

**An Urban Myth?  
The Pool at Lord Roberts Public School  
By Dan Brock**

My interest in the pool at Lord Roberts Public School began in May of this year, with a query from Dick Johnston. Dick is a member of The London & Middlesex Historical Society and currently lives in Orillia. He had been a pupil at Lord Roberts between 1947 and 1955 and said that there was a swimming pool at the school which was used during his time as storage for books, etc. According to Dick, "it may be an old urban myth but I was always told that the swimming pool...was closed as there had been a drowning there before my time..."

Lord Roberts School was opened in 1916 and stands on the site of "Bleak House," the former residence of the George Macbeth family on the northwest corner of Princess Avenue and Maitland Street. The new school replaced the outgrown Princess Avenue School on the north side of Princess Avenue between Waterloo and Colborne, immediately west of the later site of the Jarvis Apartments. The school had evolved from what was originally the two-room Bond Street School erected in 1862.

What is remarkable about Lord Roberts School is that it was the first school in London, and the only public elementary school, to have an indoor heated swimming pool!

The architects of Lord Roberts were McBride & Gilbert (Herbert C. McBride and H. Bryan Gilbert) and Arthur E. Nutter. The cost of the site was \$30,000 and the construction of the building, exclusive of furniture, was \$69,295 or approximately \$593,000 and \$1,250,100 respectively in today's currency.

Harry MacLean, who taught at Lord Roberts between 1967 and 1970, believed the same architect who designed the school also designed the London Technical and Art School (now H.B. Beal Secondary School), officially opened in January 1919. Harry notes that "many common architectural details including the glazed orange brick in the corridors" can be seen in both. Indeed, Nutter, who was both city architect and building inspector since 1908, was the architect for the Technical and Art School.

One of the pupils who transferred from Princess Avenue to Lord Roberts in 1916 was Bud Adams. Fifty years later he recalled the school's pool. "We used to have a whale of time down there, but we made so much noise they stopped us from swimming in it."

The pool was apparently still being used early in 1930. It was described as "13 ft. 6 inches wide, 26 ft. long and average depth 4 ft., with an approximate capacity of 9,000 gals. To raise the temperature of the water to 68 degrees would require 200 lbs. of hard coal per day for 6 days. This would allow the pool to be used from Wednesday afternoon till Saturday evening at a cost of coal, at present contract rate of \$12.80 per ton, for \$7.68. "The Actual cost per week would be: Coal, \$7.68; water, \$1.65 (changing once a week), totalling \$9.33. These figures represent the lowest cost and make no allowance for payment of janitor if used after hours."

No further use of the pool for swimming is to be found in the printed minutes of the London Board of Education. A handwritten exchange with a school in London, England, however, dated 1935, and found at the Western Archives, does make mention of "a Swimming Pool" at Lord Roberts.

According to George Pudney, who currently lives in St. Thomas, the pool was never in operation during his time. He attended the school from 1932 through 1939 and had been informed by an older sister that someone had drowned in the pool. Patricia Bryant, who started at Lord Roberts in 1935, "never heard of anyone ever using the pool" during the eight years she was there. She also notes that: "In 1941 or 1942 I happened to be in the pool area and the teacher asked us if we wanted to see the pool. None of us had ever seen it before. It was empty of water and we were told that it was not in use."

Based on the above, we can presume that the use of the pool for swimming ceased sometime between 1930 and 1932. In fact, in the 1930s, swimming lessons for the pupils at Lord Roberts were taken at the Y.M.C.A. During the 1939-40 school year, wooden poles were spread across the empty pool to temporarily store coat hangers collected by the pupils for the war effort. The following school year it was used to store six- and 11-quart baskets, again presumably for the same purpose.

By the early 1950s the pool area, "right beside the Industrial Arts area on the ground floor," was used as a storage room and teachers' and janitor's smoking area.

In the summer of 1955 the pool area was fitted up as a classroom. During Harry MacLean's first year at Lord Roberts, Kathy Bugg's grade 2 class occupied this room. He too had heard of a drowning in the school's pool sometime in the

distant past, i.e. prior to World War II. As for the classroom, it later became a boys' and girls' change room and a corridor.

Despite many former pupils, teachers and others' claim that the pool was closed because someone had drowned in it, presumably about 1930, no verification of this can be found either in the printed minutes of the London Board of Education or in the newspaper clipping files of drownings, near drownings, etc. and scrapbook collection as found in the London Room at the Central Library.

Dick Johnston wrote in June 2012: "More and more I am thinking that since no one seems to have any anecdotal family or social history on a drowning, it is probably an urban myth that got passed around.... Surely the death of a young child in the 30's or 40's would have been remembered for years by any number of families, more so as London was a relatively small 'city' in those years." This conclusion was echoed by his former classmate, George Anas: "If someone had drowned in the pool, it would have been in the newspapers and in the various historical books on London. In those books that I have read, I do not recall any such death being mentioned. Therefore unless there is something concrete, it must be an urban legend."