

South Norwood Lake and Grounds history

South Norwood Lake is set in attractive parkland and is the only large expanse of open water in Croydon. The lake is man-made and has an unusual history; it was built to supply a canal.

At the beginning of the 19th century the land now occupied by the lake and cricket field was part of Norwood Common, and the land to the north belonged to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In 1799 an engineer called Ralph Dodd was commissioned to survey a line for a canal to link the busy market town of Croydon to the Thames and to the London market and port. A horse drawn barge would bring general merchandise and coal to Croydon and would return with agricultural produce, timber and lime.

Dodds' scheme was not adopted, however in 1800 another engineer, John Rennie, was commissioned. Rennie supplied two alternative schemes based on a line from West Croydon via South Norwood, Penge Woods, Sydenham, Forest Hill, Brockley and New Cross to Deptford. To save on cost and water a scheme of inclined planes (instead of locks) was devised and in 1801 the Croydon Canal Act was passed. It was then decided that a canal with locks was feasible if two reservoirs were constructed, one at Sydenham (now no longer visible) and one dug at Norwood. The reservoirs were to keep the highest of the locks supplied with water. The canal was to be 34 feet wide with locks 60 feet by 9 feet, the barges were to have a capacity of 30-35 tons.

On the 22nd October 1809 the 9 1/4 mile canal was opened, a 21 gun salute met the first barge as it entered the canal basin at West Croydon, cheering crowds had gathered and a band played the National Anthem.

The Canal Company owned its own barges, horses and crews and raised its income by levying tolls on the goods they carried. They also raised money from fishing licences and the sale of Osiers (used for basket work). Unfortunately the company never really prospered and in its last years started to lose money. In periods of dry weather there were problems with supplying the higher levels of the canal and the railway was giving greater competition.

The London and Croydon Railway Company purchased the canal in 1836 and used the canal bed for the railway track once it had been drained. West Croydon Station was built in the canal basin and the line was opened in 1839.

The lake lay derelict for many years following the close of the canal, but in 1881 a sports club was formed and the lake was used for fishing, swimming and skating in winter. The lake is fed by springs rising on the hillside where the geology changes and the gravel meets the London Clay beneath. The water is very deep being about 18 feet at the centre, it has no shallow water.

A motor boat called the "Skylark" gave members of the public trips around the lake until 1955. There are still boats on the lake but they are now controlled by the Croydon Sailing Club.

The history of South Norwood Lake and Grounds is closely associated with Norwood Sports Club. Alfred Steer, Lord of the Manor founded the club having built the clubhouse himself as a residence. He took a lease on 16 acres of land including the lake and cricket field, in 1888 a further 37 acres was leased from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners who had taken over the land of the Archbishops. The Club became the largest tennis club in the world with 54 grass courts.

In 1911 the facilities which included bowls, tennis, cricket and the lake were sold to Messrs. Middleton and Bersey who ran it as a club - White Lodge Ltd.

During the 1914/18 war a golf course which had been established on the land was requisitioned for gun sites and balloons and was badly damaged.

In 1931 Croydon Corporation purchased 16 acres of the ground but the club continued to lease the facilities, the lake and surrounds however were opened to the public. In 1933 the Corporation leased 37 acres including the former golf course and bowling green from the Commissioners and eventually purchased it in 1936.

In 1969 the whole of the grounds, cricket field, tennis courts and bowling green but excluding the clubhouse were opened to the public.

Waterfowl can be seen on the lake throughout the year, some of the birds are resident and others are visitors. The birds include many varieties of Ducks, Geese together with Great Crested Grebe, Coot, Morehen and Gulls.