

First they rescued a swimming pool from closure. Now their sights are set on saving an historic hall. **Steve Snelling** meets a bunch of self-help preservationists whose voluntary efforts may point the way forward for other communities.

It was what you might call the tipping point, the instant when a sense of deep personal outrage gave way to positive action and paved the way to a preservation project with a difference. Shaun Crowley remembers it with a startling clarity as the moment his life took a sudden and unexpected twist.

Not that he realised it at the time. All he knew then was that Beccles Lido, one of a dwindling number of outdoor swimming pools, was facing oblivion as a sad cycle of closure, sale and site redevelopment threatened to claim yet another rundown, cash-starved public amenity.

And he wasn't about to let that happen without a fight. People had been swimming by the banks of the Waveney, originally in the river itself, then in a cordoned-off strip of water and finally in the riverside lido, for nigh on a century and a half. Something had to be done – and fast – if all that history wasn't to be lost.

"I thought enough was enough," he recalls. "Beccles is a lovely old town with lots of lovely old things which seemed to be disappearing one by one, whether they be nice big gardens in nice old houses which have been covered with horrible new houses or facilities being sold off, and I thought it was time to make a stand. How dare Waveney District Council come in and shut our swimming pool down?"

He wasn't the only one who felt that way. American-born and Beccles domiciled Suzanne Gibbons was among those whose "blood was up".

She says: "I was really cheesed off that Waveney was closing it. Just like that. Bang. They literally walked out and I thought, 'OK, I can understand the need to sometimes close things down, but what were we being offered as an alternative? What was going to take the place of this community facility?' And there was nothing and I thought this was ridiculous."

The outcry that ensued followed a predictable pattern, initially at least. Letters were written, meetings held and protests staged with a view to persuading councillors to rethink their decision.

"We organised ourselves as a campaign group and a fund-raising group," says Shaun who works for London-based media and software corporation Thomson Reuters. "We were campaigning vigorously to Waveney, urging them not to shut it, and we began raising money to try to make it better."

"We set out wanting to save it. We didn't set out wanting to own it. But it got to the point when it became clear that if no one else stepped forward to run it then it would close and be sold off for what ever anyone wanted to do with it, most likely some form of property development..."

The choice was stark. Either they let almost 50 years of lido history and nearly 150 years of swimming heritage disappear forever, or they could take the plunge into what was, for all of them, the uncharted and potentially troubled waters of pool ownership and management.

To even the most ardent campaigner it can hardly have appeared an attractive proposition. Starved of investment and with money and swimmers draining away like water from its leaky pipes, the pool was a pale shadow of its former self.

"It was a mess," Suzanne Gibbons says. "The whole place had been neglected."

Even Shaun, ever the optimist, admits to



In the swim: Above, Shaun Crowley, Maureen Saunders and Suzanne Gibbons – unsalaried directors of Beccles Lido Ltd. Right, community support has literally given the lido a huge lift.



having been dismayed by its decay.

"The springboards had all disappeared. It was surrounded by a horrible prison-style wire mesh fence which made it look like a concentration camp. And you couldn't see the river because of a 50ft high screen of leylandii and a rotting old canoe shed..."

Fast-forward three years and, on a sun-drenched September morning, Beccles Lido is awash with people in a graphic demonstration of the remarkable success that has not only rewarded campaigners' leap of faith but may provide a springboard for a further preservation venture as well as serving as a self-help template for other communities to copy.

Years of hard graft, relentless fund-raising and focused investment has paid off and Suzanne allows herself a self-satisfied smile that reflects the pride felt in a community mission accomplished.

Not that the former chief executive of a medical research charity is taking anything for granted. Along with Shaun and Maureen Saunders, a retired ward sister, she is now one of three unsalaried directors of Beccles Lido Ltd in charge of managing and operating the pool with special responsibility for fund-raising and seeking out potential grants.

Like her co-directors, it's not a scenario she ever imagined.

"At first," she says, "I thought I'd stay in the background and encourage and help out at weekends, but Waveney were looking for people to put their heads above the parapets and as the kaleidoscope shifted it turned out Shaun, Maureen and I had pretty much ideal backgrounds for doing something like this. Shaun's sales and financial skills, Maureen's huge experience in management and administration and my charitable and

“We were all bloody-minded enough to want to do it and if you have that kind of mentality you don't let things go wrong, and if they do you fix them...”

fund-raising background was just a lucky combination, though I don't think any of us ever saw it being put to use running a swimming pool. That's something we've learned on the job.

"I think it's fair to say we have met all the problems that were presented to us and we've done OK."

Most would say they've done a whole lot better than OK. The turnaround in the lido's fortunes has been extraordinary and has exceeded all expectations.

Shaun explains: "In the last year it operated, in 2008, the council had less than 8,500 swimmers using the pool over the course of a 12-week season. Last year, we opened by the skin of our teeth for a short five-week season and we had 6,500. And this season, which ran for 15 weeks, we exceeded 26,000."

"Even we've been taken aback by that. Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine we'd get more than 15,000. Perhaps, if we were lucky, we thought we might begin to get towards 20,000, but more than 25,000. That's up there with the best figures ever achieved and all that in what seems to me to have been a pretty rubbish summer."

More importantly, the lido showed a profit of nearly £5,000 in 2010, compared with a loss approaching £60,000 under council control in 2008, and is set to make a profit again this year.

Fund-raising has been key to the venture. In around 18 months and pretty much from a standing start, they managed to raise nigh on £300,000.

"The usual fund-raising activities have been boosted by a lottery which brings in £6,000 a year, donations – including an early whopping great one of £20,000 – and, most significant of all, a community project grant worth £150,000 from British

Gas Green Streets competition," says Shaun.

Added together, the various cash injections have allowed them to breathe fresh life into the ageing pool, overhauling vital equipment, allowing them to replace four boilers, recondition filters, put in a new chlorine-dosing system and to finally find and fix the leak that for years had baffled and defeated past managements.

But, important though the fund-raising effort has been to the lido's rebirth, the most influential factor has, in Suzanne's opinion, been the ground-swell of support from local people and businesses which has allowed them to keep costs down. By way of example, she cites a job where the original quote was £7,000, but, through shopping around and with voluntary help, ultimately cost just £300.

"This is how we have tackled the whole project," she says, "by always asking what can we do ourselves and who will help us? A local fireman knew somebody who knew someone else who does grit-blasting, so they took the pool benches away and grit-blasted them and brought them back. It didn't cost us anything."

"People sometimes forget that money isn't everything. What I call 'in-kind' bits of help are worth much more than money. And the list of that sort of help we have received is enormous."

The voluntary effort has been co-ordinated and led by Graham Norgate whose own dedication to the cause is evidenced in the 10,000-plus voluntary hours he's supervised. As the lido's own 'Mr Fix-It', he has brought his considerable technical expertise to bear on the pool project, leaving Suzanne in no doubt "we would not have been able to achieve what we've done without him".

Others, too, have contributed greatly in





# Splashing out after a giant leap of faith



**New challenge: Beccles Public Hall.**

hoping to take charge by Christmas. In anticipation of such a move, Beccles Lido Ltd has changed its charitable 'objectives' to allow it to "run any leisure facility it wants if it is for the benefit of the Beccles community".

If successful, the town's self-help preservationists face yet another major challenge. Designed as an assembly room for balls, feasts and theatrical productions, the Public Hall is in sore need of expensive and expansive renovation. As well as the management and insurance costs involved, thousands of pounds worth of structural work is needed to restore the balcony, the roof and a leaning wall to return this building to its former glory and to prevent it from falling down.

And yet Shaun appears undaunted. "Just like the lido did, it needs some maintenance work, some more substantial than others, but it's still in working order, which the lido wasn't when we took it on. It's just that it could be in better working order."

He adds: "We think it can make a profit and be sustainable and provide the sort of facility Beccles hasn't had which is somewhere to go to see concerts, comedy and variety shows."

Among those pinning their hopes on such optimism and a lido-style takeover is John Cushing, whose 25-year association with the hall has left him with deep emotional attachment to a building he likens to "a large village hall in desperate need of a bit of TLC".

A leading member of the Waveney Light Opera group, one of three Beccles-based amateur musical stage performing societies that uses the hall as a venue, he believes the lido management takeover represents the only hope of salvation.

"Unless somebody does something somewhere it's going to close," he says. "And if it closes, the various musical groups and lots of other people will not just be disappointed, they'll have a lot of spare time on their hands."

For now it's a question of waiting and hoping that the rescuers of the lido can repeat the trick at the Public Hall. Whatever happens, Shaun, for one, is not ruling out further interventionist projects and believes other communities faced with similar threats to their public amenities should take heart from their success.

"None of us had any particular specialisation to prepare us for what we did, but once you bite the bullet you discover you can do it. And we were all bloody-minded enough to want to do it and if you have that kind of mentality you don't let things go wrong, and if they do you make sure you fix them."

"Having said that, I think councils could help people to be more brave. For the so-called Big Society to really work there needs to be a support infrastructure in place to allow for the subsidised transition of amenities from council to community ownership," says Shaun.

"Even without that, though, I think we've shown that any number of people could surprise themselves by trying to do something like this and discovering they can do it. It's about taking that first step and making the commitment."



**Jumping for joy: Shaun Crowley leaps into the renovated and transformed open-air Beccles Lido. Left, Beccles Lido was originally in the River Waveney itself, then in a cordoned-off strip of water and finally in the riverside lido, for nigh on a century and a half. Below, a postcard of the lido.**

what has been a true community venture. Shaun pays tribute to the small group – Penny Brook, Sally Greenhill, James Gibbons, Douglas Johnson, Eric Wareham and Wynne Baldry among them – who established Friends of Beccles Open Air Swimming Pool and helped convince the council not only of their serious intent but of their prospects for turning ideals into practical reality.

"Despite everything," says Shaun, "we always believed that if we could make the lido into a really nice place again we would get more visitors and if we got more visitors it wouldn't lose as much money. We also felt we could probably run it more efficiently than the council... and I think we've managed to prove that."

"We haven't got it all right yet, but we're pretty pleased with what we've done after our first full season having never run our own business, let alone a swimming pool. We have pretty much replaced every bit of working equipment so, in terms of sustainability, the investment in the equipment and the infrastructure of the pool is pretty much complete."

All of which has given the town's pool saviours the confidence and belief to consider another community venture involving a further preservation-cum-restoration project designed to save the town's 18th century Public Hall.

"It's not something we ever contemplated when we set off down this path," he says. "Our only thought was to save the pool, but here we had another community asset, a part of Beccles' heritage that's been neglected but many people love, that the council want off their books and when no one came forward to take it on we decided to bite the bullet and make an offer."

Negotiations are ongoing and could be resolved within weeks with the lido team

