



'Darlington Memories' written to commemorate The Dolphin Centre being open 20 years.

It only seems like yesterday when the site of the Dolphin Public House was transformed into one of the largest leisure centres in the North of England. For the people of Darlington the Dolphin Centre represented many years of planning, designing, lobbying and preparing. The end result of which was a multi-sport leisure centre on three different levels, offering a wide range of social, sporting and recreational activities.

The original Kendrew and Gladstone Street swimming baths located in Gladstone Street in Darlington were demolished two weeks after the opening of the Dolphin Centre and a car park now stands on the site. The Centre first opened its doors in 1982 and many expectant and excited swimmers took advantage of the modern state-of-the-art facilities on offer. In the early days the queues to visit the Dolphin Pool Complex would extend out of temporary entrance, facing the Town Hall and run most of the way along the length of the building underneath the Dolphin Centre emblems.

The official opening was performed in 1982 by Sir Roger Bannister. That was the time when all of the many facilities in the centre became operational, including squash courts, five-a-side football pitches, fitness room, table tennis and badminton courts, as well as numerous exercise and coaching courses and much, much more.

The Dolphin Centre's main focal point for many years for young and old were the swimming pools, complete with the high diving boards, training pool, toddler pool and the main twenty-five metre swimming pool. Initially the pools complex opened without either of the two exciting slides that we see today but within a few years new ones were designed and installed.

The Dolphin Centre has hosted many large as well as small events during the last twenty years, for example the famous annual holiday fair organised by the Northern Echo. Other events included within the Dolphin Centre's portfolio are fashion shows, concerts, boxing tournaments and events in connection with Children in Need, It's a Knockout, Superstar, and Charity workouts. It has also been the venue for Ministerial visits and even Prime Ministerial keynote speeches. The annual Mayor's Ball has been held here since 1982. There have also been taekwondo tournaments, international and national swimming galas, disability swimming galas and host of other things.

Prior to the opening of the Dolphin Centre in 1982 the Gladstone Street and Kendrew Baths hosted many wrestling events that attracted hundreds of spectators from all over the region to watch TV favourites. These included such famous names as Kendo Nagasaki, Cat-Weasel, Giant Haystacks and Big Daddy to name but a few. These family favourites all moved with the times and hosted many similar events in the Dolphin Centre main sport hall that would house over twelve hundred spectators stamping their feet to the encouragement of the

wrestling stars. In more recent times such events have been superseded by the WWF with such big names as The Rock, The Undertaker, Triple H and Stone Cold Steve Austin.

The Dolphin Centre has attracted millions of visitors to the facilities over the years. Visitors have come from as far and wide as America, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and mainland Europe.

Some things you might not know about the Dolphin Centre:

- Did you know that the main pool holds 134,000 gallons of water?
- Did you know that the Central Hall of the Dolphin Centre was originally built in the late 18th Century as a Quaker Meeting House?
It was then used as a cinema followed by being the site of the old rents and rates hall.
- Did you know that some famous visitors that have been to the Dolphin Centre Central Hall include Charles Dickens, Sir Robert Peel, Benjamin Disraeli and Sir Roger Bannister, not forgetting more recently former Prime Minister, Tony Blair?

The Dolphin Centre has achieved much in its relatively short life-span, but one of the highlights was to be chosen to compete in the National Sports Council Management Awards. In 1994 the Dolphin Centre was successful in its application and was awarded the UK National management Award from the Sports Council of the UK. This competition was held to determine who was offering the leading facilities for leisure at the time. There was fierce competition with over three hundred entries from centres throughout the length and breadth of the country and both the Centre's staff and the residents of Darlington were holding their breath as the results were awaited. The Dolphin Centre came out on top, which was an occasion for justified civic pride and great rejoicing among the Centre's staff who work hard to maintain the high standards of the facilities on offer. Although many things have changed since 1994, the Dolphin Centre staff are committed to providing continuous improvement and innovation so that in the present climate of competition the facilities are regularly visited by the people of Darlington.

The extensive sport and fitness programmes offered at the centre are supplemented by an outstanding catering service, which resulted in achieving ISO 9002 accreditation in 2000. No order is too small or large for the chefs – from breakfast to afternoon tea in the Cafeteria, to buffet lunches in the in the Restaurant and luxurious banquets in the Main Hall. Rooms are also available for hire for private functions.