

# Recreation management in practice

Who are the right people to manage recreation centres? Geoffrey Bott, Director of the Forum, Billingham, has no doubt in his mind that these positions should go to the men who are prepared to forget Joint Council rules and regulations, the 38-hour week, evenings and weekends; above all to men with ideas.

by G. G. Bott, Director of the Forum, Billingham, Tees-side

Introducing his paper at Douglas, Isle of Man, Mr Bott said:

The architects of the Forum decided to record the construction of this unique recreation complex with a colour film. The record extended beyond this period and is now in four parts, firstly a brief explanation of the philosophy of Billingham, secondly the opening by Her Majesty the Queen, thirdly a section on the detail of construction and fourthly the participation by the public.

The film gives an indication of the basic thought behind the Forum provision as a pattern of living and the philosophy of the Council in the overall development of the town. One must ask why in Billingham and not in one or more of the hundreds of larger cities and towns. There are the two facts (a) the comparative wealth of the town per head of population and (b) and, most important, is the reasoned and adventurous thinking of the elected members and officers of the Billingham Urban District Council. Their heads were not buried in the sand and the thinking nineteenth century, as so many appear to be today irrespective of political parties. At least the development of the Town Centre, which includes the Forum, was above politics from its inception in the late 1950s. The power changed from one to another four times before the amalgamation into Tees-side in 1968 but the minutes of the Council show very little dissent or major alterations to the overall plan from one administration to another. One must, at this point of time, add that the then Clerk of the Council, Mr Fred. M. Dawson, was a man with a mission who knew what he wanted to see grow and develop in the new Billingham and bent every local government rule and regulation to get it and carried his Council members with him to do it.

The philosophy of a Town Centre for people and not an architect's dream was a solid base to work on, the centre as a traffic-free precinct, the location of not only shops and offices but of many of the communities recreational requirements were to be located in the centre so that it was alive and busy after the shops and offices closed. Thus the nightclub at one end and the Forum at the other, with the 10-pin bowling alley, art gallery and hostel between — the provision of a bandstand and regular orchestral concerts, the development of an international folklore festival were part of this provision.

Behind all this thinking and what members may think as wild and unnecessary speculation

was the commercial mind when the 28 acres that the Town Centre covers was bought 14 or so years ago for a very small sum — it has been said for less than £300 an acre. On it is approximately £7 million of development and one wonders its worth today.

The first section of the Town Centre was developed by a private property development group and when the Council realised what the land had been leased for, the cost of development, and the return from the rents, they realised that it was possible to complete the project and obtain a commercial return themselves. Consequently the Council developed the whole of the rest of the Centre with one architect, the majority of the result you have seen on the film and it is even better now finally completed. Even Michael Canney on his Utopia programme on Tees-side had good words to say about the Town Centre. It does 95 per cent of what it set out to do, namely to provide a focal point for the community, a living centre, a heart that beats for the major part of the day which is reflected in the feeling of belonging to the town and its undoubted parochialisation in the amalgamation.

From the commercial viewpoint and a fact which is now often forgotten is that the Tees-side Council are the property owners and receive directly the rents for the Town Centre development. The idea was that this would pay for the community provision of 2,000 car park spaces (still free), underpavement heating, children's playgrounds and, of course, the Forum. The estimate in 1968 was that by 1973 the whole of the development would be a 6d. rate call — £90,000 per annum.

Unfortunately this fact is not widely realised in the rest of Tees-side and consequently there is some feeling that the rest of the County Borough is supporting the Forum. The fact is that Billingham is paying far more rates than it ever was but it is hoped in turn that when the parochialism dies that Tees-side as a whole will regard the facility as an asset worth having.

These, then, are the reasons for the Forum in Billingham, now admittedly not the ideal position to serve the whole of Tees-side but at least it is there and if on the outer fringe of the Borough — better there than not at all.

The Forum is, of course, independent from the local authority in all matters but the grants received. It is a Charitable Trust controlled by a Board of Management which is made up of three Trustees, eight elected members of Tees-side County Borough Council, and rep-

resentatives from York and Durham Universities, Industry, the Unions, the Churches, the Northern Arts Association the lessee of the ice rink, the Director of Arts and Recreation, and the Organiser of Physical Education for Tees-side.

## Facts and Figures

The cost of construction has already been given but it is interesting to break down into approximate figures the cost of the individual facilities. The ice rink was, of course, the most expensive section and cost £340,000, the pools were £204,000, theatre £164,000, sports area £134,000, general amenities area £122,000 and £34,000 on external works. It has been suggested that as four separate buildings with only basic amenity areas the cost could have increased by nearly 100 per cent. There are advantages and savings of having the district heating scheme from the National Coal Board plant which supplies a heating system of high pressure hot water — whether the cost of running is now any cheaper is questionable.

Usage figures exceeded the original estimation by 100 per cent for in the first year nearly 1½ million people entered the building and this increased by nearly 100,000 in the second year. The end of the third year in July of 1970 showed a decline in actual entrants but an increase in participants despite the fact that all the other centres in Tees-side were fully operational and a new pool had been opened at Stockton, five miles away. Normal usage figures have shown that about 280,000 skate, 320,000 swim, 65,000 use the sports facilities, 130,000 attend the theatre, 10,000 people have saunas and nearly 10,000 children are looked after in the crèche. These account for only 56 per cent of the total entry so nearly 400,000 people have paid to enter the building to spectate. In the period since July, in our peak entry period, this trend has continued with increases in participation but less casual spectators.

From the beginning it has always been my intention, approved by the Board, that this would not become the Crystal Palace of the north or an existing sports club centre. It has been developed as an individual participation centre with specific encouragement for the whole family to enter as a unit and to choose an activity or be non-participants.

## Design

The external appearance fits into the general pattern of the Town Centre. This, of





course, was one group of architects' influence on the whole project. From the view from above, it can be seen that the building is really four separate units with individual design and features — each with a specific purpose both functional and aesthetic. The principles that have been followed are to put expensive finishes in the places where they are required and minimal finishes where it was felt this is all that is required. On the whole this has worked well but there are some exceptions; these can be explained almost entirely on the grounds of cost. The building is excellent value for its cost and without doubt almost anyone could go through the building and spend £100,000 on adding, subtracting and altering, shape, size and finishes. One must also realise that it was never anticipated by the architects that some areas would be used to the extent that they are and had this been considered various adjustments could have been made.

One must also remember that this building grew from basic ideas thrown out by the Council and its officers and there was no architectural brief even in its widest sense. In 1960 when the project of a sports forum was first initiated in Council and up to 1965 when the final contract was let, what was there to work on in this country — Harlow and Crystal Palace, neither of which could be compared in any sense with the Forum. I do know that nearly two years research was made in Western Europe and Scandinavia before outline plans were drawn but even this did not give many answers. Certainly my visits to centres in Germany, Holland and Sweden show their concept of participation to be entirely different and consequently design and management must be thought of in a different light.

Again there was no feasibility study undertaken by the Council — it has been described as an act of faith, which sums up the attitude of the Council and community completely. This also happened before the advent of sports councils at local and national level and I venture to suggest that if this had been proposed for any town the size of Billingham 18 months or two years later the town would have finished up with a 25-metre pool and a single-court sports hall. In fact, right up to the pre-contract stage, there were still bitter arguments between the Council and the Ministry of Housing about the size of the pool — in the end commonsense prevailed and a 110 ft. pool was agreed.

Again we have the question of the size and shape of pools. I would agree 25 or 50 metre rectangles are probably acceptable in many areas and centres but the Forum should have had a continental lido-type indoor pool, even to artificial sunlight, irregular shape, much more shallow water and even the availability of drinks at the pool-side. We regard the Forum pool as a bathing pool and not for serious swimming.

Here I think the authorities listen to the national governing bodies of sport — and I hold an executive position on one of these bodies — far too much. The provision of all sports halls and pools to their full international standard are totally unnecessary if the difference in cost makes the difference of having a facility or not having one. There are hundreds of thousands of people playing and participating in physical activities in good standard facilities which do not have the required dimensions and surely participation is the key-note. The base of the pyramid of all sport must be so wide as to throw up the odd exception who can make national or international standards. I am not advocating the non-erection of centres of these standards but the acceptance by the governing bodies that all pools must not be 50 metres long or the correct depth, that sports halls need not be 30 ft. high and 120 ft. x 60 ft. or 120 ft. square, that rifle ranges need not be the standard required for an international shoot and indeed that the number of spectators seats should be minimal — if this allows an extra area for activity or social provision to be made. Certainly this should be so in the second generation provision that must ultimately come particularly if the Forum provision is to be repeated elsewhere in this country.

#### Development

Is the Forum complete — should it develop further? Looking back one can now see the faults — the lack of some provisions and the shortcomings of the building. Could I, or any one of us, see this in the final design stages in early 1965? Is there any recreation provision open today that one can say is perfect even though there have been architectural briefs, feasibility studies and the Manager appointed long before the normal accepted practice — design and build it first and then put someone in to do the best he can with it.

The architect partner-in-charge of the Forum and I still remain friends even though

five months before completion I had holes knocked in nearly every wall in his building and altered this and that. He was the first to admit that someone from the management side should have been there in the design stage but I feel that if I had been the person neither of us would have even spoken to each other after a few months as I changed ideas as fast as he redesigned and built the structure.

Without any doubt the design has a great effect on the management and one must be complementary to the other. It was realised within three months of the opening that the building was too small and lacked certain facilities — namely a double sauna suite, proper maintenance workshops, a room for judo and allied activities, a separate table tennis room, more adequate storage, staff rooms and further offices — particularly with relation to the Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act. Later with the theatre it was quickly appreciated that workshops, paint room, rehearsal rooms and scenery stores would have to be found if the theatre was to function as a full professional production theatre.

A design to include all these additional areas was made and costed, the land was and actually still is available adjoining the Forum but the cost of £1½ million precluded any immediate start and, of course, the Billingham Urban District Council had then less than one year as an independent authority.

There have been excellent suggestions that the local night club should have been an integral part of the Centre. I reserve my views on this, and that more in the way of cultural pursuits should be included such as the art gallery which was purpose-built 75 yards away. From this can be seen that the Forum is not really complete and the numbers using it could have been increased considerably and possibly with the inclusion of sections which are viable financially could have had a good effect on the annual overall expenditure. Ten-pin bowling is one activity that it is now felt essential in the Centre as the local bowl is closed — only four lanes, but it would have both provided an additional youth facility and been viable — billiards and snooker have been discussed and a discotheque in addition to all other areas mentioned previously.

Over 200 local authorities and groups of architects have officially visited the Centre and nearly 50 groups from overseas. How do they see it? The majority would like to transfer it



to their area — until the rate call is disclosed. Some arrive with schemes already in the design stage, architects appointed and costings carried out — usually with grossly over-ambitious schemes forced through by political pressure and by the pressure from local sports bodies, sports councils and such like. If it is the sports side who have pressurised them then you get the arts bodies wanting at least similar provision: full theatre with 600 seats, arts centres, etc., in small towns and rural areas.

In the end the product falls between two stools and nothing transpires and there are a pile of plans, research material and a letter from the Department or Ministry suggesting that it is impossible — leaving feelings of frustration and bitterness. If only elected members, the sports and arts bodies could act in a reasonable manner and realise that if everyone acted in moderation or with appreciation of the area's requirements much more progress could be made. It is well known that schemes costing £800,000 have been cut to £400,000 because of the global figure of loan sanction available and have on recosting of income and expenditure put at least another 2d. on the rate call — the so-called fringe facilities outside a sports hall and pool having to be excluded, and often giving the most viable returns.

Joint provision and dual use may possibly be a part of the answer for facilities in areas which may otherwise never have got anything and the adaptation of many educational provisions outside of evening institutes and youth clubs for recreational or arts usage is probably a cheaper way still — the height of the gymnasium even doubled in size or having to go outside to go into an attached squash court is not ideal but better than nothing.

One last point in this section is the ever presence of the parochial approach, even in regional sports councils this is evident and from personal experience I know of a facility which was drastically needed and by foresight and careful planning 40 per cent of the work had been done. The proposal as a joint provision was turned down flat because it was in one borough and not the other — even though the centre of the initiator was three miles further from the site than the other.

### General Management

As I have said the Forum is an independent body and in consequence differs in manage-

ment from 90 per cent of all other types of recreational provision, which are local authority or commercial. These are protected societies with an authority's legal, treasurers', maintenance and other relevant departments to fall back on as and when required. Some centres are Trusts which rely on their own resources for administration, etc., but none have the complexities of the Forum.

Within Tees-side, which was the first one to amalgamate the leisure services departments, and there have been many more since, particularly when the authority has been 'Management Studied', there would remain the problem of how a similar complex would be administered within the department. There are usually the department specialist heads of recreation, parks, baths, entertainment, etc., all of whom would feel that the section appropriate to their department should come under their direct control. An impossible situation could easily develop with three or four departmental heads having responsibility in the building. The only way round in my opinion is the complex remaining as an entity and the Director/Manager being responsible to the overall Director.

In the report of the Sports Council Working Party on Professional Training for Recreation Management it indicates under six headings the framework of a course of training all of which is part and parcel of the positions that many people hold today — but without many realising the implications. The majority of people engaged in recreation management today have learnt the hard way and are basically self-taught.

Is this sufficient for the future with the possibility of larger centres than the Forum and the new posts created as Chief Recreation Officers and all similar posts with different titles? How many of those engaged today consider themselves capable of taking on such a task and carrying it out successfully bearing in mind that the suggested courses are of a fairly high academic level? Certainly in several positions filled recently the appointments have been made from outside the field of recreation and have leaned towards the discipline of management and accountancy.

One could stand and quote all the normal jargon of management but in recreation surely one of the major requirements is a sympathy for as many fields of recreation disciplines as possible. In our present structure the majority of the recreation service is providing the com-

munity with an amenity service and if one looked at almost any branch of recreation and the arts from purely a financial return there would not be a bath, a park, a sports centre or non-commercial theatre open, indeed the museums and art service and libraries would be non-existent. Much has been said about commercial interests investing money in recreation but I can assure you that their type of centre will differ very widely from a local authority provision. *Again I disagree with many elected members who are adamant about providing recreation services free — the scale of charges though never viable in a centre such as the Forum must be set on various principles — the standard of provision, the availability of other facilities, the location within the country, but the public must learn that payment is a necessity and an increasing and more realistic charge must be made in the future. The Forum has shown that even with the abundance of facilities within Tees-side that charges higher than the accepted rate will be paid if the facilities warrant it.*

What is the job:

(a) Management Techniques. Remember in this the Forum stands alone with only consultant legal and financial advisers — both of whom cost money. The delegation of authority and administration is widespread and has allowed a very good management and administration team to be built up. Basically the Director's job is to implement policy agreed — not dictated — by the Board of Management, to co-ordinate the team — several of whom are specialists in their own field, and to be sufficiently well informed on every item to be able to discuss with the trade union officer, the accountant, legal adviser, architect, engineers, theatre personnel, etc., the relevant problem. The implementation of these actions will normally be left to the appropriate head of the department but will be checked at the appropriate time. This is normally done at a staff meeting held once a week or as often as possible where everyone from the head porter upwards meets to discuss policy, the implementation, problems, staff, estimates, accounts, the public, etc. In this way all learn about each other's problems and a mutual way of solving them is achieved. Sectional meetings are also held frequently and the trade union shop steward has always access to the Director, though fortunately this is now rarely needed.

The Forum has a normal staff of approximately 110 with the theatre but this excludes the two leased sections, namely the two



profitable ones, the ice rink and the catering and bars, which between them employ a further 50 staff. The building is open 101 hours a week and the manual staff work on a three-shift basis over a six-week cycle — working two morning shifts, two afternoon, followed by two days off. Twice in a fortnight there is a working-in day for some and this is when project cleaning and maintenance is carried out.

*There is a fluidity of staff from one section to another and this is written into all the contracts. Consequently, if the pool is short, porters can be drafted in and vice versa; commissionaires have acted as maintenance porters and the craftsmen and technicians from the theatre and general Forum are interchangeable to some degree.*

There are eight porters to a shift, two men and six ladies, who act not only as cleaners but also cashiers, sports booking clerks and controllers of sports hirings and sales. The pool has seven staff per shift and the vast majority but for the cashiers are qualified so there is a rotation from basket-room to pool-side at regular intervals during a shift. In this way it is very easy to cover for meal breaks, holidays and sickness without necessitating overtime.

There are, of course, the commissionaires (who control and police the building), totalling six, the maintenance staff of carpenters, electricians and fitters who maintain all the heating, ventilating, filtration and electrical plant. The theatre has its own specialist craftsmen in carpenters, scenic artists, production manager, stage director, electrician and projectionist, stage crew, etc., and there are the nurses, nursery nurses, sauna bath attendants, etc.

The management staff number four, the senior administrative staff four, with six office personnel for secretarial work, invoicing, accounts, wages and salaries, telephone switchboard and hostel receptionist. The theatre has, of course, in addition to theatre staff, who mainly have shared duties, a theatre director, director of productions and secretary. I have just mentioned hostel receptionist as there is, of course, a 90-bedded hostel adjacent to the Forum — owned by Tees-side Arts and Recreation Department but administered and maintained by the Forum staff. Three years ago I remember Emlyn Jones, Director of Crystal Palace, giving a discourse on the problems of running a hostel; how true was all he said. There are probably more headaches and sorting-out in the hostel

than all the rest of the Forum. Not only do you have large junior mixed coaching and training weekends, but members of the general public, artists of all levels all of whom create incidents and situations which are at times difficult to believe.

All of these staff have to realise that the public are of prime importance and must at all times be sympathetic to their needs and requirements which are diverse, changeable, impracticable, improbable and impossible.

The old saying of 'You can please some people some of the time but not all the people all of the time' is absolutely true in recreation. Either the pool is too hot or too cold, the booking system is wrong and they can't book or absolutely correct if they get in.

The system of control and booking of the individual having absolute priority for 90 per cent of the time the Forum is open follows the philosophy of the Centre and because an individual cannot book a squash court, table tennis table, or sports hall one hour after the prior week's sheet is opened means that the place required more facilities — at peak times. What do you do with them between 8.30-5.30 p.m. Monday to Friday in school term? If they are let for educational use what happens to the four days a week and the shift workers?

As an independent body all the financial aspects except for the loan and interest charges for the building, amounting to £100,000 per annum, are dealt with internally and the total expenditure budget exceeds £300,000 per annum. The income accounts for some 60 per cent of the total expenditure and the rest is made up from grants from the local authority, the Arts Council and the Northern Arts Association. Probably the most difficult job is to balance the budget particularly when one has a theatre with very variable estimated income. Up to £10,000 can be invested in one four-week show and if audiences do not come up to expectations the rest of the financial year's programme must be re-budgeted immediately to recoup the loss and one must remember that a theatre programme must be prepared at least four months ahead.

One of the last problems in the Forum complex is the existence of commercial management. Their philosophy is, of course, entirely different and one must work towards an amicable relationship. The biggest drawback is the lack of direct control over their operation which may be against the basic

principles of the provision. In the Forum it has been possible to reach a good understanding with the ice rink lessees but, unfortunately, the very variable and often poor standard of catering which has a much more immediate effect on the public causes considerable problems. It is this that many local authorities fight shy of but it is an absolute necessity to keep this under direct control even in the smallest centres.

### The Manager

It is very evident in this comparatively new field that local authorities have great difficulty in selecting the right person. Basically they have little idea in this first place of how the centre is to be used and this is the first problem to be solved. The majority of posts are advertised in the open market and anyone can apply and I have had long discussions with people from all other disciplines in recreation as to who is the right person to manage this or that centre. The choice comes in the end from the interviewing committee and it is up to the baths manager, the parks administrator, the entertainments man or the physical educationalist to sell him or herself.

In this new field it is the man who is prepared to forget Joint Council Rules and Regulations, the 38-hour week, weekends and evenings, and is the person with ideas to market his centre, the ability to direct specialists from numerous fields, have good public relations, to know the problems of present participation and future trends, be willing to learn from others and above all have sympathy with the patrons' requirements. This is the person, no matter from which field, who will become the future recreation manager.

To the elected representative — go home and look what you are doing for your community in the field of recreation. Ask yourself if you are satisfied with the present provision. There are ways and means of providing very near viable centres if sufficient thought and planning is given to it and you ignore the pressure groups.

To the baths managers: stop being sanctimonious, self-satisfied and self-glorifying. The constant moan is that you are the men who should get the jobs because it is the job you have been doing for years. Get your heads out from under the blanket and compete in the open market with all the other so-called specialists.