

THE GROVE DAYS - BREAKING NEW BARRIERS:

The Reflections of Bryan "Griff" Jones – first Manager of The Grove Sports Centre

- **Nottinghamshire in the vanguard**

Moving to the Grove and Nottinghamshire put me in touch with a bigger pioneering arena. Nottinghamshire County Council (NCC) was the largest council in the vanguard of the concept of joint provision from the late 1960s (as set out in Chapter 7). Initially the Council opened four such centres, almost simultaneously, with the County joining forces with the local councils of Bingham, Sutton in Ashfield (Carlton Forum), Newark (The Grove in Balderton) and Worksop. In Newark's case, the driving force, and consequently the responsibility for the administration, was with the local District Council. That, in itself, was quite original and brave.

There were a number of CC officers who fully supported the concept and were well known in the very early days of sports centres. There was John Spencer (who in 1974 became CEO for Newark Council), David Barnes who was County PE Organizer, and his assistant, none other than Jimmy Munn. Nottinghamshire had been a first provider of sports barns (big covered areas, some with drop down canvas sides for bad weather -see Chapter 4: 4.1.4). David retired in late 1969 and Jimmy took over for a short period before moving to Monmouthshire, Torfaen and then Birmingham.

- **The interviews and key personalities**

Advertising and interviewing for the four Nottinghamshire joint provision centre management posts were held more or less in tandem across April & May in 1968. The first advertised was Bingham, followed by Carlton Forum, The Grove and Worksop. As we were advised at interview, there were approximately 150 applicants for the first Bingham post. At Bingham there were 12 of us whittled down to 6 in the morning, taken to lunch and then interviewed again in the afternoon. Dave Thomas got the post (later to be Director of the National Sports Centre for Wales). Then an interesting thing happened. John Spencer, County Clerk, came out and informed us that the Carlton and Grove posts were to be advertised the following week. He then kept two of us behind and told us that there was no need for us to apply that we would be on the list for interview if we were still interested, I was one and the other was Alan Slynn (later Manager of Worthing SC). The joint advert for Carlton & The Grove led to over 200 applicants. Worksop was advertised separately.

We duly turned up for the Carlton interviews and in addition to Alan and I there were 2 others from the Bingham interview, plus one 'local' applicant. Then Chris Field arrived in a jeep with his batman and major's uniform. Chris was appointed and after he moved on to Greenwich Council, he was followed in the post by another military man, Tiny (Colonel) Whitworth. When it came to The Grove, there were six of us for final interview, which went down to Alan and me. I was the lucky one but again Alan was approached, and of course landed the Worksop post.

- **Operating the Grove Sports Centre**

I was appointed in late May 1968 but in order to tie up loose ends at Breeze Hill, especially year end tournaments, I arranged to start at the beginning of October. During the interim period I made several visits to Newark, as a guest at the Chairman's annual parade, presented trophies at two local school sports days, but in some ways more important was that in addition I also had invaluable talks with Bill Winter, RDC Clerk. The result was that my staffing proposals were agreed, a provisional charging policy approved plus hours of opening, and I was allocated an office in the Council building and as a temporary measure a secretary, June Loughton. June was to become the admin officer for The Grove. Her knowledge of the Council's systems was fantastic, she implemented the charging system and managed the receptionists and all financial systems. She was a great asset and stayed until she retired in 2001.

When I arrived, in conjunction with Bill Winter, the senior staff adverts had already been placed for deputy director, pool manager, sports officer and plant engineer, and all were appointed before Christmas. June and I appointed the receptionists in Jan (129 applicants - 129 interviewed (well received by the councillors). as June recalls, phase 1 took two weeks but all was completed by the end of the month and training started on the 1st February. John Binks was appointed Deputy Director with responsibility for the maintenance of the building and general welfare of the staff and coaching squash and hockey; and Roy Claydon, Pool Manager, also took on responsibility for the operation of the bar, though I was the licensee. They were appointed in November and the Sports Officer, Jim Coates, in December.

Oh Boy what a difference to Oldham!! Nothing but help and goodwill during this period and we struck up good relationships with the Headmaster and annulled a lot of the fears of the PE staff, which recognised me as "one of them". When I was appointed the groundwork for the building was complete and when I arrived fully in October the shell was up and work was going ahead with the tiling of the pool, followed by the flooring in the main hall (Granwood), and the wooden floors in the gym. and squash courts. The outdoor areas were being cleared for the games area and provision being made for the installation of the floodlights and the car park laid.

At the beginning of November we advertised for pool and sports attendants. Six good swimmers were appointed (3 male 3 female) plus 2 reserves on a casual basis for emergencies. The pool was filled and ready at the beginning of January so the pool attendants came in for intensive life-saving and first aid skills training under Roy Claydon, Jim Coates and myself (having watched Tom Saunders at Breeze Hill, with Jim Coates sitting on the pool floor with snorkel etc, waiting to be "saved", you don't become a CPO in the navy PE branch for nothing!). They were assessed by the RLSS and re-tested every 3 months. After Jim left Ted Glover took over. He had spent 8 years in submarines before coming ashore, another CPO who had been in the gun race at the Albert Hall but was also on the fringe of the GB gymnastics team.

After one or two encounters with difficult school caretakers I wanted my own such staff. The CC would have had to bring in at least another full-time caretaker anyway. After much discussion, especially with the County Council, we succeeded. We employed a full-time caretaker and two part-time cleaners. We contributed to the school caretaker's salary based on him cleaning the squash courts (attached to School) and the old changing rooms after public use of the all-weather area. He was amenable to this arrangement which solved a clash with NUPE. He was invited to our functions and events and this resulted in a good relationship and the headmaster breathed a sigh of relief.

- **Public use in joint provision**

The public opening hours were from 5pm to 11pm on weekdays and 9am to 11pm. At weekends and during school holidays. The squash courts were open for public use every day as the County had not contributed to their cost. However, time was allocated to the school free of charge for certain periods as a "sweetener". There were over 30 schools using the pool on a weekly basis.

- **Bar decision was important**

The bar licence was granted in my name in February 1969. They had thoroughly checked my background and during the hearing I had the opportunity to spend time emphasizing the importance of trying to foster a feeling of belonging and the importance sport could play in fostering friendships among players who would otherwise finish their games and leave. The bar set a precedent for Nottinghamshire, though the other 3 centres did not have one. We had to conform to strict rules in respect that pupils at the school or visiting could not gain access to this area. The result was a well-equipped bar and social area, access to which was like entering Fort Knox. All the doors etc. had security locks, the mesh grill and storeroom the same, cameras in the social area and behind the bar, even a lock on my office door that led into the bar area. We also had infrequent visits from the police

and one or two magistrates during school hours as a means of checking that the conditions on the licence were being observed. We made many friends through this social outlet. In an area with few social opportunities, low incomes, and an above average unemployment rate at that time. I had mentioned at the licence hearing that I wanted to increase the range of leisure opportunities on offer to the public in addition to sport and I am glad that this philosophy continued after my time.

During this period Bob Tedder had opened the Bicester & Ploughley Centre, another joint provision centre. He was interested in the possibility of putting in a bar, so John Binks and I went to see him to pass on our, as it was at the time, limited knowledge. He only really had one place to put a bar and that was in the viewing gallery on the first floor, overlooking the sports hall on one side and the pool on the other. Having discussed the location and requirements I do not think it was pursued.

- **Strategic Management of the Centre**

We were responsible to a Management Committee which met on a 6 weekly cycle and comprised of 3RDC, 3UDC members, David Barnes from the CC and another, Colin Slater, who did a lot of publicity for us. In addition, Terry Mack and John Carri represented the Sports Council in an advisory capacity. As an interesting aside, one of the UDC representatives was Colonel Sam Derry, a member of the local Holes brewing family, who during the war had escaped from a German POW camp made his way to Italy and spent the last 2 years organizing the Vatican escape route for allied escapees. Lovely man. This committee was serviced by the Clerk to the RDC Bill Winter.

- **Innovation to solve storage and office space problem**

Like most early centres, we suffered from a severe lack of storage space and we cured our problem in a rather unique way. About a year after we opened, one Friday night, the local Council Clerk, Bill Winter, called in for a 'quick half' on his way home and we were discussing the problem when he stated that they were due to pull down some prefabs in the town. We were allocated one, stripped it out, except for the toilet area, and, with the help of both the RDC & UDC technical staff who laid the foundations, moved it across town and placed it next to the sports hall. We now had a complete bungalow. Space was allocated for the school to store equipment, as a result of which the CC paid to connect all the services. Besides the storage space gained, we were able to move in the maintenance base and re-arrange parts of the centre, including the reception area and increase the size of accommodation for the PE staff. At this time, we also extended outwards the office accommodation. This also reflected the need to accommodate additional part-time clerical staff. All these changes resulted in an increase in the size of the bar. The only limitation of the bungalow was that it did not have direct access to the main building as it was 25 metres, door to door. However, one of the fire doors in the main hall road was adjacent to the new storage area so this was great for moving equipment (e.g. trampolines) out of the hall and into the 'bungalow' storage.

- **Events dear boy, events....**

Following on from the successful Breeze Hill events, during my time at the Grove we held many special events - precursors to what happened in many centres up and down the country in subsequent years. On Friday 28th February 1969, the day before the official opening, Dave Lee Travis and Ed. Stewart opened on-site in the morning with the Radio 1 Club. The top two school years were invited to attend and the grammar schools and the other secondary school were invited to send along several dozen of their pupils. In the afternoon the Centre was open for public viewing. In my time we had two New Year's Eve dances with Kenny Ball, which were sold out weeks in advance. We also had Ray McVay and his orchestra in concert and a Ball & Bilk Night, with both on the same stage for the last part of the "Balderstone Jumped" evening. We held televised wrestling, antique fairs and car shows, sports expos, plus cat & dog shows. We held a disabled mini Olympics (with podium and medals) and we hosted the All-England Schools girls' gymnastics championships..... and so it went on for several years.

Newark has a small theatre and once a year the local dramatic society staged a major production. In 1970 the theatre underwent a refurbishment and we staged 'The King and I' in the sports hall.

- **Grove staff move across the country**

Grove was still early in the life of sports centres. Not only was professional interest high, but the calibre of applicant too. Many of the early centres were a breeding ground for the 'management class' of the 1970s and 1980s. Grove was no exception. This is reflected in the movement onward of early Grove staff.

John Binks, the first deputy director, left to manage Haverhill, then Harrogate and Bury St. Edmunds. Alan Burrige was appointed in his place and subsequently went on to manager in Lincoln and then on to Watford. Roy Claydon, pool manager, went on to Bletchley as my deputy there, then on to Swindon's Oasis as Manager and the Old Jail, Abingdon (conversion). Ken Bailey, plant engineer, had been appointed in January 1969 and became pool manager after Roy Claydon left.

Jim Coates, the Sports Officer, went on to Woking. He was replaced at the Grove by Ted Glover who then moved on to Doncaster. Sean O'Grady, ex-RAF Flight Sergeant PTI, followed Ted. After I left Doug Voyce was appointed Director. I understand he left for Doncaster then Lincoln and he was succeeded by Sean Grady. There were then short stints by Brian Hughes and Roy Brown (ex. Brighton goalkeeper).

- **.....and later**

June Loughton remained until she retired in 2000. It baffles me why they never made her manager. It was after she retired that the hours at the Centre were reduced, the bar was closed, and the area turned into a fitness gym.

- **An open and shut case**

The Grove Sports Centre had been officially opened on the morning of 27th of February 1969 by Walter Winterbottom OBE (awarded a CBE in 1972 and was knighted for his services to football in 1978). The Centre opened to the public for viewing in the afternoon. On Saturday 1 March, St. David's Day, we opened to the public [I did not manipulate it!!]. It was an extremely busy weekend, especially with the pool. The sports hall and squash courts were also busy. We had advertised the opening and booking procedures in the local press two weeks prior and started to take our first bookings a week before we opened.

I moved on in 1971 to manage the bright new and challenging Bletchley Leisure Centre in Milton Keynes, which set a new standard in public leisure centre provision. The Grove Sports Centre closed after nearly 4 decades of service on the 22 April 2016. The building was subsequently destroyed by fire following an arson attack on the 15th September 2017. The centre had been replaced by a new centre costing £9.4m – the Newark Sports and Fitness Centre. The old sports centre site has been designated for a new Special School by 2020.