

THE PELLs

Where Lewes workers bathed

There's something vaguely unsettling about peering into the swampy, marshy land just beyond the Pells. Seen against this eerie backdrop, this little part of town might well be one of Lewes's great frontiers. But focus on the firmer land beneath your feet, and it all seems very civilised. The combination of water, grass and ducks makes it the closest thing we have to a village green. Add to that the Pells Pool, and it's the closest thing this town has to a beach.

It doesn't take a great leap of imagination to see that the Pells got its name from the word 'pools', and that the springs feeding the pools here were what gave the area its *raison d'être* – and still do. But in 1802 it was the demands of industry, not recreation, that gave us the lovely stretch of water we have today: the building of a water-powered paper mill necessitated the widening and deepening of one of the natural pools. Soon, though, the newly enlarged pond had another use. The town's workers – from the paper mill as well as the local tannery and sawmill – badly needed a place to wash, and this fulfilled the role beautifully.

The paper mill didn't last, sadly, but, come the middle of the nineteenth century, leisure was on the government's agenda and parks were coming into fashion. The pond was conveniently situated next to an area of land given to the town back in 1603 by a Lewes lawyer, John Rowe, and so Lewes had the makings of its first proper park. But how to solve the problem of nude men still using the pond to wash and swim?

The solution came in the form of what is now the oldest freshwater swimming pool in the country, fed by those same springs and complete with modesty panel in the form of a substantial flint wall. There were two pools built: one called

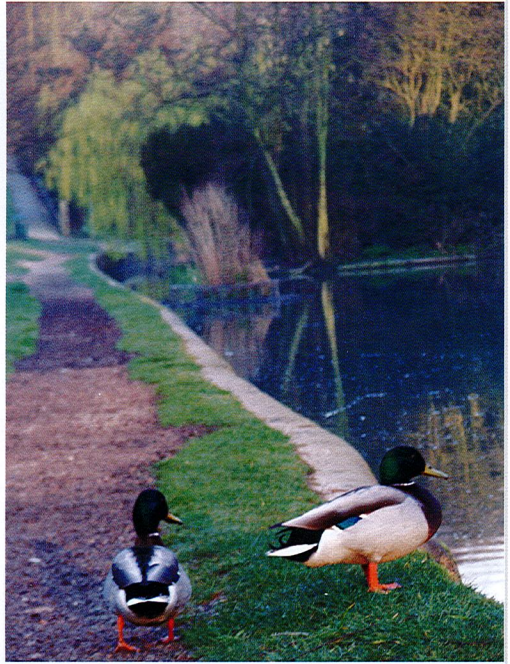


Photo by Alex Leith

the Subscription Pool which swimmers paid to use, and one called the Free Bath which was primarily for washing. And now women – not nude like the men were, but covered from shoulder to ankle – could swim too.

It was money donated at the Diamond Jubilee – that other one of 1897 – which enabled the walled playground to be built and turned the Pells into the ultimate family-friendly venue. But it hasn't all been fun and frolics since then. First there were the two world wars which brought hundreds of soldiers and firemen here to train. Then, after the Second World War, the spectre of brand-new swimming baths on the site of Grange Gardens almost sounded the death knell for the one pool here (the original Subscription Pool) that had not fallen into disrepair. But a lack of money averted the crisis. Now fast forward to 1999 and a skateboard park was proposed for the site. By hook, crook and overwhelming public support, the swimming pool survives. And so it is that on a hot summer's day the Pells is still the place to go. *Juliette Mitchell*

With many thanks to the Pells Pool Community Association