

Tooting Bec Common Café

Opened 1 September 1898



A special event to celebrate

120 Years of the Café

Monday 27 August 2018

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The original refreshment house on this site was built in 1898 at a cost of just over £320. It was designed by Thomas Blashill, the London County Council's in-house architect, and was built by John Garrett & Son of Balham.



Image courtesy of the London Metropolitan Archives

The architectural style was strongly influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement which aimed to give buildings a rustic look. The half-timbered structure also has elements of Tudor architecture which would become popular for suburban houses in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Before 1898 refreshments had been sold by a milkman on foot and then by a local baker, John Barry, from a tent. After his tent was damaged by high winds he asked the LCC to replace it with a building.

The café was owned by the LCC but rented out to a contractor who had to provide all the food and drink, and staff the premises seven days a week. There was a first- and second-class menu. Popular items included

tea, coffee, hot chocolate, lemonade, ginger beer and cake - all costing 1d (less than 0.5p). Biscuits, ham sandwiches and eggs cost at least twice as much.



Image courtesy of the Patrick Loobey Collection

Inside, the accommodation was very basic. It comprised of just two rooms: a tearoom and a kitchen with a bar or counter in between. The building was connected to the gas supply but one important thing was missing - a proper toilet. The only provision was an earth closet in the back yard for the use of the licensee and his staff.

John Barry ran the café for three years from 1 September 1898 at an annual rent of £25. He baked all his own bread and pastries, assuring the Council of their “excellence of quality”.

In 1901 he was out-bid by Albert Ruby, another local baker, who offered £30 a year. After Tooting Bathing Lake (the Lido) opened in 1906 Ruby persuaded the LCC to build him a second kiosk there.



Ruby died of pneumonia in the spring of 1908 at the age of 42. He left behind a widow and two-week old daughter. Mrs Claudina Ruby took over the licence and continued to sell refreshments on Tooting Common up until her death in May 1932.

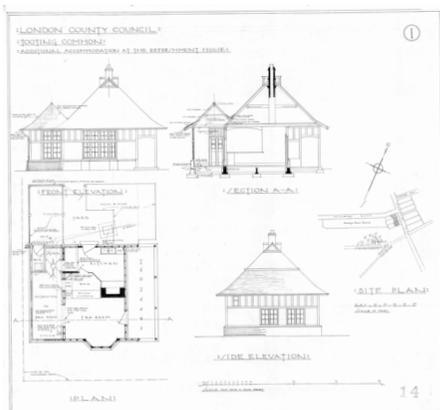


Image courtesy of Wandsworth Council

The café has been extended and refurbished several times since then, most recently in 2017 at a cost of around £200,000, but it retains its original Arts and Crafts look.

Since 2005 it has been run by a small family business, San Remo Catering Ltd, specialising in park cafés. It continues to be open 7 days a week, all year round.



Photo courtesy of Rose Duffy



The historical research for this leaflet was undertaken
by the Tooting History Group.
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Refreshments, snacks and a warm welcome 7 days a week
www.tootingbeccommoncafe.co.uk