

History of Smethwick Swimming Centre

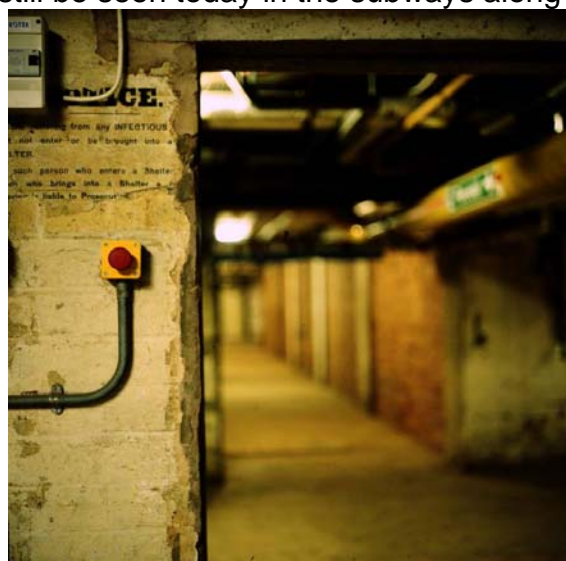
Smethwick swimming Centre, formally known as Thimblemill Baths, has gone through many interesting changes, had famous faces pass through its doors and also survived the Second World War.

Opened on the 30th March 1933 and designed by Chester Button and Roland Fletcher, the art deco features of the building were inspired by the high arched roof of aircraft hangers in France. In turn these features were derived from the Scandinavian timber construction of the Breslau exhibition pavilion in the early 1920's. Other similar designs can also be found at the Royal Horticultural Hall in London.



During the World War 2 years the baths was used for different reasons than for recreation. The subways and cellars were used as an air raid shelters.

Posters from the war period can still be seen today in the subways along with drawings on the wall.



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Thimblemill Road also saw arrivals of troop from the U.S.A being stationed round the corner from the baths at U.S.A.A.F station 522. This is the site where the Barnwell factory stands today.

You may think that Smethwick in an unlikely place for a U.S Air Force base but its unlikely situation was good cover for a supply depot and its location also being good for movement of supplies.

After World War 2 had finished the baths started to see some of its most exciting times. There were two distinct seasons. From April to September the main pool was open for public swimming and October to March the pool was emptied taking 2 days to drain. Once empty the area was boarded off with a sprung maple floor. The setting up of the sprung maple floor would take 2 weeks to construct, but once done such events as hair dressing, dancing and boxing took place.



Action from boxing at
Thimblemill Baths



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In 1959 the baths also hosted swimming galas. As it was one of the largest pools in the country at the time in 1959 the Great Britain V's West Germany gala took place with the event also being televised.

Swinging into the 60's the baths saw The Joe Loss Orchestra play, more wrestling and boxing events taking place, the famous comedian Tommy Cooper also made an appearance and famous DJ Pete Waterman also had an embarrassing moment when entering the baths to do a gig. The then manager gave him some rather negative comments.

During the 60's the baths still continued to hold dances with Smethwick getting a poor reputation for being one of the rougher dance halls with regular fighting and a famous riot in 1967 where fighting spilled out onto Thimblemill Road and the late bus nearly turned over.

The famous acts didn't stop there. In 1962 the baths played host to one of the most famous bands in the world the Beatles. On Monday 19th November the boys came to town after doing an 85 mile dash down south from a gig in Liverpool at the cavern Club, then the Adelphi Ballroom in West Bromwich and finishing at Thimblemill.



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As the 60's rolled on The Rolling Stones performed in 1964 on 25th March, in 1965 The kinks performed on 27th February at 10.15pm, The Small Faces in 1966 and The Who also played in 1966 on 22nd January.

In the late 60's it was decided that all concerts and dances would come to an end.

As the famous faces stopped coming the baths attention seemed to be turned to the building itself and in 1968 the small pool was opened.



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Stepping into more recent times and the now Smethwick Swimming Centre still has the same art deco features but added with a few more modern twists.

There are still 2 pools but there is now a split level gym with 3 areas with area now in the old cafe, a dance studio with a group fitness programme and a sauna and steam facility.

The subways which were once used during World War 2 still have memories on the walls and attract attention from general public, have been used for ambulance and fire service training and paranormal groups finding spooky goings on from the centre's famous history.

The centre was featured on the BBC's The One Show. Presenter Phil Tufnell came down to report on the pool rules poster. Smethwick was the first centre to have the poster which was displayed at Smethwick Baths in 1942.



When recently refurbishing the front of the building the original sign 'Smethwick Baths' was discovered behind a modern sign. This has now been kept although several local residents know the centre as Thimblemill Baths. The building is also a Grade 2 listed building.

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