

## Marshall Street: a brand-new vintage

**London has recently acquired a new swimming pool or, more accurately, has had an old one returned. A few days before its official opening The Leisure Review visited Marshall Street Baths to see how one of the city's most historic leisure facilities has been rejuvenated.**

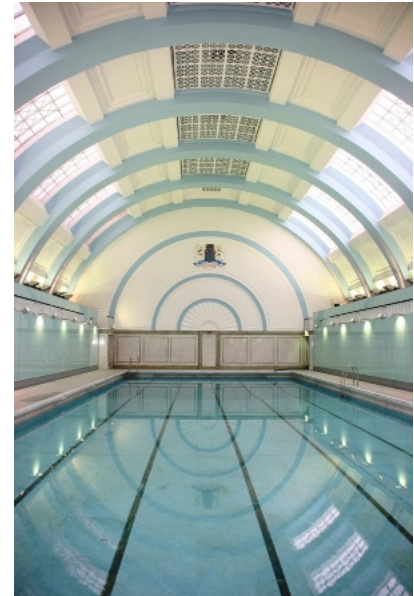
Situated on the western fringes of Soho, Marshall Street is a quiet thoroughfare a few dozen paces from the fashionable bustle of Carnaby Street. For more than a decade there had been little to indicate to the casual stroller that there was once a swimming pool in the vicinity and even a close inspection of the rather non-descript building facade on the eastern side of the street would have offered few clues that an impressive example of historic swimming pool design was sitting unused behind the doors. But in recent months signs of the life of leisure have returned to Marshall Street: an A-board proclaims the legend "Marshall Street Leisure Centre" and invites membership applications, new signs provide details of opening hours and a brand new door is continuously swinging as customers come and go.

When Marshall Street closed to the public in 1997 it seemed that another name was about to join the long list of lost swimming pools. Much loved by the citizens of Westminster for its barrel-vaulted ceilings and pool-side changing cubicles, Marshall Street was a celebrated example of leisure provision in a different era but by the 1990s it was clearly showing its age. Safety concerns regarding the fabric of the building finally resulted in its closure and, given its highly valuable location, many feared that the all-too-familiar progression through disrepair, dilapidation and dereliction towards development in the interests of commercial property and private profit was about to claim another of London's historic cultural venues. That it escaped this fate is a cause for celebration by anyone with an appreciation of architecture, social history or interior design, not to mention anyone interested in how leisure providers in the modern era are able to use current models of partnership and funding in the interests of public leisure provision. Although property development has played a crucial part in securing the future of Marshall Street Baths, the story of the building is now one of restoration and rejuvenation, offering a tale of how Westminster City Council has been able to develop a modern leisure facility while retaining an architecturally significant historic pool as its centrepiece.

The leisure credentials of the Marshall Street site are lengthy. A swimming pool was opened here in 1850, having been built in response to the 1846 Baths and Wash-houses Act. In 1928 work began on the current building under the architectural guidance of Alfred W S Cross and Kenneth M B Cross. Funding came from public subscription and the new facility opened in 1931 as the Westminster Public Baths. The building included two swimming pools (first and second class), a public laundry, a child's welfare centre and a public bathing facility. The barrel-vaulted roof of the pool hall, along with the Italian marble used to line the pools and the Swedish marble on the walls, made for an impressive, art deco swimming experience. A bronze statue by William Gilbert of a merchild with two dolphins added yet another stylish touch.

From the moment the doors opened the Marshall Street Baths were a popular and well used addition to local life. Situated in the heart of the West End, the pools were also a convenient practice venue for the aquatic spectacles that were a regular feature of London's theatrical repertoire during the 1940s; Johnny Weissmuller was among the many celebrated performers who came to Marshall Street to hone their routines before taking to a flooded stage a few streets away. In 1987 the historic value of the building was recognised with a Grade II listing but the absence of sufficient investment in the fabric of the building meant that an increasingly shabby pool hall, still with its pool-side changing cubicles and marble fittings, had lost most of its elegance. By 1997 it had become a dangerous structure and the decision was taken to close the pool to the public. English Heritage added Marshall Street to its list of buildings 'at risk' and the future looked bleak.

For much of the next decade the doors were shut but activity continued. The Friends of Marshall Street was formed to lobby for the building's protection and schemes were devised whereby the future of the building as a swimming pool could be secured. For all that the value of the site to developers represented a threat, it also provided an opportunity to generate investment. Among the shareholders of Marshall Street Regeneration Limited, a consortium established as a vehicle for the reinvention of Marshall Street and to serve as a partner for Westminster City Council, was a property company, Resolution Property, that could see the merits of retaining the leisure heritage of the site as part of a mixed-use development. The result was a £25 million redevelopment of Marshall Street Baths to include 52



Keeping your marbles: the impressive interior of Marshall Street

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residential units, 15 of which are part of an affordable housing scheme. Work on the scheme began in 2008 and it reopened on 26 July 2010 but the official opening, performed by Michael Palin, patron of the Friends of Marshall Street, took place a couple of months later on 24 September.

The end result of a thirteen-year hiatus is a refreshingly old-fashioned swimming pool in the context of a reassuringly modern leisure centre. Of the two original pools, the main pool has been retained along with almost all the original features of this part of the building, including the marble, the famous barrel-vaulted roof that floods the pool hall with natural light and the merchild sculpture (carefully stored off site and returned unscathed from its safe house as the project was completed). The poolside cubicles have disappeared, replaced with their modern equivalent in almost the same position but with bathers now screened rather more effectively from view, but the 33 and one third yard tank with its distinctive depth profile (the deepest part is towards, but not at, one end) are sufficiently quirky for the spirit of the pool to survive. Behind the main pool hall, where the second-class pool used to be, is a large exercise studio. Below this one can find two gyms (the main gym and a 'community gym' for use by groups), a health suite with two saunas, a steam room and four treatment rooms, and brand new pool plant incorporating an ultraviolet system. Back upstairs there is another large and airy studio. Moving around the building one notices that the historic fabric of the building is retained wherever possible, most notably in the stairwells, where the original brass balustrades have been preserved, and in the corridors, where the original blue and white tiles have been newly polished to a high sheen.

Centre manager Darren Sadler is pleased with the response that the new centre accommodating the old pool has provoked among the public. On behalf of Nuffield Health, Westminster's leisure management contractor, he is able to report that membership is outstripping original targets and ten minutes in the reception area, during which the turnstiles never stop clicking, support such a claim. It is also noticeable that during our short time at the front desk several people escort friends into the building to show them the pool through the reception window; add half a dozen membership enquiries and a couple of pay-as-you go swimmers and it seems that the newly rejuvenated Marshall Street Baths is alive and well.

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