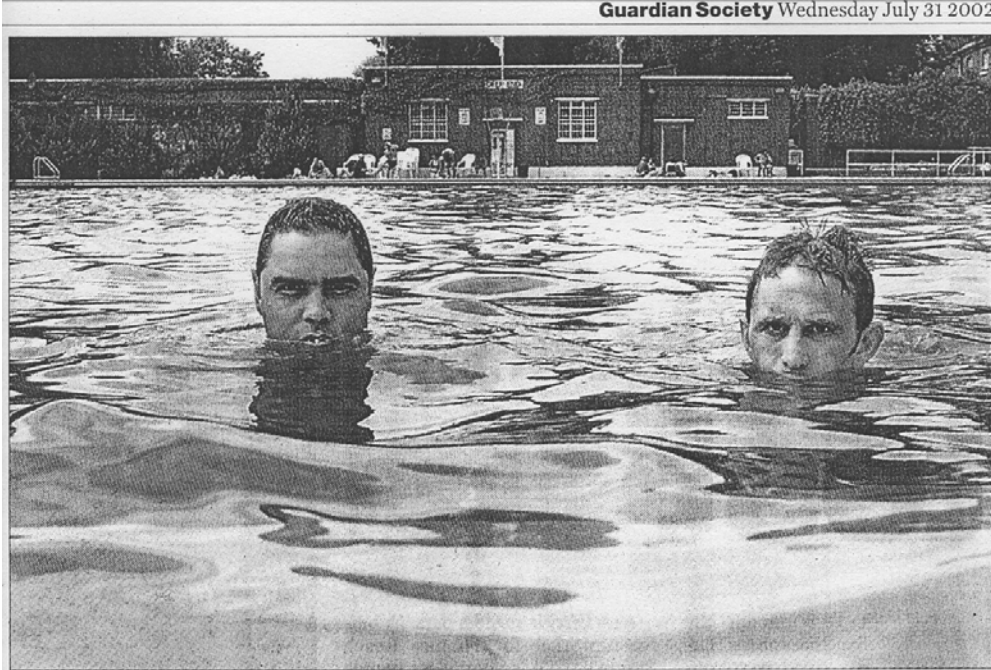
Some users think the private health club notion might mean an end to the traditional inclusiveness of Brockwell. The lido's catchment area is a mix of poverty and affluence and many say one of its virtues is that it attracts people from all income levels and social and ethnic groups.

"There are big clans of people who come here; three and four families together," says Mike Evans, an advertising copywriter. His wife, Alice, a nurse at St Thomas' hospital, says: "Our children make new friends every time."

A survey of almost 900 visitors, undertaken by the Brockwell Lido Users group, found high levels of satisfaction. Group committee member Yvonne Levy says the lido was her "special refuge" when her mother was seriously ill; but she is pessimistic about Lambeth giving a regular subsidy again. "Not a cat in hell's chance," she says.

This does not deter another activist, Harry Eyres, arguing for the retention and expansion of all lidos — the subject of a thesis he is preparing for a master's degree at the London School of Economics.

"Lidos are an endangered species," says Eyres. "Those in London were built in the golden age of the LCC [London County Council] under Herbert Morrison as part of a great democratic vision for the city. They remained hugely popular through to



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