

Fond memories of California

SIR — My sister has sent me a clipping from the Wokingham Times (June 18) where you featured California Country Park.

I thought you might be interested to hear from someone who had first hand knowledge of the early years, as I was employed there from 1937 and on into the war years.

Alf Cartlidge, known to all employees as 'The Governor', owned a charabanc (bus) company in Teddington, London, when he purchased Longmoor Lake and the surrounding property in the early 1930s.

His plan was to use his charabancs to take parties of people from London to enjoy a day in this very pleasant countryside.

These were mainly school and Sunday school parties and pensioner groups.

The Pavilion Restaurant and ballroom depicted in your photos was built around 1937 and was constructed over the original single story restaurant.

The ballroom floor was not sprung as stated in your article, it was made of Canadian Maple and highly polished.

The large glass area in the centre was constructed from glass panels, which came from a well-known nightclub in Maidenhead after it had been refurbished.

This nightspot was reputed to have been a favourite haunt of the then Prince of Wales and Mrs Simpson, so they may well have danced on the floor before it was installed at California.

The teak columns to be seen at the sides in the photos came from the India Pavilion at the Empire Exhibition held at Wembley.

Almost everything at the entertainment complex was built on site by Mr Cartlidge's own workforce. He hardly ever employed outside contractors.

There was no mains electric power or water on the site. Power was generated by two DC dynamos driven by belt from Lister diesel engines.

Drinking water was pumped from the lake. The paddle steamer, which plied the lake carrying up to 60 passengers, was built at the lakeside.

The model railway locos were built in our workshop, although the original steam trains were installed and run by Mr H Bullock of Frimley, who after a couple of seasons had to withdraw owing to financial difficulties.

After that new tracks had to be laid and new locos and carriages had to be made. It was a very busy time in our workshop.

At the outbreak of war Cartlidge converted the restaurant into a machine shop which was named Lakeside Engineering Works.

Throughout the war the factory did a whole range of sub-contract work, mainly for the aircraft industry.

Dances were held every Sunday evening and they were very popular with the service personnel from military establishments around the region.

The entertainment business re-started when the war ended and the speedway re-opened and was run by the newly-formed California Motor Cycle Club.

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