

The Origins of Victorian Public Baths, with special reference to Dulwich Baths

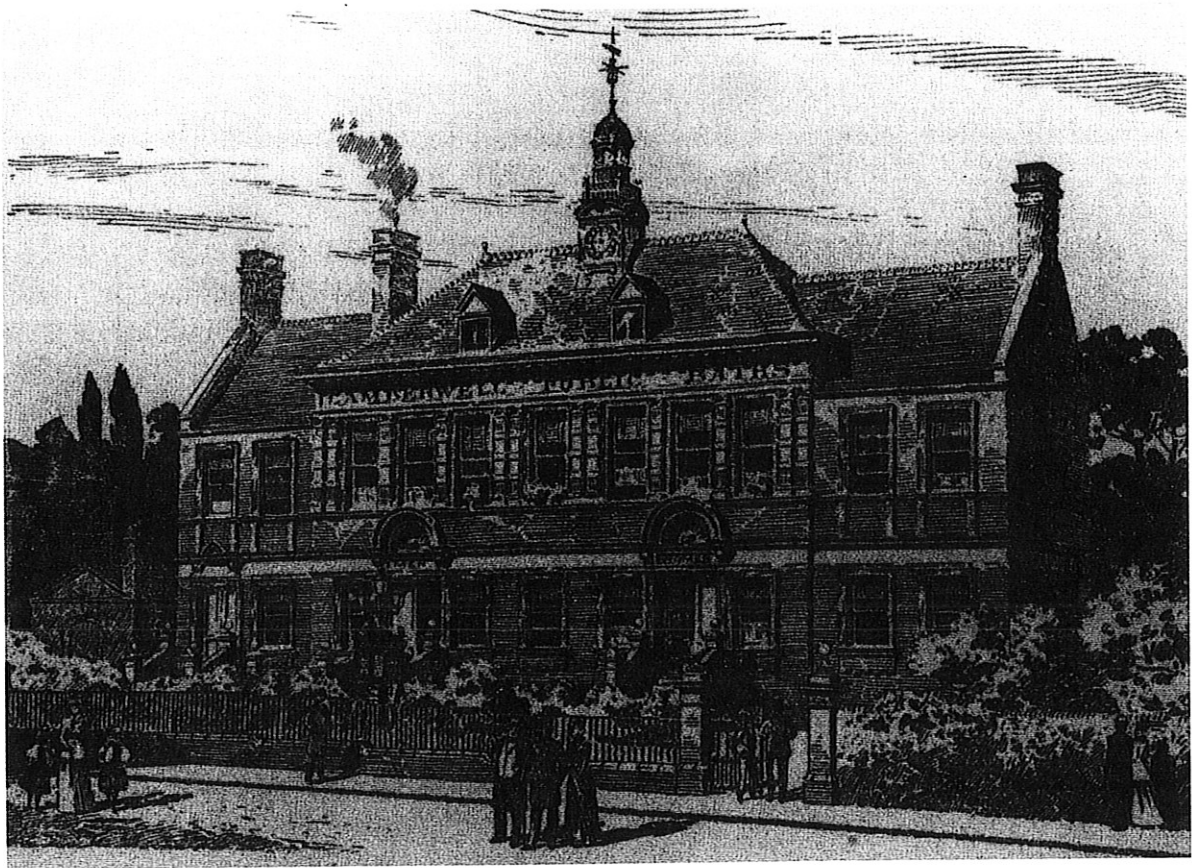
POLLY BIRD

Victorian public baths are a good example of public buildings which are taken for granted until they are threatened with destruction. Although we think of our public baths today as primarily swimming pools, they originally fulfilled a variety of functions. Some catered for private washing in cubicle or 'slipper baths' and for the washing and ironing of laundry. The larger bathing pools or 'plunge baths' were designed to provide the opportunity to improve health. Baths' buildings could also contain other types of baths—vapour baths, hot-air baths, Turkish baths, Roman baths and occasionally showers or 'rain baths'. Large baths' buildings were often designed so that the main pool could be boarded over to make a municipal hall. Typically this was done in the winter when heating the pool was expensive; the pool would be unboarded and used for swimming in the summer. The halls so created were used for concerts, dances, sports and other large scale entertainments. Sheffield Road Baths in Rotherham, for example, had a pool which could be converted to a public hall holding 750 people for dancing or 1,200 seated for concerts. It became one of the three main public halls in the town. So baths' buildings became not only centres for washing, swimming and bathing but also major sporting and social centres.

There are no complete records of the number of surviving Victorian public baths in the UK. The Sports Council's facilities database records a total of 1,060 public baths' buildings of all ages in England housing one or more pools and estimates about 2,000 exist altogether in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This includes those in public use which are local authority owned or managed for local authorities under compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). (It excludes private pools and pools attached to schools, hotels, and in private gardens.) The Victorian survivals in this number are difficult to estimate. The *Carnegie Report on Public Baths and Wash-Houses* of 1918 records 233 public baths of Victorian origin (excluding school and open-air baths) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland plus 40 in Scotland and Ireland.¹ But a recent survey² suggests that less than 30 per cent remain today and not all of them are still in use. One of the depressing results of the survey was that it showed the rapid rate at which Victorian baths are now being demolished.

Victorian public baths are an important subject for local historians. The history of swimming as a leisure activity has been neglected. Study of baths' records shows the thinking behind local authority decisions to build baths and gives an insight into the social and practical expectations of suppliers and users of the facilities. The buildings themselves are worthy of study for their architectural importance.

Many of the buildings are fine examples of Victorian monuments to civic pride. Corporations often went to great lengths to produce public baths' buildings of architectural merit designed to enhance the town's standing. They range from simple functional buildings on one floor to elaborate ornate structures on two floors looking like substantial provincial town halls. Public baths were often designed by experienced architects, who were chosen in open competition, and many baths were designed by well-known practitioners, such as Spalding and Cross who specialised in public baths' buildings. At other times the county architect or surveyor would design the building.



1. Dulwich Baths c. 1896. Note the mistake in the name. Reproduced with permission of Southwark Local Studies Library.

The origins of Victorian public baths

Why were these public buildings created? Dulwich Baths in South London, like other Victorian baths, was the result of a long established campaign to persuade local authorities that building baths and wash-houses was not only of practical benefit to the general public and employers, but also morally right. Public baths and washing places were not a new idea; they had their origins in ancient Greece and Rome. But the public bathing habit established by the Romans declined after the end of the Empire. It was only in the Victorian era that it revived, and then the underlying motivation was different. Industrial pollution of water and air together with terrible overcrowding in the cities created a hotbed of disease. Two major cholera epidemics in the 1830s and 1840s jolted the well-meaning middle classes into thinking how to help the working classes keep their clothes and bodies clean and thus reduce the level of disease and death. A healthy working class would also mean a stable working population.

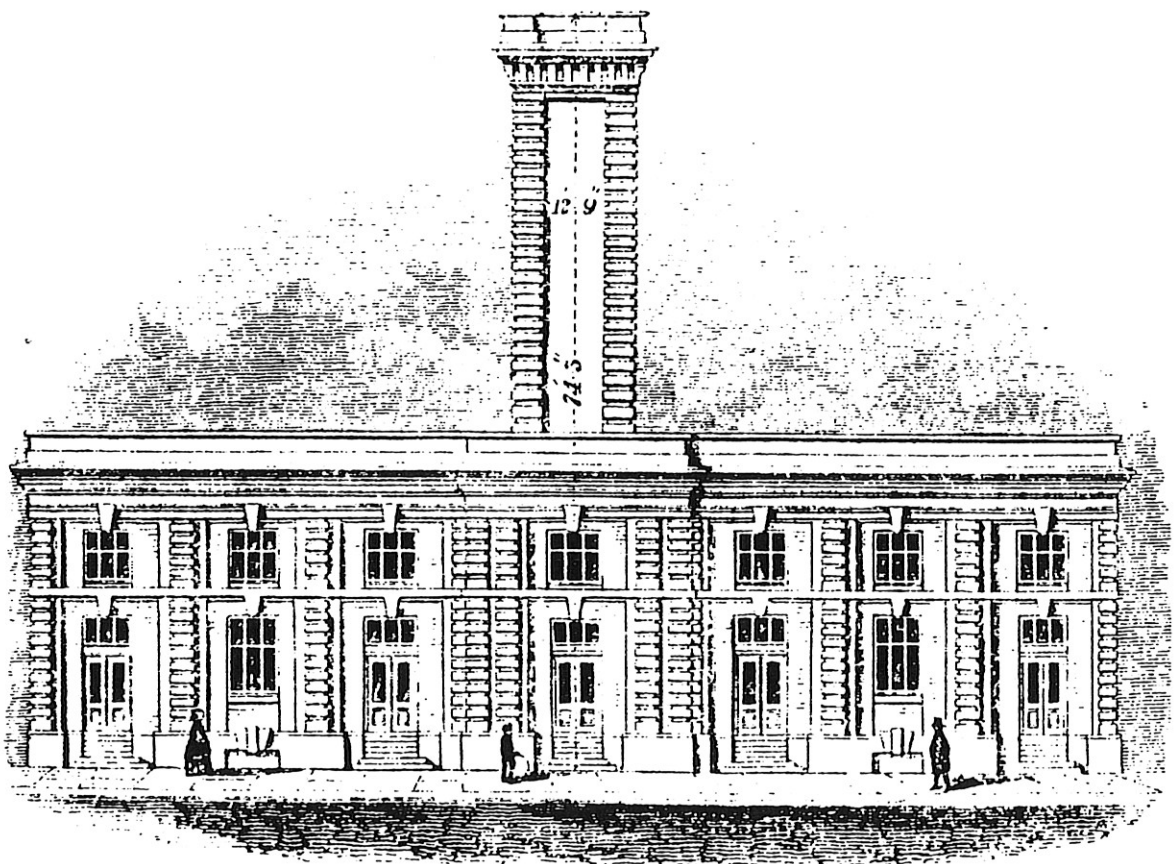
Not all authorities needed convincing of this. Liverpool, a pioneer city in public health, built a municipal wash-house in 1841 after seeing the popular efforts of Kitty Wilkinson to provide washing facilities for her neighbours during the 1832 cholera epidemic.³ Later London was to take its place in the forefront of change because of the rapid development of housing and industry coupled with the appalling conditions of the London poor. A group of forward-thinking Victorians met to try to force the government to encourage the building of public baths and wash-houses. They wanted the government to pass a Bill enabling local authorities to borrow money and to raise rates to build such places.

A meeting was held at the Mansion House in 1844 and a 'Committee for Promoting the Establishment of Baths and Wash-Houses for the Labouring Classes' was elected. The man behind the movement was the Revd. Sir Henry Dukinfield, then rector of St Martin-in-the-Fields. He chaired the Mansion House Committee⁴ which raised a large public subscription to build model baths and wash-houses to demonstrate to others how successful the idea could be. It set out to prove that by charging a low subscription, a great many people would use the baths and so the promoters would recover their costs.

The first public baths in the city were built in Glasshouse Yard in Dockland in 1845.⁵ These were followed by a more elaborate model in Goulston Square, Whitechapel. This was opened partially complete with 40 wash-houses in 1847, and it was very popular. The financial principles behind it were soundly established and encouraged other authorities to follow suit, broadly replicating the layout of the Goulston Square building. The Goulston Square building was completed in 1851 when it was officially opened by the Prince Consort.⁶

The success of the model wash-house and the urgent need to provide more sanitary conditions for the poor were influential in forcing the government to pass the Bill which became the Public Baths and Wash-Houses Act of 1846 and a similar Act for Ireland was passed shortly afterwards, although Dublin did not build its Tara Street baths until 1886. An amendment to the 1846 Act to increase facilities was passed in 1847.

Sir George Grey introduced the Bill into the Commons in 1846 by saying that the Bill was 'intimately connected with the comfort, and indeed the health of a large portion of



2. Westminster Parochial Establishment. Built c. 1851 containing 64 baths, 60 wash tubs and 2 plunge baths. One of the early public baths based on the model establishment in Goulston Square.

the working population, particularly those residing in large towns'.⁷ The Bill was designed simply to give permission for authorities to raise money to build public baths if they wished to do so. There were many supporters of the Bill, including The London Dock Company, The Physicians and Surgeons of Southampton and more than 100 firms of bankers, traders and merchants in the City as well as local authorities from St Martin-in-the-Fields, Westminster, St Andrew Holborn, St Clement Danes, Southampton, and Truro.⁸ There were dissenters too. The owners of the City Road private cold swimming baths called Peerless Pool sent a petition claiming that the rates would be misused because the middle classes would benefit, not just the poor. Loss of trade was probably uppermost in their minds. The Lords decided they had no case and that public baths would make a profit of seven to 10 per cent, ample to repay any money raised from the rates and to contribute to maintenance.⁹

The emphasis of the campaign was on relieving the lot of the poor. But there was a strong feeling that a clean body improved public morals. At the second reading of the Bill in the Lords, the marquess of Lansdown said that habits of cleanliness 'were connected in an imperceptible degree with many of the highest moral and religious virtues.'¹⁰ At the third reading this was emphasised by the bishop of London who said 'the subject nearly concerned the moral as well as the physical welfare of the humbler classes ... affecting their moral welfare through their physical state.'¹¹

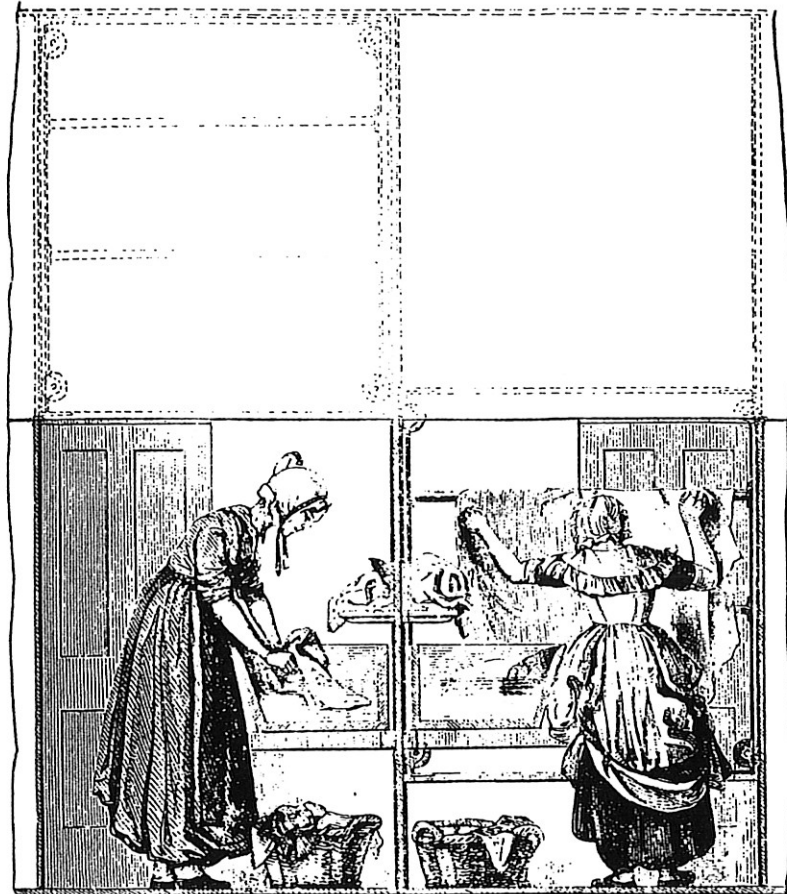
The middle classes were not entirely altruistic in their desire for the Bill to be passed. The promoters of the Bill realised that 'the country would derive a great profit in the increased physical comfort and improved moral state of the working classes.'¹² In other words, a clean, fit working class would result in better-behaved citizens and fitter workers. The bishop of London added that the government should 'elevate the poor man from extreme destitution—they must take off from him the urgent pressure of misery before they could assail him, as a moral agent, with any chance of success.'¹³

The Bill was passed on 26 August 1846. It enabled any parishes which wished to do so to raise money from the rates to build public baths and wash-houses. If they did, they had to appoint between three and seven Commissioners for the Act.

The organisation of public baths

The number of baths for the poor and middle classes was strictly laid down in the 1847 amendment to this Act: two baths were to be built for the labouring classes to each one for the middle classes. The middle classes, or those deemed able to pay a higher rate, used the class one baths and the others were for the poor at a lower rate.¹⁴ Swimming pools were also built to two standards. For example, Dulwich Baths until recently had two pools in operation: a large pool, originally the first class pool, and the smaller 'second class' pool. Ironically, the 'second class' pool is now the only one still in operation. The middle classes' higher fee subsidised the baths for the poor. Thus the middle classes gained use of the baths while virtuously providing the facility for the less well off. Charges were initially fixed at 1d. for cold baths, warm baths 2d., washing troughs 1d. per hour or 3d. for two hours. Using open bathing spaces with other people cost 1s. 2d.¹⁵

Another amendment to the Act was introduced in 1878 especially to 'provide for the establishment of covered swimming baths and other purposes.' These baths had a roof over the swimming pools to protect them from the weather. They were allowed to be closed for up to five months each year between November and March so that other activities which provided 'healthy recreation or exercise' could take place. Charges for covered baths were not to exceed 8d., 4d. and 2d. for first, second and third class baths respectively.¹⁶



3. Typical early wash-house.

The creation of Dulwich Baths

While many authorities did take the opportunity to open public baths soon after the passing of the 1846 Act, the parish of Camberwell, a largely rural area until the latter half of the nineteenth century, did not consider the matter until the late 1880s. With the growth of the railways and the movement of workers to the suburbs, the population of Camberwell as a whole, including East Dulwich, grew rapidly in this period. The increased need for improved sanitation and leisure facilities meant that the time was ripe for considering public baths. The possibility of public baths for Camberwell was first raised in a meeting of the vestry of St Giles, Camberwell, in 1887 by Councillor James Tressider Sears.¹⁷ The vestry supported the proposal and appointed Sears as Chairman of the Commissioners. The provision of baths and wash-houses in Camberwell was mostly private and inadequate in the 1880s, so public baths were needed.

The Commissioners consulted other parishes which had already taken advantage of the Act—Bermondsey, Poplar, St James Westminster, St Marylebone, Rotherhithe, St Margaret and St John Westminster, St Pancras, Whitechapel, Lewisham and Greenwich. These parishes all said that implementing the Act had been beneficial.¹⁸

The Commissioners originally decided that they could provide three public baths' buildings, one for each of the Parliamentary divisions of Camberwell—North Camberwell, Peckham and Dulwich. In the end only the Camberwell and Dulwich Baths were built and both still stand. It was thought that all three could be established with a loan of £65,000 over not more than 30 years. Expenses for the baths could be

paid for by the profits from them and if necessary by levying a rate of not more than 1d. in the pound.¹⁹ Like the promoters of the Act 31 years before, the Commissioners of Baths in Camberwell thought that public baths would be morally and practically beneficial. They decided that the baths would 'confer on our parish a boon of the highest order, and one which cannot fail to promote the cleanliness, health, and general well-being of the people.'²⁰

Dulwich Baths was built first. A site was acquired opposite Goose Green in East Dulwich in 1889. It was an awkward shape but reasonably priced at £1,250 freehold or £50 a year leasehold for an 80-year lease.²¹ The Commissioners again consulted neighbouring parishes over the design of the baths and decided to hold an open competition to find an architect. Mr Charles Barry, surveyor and architect for Dulwich College, was appointed assessor for the competition.²² By this time architects had become familiar with the problem of building baths and some were specialists. It came as no surprise that the winning team was Spalding & Cross who were experienced at building baths. Their design was:

convenient, economically arranged, well lighted and ventilated, and as to which the greatest pains had been taken by the authors to make the warming arrangements as complete and effective as possible and with economy in working.²³

Spalding & Cross had provided two alternative methods of heating the baths and estimated the cost at £14,225.

Henry Spalding (1838-1910) had joined forces with Alfred W. C. Cross (1858-1932) for ten years from 1889 to 1899. In the first year of their partnership they designed



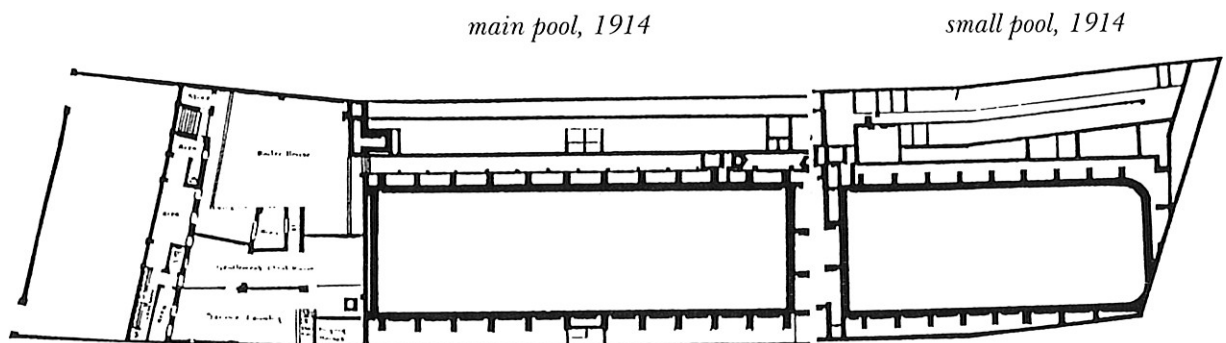
4. Inside of the small pool showing the lantern light.

Hampstead Public Baths. They went on to have further competition successes, designing baths for Walthamstow, Wandsworth, Coventry, Hoxton, Lincoln and Camberwell. Spalding could include Westminster, Shoreditch and Hoxton among his designs.²⁴ When Cross left the firm he went on to design Haggerston, Finchley, Deptford, Finsbury and Westminster baths. He also wrote a book called *Public Baths and Wash-houses*²⁵ in which he set out many of the ideas which were put into operation at Dulwich Baths such as

a fundamental principle that none of the swimming baths should be deprived of the inestimable advantages obtained by the employment of the long continuous lantern light occupying, practically, the whole of the length of the bath.²⁶

Dulwich Baths clearly shows this principle in practice and the lantern lights, one over each of the first and second class pools, are clear glass, peaked roofs. These are not impeded by any part of the first floor building, including a first floor flat at the front which was used for housing the superintendent and his wife.

Spalding & Cross were praised for keeping both pools at Dulwich on the ground floor on a site which was an awkward shape. The site determined that the first class pool was 40 by 10 yards and the second class pool was 30 by 10 yards, a discrepancy which was not just a reflection of the two classes of the pool. The second class pool still in use has one corner which comes very close to the main wall, making walking around that part of the pool difficult.



5. Drainage plan of 1914 showing the two pools at Dulwich Baths.

It is unfortunate that drawings and plans relating to the competition for Dulwich Baths appear to have been lost during council moves between buildings. The earliest remaining plans are some which were selectively copied from drainage plans before the bulk of the old drainage records were destroyed to save space, much to the dismay of Southwark's Local Studies Library. Other more modern plans dating from the 1960s onwards are lodged with Southwark Council's Architects' Department and relate to various alterations done during that period.

A plan and elevation of Camberwell Baths, among others, appears in Cross's book,²⁷ and plans and elevations of baths in other areas can be found in newspapers recording the opening of these facilities. The lack of similar plans for Dulwich demonstrates the importance of not only preserving records but also of recording their whereabouts. It also shows that even today when people should be more generally aware of the importance of preserving records, it is still possible for whole archives to be lost or destroyed systematically in the name of financial or space savings. However, Southwark Local Studies Library does hold, among much other relevant and useful information, a



6. The large pool at Dulwich Baths.

number of photographs of Dulwich Baths as well as Camberwell Vestry minutes and Commissioners minutes for the Baths and Wash-Houses Committee, sources which have been used extensively in this article.

The building work was done by Leonard Henry Holloway, but there were a number of setbacks before the Baths were completed. For example, the Effra sewer, a branch of the Southern Main sewer, which provided drainage for the area, flowed under the site and its crown was discovered to be only ten feet below the surface and in a different position from that marked on the architects' plans. The architects had to produce revised plans to take this into account. The owners of Westwood House, which bordered the Baths' site, sued Holloway for trespass but settled for £20 and costs. The need for longer drainage pipes caused more delay. These and other setbacks meant that progress was much slower than anticipated and the Baths expected completion date of 1892 seemed in jeopardy.

The plaque outside the Baths demonstrates the importance of checking visual remains against original documents. It optimistically shows the date of completion as 1891, but the Baths were not in fact finished until 1892. Even at the last minute there was a problem. Shortly before the opening day the water pressure was discovered to be too low to allow the water to be connected. Only quick thinking by the clerk and rapid negotiations with the Water Company enabled the water to be connected the morning of the day before the opening.

Dulwich Baths was finally opened on 25 June 1892 by Councillor Sears in front of 1,000 people. The first person to use the Baths was Mr G. A. Blake, amateur plunging champion of England, who dived into the first class pool and glided for 63 feet 2 inches, 12 feet under his record.²⁸

Sex discrimination at public baths

A study of the records of Dulwich Baths in the Camberwell Vestry and Southwark Council minutes illustrates a number of social attitudes and problems. One of the most interesting from a modern viewpoint is the discrimination between men and women not only as employees but as users of the baths. Similar discrimination is highlighted in other baths' records.

Women were employed as attendants but were paid less than the men. Mrs Mary Anderson at Dulwich Baths was hired for 20s. a week in 1892. William Edward Sanderson was employed as an attendant at the same time for 25s. per week.²⁹ By 1910 the wages for general attendants at Dulwich were 30s. for men and 20s. for women.

Male and female employees also had different spheres of operations. There were male and female bathing attendants for both classes of pools and baths but they only attended bathers of their own sex. When instructors were in the baths they only taught pupils of their own sex. Women were also the money-takers at Dulwich Baths. The laundry work was given to men and the towel washer was male. In baths which had a laundry, women were usually not allowed to do the heavy bag washes. This was the job of the male attendant who would lift heavy loads of up to 25 pounds. There was also discrimination in the number of attendants of each sex employed in the baths. At Dulwich when the Baths opened there was only one female attendant but seven male attendants.

A married couple were usually employed as baths' superintendent and matron and lived above the baths where built-in accommodation was available. They received a salary and sometimes coal for fuel and gas for lighting. Typically the man would hire the staff and run the baths while his wife acted as money-taker. Dulwich Baths was run at first by a married couple, Mr & Mrs Johns, who occupied the first floor flat.³⁰

There was also discrimination against women in the provision at the baths. At Dulwich there were 38 baths for men (16 first class and 22 second) and only 15 for women (six first and nine second).³¹ This discrepancy was typical of most public baths. Woolwich Baths had 51 baths for men and only 12 for women and Shoreditch had 21 first class and 36 second class baths for men but only five first class and 15 second class for women.

Apart from the difference in the amount of bathing provision between the sexes, men and women were kept strictly segregated until the mid-twentieth century, both for bathing and swimming. Many public baths were built with separate entrances for men and women, which usually led to segregated waiting areas and the separate bathing and swimming provision. One bath, the Old Baths at Durham, erected in 1855, had no special slipper baths provision for women, who had to share the same corridor as the men. This was considered so unsuitable that even as late as 1932 when new baths were built the new building was given separate men's and women's entrances leading to separate waiting areas and separate doors to first and second class slipper baths' corridors for each sex. Trippett Street Baths in Hull built in 1850 had individual baths for men and women and a men's swimming bath and a women's plunge bath. The first public wash-houses built in Liverpool in 1842 had separate second class baths for men and women, and men and women had to use the slipper baths at different hours of the day.

Men and women were strictly segregated for swimming. Schoolchildren had their swimming lessons on different days as girl and boy groups with a same sex instructor. Swimming as a mixed activity was late in receiving permission from local authorities. In Dulwich this was only achieved in 1946. It is ironic that with women's liberation well

advanced many women are asking for single-sex bathing which many pools now provide. This is not only because many women prefer to swim without distraction or harassment by men but because women from other cultures often have religious or social prohibitions about being less than fully clothed in front of men.

Uses and abuses

During national emergencies baths' buildings were put to a variety of uses. For example, during World War One Dulwich Baths was a base for hospital and Red Cross work in 1914 and housed the War Refugees Committee and Belgian refugees until 1915.³² The War Office used the Baths to accommodate the Camberwell Gun Brigades (33rd Divisional Artillery). After the Brigade left later in 1915, the Baths were used for troop accommodation and from September that year quartered two Brigades of the Territorial Army.³³ Although the Baths were not officially designated as an air raid shelter, the council allowed the public to use them as such at their own risk. In 1917 Dulwich Baths hosted an economy exhibition visited by the duke and duchess of Connaught. The inhabitants of East Dulwich provided 40 stalls with activities ranging from salvaging tin foil to poultry keeping.³⁴ By 1918 the Baths were being used by East Dulwich Special Constabulary.³⁵

In peace time the halls in many baths' buildings served as venues for concerts, parties, sales, meetings, dances and sports. Local schools used the Baths for swimming lessons. This tradition carries on today, backed by the extra need to raise money to keep the baths open. Many Victorian baths' buildings are now redesignated as 'Leisure centres' and provide extra facilities in the form of rooms for meetings, fitness centres and so on.

In recent years there has been a decline in local authority support for these older public baths. The high cost of maintaining older buildings in competition with alternative sports facilities and newer 'leisure' pools in many areas has meant that the fabric of Victorian public baths has deteriorated and many have been permanently closed or demolished. Dulwich Baths has certainly suffered from neglect and financial restraints over the 102 years of its history. All but eight of the slipper baths have gone. The first class pool is now permanently boarded over and is unlikely to reopen because of the huge cost of repairs. The pool has been drained and the seepage from it which kept the surrounding clay moist has ceased. Cracks have appeared in the pool, which would be expensive to repair. However basic repairs and safety improvements have been made.

But Victorian public baths are popular with local people who value their convenient locations, 'real' swimming pools and friendly atmospheres. Residents are waking up to the possible loss of their favourite pools and have begun to protest at threats of closure. Conservationists are also becoming concerned at the loss of these fine examples of Victorian public architecture, and in Dulwich campaigners obtained a Grade Two Listing for the Baths. In Dulwich local opposition has kept the Baths open in spite of council wishes to close it. Southwark Council now has plans to refurbish the Victorian section, including the pool, and replace the twentieth-century section with new purpose-built facilities. This will require funding from the council and other bodies such as the National Lottery, who have been approached. At the time of writing the future of the Baths is still in the balance. What is certain is that local people will continue to fight to keep open one of the most important buildings in their community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Southwark Local Studies Library for permission to use photographs from its collection.

REFERENCES

- 1 Agnes Campbell, *Report on Public Baths and Wash-Houses in the United Kingdom* (The Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, Edinburgh, 1918).
- 2 Postal survey of all counties in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Eire during Autumn 1994 conducted by Polly Bird. See also Polly Bird, *Making A Splash: The History of Dulwich Baths* (London, 1993).
- 3 Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives* (London, 1983), p. 73.
- 4 John Weale (ed.), *London Exhibited in 1851* (London, 1851), p. 254.
- 5 Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert, *The London Encyclopaedia* (London, 1983), p. 624.
- 6 Weinreb and Hibbert, *The London Encyclopaedia*, p. 624.
- 7 *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)* 9 & 10 Vict. LXXXII, p. 762.
- 8 *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)* 9 & 10 Vict. LXXXIII, p. 105. and *Lords Journals Vol 78, 9 & 10 Vict.*, pp. 534, 669, 753, 859, 1018.
- 9 *Debates LXXXVIII*, pp. 104-5.
- 10 *Debates LXXXIII*, p. 227.
- 11 *Debates LXXXIII*, p. 104.
- 12 *Debates LXXXIII*, p. 104.
- 13 *Debates LXXXIII*, p. 104.
- 14 'Bill intituled An Act to amend the Act for the establishment of public Baths and Wash-Houses', *Bills Public III 1847*, p. 223.
- 15 Act for Baths and Wash-Houses, p. 483.
- 16 Baths and Wash-Houses Act 1878, pp. 249-51.
- 17 Camberwell Baths and Wash-houses Commissioners Minutes 1887-1893, 16 Feb. 1887.
- 18 Commissioners Minutes, 15 July 1887.
- 19 Commissioners Minutes, 15 July 1887.
- 20 Commissioners Minutes, 15 July 1887.
- 21 Commissioners Minutes, 12 April 1888.
- 22 Commissioners Minutes, 13 March 1890.
- 23 Vestry of St Giles Camberwell Minutes, 10 July 1890, p. 391.
- 24 'The Late A. W. S. Cross', *The Builder* (6 Jan. 1933), 21.
- 25 A. W. S. Cross, *Public Baths and Wash-Houses* (London, 1906).
- 26 Cross, *Public Baths*, pp. 32 & 35.
- 27 Cross, *Public Baths*, pp. 82 & 83.
- 28 'Dulwich Public Baths', *South London Press*, 2 July 1892.
- 29 Commissioners Minutes, 23 May 1892.
- 30 *Report of the Commissioners of Public Baths and Wash-Houses* (Camberwell, 1892), p. 172.
- 31 Leisure & Recreation Programme Area Team, and Borough Engineer and Surveyor's Department, *Swimming Pools, warm baths and laundries. History and Legislation and Present Position Statements* (Libraries and Amenities Committee, Southwark Council, 12 March 1975), p.6.
- 32 Borough Minutes 1914-1915, 27 June 1915.
- 33 Borough Minutes 1914-1915, 22 Sep. 1915.
- 34 'Economy Exhibition in Dulwich', *South London Press*, 19 Jan. 1917.
- 35 Borough Minutes 1917-8, 12 June 1918.

POLLY BIRD is a full-time professional writer and the author of four books as well as *Making a Splash: The History of Dulwich Baths*. She is a member of BALH and a founder member of the *Friends of Dulwich Baths*. (*Making A Splash* is available from *The Friends of Dulwich Baths* c/o 98 Oglander Road, London SE15 for £3.80 including p&pp).