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## The Michael Sobell Sports Centre, Islington – The Early Days

The Michael Sobell Sports Centre in Islington is unique in many ways. Its origins were the result of a uniquely generous act of philanthropy on the part of the entertainment and electrical entrepreneur, Sir Michael Sobell, who decided to donate £1.1 million to establish a sports centre in a (then) deprived area of Islington in Inner London. The London Borough of Islington provided a site off the Hornsey Road in London N7; the site was surrounded by high rise flats, the main railway line from London Kings Cross to the north of England and some derelict land. The initial cost of the centre was £2million, a substantial amount at the time; the rest of the capital cost was met by the Variety Club of Great Britain and Islington Borough Council.



The centre was also unique as Britain's first purpose built, inner city sports centre. It must be remembered that this was in the early 1970's before Islington became a by-word for "gentrification." At the time the area had many indicators of social and economic deprivation and was a predominantly working-class area, of mixed ethnicity, where many families enjoyed the benefit of social housing.

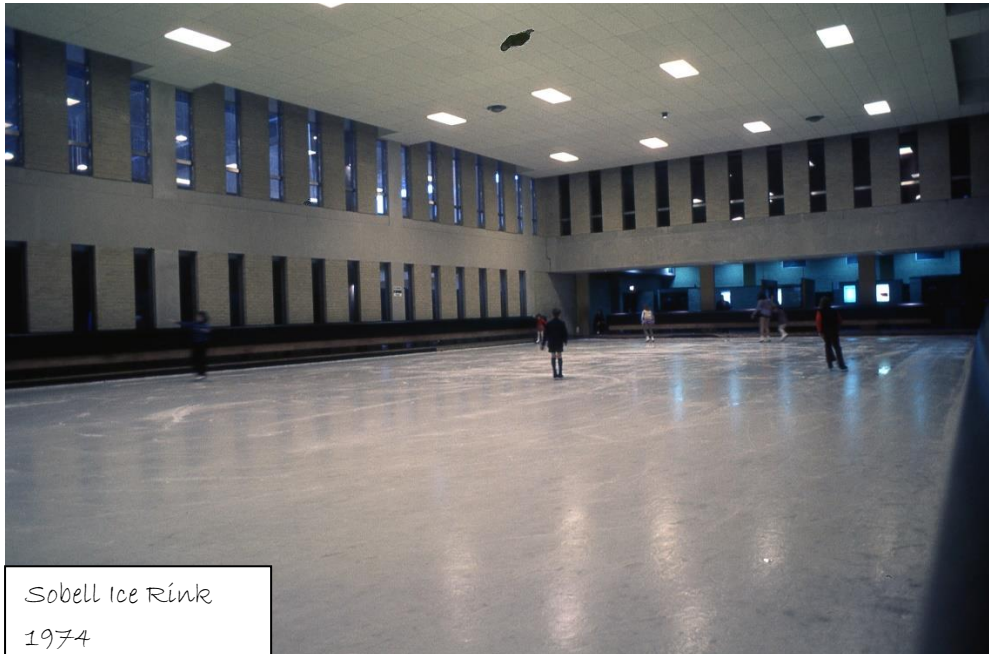
Sir Michael Sobell, through his charitable foundation, involved a number of business, entertainment and other acquaintances in the project including architect, Sir Richard Seifert, the Mecca Leisure organisation (which at the time operated the Silver Blades Ice Rinks as well as ballrooms and bingo) and others who either donated money through the Variety Club or gave goods or services towards the development. As a result a new charitable trust, the Sobell Variety Islington Trust, was created, with representation from business, entertainment and Council interests. The Sobell trust also funded the development of another centre in the Welsh town of Aberdare, but that's a story for others to tell.

Work on the design of the centre began in 1972 and Sir Richard Seifert, one of the most prominent architects of the 1960's and 70's, donated the work of his practice to design the project. Seifert was responsible for many iconic London buildings of the period including Centre Point, Euston Station and Tower 42 (formerly the Natwest Tower.) However, he had not then, and did not later, design any other sports facilities although he did later design the successful Wembley Conference Centre (its designer was therefore another unique feature for Sobell.) It would appear that he was given little in the way of a brief and there were very few examples of good practice to call on at the time as Sobell was one of the earliest sports centres to open in Britain after Harlow.

Some may have had reservations about an oval footprint to accommodate essentially rectangular activity spaces and this provided a number of subsequent managerial challenges, including fitting a judo dojo into a basically triangular space! The black marble entrance façade and the ribbed concrete construction could also be seen as forbidding for a leisure building but these materials were very characteristic of many buildings of the period and certainly made an impact on their surroundings. Overall, however, the Sobell Sports Centre was an impressive building with a wide range of activity

areas and provision for both active and passive leisure and was considered at the time to be a major development in Sports Centre design.

The involvement of Mecca was also a unique feature as part commercial / part trust management was an untried concept. Mecca managed the 32m x 16m ice rink and the catering facilities. Mecca was at the time one of the most successful leisure operators in Britain and their involvement was a coup for the trust, however, their commercial imperatives and profit motives were at odds on some occasions with the Trust's more socially orientated philosophy. The original design envisaged a single entrance for the centre and the ice rink but it soon became necessary to create a separate ice entrance which in turn led to a number of other



problems as the rink had not been planned with separate changing areas and had a very small toilet area (the juxtaposition of porcelain toilets and steel ice blades was also not conducive to a good outcome for the former!) This created a number of difficult internal circulation problems as skaters had to make their way to the main centre toilets at the other end of the building, creating security and control problems while also denying ice rink users access to catering services.

The different approaches of the commercial and trust management teams also created managerial as well as design tensions in the early days of the centre which were not fully resolved until the management of the two facilities were combined. One of the lessons from this arrangement may be that an earlier involvement from potential users and building managers might have made a more effective use of circulation space and support facilities, although at the time there was limited public and professional understanding of the need for such involvement and limited experience to draw upon.

Another unique feature of Sobell was its scale. It has a main sports hall which can accommodate 16 badminton courts, twice the size of the standard "two-court hall" and it was the largest sports hall in Europe at the time. The hall was also capable of accommodating competitive tennis so that its height required the use of long, heavy-weight curtain court dividers.

As well as the main hall and the ice rink the centre originally accommodated a multi-purpose hall for small scale games; a practice hall, which initially contained an indoor dry ski slope device (presumably donated by one of Sir Michael's contacts but of dubious value in Islington at the time!) this room also later accommodated the first indoor golf simulator in Britain; 6 squash courts; the aforementioned Dojo; a projectile room for archery and shooting; an indoor climbing wall and a later addition of a

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traversing wall; a weights room/ gym which had its own sauna cabin and the latest (for the time) Nissen multigym equipment. At the other end of the exercise scale was a snooker room with two full sized tables. The centre was initially designed to have a caretaker's flat but this was converted to management offices prior to opening. In addition, there were the usual changing accommodation, reception area, administration offices, restaurant, bar and catering facilities but unusually a glass and marble staircase to a Director's Suite on the first floor.



The scale of the main hall and the centre's central location brought major international sport to this part of London - a great inspiration and opportunity for the local community as well as for London. It attracted large scale, often televised, events such as International Judo, Gymnastics and Indoor Hockey, the Dewar Cup professional tennis tournament and a world boxing championship fight featuring Britain's world champion, John Conteh. National League Basketball also featured with the Sobell based, Embassy All Stars, being one of the major teams of the time.

Bizarrely, the centre also hosted the Labour Party Special Conference on the Common Market in April 1975 where 1500 delegates debated the party's position on the question of whether Britain should join the E.E.C. Centre managers watched from the balcony as Michael Foot, later to become party leader, argued passionately against the proposal while Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Barbara Castle put the case in favour. So Sobell played its minor role in one of the historic political decisions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (for better or worse!)

For such a large building the centre had very little car parking space which exacerbated the problems of staging large events; this was also a day to day management problem. Until recently there was also no outside activity space. Another unique feature of Sobell was that the management team was not made up of predominantly ex-PE teachers or military personnel as was the case with many early centres but was largely composed of current or former sports people. Admittedly, the first Director had been military; Wing Commander David Monteith-Hodge, had overseen the early development of the centre but by the time of opening the Director was David Hemery, former Olympic 400 m. hurdles gold medallist, who had recently retired from athletics to take up this, his first, managerial post.

With David in the senior management team were two Assistant Directors, John Lord, a former England Basketball international and graduate of the Loughborough MSc Recreation Management course and Steve Sherlock a former public school English master. These three were responsible for the overall policy direction and strategic management of the centre. Responsible for the day to day operations were three Recreation Managers, Chic Carvell a graduate of the Scottish School of Physical Education at Jordanhill College and the North London Poly DMS who had worked with Roger Quinton at the Picketts Lock centre (and was therefore the only one of us with any previous practical leisure management experience!) David Lord, brother of John and also an England Basketball international and languages graduate who had recently returned from playing professional basketball in France and

Hong Kong and yours truly, Hywel Griffiths, who was at the time studying for a Doctorate in fluvial geomorphology at Swansea University and playing rugby for Swansea RFC (why they appointed me is a mystery to this day!)

Working with the Recreation Managers were three Recreation Supervisors, Berwyn Price, former Commonwealth games 110m hurdles Gold medallist and graduate of Aberystwyth University, Cathy Rudolph, an American sports degree graduate and, unusually for the time a female member of the management team and Ian Muir the only former practicing PE teacher in the group whose contacts with Arsenal FC through his friendship with Liam (“Chippy”) Brady would prove to be invaluable.

Although the team lacked experience they made up for it in fitness and enthusiasm, working long and unsocial hours and frequently getting their hands dirty in the completely literal sense. Back to back 15 hour days were a regular feature of week end shift patterns, a programme which would be well outside the European Working Time Directive of the present day. However, such hours were necessary to overcome the many teething problems with a new facility.

The Administration team was headed up by Jack Edwards another with sporting links having had the dubious distinction of being Ugandan Dictator, Idi Amin’s, boxing coach. Jack was a boxing coach of some ability and his adopted son, Carlos Boza Edwards, went on to be a World boxing champion. Jack brought a number of well qualified Ugandan Asian exiles to add their expertise to the admin and finance teams. Local knowledge was provided by the formidable duo of Kim Cummins, Administration Officer, and Maggie Sandford who led the Reception team. Secretarial support was provided by Sue Darton (later Lord.) who went on to be the assistant to Paul Hutchins, Director of Training and Davis Cup Captain at the LTA and Linda Ricardo. There was also a dedicated in house maintenance team under the control of Buildings engineer Tom Manfield.

The ice rink and catering had their own Mecca employed management team headed by Tony Mould, who, in proper Mecca tradition wore a dinner suit while on duty much to the amusement of local customers. The scale of the management team may come as a surprise to those more accustomed to the slimmer management arrangements in present day centres but it was not unusual for the time to have several layers of management at even an average sized centre.

The success of Sobell as a breeding ground for managers can be seen from the subsequent careers of many of its alumni. David Hemery went on to hold a number of influential positions in British Athletics as well as following a career as an inspirational speaker and writer. His story on TV’s “This is your life” programme was however, recorded at Sobell! John Lord went on to manage the Wembley Complex and Cardiff Arenas and to oversee major developments in both. He later became Development Director for the European operations of Ogden Entertainments Inc. the major American arena developer and operator. Chic Carvell went on to manage at the Oasis in Swindon before setting up one of Britain’s leading sport and fitness charts and publications companies, Chartex Ltd. David Lord managed facilities at Leatherhead and became Director of Recreation at the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority before joining the Disney Organisation as part of the development team for Disneyland Paris and later working with Roger Quinton as a senior consultant with RQA Leisure Consultants before succeeding as MD following Roger’s untimely death. Berwyn Price went on to manage leisure centres at Andover and Swansea before becoming Assistant Director of Leisure for the City and County of Swansea where he project managed the development of the Liberty Stadium among other things. Cathy Rudolph returned to the States where she held a number of management positions. Jack Edwards returned to boxing coaching and management.

As for yours truly, I left to join Harry Littlewood’s Facilities Unit at the Sports Council which was at the time heavily engaged with the emerging leisure management profession. After a period working for John Birch at the London and South East region of the Sports Council, I moved into Local Government,

first as Assistant Director to Keith Ivory at Tower Hamlets and then as a Director at a south coast authority before completing what may laughably be called my career in leisure planning and management consultancy.

So much for the personalities; but to get back to the centre itself. The Sobell Centre was officially opened by the Duke of Edinburgh on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1973 and promptly closed on the following day as it was not ready to receive customers, finally opening for business in January 1974. The centre's opening was accompanied by local protests about access and cost for local people who felt that it had been imposed on their community and that many would not be able to afford to use it.

However, the predicted conflicts became apparent from the outset; there were conflicts of access between the centre and local youths and conflicts of use between the local community and incoming users from more affluent neighbouring communities (an irony given the gentrification of much of Islington in the present day.) The local press condemned the centre for serving the "white skirted badminton ladies of Highgate and Hampstead" at the expense of local people. Regrettably, much of the opposition to the centre was generated by one or two local activists whose main complaint was that they were not consulted beforehand and that what the area needed was a community centre. Casual use was also not well developed at the time and therefore the inevitable conflicts between the club user and the casual player became an issue at Sobell as it was in many early centres. However, the centre did have a remarkably successful and well-developed day time schools programme, involving the employment of 12 specialist sports coaches, which served to educate and entertain several hundred young people each week who would become the next generation of potential users as well as providing much needed variety in the physical education programmes of surrounding inner city schools, many of whom lacked any kind of indoor or outdoor playing space.

In addition to the sporting conflicts, the centre also suffered social conflicts as economically disadvantaged local youth took advantage of the porous access controls and the myriad exit doors to find ways of getting into the centre and to create the kind of mischief which boredom, lack of access to activity and financial poverty often promotes. Petty acts of vandalism, thefts from changing rooms, occasional fights and threats of violence were common occurrences. The centre's initial response was to hire uniformed security guards to man the public entrances and patrol the building but this only led to new games such as "chase me" and "minor riot" and only served to worsen relations between the local community and the centre.

To counter such behaviour and local antipathy the centre tried to promote activities such as low cost taster courses, after school activities and school holiday programmes. This last was very popular especially when directed by the ever resourceful "Uncle Chic" who would take to the centre's public address system to encourage the young participants to join in the ingenious range of activities which he devised for keeping them amused. The hybrid activity of "rugby basketball" was a particular hit with some of the more aggressive boys!

One particular activity programme aimed at reconciling the centre and its local community was suggested by the London and South East region of the Sports Council. They offered financial support for 12 weeks of "Family Activity Mornings" on Sundays during the centre's first year. The idea was that for a minimal cost all members of a family could join in a wide range of coached activities from badminton or aerobics to snooker or weight training.

It's certainly the case that the Sports Council has had many better ideas in its illustrious history in leisure, as it soon became apparent that families in that part of Islington generally spent their Sunday mornings either recovering from Saturday night, at Church or preparing for family Sunday lunch. In any event the greatest take up in the entire period was 10 families and the lowest was a mere two. The idea though clearly well intentioned wasn't pursued beyond the initial 12 weeks!

However, there were many successes including the previously mentioned school holiday programmes and, thanks to the links established by Ian Muir, some football and netball programmes with the involvement of Arsenal Football Club. This link continues to this day with the Arsenal having relocated from their former ground at Highbury to the Emirates stadium just along from Sobell and actively promoting Netball leagues and other activities at the centre. These links also led in turn to the short lived “Super Sixes” football league. This was a commercial promotion fronted by Jimmy Greaves and Ian St John to try and establish a professional, televised indoor six a side league with teams representing the major football clubs. The teams were made up of mainly recently retired pro footballers including Dennis Law, George Best, Frank Worthington and a number of England’s 1966 World Cup winning team and even featured the Portuguese great, Eusebio among others. Unfortunately, the organisers failed to attract the proposed television interest and also failed to anticipate the lifestyle changes which retirement had wrought on many of the contracted players! Unfortunately, the league lasted no more than three weeks before the organisers abandoned the idea due to limited public and TV interest.

Five or six a side indoor recreational football was one of the activities guaranteed to attract local interest and the centre hosted a number of leagues which always drew a full list of teams from pubs, social clubs, workplaces and other looser groupings. The Recreation managers’ lot was never made any easier when it was found that the ref for the night had failed to turn up, leading to a long evening of personal abuse and the questioning of the parentage of whichever Sobell manager who was unlucky enough to have to stand in and take up the whistle.

Another activity which caught the imagination of the local youth was ice skating and the rink was inevitably full on most evenings with crowds turned away on many week-ends. Sobell undoubtedly succeeded in introducing many inner city young people to ice skating, an activity which they would otherwise have had no opportunity to enjoy. However, as mentioned earlier the design of the building was not ideal for this level of use. However, the rink also played a part in the Olympic success of John Curry who used it as a training base before his gold medal winning Olympic performance.

Mecca contributed significantly to the fitting out of the rink, bar and cafeteria and it was understood by the Trust that the income from the rink was planned to offset this initial investment over a period of time.

The operational business model for the Trust initially envisaged that Variety Club members would donate money to set up a trust fund, the interest from which would meet the annual operating deficit of the centre. Unfortunately, this proved to be unrealistic and never materialised, so that from the outset the centre was operating without any cover for its financial losses which increased annually. After lengthy negotiation led by Acting Director, John Lord, the Borough of Islington agreed, after 3 years of Trust operation, to take over responsibility for the financial operation and the maintenance of the asset, thus bringing to an end the Trust/ Commercial partnership model.

Sobell contributed to the development of a whole generation of leisure professionals in one other way. Based at the North London Polytechnic on the nearby Holloway Road, George Torkildsen, Gwyn Griffiths, John Dawes and others were busily training the new generation of managers on the Diploma in Management Science (DMS) course in leisure management, one of the very few early professional courses in the discipline. The students were actively encouraged to take on part time evening and week end work as Centre Assistants at Sobell. Hence a number of future Directors of Leisure had their first experience of management chasing “Gregory” around the squash court corridors of the Sobell or hauling bleacher seating units into place for a large scale event.

Sobell was also the focus of professional interest among architects and the wider leisure profession due to its size and location and in its early days many groups sought visits to see the facilities or learn

lessons from its management. On one famous occasion when David Hemery was guiding a group of Sports Council dignitaries and others around the building, he threw open the doors of one of the stores to demonstrate how well provided the centre was with storage space only for the delegates to see two people engaged in activities which were energetic but more procreational than recreational! Fortunately, the religiously minded David never turned away from facing his audience and was possibly puzzled by the level of tittering among the group and why they found storage so amusing. However, those who were there including the late Regional Director of the Sports Council's South West Region, Peter Barson, remember the incident vividly!

As previously mentioned I only remained at the Sobell for 18 months before moving on to the Sports Council but in that year and a half I think I gained about five years' worth of management experience (as well as a few nightmares) along with a clear understanding that the customer has to be put first in any leisure operation and a number of life-long friendships which continue to this day. We were fortunate to have been around when Sports Centre Management was still an emerging profession and we wouldn't have missed it for the world.



*The Sobell Recreation Management Team  
40 Years on! From the left - David Lord,  
Berwyn Price, Chic Carvell, Hywel Griffiths*

## Conclusion

Whatever the problems associated with its development and the local protest which accompanied its opening and early operation the Sobell Centre has become a part of the community as evidenced by the local protest which accompanied plans by the Local Authority to demolish it and replace it with a smaller centre and housing in the early part of the current century. Since then it has performed an important role as a training base for the London 2012 Olympic Games and in 2010 a plaque commemorating Sir Michael Sobell's generosity was unveiled at the centre. The accompanying press coverage at the time described the centre as the "much loved Sobell Sports Centre;" surely a clear indication of its success and a vindication of those early efforts to engage the local community which it now serves so well.

## Hywel Griffiths 2017

