

## Getting Into the Swim

Michael Loftus



## Swimming, Baths and the 'State of Trade' in Kidderminster





**Getting into the swim**

**Swimming Pools, Swimming and the 'State of Trade' in  
Kidderminster 1851- 1938**

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*Swimmers in the Open Air Baths, Kidderminster, 1931*



#### Authors Note

My family moved into a house on Reservoir Road, Kidderminster in 1993. The late Councillor Peter Carter, a family acquaintance, recounted to us with a chuckle, how he had swum in the reservoir the road was named for, as a boy. I assumed at the time that he was recounting a tale of laddish pranks with the town water supply, but the story stayed with me.

Much more recently, and with a little more time in my hands, I have taken a greater interest in the history of my adopted home town and this little piece is the result of my trying to satisfy my curiosity about Peter's tale.

But for me this story begins from that sliver of truly oral history -which I find really satisfying.

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## Chapter 1 'The State of Trade...'

Kidderminster was one of the very first of the smaller towns in England to have a purpose built municipal swimming pool. The Town Baths, which included a very small pool together with public bathing and laundry facilities, first proposed in 1851 were an initiative that actually placed Kidderminster in the vanguard of action on public health measures in England at the time. When the Baths actually opened on Mill Street in 1855, only Maidstone, Bilston and Swansea, as places of comparable size, i.e. with populations of around 20,000, are reported as already having swimming facilities. (George Cape of the Lambeth Baths and Wash House company surveyed the national situation in 1854 and found that in addition to these small towns only a few of the cities and largest towns, such as Birmingham, Coventry, Nottingham and Wolverhampton, all with populations many times larger than Kidderminster, had public baths or swimming pools<sup>1</sup>).

This was not the end of the town's appetite for novelty in this area. Kidderminster then went on to open one of the very first municipal Turkish Baths in the country in 1871. This was followed with an open air swimming pool (in 1900) and an early development of a lido (in 1930) when neither of these sort of attractions were at all commonplace. Then, in 1932, a new swimming pool and baths which finally replaced the Mill Street baths were built. The tale of the personalities, the personality clashes and the heated debates that accompanied (and often resisted) all of these innovations are set down here.

It is difficult to exaggerate quite how radical a development the first decision to invest in the public baths was for a small town. Thirty years after the Baths were proposed and built, a survey that Kidderminster Town Council undertook on its own behalf showed that only a handful of thirty six comparable towns contacted any had public baths provision. Even later, in 1916, when the Carnegie Trust conducted a national investigation into the topic, Kidderminster was one of only seventeen similarly sized places with public baths - and it had a larger provision than most of these others<sup>2</sup>

However, back in 1851, the suggestion that the Town Council should build the Baths almost ran aground as soon as it had been raised, when members of the Council, confronted with the costs of building and operating the baths, conjured up for themselves the ogre of 'the state of trade' as a compelling obstacle to the idea. The particular concern at the time was the advent of power looms, a major technological innovation for the carpet industry (the town's principal economic activity) which presented a threat to the existing order both for businesses and the workforce. The pressing need to avoid the burden of rates on the town's businesses, always a major priority, loomed even larger in this period of economic uncertainty and there was a view that the baths would add unnecessarily to this burden.

Although it was actually faced down on that first occasion, an invocation of 'the state of trade' was to echo fairly regularly through council meetings for decades as a telling argument for deferring or avoiding action involving any spending on all manner of fronts. As we will see it was certainly at the core of the reasons why Kidderminster, so innovative in building the baths, was to wait for almost eighty years before the Mill Street facilities were finally replaced. This was despite the fact that even from as early as the mid 1870s there were frequent complaints about the inadequacies of the provision.

Today, perhaps, we would regard a swimming pool as a wholesome but unexceptional 'vanilla-flavoured' element of any community's facilities. However, in following the twists and turns, the frequent false starts and the dead ends that accompanied the long and protracted debates about



swimming and bathing in Kidderminster, we see the town working its way to a sense of the role of the Town Council as the promoter of community welfare. This can be seen emerging together with the notion of a broad view of what is was that constituted the full civic responsibilities of the Council and the townspeople as a whole. This brought about the building of the baths in the first place and then in their eventual, though long postponed, replacement. The slow progress to this end is seen in repeated arguments setting the responsibility of the Council to use ratepayers' money sparingly against the advantages to the town as a whole that such investment generated and of the benefit in terms of health and welfare that it would produce.

One can also see all manner of quite dramatic social changes that were being experienced in the town and across the wider nation, reflected through the, perhaps unlikely, mirror of a swimming pool and the debates associated with it. These included a changing economy, a growing town population, the electorate expanding through political reform, new political alignments, the place of women in the community and the work force, and other issues through to the wider relationship between the sexes and even the importance of proper Sunday observance. All of these, often highly contentious, topics left a significant impression on and shaped the swimming pool debate.

These many, and diverse, strands are threaded together in the story set down here.



## Chapter 2 Testing the Water

At a Kidderminster Town Council meeting on 12 August 1851<sup>3</sup>, Councillor Henry Chellingworth (having given notice of his intentions at the previous meeting in May) presented a memorial- a public petition - signed by upwards of 400 voters, urging the Council to adopt the 1846 Baths and Wash Houses Act. (Brief biographies of Chellingworth and the other major players in this story are set down in appendix 2). The fact the memorial attracted 400 signatories needs to be set in the context of time and place. In a town of about 20,000 people there were only some 500 (all men, of course) eligible to vote in local elections and to whom the Town Council were accountable via such a petition, so we can conclude this was a matter of major public concern and interest. Berrow's Worcester Journal underlined its significance reporting that the petition had been 'numerously and influentially signed'<sup>4</sup>.

Chellingworth, at the meeting in May, had said 'there is not a town in the Kingdom where such [baths] have been established other than that results have been most beneficial to inhabitants generally'<sup>5</sup>. The Council accepted the desirability of such a proposal but doubted their powers to progress it, wondering if some public benefactor would be required to meet the costs.



*The Town Council met in the Guildhall until 1878 when the new Town Hall came into operation. The Guildhall was demolished in the same year*

The activities and debates within the Town Council will loom large through this little story of bathing, swimming and swimming pools. It might be helpful at the outset to sketch the state of local government and the Kidderminster Town Council at this point in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Kidderminster was one of a number of towns across England (some 178 in total) that had their local government arrangements reformed by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Essentially, having tried to address issues of corruption endemic in the parliamentary process through the Great



Reform Act of 1832, Government then turned its attention to implementing equivalent changes in local government.

The reformed Kidderminster Corporation had a basic structure that continued through the entire period covered here and indeed until the comprehensive local government reform in 1974 that created Wyre Forest District Council covering Kidderminster, along with Bewdley and Stourport and the adjacent more rural areas.

Under terms of the 1835 Act, the Corporation comprised all of the voters (burgesses) of the Borough and they elected a Town Council to be their executive arm. The burgesses were the owners of property and ratepayers in respect of such property. The Council comprised the Mayor, elected from within the Council members, and serving for one year but able to be re-elected to the position if he were willing and the rest of the Council agreed it; Aldermen, also elected from within the council and then the Council itself. Kidderminster from 1835 had 6 alderman and 16 councillors. The total number of burgesses at the outset was about 500 people as mentioned above (but had grown to nearly 1500 by the early 1860s and then expanded significantly with the next stage of electoral reform in 1867). The town was initially divided into two wards (north and south) for electoral purposes. The number of electors grew as a result of population growth but even more significantly as the franchise was extended from its initial narrow base and also as the town grew beyond its original boundary (there was significant boundary extension in 1912). By 1930 there were six wards, eighteen councillors (though still six alderman) and a total electorate of about 14,000 people– the Equal Franchise Act 1928, then recently passed, meant that all people (male and female) aged over 21 were entitled to vote.

Party politics were present from the outset – there were Liberal and Conservative members, with the Liberals drawn particularly from the non conformist religious tradition and including many of the carpet manufacturers, whose activity dominated the town's economy, and who (in the mid nineteenth century at least) were of this persuasion. Some of those who survived and prospered in the carpet business found themselves drifting by the end of the century to both Conservatism and the Anglican Church. Each of the political groups however were equally adamant that their overriding concern was with economy in their local government activity and minimising the rate burden on the burgesses - their electoral masters.

The 1835 Act charged municipal corporations with establishing a watch committee, appointing constables and also with making 'such Bye Laws as to them shall seem meet for the good Rule and Government of the Borough, and for Prevention and Suppression of all such Nuisances as are not already punishable' and transferred to the newly shaped Corporations powers related to 'paving, lighting, cleansing, watching, regulating, supplying with Water'.

There was however no requirement to take any significant action in these areas. In the first decade or so after the reform, Kidderminster Town Council did approve and publicise bylaws on matters including the transportation of night soil through the town, the management of fierce dogs, bill posting and similar matters. They exercised themselves with loyal addresses to Queen Victoria on her accession to the throne, her marriage and the birth of children. They agitated a little later in support of a new railway company that would bring a service to the town. Uncharacteristically perhaps, they busied themselves briefly with the national debate on the repeal of the Corn Laws. They became embroiled in disputes about the management of some local charities and the rearrangement of certain pews in the Parish Church. New robes were procured for the Mayor to enable him to feel properly dressed in attending an event convened on behalf of the Prince Consort<sup>6</sup>.



However their apparent lack of more concrete activity can be attributed to the fact that local Government in England can only take any action when and where it is specifically empowered by national legislation. Some of the most necessary powers to address problems in the town did not sit with the Town Council but with separate commissions. The first new major legislation of general significance bearing on the Councils after the creation of the new Corporations was probably the Public Health Act 1848 which focused on the issues of water; sewerage; drainage; cleansing; paving, and environmental health regulation. This Act placed responsibility in the first instance with new local boards such as a Health Board, rather than the Corporations. In Kidderminster, the Council were approached by the local Health Board to act jointly following an outbreak of cholera in 1849. Some members of the Town Council in Kidderminster seemed happy to leave the responsibility to the Board but a majority agreed that which they should form a dedicated committee to act if needed - although they seem then to have taken little, if any, direct action.

The Public Baths and Wash Houses Act actually preceded the much wider-ranging Public Health Act by two years. Both were driven by both concerns about general national issues of public health but also specific anxieties resulting from outbreaks of cholera in the urban areas. One such wave of epidemics had swept through Europe at this time. However, notwithstanding the apparent groundswell of local popular opinion in Kidderminster supporting Public Baths in light of the enabling legislation, the willingness of the Council even to contemplate the scale of expenditure that the baths were likely to require presents a striking contrast with their activity prior to this point. It meant the Town Council was taking its very first steps towards providing new public infrastructure for the town since its creation some sixteen years earlier- a bathed new world indeed.



A COURT FOR KING CHOLERA.

*Figure 1. Cholera was almost endemic in the newly industrial urban areas of the early nineteenth century*



The Public Baths and Wash Houses Act which Chellingworth and his memorialists were urging the council to adopt, was the first of a number of pieces of legislation emerging in the early Victorian period to try and come to terms with the daunting and dramatic changes that industrialisation and urbanisation had brought about in England in the previous half century or so. London and the growing industrial cities were increasingly inhabited by a new class of urban workers, living in overcrowded and inadequate housing, lacking both sanitation and clean water supplies. By way of local illustration, Kidderminster's population grew by over 40% between 1801 and 1851- rather faster than did Birmingham- while the number of houses grew more slowly suggesting that overcrowding was also on the increase.<sup>7</sup> Disease, in particular cholera, was a constant threat even in the absence of specific epidemics. There was an increasing awareness that people unable properly to wash themselves, their clothing or bedding, presented a very probable cause of the spread of disease as well as being its victims .

At one level there was an appreciation of the risk to the upper classes as the cities in which they, too, lived, became swamps breeding disease; at a more high minded and humanitarian level, particularly among those parts of the Churches which sought to minister to this urban underclass, there was an acute awareness of the assault on human dignity that life in perpetual dirt and squalor presented. Kidderminster, as just noted, had experienced an outbreak of cholera in 1849. Possibly this experience had heightened an appreciation of the community benefits that access to washing facilities would bring about and stimulated the very emphatic support for the memorial.

The legislation was permissive – it allowed local authorities to use rate income to support the establishment and facilities for baths and laundries but did not require them to do this. It controlled the prices that could be charged for use by 'the labouring classes' and placed a ceiling on the differential for prices charged to the 'higher classes' for bathing. It also covered the provision of open air bathing spaces. The Act controlled charges of these facilities for users. The Act also made it possible for local authorities to borrow from the Public Works Loans Commission to finance the building and equipping of baths. It required that local authorities adopting the Act to build baths should keep those open for at least seven years as a trial; if they were then seem to be too expensive to run, the opportunity to close the facility was allowed.(This was to prove significant in Kidderminster in due course)

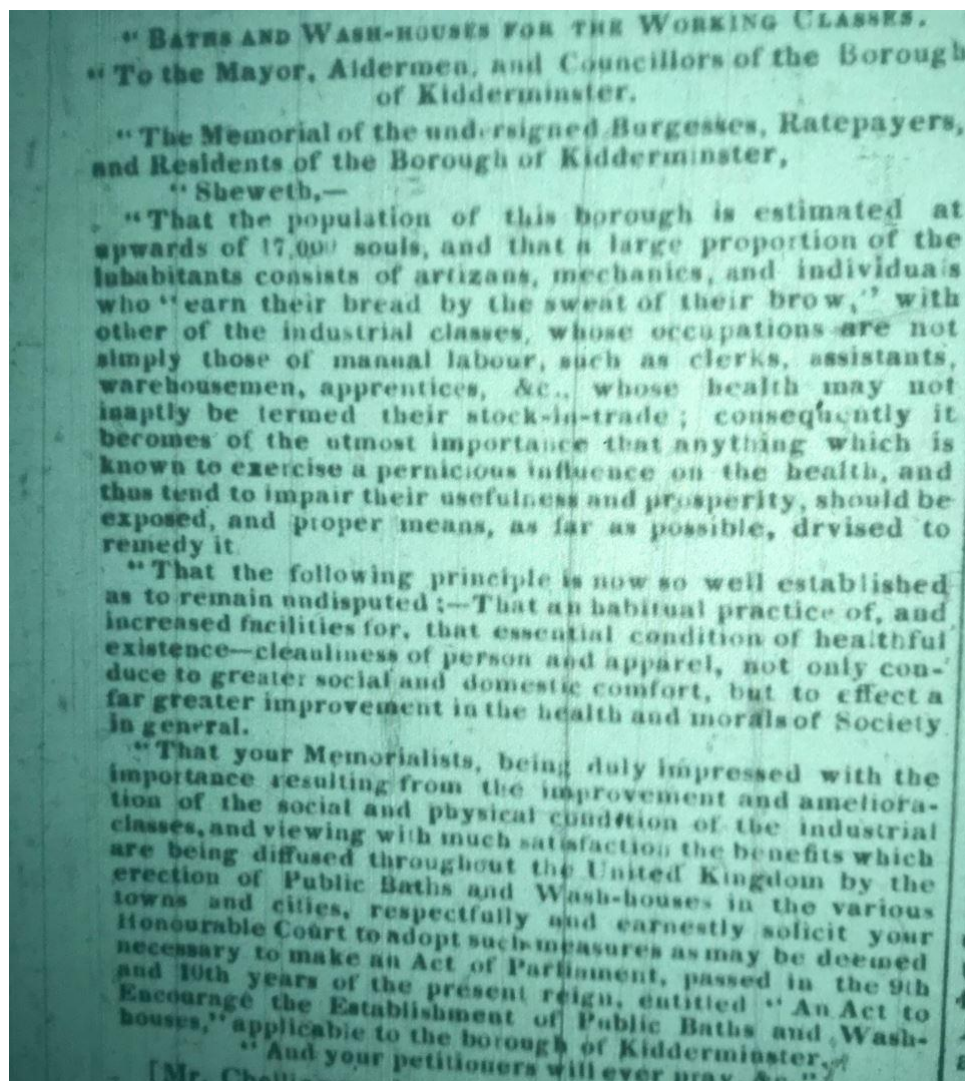
The legislation did allow local authorities to act to provide open bathing spaces, although there was a not an explicit reference to indoor swimming pools. It did allow for provision of sizeable plunge pools providing large scale access to personal washing facilities for people unable or unwilling to pay for use of the slipper baths and more private individual bathing these provided. Some local authorities took advantage of this to create dedicated swimming pools alongside the other facilities.

Kidderminster's response to the opportunity provided by the Act was not laggardly – even in 1854, just a year before the Kidderminster Baths became operational, only twelve towns had used the Act to set up their own facilities.

After presenting his memorial in August 1851, Chellingworth had the Town Clerk read the relevant Act underlining the fact that the Council did indeed have the power to establish and finance the Baths. He reassured members that his analysis of the statistics strongly suggested that such baths would be financially self supporting within a few years. He pointed out that, for want of an alternative, some 200 people per day bathed in 'a dangerous part of the Stour at Puxton'<sup>8</sup>. His motion that the Council adopt the Act was seconded by Dr William Roden, a local doctor and Town Councillor, who confessed his embarrassment that he, a medical man, had not brought such a proposal forward himself. The motion to progress this by adopting the Act was passed unanimously



and the Council set up a Baths and Wash Houses Committee to undertake detailed plans and preparations.



*Henry Chellingworth's Memorial presented in August 1851<sup>8</sup>*

This Bath Committee set about its task with a will, aiming to specify the facilities that it expected the baths to provide and also identifying the location that might accommodate them – a site in Mill Street was already seen as the prime location if it could be secured at the right price. At this early stage the outline specification was teased out and a London based engineer, Mr Bayley, was consulted as to possible costs of creating the baths.

The Committee seem to have been more than a little discouraged by the results of this exercise. Their preliminary investigations suggested that cost of building the baths would be of the order of £3000, with operating costs of about £800 per year and income of £500 per year. The Public Works Loans Commission would not advance a loan more than £2000 towards the capital costs. The Committee deliberated and Councillor Chellingworth came back to the full council in June 1852 with the Committee's recommendation.

This was that, in light of the state of trade, they did not feel that they could look to place any further burden on the rates to meet the costs of the proposed Baths. They proposed that although their enquiries in the matter should not cease, but nor should they proceed hastily, and in effect sought to

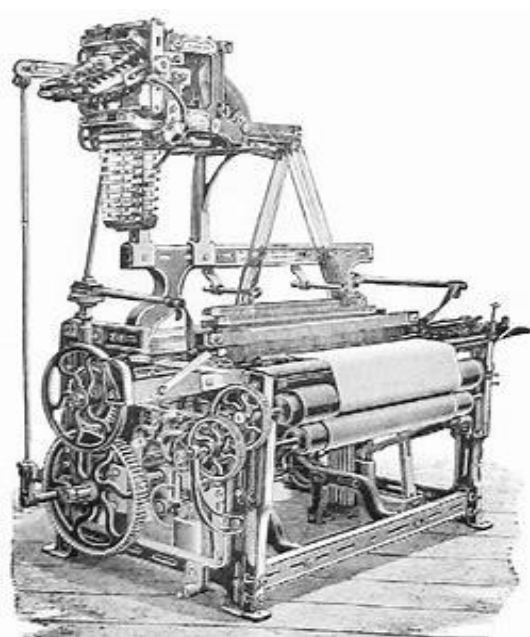
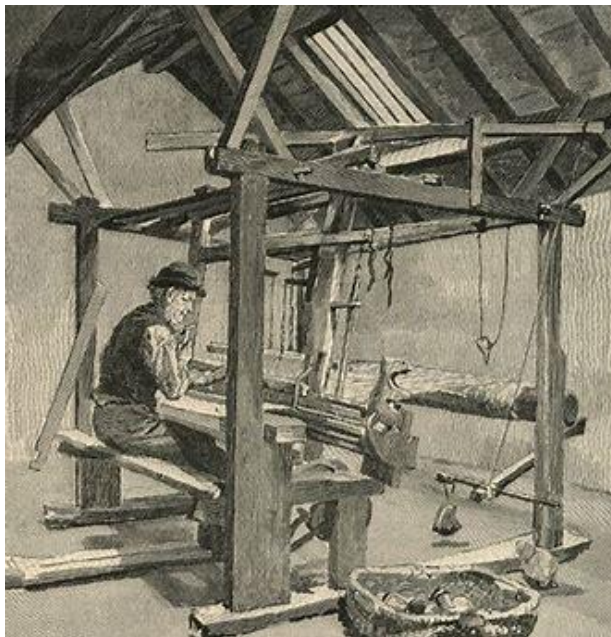


bring any prospect of practical implementation to a halt. Chellingworth, himself, proposed a motion to this effect.

The screeching brake on civic innovation that the mere voicing of the expression 'the state of trade will not allow...' echoes often through the succeeding eighty years with such regularity that another brief digression may be helpful.

Kidderminster was at this point very much a one trade town. Probably half of the working population were employed in the carpet industry and a half of the remainder were shop keepers, publicans, or in other similar trades largely reliant on the income and spending of the carpet workers.

Kidderminster was hardly unique in the narrowness of its economic base. Many of the smaller industrial towns in and around the Midlands had the same character. (One thinks of nail making in Bromsgrove and needle making in Redditch). Kidderminster though had a particular vulnerability given the nature of its product base, Carpets are to an extent a very discretionary product whose purchase could be postponed or abandoned given the circumstances of buyers. Other goods suffered the swings up and down in the business cycle and confidence – however Kidderminster was exposed to a longer business cycle with demand falling early in any downturn and being slow to recover.



*Hand loom and Steam loom*

It had been largely a craft industry up to this point in time. However, the application of new technology was inevitable and was imminent by 1851<sup>9</sup> bringing more mechanical methods of production and displacing traditional employment. Power looms, which harnessed steam power to drive the loom, were being eagerly promoted at the Great Exhibition in that year. The carpet industry in Kidderminster was slow to respond. The power looms, though, were to have their impact on industrial relations in a town that only a generation before had experienced violent industrial disputes during a previous major economic downturn. All of these matters were coming to a head as the proposal for the public baths were being debated. Early in 1852 the first two manufacturers to install the power looms were already gravely at odds with the workforce. The employers responded by bringing workers in from Yorkshire (these looms were largely an American invention; Crossleys in



Halifax had taken up the opportunity to licence the technology which has been promoted at the 1851 Great Exhibition so the expertise to set up and operate sat with them). There were violent confrontations arising from job losses as the new technology was introduced; businesses unable or unwilling to use the new techniques were ceasing to be viable.

So, the suggestion in Chellingworth's resolution that the Council should do no more than hasten slowly was founded in this sense of the economic realities the town and council were facing.

At this point in the 1852 Council debate, however, Councillor Pemberton Talbot objected, pointing out other, equally compelling, political and legal realities - particularly that the Council had already, unanimously, agreed to adopt the Baths and Wash Houses Act – and that they had done so at the urging of an overwhelming majority of the burgess class. Talbot sought the Town Clerk's views as to whether it was in order to put a motion rescinding the earlier decision to build the Baths<sup>10</sup>.

The Clerk advised that such a motion could not be put and instead an alternative approving a delay of six months in any further action with regard to the baths plans was put and approved by 10 votes to 9.

In November, after council elections, the Committee reported again to Council this time seeking approval to spend up to £50 on plans and other preparations – a spoiling amendment reducing this figure to five guineas was lost and the Committee was in a position to move forward again with some resources at its disposal.

Their next move was to engage the London-based architectural practice of Ashpital and Whichcord to move the project forward. Arthur Ashpital and John Whichcord Jr had already established themselves as the leading lights in a movement to encourage the development of Baths and Wash Houses following the 1846 Act. They had quite literally written the book on the matter which first appeared in 1851 and went through a number of subsequent editions<sup>11</sup>. They were responsible for baths in Lambeth but also in Maidstone, Swansea and Bilston as well as in Kidderminster and were particularly keen to encourage other smaller towns such as Kidderminster of their own conviction that baths and wash houses could be built and operated economically in such localities. These were significant men in their profession. Ashpital suffered ill health through his life, lived abroad for some years and died in 1869. He endowed the Ashpital Prize awarded to student with top final year marks in the Royal Institute of British Architect's examinations. Whichcord went on the design landmark buildings such as the Grand Hotel in Brighton and was president of the RIBA from 1879-81. (The Kidderminster Town Baths however do not feature prominently in the professional CVs of either Ashpital or Whichcord.)





*Figure 2. John Whichcord, Junior, President, Royal Institution of British Architects*

Their book makes much of their practical experience in building Baths and Wash Houses but also emphasises the many social and domestic benefits that baths and wash houses would bring in their wake – not least that the availability of the public wash house mitigated the risk that the working man returning on washing day to a home draped in damp and drying linen might be tempted to slope off to the beer house with the risks that engendered. They were mindful too that wash houses themselves needed to be strictly managed to ensure that the women using them were not to succumb to gossiping or, worse, gin drinking.

Their book was enthusiastically reviewed in the Worcester Chronicle and one suspects that Henry Chellingworth's confident predictions of the financial success of an operation in Kidderminster might have been drawn in the first instance from the work of Messrs Ashpital and Whichcord. Presumably their achievement in designing the public baths in Bilston, where a contract to build was let in September 1852, was also important in securing the commission in Kidderminster.

John Whichcord came to meet the Committee in Kidderminster in February 1853<sup>12</sup> and in the light of that meeting presented initial plans suggesting a cost to build Baths of the order of £2500. He also offered the opinion that the preferred site in Mill Street was well suited – presumably because water could be extracted from the river for some of the facilities, not least the swimming pool. (The Maidstone baths had had to draw water from a point some three quarters of a mile away which was a significant element in its costs). The councils initial wish list had included two swimming pools – presumably a first class and a second class one – the facilities of all public baths at this time seem to be conceived along the lines of the railway service. The Committee sent the initial plans back to Whichcord asking for a larger pool (and also that he remove plans for an Infants School which seems to have crept into the specification at some point.)

Ashpital and Whichcord were clear in their book that a facility for a town of some 20,000 people should cost of the order of £5000-6000 and the baths in Maidstone did have costs of this scale. They urged prospective clients, as architects do, now no less than then, not to scrimp on costs – and it would not be unworthy to note that their fee would of course be based on the total capital outlay to be incurred in completing the project.

It is clear though that the baths proposed for Kidderminster were essentially identical in scale, layout and operations to those built in Maidstone and in Bilston. (The Bilston baths had a capital cost of



some £2500) There can really have been little original work or thinking required on the part of the architects so they may have been resigned to have the capital size of the project scaled down.

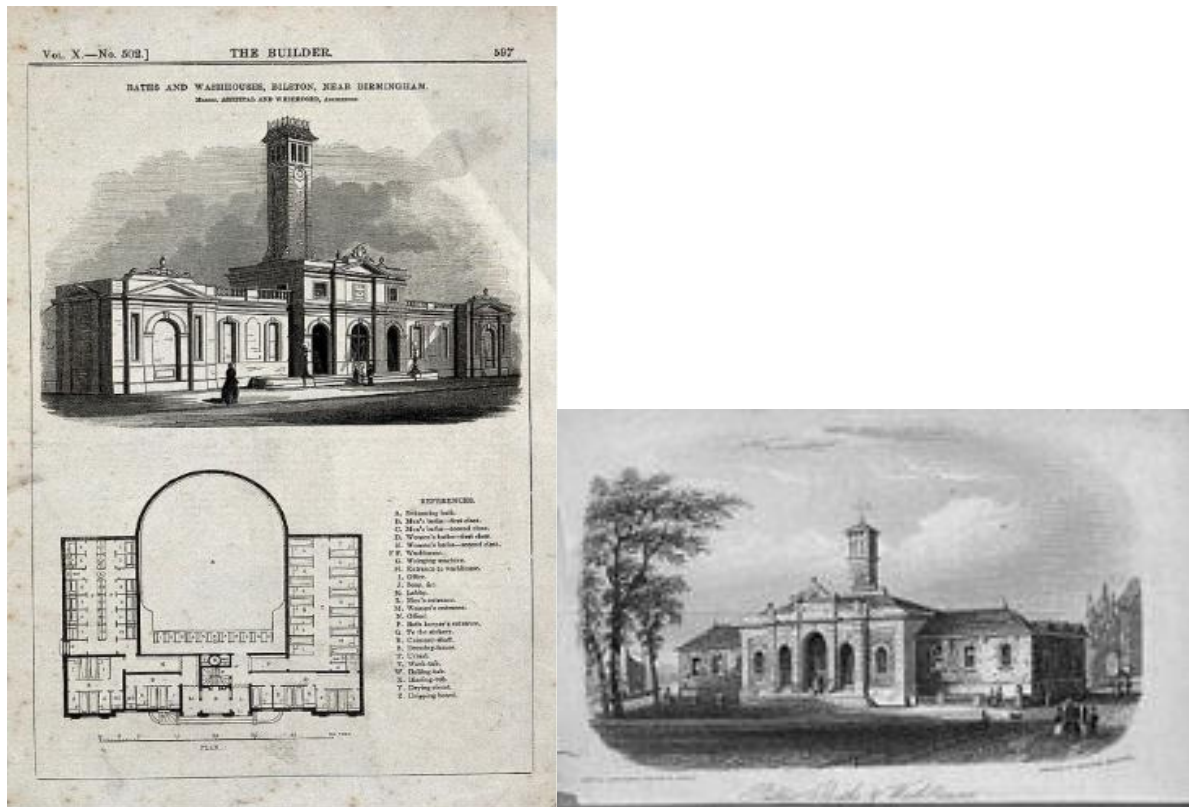


Figure 3. Whichcord and Ashpital's plans for Bilston Baths (left) and Maidstone Baths

Whichcord was confident that though, on the basis of their experience elsewhere, that the baths could cover costs and even be profitable. He specifically advised that the financial security of the operation in Kidderminster would be even greater than was the case in Maidstone, with which they were familiar, as demand would be so much the greater in a more densely populated industrial area such as Kidderminster than it was in Kent.

The project then went through a phase of steps forward and backwards, postponements and the like. The protracted nature of the process – and the value which working people placed on the baths – is revealed in a handbill that appeared at the end of one of the industrial skirmishes that flared on and off around the power looms issue at this time. It urged the operatives to show the Town Council by all means how they valued the proposed baths and regretted the delays in bringing them forward. Waxing lyrical the author (an anonymous 'Working Man') urged 'Let us then be stirring not the mud in the gutters but the pure water of the stream from the mountains and we shall each come out a more pure and healthy Working Man'<sup>13</sup>.

By June 1853, revised plans had been prepared and the opportunity to acquire the desired site in Mill Street seemed to be resolved. Chellingworth advised the Council<sup>14</sup> that he could now supplement the original ratepayers memorial with a petition from some 1200 operatives all as eager for the scheme to proceed as the handbill author suggested. Councillor George Griffith however had been undertaking his own research and in light of contact with baths operations in London, Liverpool, Birmingham, Maidstone 'and others' reported the view that none of these seem to have reached the happy financial position Chellingworth had forecast. The working class were not eager bathers, Griffith contended, and in a predominantly working class town such as Kidderminster the



financial issue might be even more problematic than elsewhere. However the Committee were given authority by a majority of eight to six (the 'state of trade' party had not gone away at all – though even Griffith conceded that at that precise moment 'trade was good') to adopt the plans, to acquire the site and to proceed to erect buildings and to furnish them.

The Town Clerk was instructed to make the necessary approaches to the Commission of Public Works to secure a loan of £2500 to finance the development.

A year later though the project was still tied up in the task of acquiring the preferred site. An alternative had presented itself and the architects pronounced themselves equally happy with this as a location. At much the same time, the Public Works Commission were advising the Town Council that if they could not quickly come to a decision to draw down the loan that was being made available, it would be withdrawn. This appears to have prompted the Council finally to conclude negotiations and acquire the site in Mill Street that had been in mind since 1851. (The completion of the Kidderminster Ring Road in 1984 has left Mill Street as something of a backwater. In the middle of the nineteenth century however it was one of the main routes into the town and a major centre of economic activity. Many of the old carpet families had had both their homes and their business premises there and over the next few decades it was to be the location for significant further large scale industrial development.)

They were also able to appoint a contractor to build the facility. This was Henry Ankrett, a significant builder in the town. 1855 was to be a busy year for his firm as they were also building the 'Lord Ward Shed' an imaginative initiative funded by Lord Ward, the principal land owner in the town, at the urging of two of leading manufacturers. This was to provide a factory unit large enough to accommodate the new power looms, managed on a shared basis which allowed a number of businesses the opportunity to access this new technology. This co-operative approach was much less expensive than it would have been had individual companies sought to provide themselves with both the looms and the space to accommodate them. A number of businesses were able to establish a position in the marketplace on this basis before expanding into their own purpose built facility. Ankrett also built at least one of these new premises.

A first stone for the Baths was laid by Mayor Kitley in October 1854. The building was described as being 'a fine specimen of Italianate architecture', standing 30 feet high, on a site with a frontage to Mill Street of 50 feet and stretching 78 feet back to the river.

Two further wobbles ensued – the Public Works Commission, in view of the state of the money market, would only lend at 5% rather than rate of 4% that the Council had anticipated; a hard winter delayed the building programme which pushed an opening date beyond the late Spring and a flurry of meetings led to the Council insisting that the contractor open the baths swiftly and that he accept liability for any mishaps that might arise from this decision. One of the final decisions regarding the baths operation was that there would be opening in the early morning on Sundays – from 6 am to 8.30 am. Presumably, cleanliness was accepted as being so close to Godliness that it meant that some breach of Sunday observance could be permitted.

So the Baths opened on 5 July 1855. Berrow's Worcester Journal noted 'the opening took place without any ceremony whatsoever as it was only decided upon on the previous day by the Committee who seemed very anxious that even a day should be lost to the inhabitants who have been impatiently awaiting the opening.'<sup>15</sup>

The Baths comprised a swimming pool measuring 36 feet by 23 feet 6 inches (about a quarter of the size of a typical modern municipal pool) and fifteen slipper baths (three male and two female in the



first class and eight male and two female in second class). It was just a little smaller than the baths that Ashpital and Whichcord had designed for Bilston and Maidstone which had 18/19 slipper baths but we can be confident that the strict separation of the sexes designed into the Maidstone building also prevailed in Kidderminster. It seems that there was no expectation that ladies would want to swim. The project had cost £3335 3 shillings and 5 pence with the balance over the government loan of £3000 being met directly from the rates.

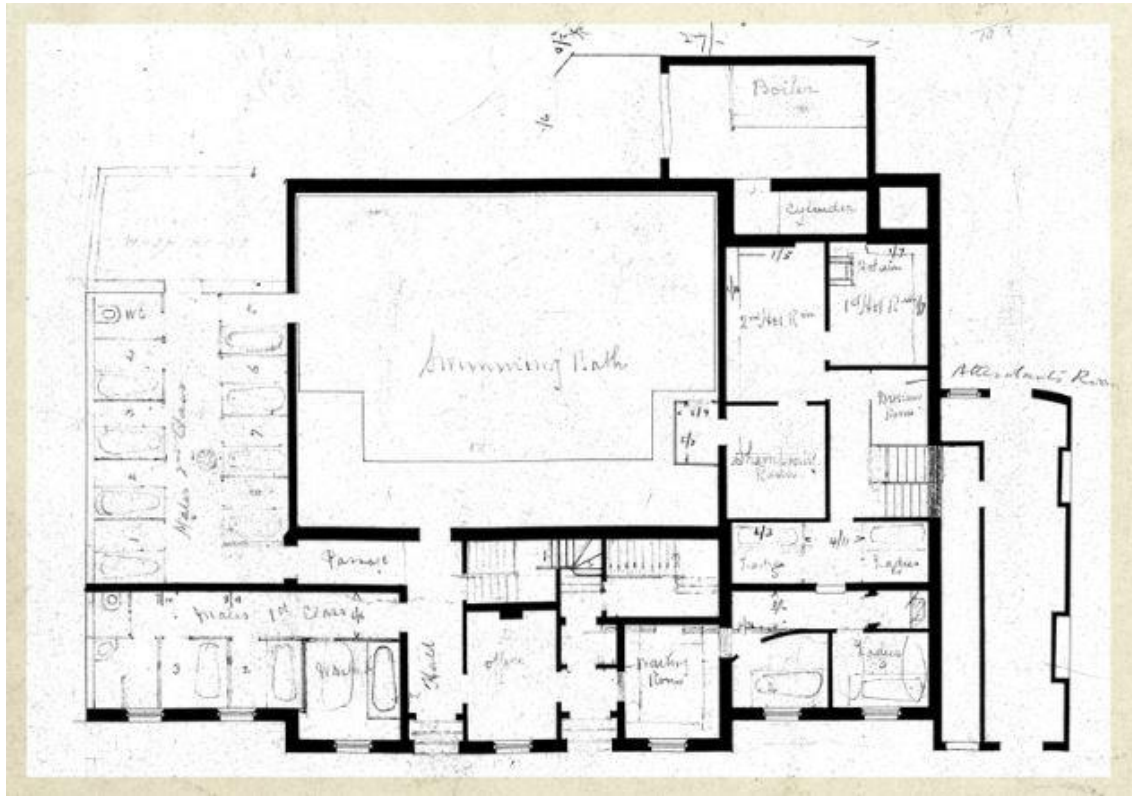
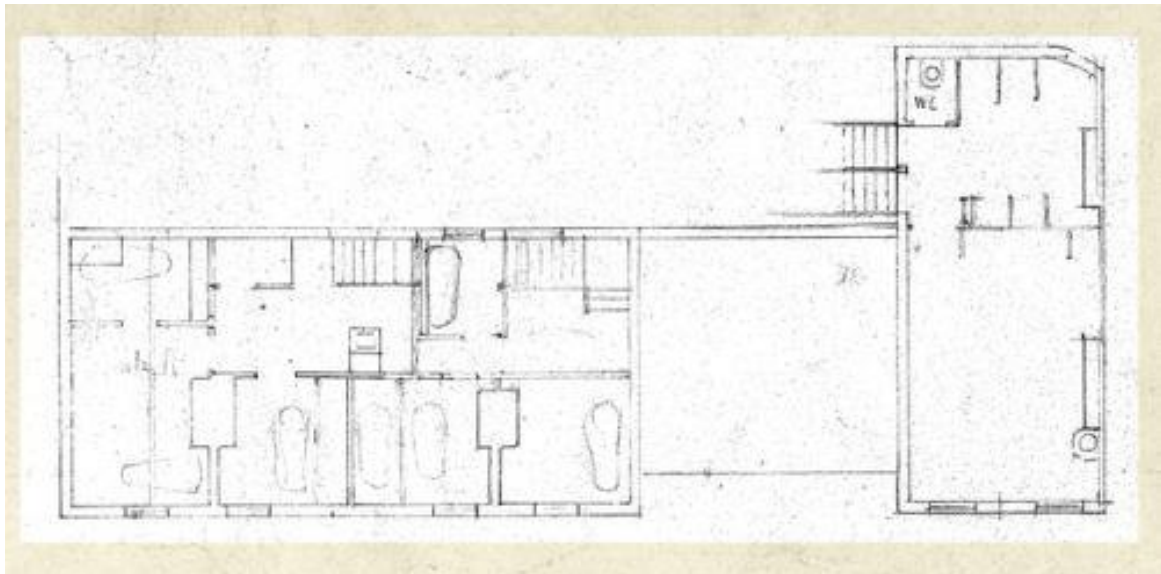


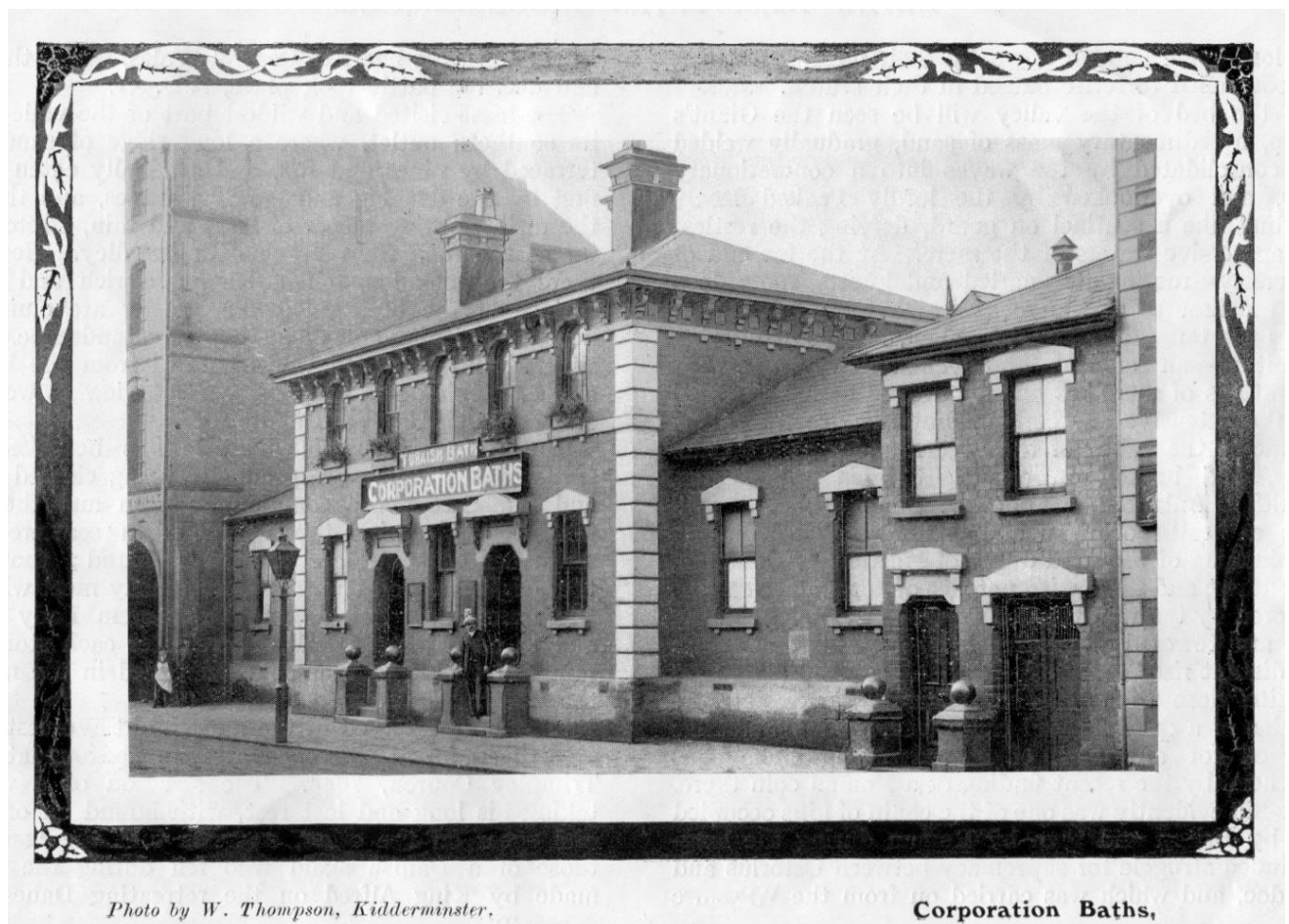
Figure 4. These floor plans of Mill Street Baths date from c1870. The swimming bath is in the centre. The upper floor (plan below) provided the Baths Superintendent's living accommodation and the first class slipper baths for women. The Turkish Baths area on the ground floor originally housed the Washroom/laundry facilities. The laundry on the plan would have been for towels and swimming drawers – and the Turkish bathers' sheets.





*Figure 5. This picture shows baths (centre, 'bisected' by the lamppost). The picture dates from before 1881 when the new Town Mills were built adjoining the baths on the left.*





*Figure 6. This photograph is of the Mill Street Baths in the very early years of the twentieth century (by which time it had been in operation for some fifty years).*

Despite the overspend against the budget (caused by need to secure a way leave adjacent to the premises) the Committee were pleased to be able to report that they had made a significant saving through striking a contract whereby power could be taken from the neighbouring Town Mills rather than needing a boiler and engine as part of the baths. This also means that the building itself was perhaps less imposing than Ashpital and Whichcords projects in Bilston and Maidstone which each had an large tower, no doubt concealing a chimney. The opportunity of accessing the Town Mills power might well have been another among the reasons the Committee persevered so long in trying to secure the site in Mill Street for the baths.

Some 4914 people were reported as using the baths in the first month. 3378 of these were 'swimmers' paying 1d for the privilege (some, indeed, many of these, may well have people using the pool as a plunge pool for bathing rather than actually swimming<sup>16</sup>.)

There were early problems however. The operation of the baths clearly became an issue in the town council elections in 1856 arising, it seems, from both the quality of the water supply (there were frequent observations of its 'foulness') and its dependability. Berrows Journal noted sternly just before election day that 'several parties in the town lately promulgated opinions antagonistic to well working of these sanitary accessories' but that with regard to closure 'a move in that direction would be deserving much censure'. The new mayor, Mr Batham, addressing the council



immediately after he had taken office laid down that the despite past divisions of opinion on the subject the baths were now a fact. There was a need to treat it as such and to work together to make best use and reduce the burden of costs.

Possibly to that end, advertisements were placed in local papers stressing the attraction of bathing itself and the facility in particular. One such piece reported an increase in total users (bathers and swimmers) from 8,900 in 1856 to 11,600 (1857) for the months May to September. It was expected that 'the time was not far distant when we would receive the thanks of their fellow townsmen for having placed such a sanitary blessing within reach of all classes of the inhabitants'.

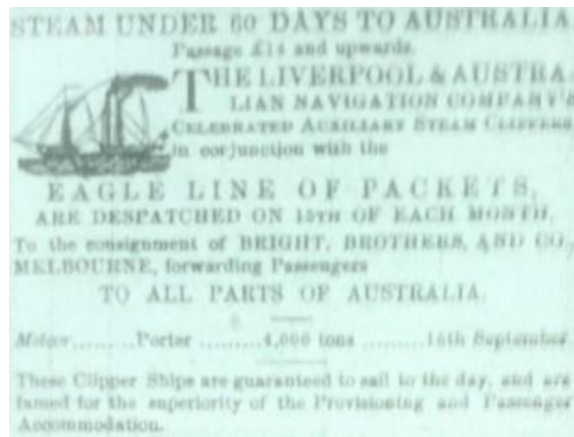
The problems had certainly continued into 1857 with mud and filth contaminating the small adjacent reservoir that served the baths. Other initiatives to encourage use were implemented including laying a pipe to carry warm water from Humphries' nearby premises as well as offering season tickets and reduced prices to encourage children as users with their parents.

In 1861 however the project was still proving problematic. Notwithstanding the optimistic projections that the Council had been provided by Messrs Ashpital and Whichcord about profitability, the Baths were losing, rather than making, money – as Councillor Griffith had forecast. The Baths and Wash Houses Committee had advertised to see if anyone might lease the building and equipment and run as a commercial concern but there has been no response. However, the council now had its attention drawn to the section of the legislation that required that if the Act was adopted, the baths had to be run for seven years before any final decision as to viability could be made. At the same time Mr Goodwin, the owner of the Town Mills, was seeking to terminate his contract for the supply of power which would require that the Council invest in replacing this. He was persuaded to suspend this decision for twelve months

The council responded to the immediate financial position of the baths by reducing the wages of the baths staff to cut costs and by reducing prices to try to stimulate demand.

It is also worth recognising that the fears about the impact of power looms elsewhere on local industry were proving to have been well founded. Kidderminster experienced a dramatic fall in population of some 20% (4000 people) through the 1850s<sup>17</sup> and into the following decade, as the traditional hand loom business contracted and people left the town in great numbers seeking work elsewhere. The pressure to reduce the councils costs and rate demands in the light of this contraction in business was significant.





*Emigration to Australia or Canada was an option for many Kidderminster people in the 1850s in the light of the advent of power looms to the industry. Advertisements like this were common in the local press.*

Then in January 1862 the committee were advised that a cog wheel in the pump bringing water to the baths had broken and as a result the baths were without water for some time. The Council seem to have decided that the opportunity to avoid the financial losses and close the baths had presented itself and they determined that they would not sanction the expenditure to replace the pump. Public opinion in the Town was not impressed. The very next council meeting in February was presented with a new petition that recorded satisfaction with the existence of the baths and noted with regret that closure seemed to be under consideration. The signatories expressed the view that the moderate deficit on the baths operation would be 'cheerfully borne in consideration of advantages accruing to the morals, health and comfort of the young and industrious classes' and they begged that the Council should not allow it to be closed.

The petition as recorded in the Council Minutes<sup>18</sup> has the names of its signatories and is headed by Thomas Lea and John Brinton who were each leading industrialists and were also each to serve as Liberal MPs for the Borough. This suggests a significant change of mood among the Liberals of the town as the opposition to Chellingworth's initial proposal had been led by George Griffith, himself a Liberal (Griffiths sought the Liberal nomination for the parliamentary seat in 1868 when it was actually secured by Lea).

A second petition, less sentimental in approach, insisted that the baths should not be closed before the expiration of the loan taken out to build them. In the face of this the council reversed their decision regarding the pump and also sanctioned spending on further advertising and improvement of the facility to a limit of £10.

In summer 1863, the Baths Committee proposed that the Wash House be closed given that receipts were so small in comparison to expenditure. Ashpita and Whichcord's touching view of the domestic bliss that these laundry facilities might generally bring did not appear to be forthcoming in Kidderminster – at least not on a sufficient scale to keep them open. Mayor Roden proposed that the area released might be used as a second smaller swimming pool but the idea was not taken up.

The issue of the operation of the Baths then seems to have fallen off the town and the Town Council's agenda for some while.



## Chapter 3 Getting up a head of steam

The next stage in the development of activity at Mill Street produced a touch of novelty that was even more exotic than the development of the baths themselves. This came when, at a meeting of the Town Council in May 1870, Councillor Turton gave notice that at the next meeting he intended to present a memorial from residents seeking the introduction of Turkish Baths facilities at Mill Street. This was duly done and the matter referred to the Baths and Wash Houses Committee for investigation. The borough surveyor was asked to provide estimates for converting the redundant wash house area into a Turkish Baths and arrived at the sum of £207 for adaptations and an estimated £50 of annual running costs.

When the Baths Committee report, with its recommendation to proceed, was considered by the Council, they also had in front of them a petition from 191 residents asking that they not proceed. The council minutes do not record the number of signatories to the initial memorial requesting that the baths be established but we can presume that it was a larger number than of those opposed to the idea as the Council voted 10-6 in favour of the proposal. Work was commenced and the new Turkish Baths opened in February 1871 – though costing almost twice as much to deliver (£400) as the borough surveyor had estimated.



*David Urquhart*

More generally, the emergence of Turkish Baths were a curious phenomenon around the country at this point. By the time Kidderminster welcomed its facility there were perhaps 40-50 outside London alone– many more came and went through the rest of the nineteenth century. The provision of Turkish Baths in Kidderminster was not unique but nor was it commonplace. The fact that they were owned and operated by the Town Council was unusual. (There was also some doubt as to whether the provisions of the 1846 Act actually allowed for such baths to be supported by local rates income.) The fact that the Kidderminster Turkish Baths survived in operation, at the same location and under the same management into the 1930s, is actually quite striking.



Turkish Baths were introduced to Britain<sup>19</sup> by David Urquhart, a Scottish diplomat and politician, whose career had taken him to Turkey and the wider Ottoman Empire. As a result he acquired a particular interest and sympathy with Turkish politics and culture. One aspect of this was a deep opposition to Britain's foreign policy in the Middle East. This had led him to being recalled from his post as secretary at the British Embassy in Constantinople in 1837. He strongly opposed the policies of Palmerstone in the 1850s.

He was impressed by other aspects of Turkish life and introduced the ideas of Turkish Baths in his book, *The Pillars of Hercules*. He was involved in the design of the very first Baths in London in Jermyn Street in 1860.

The local opposition to the Kidderminster project seemed to have two overlapping aspects – the notion, deriving from such an alien culture, of choosing for alleged health benefits to sit in a steamy environment does seem to have been regarded as both comic and absurd by some councillors. More hard headed was the idea that it was not the role of the local authority to provide such a service for the indulgence of the well-to-do. It certainly was the case that most, if not all, other Turkish baths operations in England at the time were commercial operations seeking to be run for profit.



*Figure 7. The exotic nature of the Turkish Baths made them a source of general amusement in some quarters as this Punch cartoon shows*

The supporters of the Turkish Baths in Kidderminster were keen to stress the general medical benefits that the services of the Baths provided and in due course secured the support of local medical practitioners to this end. They also argued that the facilities were beneficial to the ordinary working man (like the chimney sweep above, perhaps) and could help alleviate the aches and strains caused by heavy manual labour. The fee structure with reduced prices after 6 pm on



weekdays and after 2pm on Saturday was to facilitate access by working people (though those with reservations about the baths were happy to point out that the middle class were only too happy to take advantage of these reduced rate slots).

**CORPORATION BATHS,**  
MILL STREET.

The Baths' Committee of the Town Council wish on the approach of the season, to draw attention to the ample accommodation provided by the Corporation for the Burgesses and the public generally, on the most moderate terms. The Baths comprise the following departments:—

GENERAL SWIMMING BATH.  
GENTLEMEN'S WARM AND TEPID BATHS.  
LADIES' PLUNGE BATHS.  
LADIES' WARM & TEPID BATHS.

**THE TURKISH BATHS**  
ARE NOW OPEN DAILY.

The Heating Apparatus is in perfect working order, and gives every satisfaction to the visitors. It has been entirely re-constructed with the best material, and on approved principles,  
Every information to be had on applying at the Baths, to

W. CRANNAGE,  
Curator.

May 6, 1871. 686

*Press Advertisement for Turkish Baths – May 1871*

The Turkish Baths were opened in February 1871 with advertisements featuring prominently in the front page of the Kidderminster Shuttle (which had itself begun publication only a year earlier). The baths appear to have experienced some early mechanical problems and were being promoted as re-opening with heating apparatus in full working order in May – the advertisement above was issued for the re-opening.

At much the same time the creation of a new reservoir, off the Stourport Road and just outside the town boundary was welcomed when it was completed in 1871. It meant that the swimming pool and baths could be supplied directly by gravity rather than having to have water extracted from the adjacent river Stour. The reservoir drew its water from artesian wells, hundreds of feet below the town. Steam power and an adjacent pump house brought the water to the surface. (There is more about the creation of this reservoir below.) At about this time, the Council's insurers were insisting that the existing pump at the baths be replaced and the Baths Committee did wonder whether, with the advent of the reservoir this was necessary. The intention was that gravity would deliver the water from the new reservoir in its relatively elevated position above the town but in the end they did invest in a new pump.

By 1875, the Committee might have been particularly grateful for the existence of the reservoir, as the appalling quality of water in the Stour was being noted as being damaging to water life (and presumably to users of the swimming bath had the river still supplied the pool.) The quality of the



water from the river was also noted as being unsuitable for the dyers in carpet works – a case, for once perhaps, of the brightly coloured kettle calling the pot black given the damage to the river emanating from the works themselves.

In August 1875 there was some subdued delight at the fact that the loan taken out to finance the baths in 1855 had been repaid. Alderman Holloway noted the baths had never been intended to make a profit but to encourage cleanliness and that they should be better promoted to the townspeople. However the reason that joy was confined was evident in the view expressed in council that baths were in a 'most unsatisfactory condition' and were 'absolutely unsafe'. Councillor Green was of the opinion that 'the mere fact of teaching people to swim ought to be sufficient cause for keeping up the place'.

The experience of those actually using the baths to swim at this time was conveniently reported by a swimmer, signing his letter to the Shuttle 'A Swimmer', who wrote to the paper in April 1875<sup>20</sup>.

He argued that there was a need to provide suitable new accommodation for swimming, that the river was unfit for this purpose and that the old (Mill Street) swimming bath was 'entirely out of the question'. He expressed the hope that with the advent of the new reservoir and waterworks the water in the pool might be changed a little more, reporting that the pool contents were often 'more like liquid mud than water'. He also had some concerns about the general environment of the place noting that 'respectable people have to mix in with all the roughs of the town and be insulted and oftener half drowned by being thrown into the water'. He concluded hoping that some kind member of the Council might raise these concerns in the Chamber.

There seems something of the tone of an earnest schoolboy about the letter – if this is indeed the case, the author might have been chastened to realise that he would be an elderly man before his aspirations for a new pool were to be finally achieved.

The letter is, however, evidence that swimming was becoming an increasingly popular activity in Kidderminster as well as across the country as a whole. Matthew Webb completed the first ever cross channel swim in 1875 which generated a huge national public enthusiasm for the activity but in the industrial urban areas generally the rivers were a no more inviting prospect for swimmers than was the Stour in Kidderminster. Increasingly a 'proper' swimming pool was becoming something to which all progressive towns aspired. (For example, Sneinton in Nottingham built a public baths, with plunge pool first in 1851, replaced this with new baths including a swimming pool in 1879 and then new, further-improved baths opened in 1896.)

The power for local authorities to provide such facilities were provided by new legislation, the Baths and Wash Houses Act of 1878 which removed any of the ambiguity that the previous legislation had left. It placed the construction of covered swimming pools within the power of local authorities – and allowed that such pools might be closed for a period up to five months between November and March. Councillors in Kidderminster however did not pursue this new opportunity with even the guarded enthusiasm they had shown twenty five years earlier.



## Chapter 4 Water, water everywhere – Hydrophobes and Hydrophiles

The reason for that reluctance – which was to last for decades- can be set firmly in events in the early 1870s. Through much of the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the council seemed pre-occupied by issues related to water, its demands and benefits and the inordinate costs of its supply, management and control. It's unfair, though a convenient shorthand, to contrast a Hydrophobe contingent, appalled by the huge costs of the very necessary investment in infrastructure such as piped drinking water and sewage management, with a party of Hydrophiles eager to spend even more on Turkish baths and an improved swimming and bathing facility.

Underlying all of this were the huge problems caused by the fact that the economic recovery in the town after the power loom crisis, resulted in the River Stour through the town becoming increasingly an industrial and domestic sewer into which all manner of waste was discharged by locals. (In treating its river largely as a sewage facility, Kidderminster was, of course, far from unique. In 1858, an especially hot summer meant that the water level in the Thames fell significantly and the stench from human and other waste habitually dumped in the river was only too evident, bringing Parliament and the rest of the city almost to a halt. This 'Great Stink' ushered in the Bazalgette sewer systems which still serve the metropolis<sup>21</sup>.)

The scale of the problem for Kidderminster that the lack of effective sewerage presented had become abundantly clear in the late 1860s and the council consulted with specialist engineers to determine a solution. This was produced but when presented to the Corporation as a whole – that is the entirety of the ratepayers/ burgesses- there was such resistance at the costs and associated rates burden that the Town Council did not feel that it could proceed. The Council looked to defer a decision but action was then pursued by local doctors. They were agitated about the death rate in Kidderminster which they saw as being materially higher than in neighbouring areas and which was attributed to inadequate sewage facilities. The doctors pressed the Poor Law Guardians to petition the Home Secretary who at this stage had responsibility for local health matters and could require action. The Home Office despatched an inspector to make a local investigation into the situation. The inspector required the Council to take urgent steps regarding sewage treatment and water supply, with the threat that if they did not act themselves, Government would take the necessary steps unilaterally.<sup>22</sup>

In the light of this threat they committed themselves to a very major improvement through a scheme of investment in sewage treatment and water supply. The Mill Street Baths had been the first significant capital project that the town council had ever undertaken. That investment was rendered almost trivial, though, by expenditure on this new water and sewage scheme financed by borrowing, which amounted to a total of almost £100,000 (perhaps equivalent to £11 million in today's money). This included the cost of the new reservoir already mentioned<sup>23</sup>.

It was eventually to become clear that this investment was failing on a quite disastrous scale to deliver. To be fair, the debates around the issue at the time make it clear that many members of the council did not feel that they had the competence themselves - or had access to the appropriate professional advice – to oversee such a huge and complex project. In fairly short order as we will see, another tranche of investment would be needed to address the problems which the first scheme had increased rather than resolved. In this financial climate, the willingness of the council as a whole, notwithstanding the evident enthusiasm of some members, to incur even more debt to improve the public bathing provision never mind support a 'frivolous' leisure activity such as swimming, was seriously lacking.



Notwithstanding this, various members and others in the town took it upon themselves to raise the importance of swimming and advanced the idea of a new pool for the town. There was a suggestion in council in 1879 that it might be sensible to make it more widely known that the water in the pool came from the reservoir (created as part of the now-failing water and sewage system) not from the river and that it was clean enough to drink<sup>24</sup>. The better classes might then be happier to have their offspring learn to swim there. This was a rather bold claim to make as the reservoir itself had only recently had to have extensive work to prevent weed growing in it. (The reservoir was uncovered and so was vulnerable to this weed infestation). The weed had tainted the water making it unfit for human consumption for some months<sup>25</sup>. What is more, the swimming pool may no longer have comprised the liquid mud from the river reported by the 'Swimmer', but in common with other pools across the land at this time, the water was changed rather infrequently and was probably not especially potable.

Samuel Stretton who was the chief surgeon at the Mill Street Hospital wrote to the council in 1879 and 1880<sup>26</sup> presenting the case for improved swimming facilities – the Mill Street bath, he said, was cramped and the water in it so cold as to be a major disincentive for young children learning to swim and might even constitute a risk to their health. Councillor W H Green who was one of the most doughty defenders – and enthusiastic users – of the Turkish Baths also noted the need for a better swimming accommodation but also acknowledged that it would not be a financially profitable activity.

Concerns about the physical conditions of the baths building continued to be raised<sup>27</sup> - the 'Turkish - hydrophile' contingent thought that this was a major reason that the Turkish Baths were less well patronised than they might otherwise be and that enthusiasts for the treatment were making their way to Worcester and Birmingham to experience a more congenial environment. In Spring 1880 a storm damaged the baths building and as a result the roof was removed leaving the swimming pool uncovered – and presumably even less enticing to the better classes and their children- particularly as it was to be some years before any action was taken to restore the roof.

In June 1880, the then Mayor (Councillor Naylor) decided, albeit rather cautiously, to take the bull gently by the horns having given notice at the previous meeting of his intention to raise the issue of swimming provision in the town. It was a matter that had been pressed upon him, he said, since becoming Mayor, and it really needed the attention of the full Council. The Mayor, it is fair to say, was another member of the 'Hydrophile' faction on the council, eager to see the Turkish Baths thrive and willing to suggest that if a suitable site for a new swimming pool could be found this might allow a further expansion of the Turkish Baths into the space vacated by the old pool.

He conceded that it was not appropriate to burden the town with further costs to the rates. He did wonder if some use might be made of land the town was in the process of acquiring in Green Street where proximity to the pumping station might mean that water at a suitable temperature for swimming was readily available – removing the need for boilers and coal to heat the water. He proposed that the Baths Committee be instructed to consider 'if it is desirable for a swimming pool to be constructed and if so to bring up plans and estimates of costs with all useful particulars to the next meeting of the Town Council.

The Baths Committee was looking at site options for a new swimming pool and in July 1880 the Town Clerk was asked to look at possibility of raising a loan for £2000 to acquire a site near Caldwell Mill which the Borough Surveyor had judged to be the most appropriate location.



Nothing more concrete appears to have happened as a result of the Mayoral call to arms other than various other enquiries by the Baths Committee into the availability and costs of some other sites. In early November Dr Stretton was yet again in correspondence with the Council supporting the proposals for more space for the Turkish Baths and expressing the hope that plans for swimming accommodation 'so urgently required [were] not wholly abandoned by the Council'<sup>28</sup>.

Mayor (Willis) who took in the chair in November 1880 grasped more firmly the baton tentatively proffered by his predecessor a few months earlier and at his first Council meeting was forthright about both the need and the financial implications. The erection of a good swimming pool, he said, '...is essential for the general health of the people'. Schoolchildren, he said, should be taught to swim as part of their general education. The baths should be self-supporting, he hoped, but even if it required an application to the rates 'the town would be well paid in general well-being of the town' that resulted from the availability of such a facility.

His year in office however saw only grumbles from members who had seen the better quality of swimming facilities in other towns (and urged action to spend on building a larger pool in a substantial and handsome building) together with countervailing grumbles from the Hydrophobes about the costs and very nature of the Turkish Baths. The Kidderminster Shuttle, rarely focused on local issues other than at council election time, otherwise preferring to muse and offer advice on international politics, national finances and the over whelming excellence of W E Gladstone. It was moved to observe, though, that the anti-Turkish Baths faction were like terriers with a rat over the issue – teasing and tearing at it, releasing it for a while, then dragging it back into the fray for their further amusement<sup>29</sup>.

This continual bickering did finally produce a novel course of action; the Town Clerk was instructed to contact other local authorities to enquire as to their experience of operating Turkish Baths after a motion to this effect was passed on the Mayor's casting vote. It produced no real illumination at all. 36 councils were approached, 31 of these replied, none of which operated Turkish baths- underlining the exceptional nature of Kidderminster's municipal provision – perhaps most significantly, only four of the sample had public baths at all. (This research followed on a similar survey undertaken by Councillor Holloway on his own initiative which had been seen as usurping the role of the Town Clerk and which resulted in the Council making clear their disapproval of members taking such unilateral action<sup>30</sup>. This disapproval would not have much daunted Holloway who prided himself on a capacity for independent thought and action.)

However in June 1883, there was the appearance of a significant leap forward. The Kidderminster Shuttle had advance intelligence of proposals that were to be brought forward by the Improvements Committee which was perhaps the real powerhouse of activity within the Council at this time. The Chairman, Councillor Herring, who, as a conservative might not have expected to receive untrammelled praise from the Shuttle, was lauded in anticipation of his bringing forward 'one of the most enlightened and public spirited proposals yet made by the council'. Specifically, Herring was making more concrete the suggestions of the Mayor from three years before and proposing that new swimming baths be constructed on land on Green Street and that the Mill Street premises be remodelled to provide private bathing and a larger space for Turkish Baths. In addition, and it was this that particularly delighted the Shuttle, he proposed that free swimming lessons be provided to all elementary school children. The paper endorsed this with enthusiasm saying that 'The art of swimming ought everywhere to be taught as a branch of national education'.

Councillor Tempest Radford was not convinced that Green Street was the right place and argued for a location on Station Hill<sup>31</sup>. He also introduced a significant issue that reflected a new and material



change in the town's economy – the growing employment of women in the carpet industry. The most recent changes in technology had seen many more women working in the sector – and industrial action as men tried to resist both the technology and its labour market implications. Tempest Radford voiced his concerns about women returning from their day's work grubby and dirty and underlined how out of step with this new economic situation the baths provision (with only a handful of slipper baths set aside for women) had become.

Councillor Herring presented his proposals formally in August<sup>32</sup>. The Council was to acquire 7 acres, 1 rood, 12 perches of land at Green Street from the Birmingham Banking Company at a cost of £1300 for proposed new swimming baths and other baths. The site would also accommodate stabling and other activities of the authority. The Chairman's acumen in acquiring the site for less than the vendor's initial asking price was duly praised.

Herring observed that 'no doubt the chairman of Baths Committee will have something to say when plans are prepared' leaving unresolved the matter of the free swimming lessons which might become a charge on that Committee's budget.

At the beginning of the new Municipal Year in November, the Mayor (Daniel Goodwin) was keen to be assured that proposals for the new baths would indeed be forthcoming. Alderman Coxon, the Baths Committee chair reported that as soon as the new Committee was fully constituted action would ensue and that ground plans were already being worked up<sup>33</sup>.

Indeed, 1884 began with a virtual frenzy of activity on the baths front. The new committee was as keen as the Mayor on the development of new baths and anxious about the inadequacy of the existing buildings which were described as 'a disgrace to the town' with new facilities being 'urgently needed'. The Borough Surveyor pronounced that he did not have the capacity to design the new baths and a competition among local architects was proposed as a means of expediting matters. A sub committee of members made visits to Hanley and to Birmingham – and considered one to West Bromwich - to explore the facilities there and, crucially, to gauge an indication of the costs of providing equivalent facilities in Kidderminster<sup>34</sup>.

They came back to report to council that to build new baths on the scale and with the facilities that they had viewed would cost of the order of £5-8000. The all-too familiar tocsin was sounded again. It was proposed that in the 'present state of trade in the town' such an investment could not be considered.

However, for once, this reverse was not the end of activity or enthusiasm on the part of the Committee or of the wider council. Councillor Grosvenor wondered if some much more modest expenditure might in some way relieve the constraints caused by the 'miserably small bath'.

Councillor Potter urged that the opportunity to make use of the river should be not be ignored. Specifically he suggested that swimming might be possible at Puxton. He had swum there himself as a boy. This presumably was the bathing area in the river that Henry Chellingworth had mentioned when introducing his memorial back in 1851. Councillor Jeffries thought that spending £50 might provide a dressing shed opposite to the Ironworks there. (It seems improbable that the quality of the water in the Stour had improved since it was the cause of such concern in 1875 but this did not seem to be an issue for these members).

The summer of 1884 proved to be a very hot one – the appetite for swimming responded to the temperature but of course the facilities were not equal to demand. The pressure of demand was



referred to the Baths Committee but there was little hope of a solution. (Other members were 'afraid they would do nothing')

News reached the council of an outdoor swimming facility in Leicester, created by taking water from the river there and a visit was duly arranged in July. Councillor Potter insisted that Puxton could accommodate such an operation. The visit to Leicester suggested that something similar could be provided in Kidderminster at a cost of around £1500 and after reporting that visit to Council in September, the Committee began to look at possible sites in Kidderminster. (Councillor Potter, presumably not entirely surprising anyone, again proposed Puxton as a suitable location.)

However the town suddenly had something to distract it dramatically from the issue of swimming and swimming pools. It is a slight digression from our central theme but it bears very acutely on the general issue of public health which lay at the core of the baths debate and reveals some of the attitudes that prevailed at the time. It also bore directly, after a decade or so, on the topic of swimming, so it does bear some examination.

The dramatic development was an outbreak of typhoid fever in the town which began in late August 1884 (in the wake of the hot summer already noted) and persisted until December – there were 1200 cases of the disease and 110 people died. The disease was more prevalent in the newer parts of the town which sat on higher ground. A government inspector attributed the disease to the continued heavy reliance on middens and night soil collections for waste but also to the failure of the 'new' sewage system, and the unsuitability of the new reservoir, which together had been built at such considerable expense a decade or so earlier.

From the outset there has been complaints and distress about the smells emerging from this new system. The Inspectors report revealed that as a consequence of a dispute between the consulting engineer who designed the system and the Council, there was no proper plan of the route that the sewers followed, so maintenance and repair was very difficult; that the sewer pipes had been badly installed; and that the new reservoir did not sit sufficiently high above the town, particularly the newer parts, for gravity to ensure water from it flushed efficiently through the system. (It would be fair to say that name of J R Fairbank, the responsible engineer, stood in as bad an odour as did the town itself in the wake of his works. His reputation and professional reputation was impugned with energy and enthusiasm within the Council Chamber with one Mayor relishing the prospect of a case of slander being brought by him)<sup>35</sup>.

The response within the council to the first intimations of the typhoid epidemic do reveal something of contemporary local attitudes to general public health.

in September, when there were already some ten deaths confirmed as having been caused by typhoid, and with the Medical Officer of Health warning that there were many more inhabitants on the point of death, Alderman Willis was reported as saying 'During such weather as we had been experiencing it was almost natural that young children should die like flies'<sup>36</sup> He went on to say that with regard to smells permeating the town that 'these very much resembled the beautiful smell found in the Turkish bath- that of sulphuretted hydrogen ... an antidote to typhoid.'

The consequence of the typhoid epidemic and the attribution of its causes was that the Council found itself facing another wave of essential investment in water and sewage infrastructure including an entire new reservoir. They sought permission to borrow a further £27,000 to finance these projects<sup>37</sup>. This may have further blunted the, at best nervous, appetite for spending on less pressing matters such as swimming baths. The new reservoir was built at a slightly higher elevation above the town than was its predecessor to benefit more fully from gravity in its operation and



continued for many years to play a part in the area's water supplies. The town as a result, also acquired, by default, a redundant reservoir when the new one finally came into operation in September 1886 (this one was covered rather than open to the air so as to avoid its predecessors tendency to support weed growth).

Notwithstanding these other pressing requirements, the issue of new swimming baths did not disappear altogether. Councillor Potter sought to be placed in the Baths Committee in November 1884 to better explore and promote his enthusiasm for an open air swimming area at Puxton. Six months later, members were, perhaps teasingly, asking Mr Potter how his plans for Puxton were progressing and when fuller proposals might be forthcoming? They were advised that two or three locations were under consideration and responses from relevant landowners was awaited ('No money for that' came a voice in the Chamber).

Public enthusiasm to put Councillor Potter's ambitions into practice did seem to be running ahead of the Council's ability to respond. It was reported in July 1885 (another hot month perhaps, though without the dire consequences of the previous year) that great many young men were swimming in the river in defiance of the council and the police. We can presume from the involvement of the police that this swimming might have been accompanied by other high jinks and disorder. It is almost certainly also the case that there may have been the prospect of affronts to public decency as trunks (or to use the contemporary description, swimming drawers) may not have been universally worn- or, to be quite frank, worn by any of the swimmers. However the Committee did not want to be seen in interfering in any way with the sport of young men. Councillor Greaves was forthright enough to say that if there was sufficient space it ought to be encouraged. It is not clear whether he saw the activity as underlining the demand for 'proper' swimming facilities or alternatively in obviating the need for the Council to spend ratepayers money on providing them at all.

At the very end of 1885, the Chairman of the Baths Committee, George Holloway announced his hope that it would be possible to arrange swimming competitions at the baths. The establishment of a single national body overseeing swimming was close to completion at this time. ( The Amateur Swimming Association came in to being in 1886<sup>38</sup>). Perhaps this stimulated idea of local competitions. However given the small size of the pool and what we know of the general conditions in it, this seems a rather ambitious aspiration - and nothing seems to have come of it for a considerable period of time.

Through 1886 Councillor Holloway regularly reported his embarrassment at the condition of the baths and the inadequacy of the swimming pool in particular while at the same time acknowledging that 'the state of trade' would not permit the necessary expenditure to provide more suitable facilities. He noted with regret that nothing had come of the plans for baths in Green Street and took the opportunity to introduce another and novel dimension to the debate – the eagerness of ladies to learn to swim and the impossibility of that being done in the existing inadequate facility<sup>39</sup>. The previous chairman, Alderman Coxon reported that in fact when he has been the chairman of the Committee that rods, curtains and coconut matting had been purchased to facilitate use of the swimming bath by ladies (this had been in 1883) but that, as far as he knew, they had never been installed.





*George Holloway was an indefatigable proponent of baths and swimming pool for some forty years.*

However, in May 1886, the Baths Committee was agreeing 'extended ladies hours' for swimming – from 2 pm to close on Tuesdays and on Fridays between 10 am and 1 pm so presumably these features had finally been installed. Its possibly worth noting that in 1881, the baths committee made a purchase of a supply of bathing drawers that were available for hire so male swimmers may have been covering themselves. How ladies were to dress for swimming wasn't discussed but in any event any form of mixed bathing would have been inconceivable at this point in time.

By the summer of 1886, after floods had caused some damage to the baths, Councillor Holloway was casting around for ever more creative ways in which he could address his ambition of bringing better swimming facilities to the town without unduly alarming fellow members with the cost. The town's original sewage system had had storage tanks located in Green Street where waste was held before being transported to the sewage farm at Oldington. These tanks had been redundant after that aspect of the system was overhauled. (The Borough Engineer had brought colleagues from across England to inspect the original Kidderminster system and found them appalled in particular by this feature.) The sewage tanks had been abandoned in 1879 when arrangements to pump sewage directly to Oldington were put in place.



Holloway wondered if these might be adapted to provide swimming baths. The tanks are reported as each having a capacity of some 130,000 gallons. Depending on their other dimensions this means they were possibly some three to four times the size of the pool at Mill Street. The Engineer advised a cost for this adaptation of the order of £1000. The Chairman was not convinced by this and thought it could have been achieved at much lower cost but when he ventured this opinion in council he was castigated for impugning the professional judgement of the appropriate council officer. There was also a not unreasonable view that people might be loathe to take up swimming in containers first built to accommodate sewage - irrespective of what adaptations might be made<sup>40</sup>.

In August, the Shuttle turned its mind to the issue of new swimming baths, though the motivation seemed to be a rather defensive one of arguing against a proposal to raise funds by public subscription for improvements to the Parish Church. The paper, with its deep non-Conformist roots, suggested that this was a specific matter for the Anglicans of the town to address and to fund from their own resources. New baths, it argued, might be of a more general benefit and public fundraising to the sum of £800 or £1000 might mean that this could be delivered without the costs falling entirely on the rates.

Holloway and the Baths Committee continued to regret the fact that Kidderminster still had an apology for baths. However within a few short months the possibility of a dedicated new baths building presented itself to great excitement and enthusiasm in the Chamber and across the town.



## Chapter 5 A Jubilee – and an insurrection

The year 1887 was to be celebrated as the Golden Jubilee of the accession to the throne of Queen Victoria. Towards the end of 1886 the incoming Mayor was approached (as were all others serving in similar roles across the nation) on behalf of a national committee chaired by the Prince of Wales asking what proposals they might have to mark this hugely significant year in their own towns and communities.



*Figure 8. Thomas Tempest Radford*

The new mayor (Thomas Tempest Radford) announced that he intended to hold an open public meeting (of the 'men of the town') where he hoped that options for a suitable memorial could be considered in an open and honest way. Population growth, together with electoral reform, meant that number of voters had grown from the 500 or so in the middle of the century to 4500 in 1886. This growth in the size (and, more significantly, the composition) of the electorate was a development which was to have dramatic consequences. Introducing the idea of a Jubilee commemoration at the annual meeting of the Town Council, the incoming Mayor's hope was that a proposal would be forthcoming which resulted in erecting a facility or carrying out some significant work which would be of permanent use to the inhabitants.

The public meeting took place on December 4 1886 and was marked, as the Shuttle reported, by "sobriety and utilitarian spirit". Sobriety is significant; public meetings in Kidderminster- most



notably those associated with general elections- had long been notorious for a singular absence of sobriety.

The Shuttle welcomed, in particular, a suggestion from the Vicar of Kidderminster that a suitable project would be to provide dedicated premises for the Free Library and Reading Room. This institution had existed for as long as the Baths in Mills Street (it had opened in September 1855, like the Baths in response to public petition, and was housed in one of the public rooms in the Town Hall). The Vicar argued, with the Shuttle's strong endorsement, that a dedicated new building for this function would be 'in every way fitting to commemorate the virtues of our Sovereign Lady'.

Despite its own preference, the Shuttle clearly detected that the mood of the meeting was more attuned to the idea of new swimming and other baths for the town. A particular theme of the specific proposal (which echoed contributions that that new Mayor had previously made to the ongoing debate on the baths issue) was the provision of free warm baths for the working women and girls of the town, in this new facility – together with free swimming for all. At the heart of this was the fact that further introduction of new technologies meant that the employment of women in the carpet industry was increasing<sup>41</sup>. The need for improved bathing opportunities for these working women was becoming ever more apparent. (The fact that they were paid less than men was a grave issue for the Carpet Weavers Association and was a source of new industrial friction,)

The Mayor was also offering a 'valuable site' for the baths on Comberton Hill. The Shuttle was of the opinion that the right facility under the right management could probably cover its operating costs and was also keen to explore the idea that the old Baths site on Mill Street might be available for conversion to provide the sought-for Library and Reading Room.

(The editor of the Shuttle, a man always eager to give the fullest display of his erudition and wit, must, sadly, have been unaware of the ancient Greek proverb that defines an idiot as someone who can neither read or swim. He, surely, would not otherwise have held back in venturing the hope that if members of the Town Council were to avail themselves to the full, of both baths and a reading room, then the resulting dilution of idiocy and consequent improvement in the government of the town would more than justify the expense.)

The financial underpinning of the proposal lay in the mayor's hopes that, excited by the principle of the idea, and with this sweetened by the prospect of their generosity being recorded in perpetuity in a prominent place on the baths building and thus associated with the Jubilee itself, leading citizens would dig deep into their own purses to support the idea through personal donation. He also anticipated significant income from disposal of the old Baths site (so much, though, for the provision of new Library and Reading Room on the site). The extent of the balance of costs, to be funded by borrowing and repaid through the rates was, he thought, modest.

The outline of the proposal was debated again at the Town Council's first meeting of the Jubilee Year on January 8. There did seem to be some misgiving about the breadth of 'free' services that were being bandied about but this, it was decided, would be a matter for the Baths Committee to resolve in due course

A second public meeting was arranged to take place on 13 January at which it was proposed that the business was to be to 'to take into consideration the erection of a public baths as suitable local memorial of the jubilee'<sup>42</sup>

To assist the public in better assessing the proposal, drawings and a description of the main features of the proposed baths – drawn up by the Borough Surveyor- had already been put on public display.



The Shuttle also published details<sup>43</sup>. The scheme was to provide for three swimming baths, one first class (60 feet by 30 feet, one second class (50 feet by 30 feet) and one for boys (50 feet by 25 feet) – there was also proposed a small wash bath for boys who were presumed likely to arrive rather grubby and so in need of soaping down before entering the swimming areas. On the ladies side of the building there would be a further two swimming baths. On the upper floor would be Turkish and other bathing facilities segregated for male and female patrons. Tempest Radford also returned to the preferred site he had suggested in 1883 – a location on Station Hill.

The building itself was to be in ‘Queen Anne style’ red brick with white facings. There would be two entrances and between these, treated in an elaborate manner, the borough coat of arms, a tablet recording the erection of the building and possibly a small medallion of the Queen. In all what was on offer would, it was promised, mean that the town was possessed of a suite of baths, ‘as complete in their arrangements as any in the Midland Counties’.



*Figure 9. The plans and drawings for the 1887 Jubilee Baths have not survived. From the description something with a similar exterior style to the Carpet Manufacturing Company premises (above) built a few years earlier, with red brick and white facings as proposed for the Baths, seem likely. Tempest Radford was a director of that company.*

The material promoting the scheme was on show in Attwood and Issacs’ premises in the Bullring where it could be readily viewed by the townsfolk. As it turned out this may not have been the most fortuitous location.





*Figure 10. Attwood and Isaac's store in the Bullring where the Jubilee Baths plans were exhibited*

The meeting to consider the proposal went ahead attracting a large and enthusiastic gathering despite it being, as the Shuttle recorded, an unwelcoming night in terms of weather. The Mayor's presentation of his proposal was regularly interrupted by cheers. The town, he said, had long laboured under disadvantage of not having 'accommodation to cleanse the body'. There would be free baths for woman and children. He reported the position with regard to donations already committed to the project and was confident that fund raising would leave no more than £1000 of the total costs of £4250 to fall on the rates.

Councillor Holloway, chairman of the Baths Committee who had long complained about the service he oversaw, exclaimed that if baths were established it would provide 'one of greatest blessings they would have in the borough'.

A motion was passed unanimously by those assembled, 'that this meeting endorse and support the suggestion of erection of public baths as suitable memorial ... to commemorate the jubilee.' It called on those present to 'use best endeavours to give effect' to the motion. A committee to drive the project forward was appointed.

Samuel Stretton, who had complained often about the inadequacy of bathing and swimming facilities, applauded the proposal as a 'scheme of great advantage in health and to wealth and general prosperity'

The clear blue sky of positive and upbeat sentiments across the community was however about to be occluded by something approaching a perfect storm that arrived with considerable ferocity and alarming speed. The components were in place; the baths proposition was (to change tack with my metaphor) a splash of petrol and a match, on a heap of dry kindling that been growing for some time.

At bottom there were the financial consequences of the disastrous failure of the expensive initial investment by the council in water and sewage treatment and the further investment required to address this after the typhoid epidemic of 1884. (When the association of municipal engineers came to Kidderminster to inspect the revised system in 1886, the Borough Surveyor reported to his



professional colleagues that the outstanding debt arising from all of this investment stood close to £150,000.)

The council's appetite for further investment in the town's facilities was not particularly curbed by this accumulation of debt – a programme of ongoing improvements were being outlined that, in addition to the special case of the Baths, included work to bring the Retail Market to a better operational standard.

While all of this was going on, there had arrived from another quarter, questions about the competence of the Council to properly manage both this new investment programme and its financial affairs more generally. The Town Council's elective auditor, Harvey Preen (in effect an independent external auditor) had used his report in June 1886 to highlight a number of grave deficiencies in this regard.

Preen was a chartered accountant by profession. He had not been satisfied with the approach of his predecessors as auditors and was determined that he would not sign off the accounts without a proper inspection. He had devoted six days to the task including a review of the financial reports of other boroughs to get a sense of current good practice. He wished to be sure that any changes he might propose might be reasonable and not costly to implement. His candid view was that 'the books were a disgrace to the town'. They did not make it easy to understand either payments or receipts and he was concerned that this information should be readily available and comprehensible for rate payers. He was not suggesting that there was any fraudulent activity underway but the records under the present system would in fact make any such fraud 'impossible to find out'.

On top of this revelation, and just as the enthusiasm for the new Baths was gathering pace, the Council announced that they were facing a deficit of some £3000 for the forthcoming year and the need for an increase in rates in order to absorb this. The Shuttle also reported that the Mayor's efforts to raise the funds for the Jubilee project which he had anticipated from public subscription were experiencing a 'glacial undercurrent' in response and that his Worship was collecting criticism rather than guineas from those from whom he was soliciting support for his scheme.

The prospect of the Baths development requiring an even greater contribution from the ratepayer than had been envisaged in the Mayor's proposal produced a very rapid response from some business people – particularly, it would seem, the retailers and smaller traders of the town. (It was in a sense a guerrilla movement – the more formal mechanism of the Chamber of Commerce, for example, was not involved). The expanded franchise after the 1867 Reform Act would have increased the number of small retailers and traders entitled to vote. The fixed costs of the rates were always seen as a particular burden by these businesses and they were loathe to see it increased. The possibility of this disquiet manifesting itself in the ballot box troubled some Council members.

A public meeting was rapidly convened from this section of the business community<sup>44</sup> with the aim of presenting their views to the town council meeting in February. The Baths proposal was a particular focus of concern and there is more than a little irony, perhaps, in the fact that the meeting elected as its chair and also as head of the deputation to meet the Council, no less a person than George Isaacs in whose store window the plans for the Baths has been so prominently displayed only a few weeks earlier.

The open meeting identified a range of concerns. With regard to the Baths, they asked that the Council should obtain reliable statistics from various parts of the country to see if other baths paid their way and protested against the erection of any Jubilee memorial 'which would make a



permanent addition to the rates of the Borough.’ More generally they called for a halt of any further ‘improvement’ (citing the retail market in particular) till the rates of the borough had been reduced to a reasonable level.

A resolution was also passed drawing attention to the fact that no action had been taken in the light of the elective auditors report in respect of the accounts. For good measure, and making a final shot across the bows with regard to suspected profligacy in the council, they also asked for information on the salaries and fees paid to officers of other comparable local authorities across the country.

A meeting with the town council took place within days – there was concern from the Mayor and Council who were particularly anxious to repudiate any suggestion of financial impropriety. They offered to engage accountants from Birmingham to examine and suggest improvements to the accounts.

The Public Baths proposal, though, was conceded without a fight<sup>45</sup>. It fell, as it were, dead in the water.

The Mayor was aware that his exhortations for public subscriptions were failing to have the necessary effect. If the Baths were to proceed, the requirements for ratepayer financial support would be greater than he had anticipated and in the light of the evident and vocal opposition to the plan there was no point in pushing for that.

The Shuttle reported the ‘sudden abandonment’ had caused ‘no little sensation and regret’ and wondered if the forces that has brought it about might even be ‘astonished and afraid of the success they have achieved’. The paper encouraged the Mayor not to give in so swiftly to the ‘crude and indiscriminating cry for Economy’ that had invaded the Council Chamber.

The failure of the proposal did however give the Shuttle the -never declined- opportunity to berate the members of that Chamber for their general inadequacy and as being ‘fourth and fifth-rate busybodies’ with regard to their more general financial acumen and management skills.

Within the Chamber the decision not to move ahead with the baths scheme was accepted with a sort of impotent rage. The Baths Committee in March considered a motion regretting the decision not to proceed with the Jubilee Baths and urging that the proposal for the baths and a Free Library funded by subscriptions should be instigated - but then thought better of it. Councillor Holloway fulminated against those opposed to the baths as being ‘people who never took a bath themselves’. Councillors underlined the point that the loss on the Mill Street baths would still have to be sustained while the new baths with an improved environment and wider range of services might have even made an operating profit. The problem, Councillor Tomkinson, observed, was the ‘contemptible meanness of Kidderminster ratepayers’. The alleged support for the proposal from major manufacturers, and the opposition from the retail sector was the cause of a modest spat between the Mayor and George Isaacs. Dr Stretton, a long term advocate of better facilities regretted in letter to the Shuttle that no attempt had been made to raise modest funds to support the baths from the very many ordinary households in the town. Another letter to the paper castigated the approach of looking to the largesse of the more wealthy towns people to bring forward needed social improvement .

Flurries of resentment at the failure of the scheme continued to flare, not least when it turned out that the summer of 1887 was again a particularly hot one, leading to enthusiastic use of the Mill Street pool to an extent that prospective patrons were being turned away due to overcrowding. If



only we had stuck to our guns, councillors muttered, we would have a new baths under construction by now and would not risk this situation in the future.

The ratepayers group had formed themselves after their February success as a Vigilance Committee to sustain their scrutiny of the council's activity but this seemed to dissipate into a forum where individual shopkeepers grumbled about their own rates assessment. When the idea of the crowded out bathers of Mill Street confronting the Vigilance Group with consequence of their action was raised, it was suggested that no one knew who they were or where they were to be found

Away from the battlefield, members were still happy, months later, to bicker about the 'action taken by a number of busybodies' which had led to the abandonment of a splendid scheme. Councillor Howe Green talked of how a 'foolish policy on behalf of a few' had deprived the town of new baths. The Shuttle's Review of the Jubilee Year noted that the baths proposal 'seems as if it would be taken up with great heartiness and determination' until 'captious critics arose' and the 'admirable and much needed plan could not be carried out.'<sup>46</sup>

However, it is doubtful in the extreme if the Jubilee Baths proposal could ever have gone forward to deliver anything remotely like the manifesto that the Mayor had launched. This is not mere hindsight as the evidence for this conclusion was very much to hand in 1887. Just a few years earlier the Baths Committee had taken some care to examine scale and costs of other municipal baths in the Midlands – particularly the facilities in Hanley, Birmingham, West Bromwich and Leicester. The Mayor's ambitions to provide Kidderminster with the finest suite of public baths in the Midlands Counties are certainly evident by any comparison with these other towns, as the scheme he proposed exceeds all of these in scale.

However, the Hanley Baths – the largest of those investigated, but still more modest than the plans outlined for Kidderminster, had cost £10,000; those in West Bromwich £7300<sup>47</sup>. Hanley had a population at the time of 76,000 – some three times that of Kidderminster and, presumably, with both demand (for swimming baths and associated services), and a tax base, larger by the same degree. The Mayor talked blithely of raising perhaps £1000 from the sale of the Mill Street premises – comparisons here are a little more problematic but when the site was finally sold after the Baths closed in 1935 it only realised some £350. Finally there was certainly a suggestion (admittedly from people not enamoured of the Baths proposal) that the site was not large enough to accommodate the scheme which was proposed. (The site that the Mayor proposed on Comberton Hill, in due course, became the location of the Theatre/ Opera House).

None of these reservations appear to have been raised at the time – and had it not been for the Poujadist February insurrection, the Mayor and the Council might have been able to cut their cloth better to meet their need with a more modest development which nonetheless enhanced the town facilities. It is difficult though to avoid the view that Harvey Preen's strictures on the general financial management within the Town Council at this time did have some merit. One wonders in particular if Mr Tempest Radford would have allowed enthusiasm for a desirable project to cast aside business sense in such a cavalier fashion when discharging his responsibilities as a director of the Carpet Manufacturing Company.

The town did, in effect, get its Jubilee memorial in the form of Brinton Park with the site presented to the town by John Brinton in 1887 – though some members of the Vigilance Committee even had their reservations about this too, grumbling about the rate burden arising from maintaining and managing it and also muttering that it was too big a space for a small town to take on. The Free Library and Reading Room was pursued and funded by individual subscription and much driven by



personal commitment and energy of Michael Tomkinson. It was actually opened formally by the Countess of Dudley in April 1894.



*Figure 11. Brinton Park c 1907*

It is probably also worth recording that two other towns of much the same size as Kidderminster did use the enthusiasm for marking the Jubilee successfully to build swimming and other baths. These were Westbury, in Wiltshire, and Glossop, in Derbyshire. The baths built then, with appropriate adaptation and much reinvestment over the years, are still in operation today. Like Kidderminster, these were communities dominated by a single economic activity -cotton in Glossop; woollen goods in Westbury. The significant difference in the situation in these two places compared to Kidderminster is that each had a single large employer willing to underwrite the capital cost of the new facilities as a way of marking the Jubilee. It is probably also relevant that neither had a public bath at all prior to 1886/87<sup>48</sup>.





*Figure 12. Westbury's Jubilee Baths (Wiltshire), which are still operation, were built in the Queen Anne style that Mayor Tempest Radford had intended for Kidderminster – and display (just below the apex of the gable above ) the sort of commemorative medallion to which he had also aspired.*

The general debate on swimming and its increasing popularity as a leisure activity may have had some less salubrious consequences. The swimming pool had now been without a roof since 1880 though a screen had been erected to preserve some of the modesty of patrons. With the increasing numbers of lady users however it seems that some employees at the next-door Town Mills were availing themselves of the opportunity to ogle the female bathers in the pool from the Mills upper floors. The need to replace the roof had become more urgent and this had been suggested in October 1886. The chairman of the Baths Committee had then told his fellow members in December that he was looking replace the roof but had dropped the idea when the Jubilee Baths idea was alive; he returned to the idea, no doubt hoping to cover his own embarrassment at the failure of that proposal by at least protecting the modesty of lady swimmers who were eager to take up the recreation<sup>49</sup>. The pool opened with the a new corrugated iron roof at the beginning of June 1888.

Cowed a little by the failure of the Jubilee scheme, 1888 was a less energetic year on the Baths front – a proposal that boys from the union workhouse might have free use after 6.30pm (but were to supply their own towels) was approved. The Committee were not however able to accommodate requests for girls from the workhouse or to allow special rates for elementary school children in general (due to capacity problems).

In turning down this proposal the Baths Committee indicated that they hoped soon to bring forward a new proposal that would increase the swimming opportunities in the town. This turned out to be a further revisiting of idea of creating an area on the river Stour dedicated to public bathing. The fact that this was still under active consideration emerged at a debate in Council in July 1889 which the Shuttle headed with a weary title 'The Baths- another fruitless discussion'. The Baths Committee had been exploring the possibility with a number of riverside landowners with property close to Mill



Street but the opportunity was focusing on Councillor Potter's oft-voiced favourite – Puxton Meadows.

The Baths Committee Chairman in presenting his monthly report again bemoaned the quality of the Baths and the inability to deliver the educational experience that a decent swimming baths might provide. The swimming bath, he said, was so crowded in warm weather that it resembled a beehive. Lady swimmers had requested more reserved time at the baths but this was not feasible. Other options to resolve the problem were bandied about – the Green Street sewage tanks entered the frame again as, for the first time, did the idea of using the old reservoir which had been abandoned as redundant when the enhanced drainage and water facilities came into operation<sup>50</sup>.

(It is difficult to avoid the view that for some members the earnest desire to recoup something from the financial black hole that the 1870s water and sewage disaster had created never faded and the possibility of reusing these relics in some way was seen as a means of diluting the memories of that debacle. The old reservoir was becoming a liability in other ways too – a year later, in 1890, the Drainage and Works Committee was advised of 'frequent damage by lads' at the upper pumping station adjacent to the old reservoir including the destruction of a rain gauge, throwing stones, breaking trees and that matters were 'worse on Sunday evenings when the site of the Reservoir is thronged'<sup>51</sup>)

Councillor Potter did not miss the opportunity to raise again in Council the attractions of his long cherished swimming hole at Puxton – councillor Herring referred scathingly to the doubtful attractions of swimming in mud. ('It was good enough for us when were lads' came Potter's inevitable response.)

The Deputy Mayor also mused over the possibilities of re using the old reservoir . Councillor Tempest-Radford raked over the ashes of his own abandoned Jubilee Baths chiding councillor Bennett with proposing costs of some £1500 to adapt the old reservoir when Bennett had been instrumental in blocking Tempest-Radford's own scheme with – he said- much lower costs to the ratepayer. In any event, he thought, people would have misgivings, however erroneous, that the reservoir was in some way part of the town water system and resist the idea of its use for general swimming.

Councillor Bytheway, then Baths Chairman, concluded by saying that only if the Council were prepared to make the resources available – and risk the ratepayer's response – could any improvement be forthcoming. He came to the next council meeting to advise that proposals to use the old reservoir in any way would be too expensive. (However the seed of an idea had been laid, as we will see).

Councillor Herring's observations regarding swimming in mud were given a slightly different complexion when a letter in the Shuttle later in the year described the water in the swimming pool as so dirty as to make it impossible to see the bottom. (The Pool Superintendent had been absent from work as he was ill, the Chairman explained, so regular replacement of the water in the pool has not taken place.) In any event, Kidderminster swimmers would have been far from alone in enduring the trials of a murky pool. The water in swimming baths across the land was, as a matter of pretty universal practice, changed perhaps once a week with inevitable consequences for both water clarity and hygiene; in some towns a degree of price discrimination was practiced with users on fresh water days charged a higher rate from those later in the week.

The idea of creating a swimming area on the river was however finally laid to rest in 1890 (it might be noted that there were regular swimming facilities created for the summer on the Severn at both



Stourport and Bewdley – the Severn, though, was perhaps less of an informal industrial sewer than was the Stour). The Baths Committee had opened discussion with a landowner at Puxton to secure access to some 80 feet of river bank and also to erect a dressing shed and fence – with a cost £3 per season for access and about £50 for the other facilities. Councillor Potter, no doubt in deference to his long standing and resolute advocacy of the notion, had the privilege of seconding this course of action when it came before the full Council

It was, though, a dubious privilege indeed, when Samuel Stretton, by now a member of the council, responded to the idea<sup>52</sup>. He could not have been more scathing in his assessment of the proposal describing it as inadequate, unhygienic, an addition to the existing disgrace in terms of swimming facilities and revealing an absolute want of civilization which would result in 'hordes of young fellows running about in a state of nudity'. He urged the Committee to revamp on a suitable scale the Jubilee proposal. Other members concurred, with Councillor Herring agreeing that this new Puxton proposal would become a public nuisance and Councillor Tomkinson asking that the committee return with a proposal for a thoroughly good swimming pool. The Shuttle weighed in on the side of the angels ( as opposed to the mudlarks) supporting Stretton and observing that the 'greatest mistake was premature abandonment of the new baths which with tact and patience' would have been a permanent gain to the town.

The committee did return to Council with the advice that such a new baths as suggested by Stretton would cost of the order of at least £4000 – and that this could not be afforded at this point.



## Chapter 6 The advent of 'the Art of Natation'

The debate on providing a new building to accommodate the Baths settled into a sort of hibernation for a few years through the early 1890s but the issue of swimming itself – particularly of learning to swim – came very much to the forefront. There was a strongly emerging view that swimming was a skill to be acquired, in particular by children, and that the most appropriate way for it to be learnt was in a disciplined and formal way. The Baths Committee were in regular receipt of applications from schools and from others for dedicated access to the Mill Street pool and for a discounted rate for this use.

The first group to benefit from this were the girls of the Union Workhouse. The request that the girls enjoy the same privilege as their brothers had been turned down on first approach but from June 1892 they had access to the pool at a specified time at price of one half penny. A similar facility for the boys of St Johns School was also approved.

In September there was a request from the Addenbrooke household on behalf of the young ladies of Kidderminster Girls School that the existing ladies exclusive session on Friday morning be switched to the afternoon as their classes did not allow them to take advantage of it; the Committee regretted that they were not able to accommodate them.

Adults also generally seem to have taken to swimming. One correspondent ('A Swimmer' – perhaps not the same person as the one who, in 1875, had been so intimidated by the roughs of the town in the pool) suggesting in a letter to the paper that the baths might be kept open in the winter – as was the case in Birmingham. 'The expense of heating', he suggested, 'would be small'.

The New Meeting School approached asking for the same discount as had been provided to St Johns. The Committee turned this down and, for good measure, mindful no doubt of leaking floodgates with regard to future requests that they were facing, rescinded the deal for St Johns, too.

A further indication of the changing interest in swimming in general came when the Committee thought it necessary to have a notice displayed reminding patrons that hired swimming drawers had to be returned at the end of the swimming session - and also began the sale of swimming drawers to real enthusiasts – for 6d<sup>53</sup>.



*Men's swimming drawers c1890 – Ladies swimming attire at the time( below) aspired to elegance rather than athletic efficiency*





Some of those enthusiasts might have been interested in a letter in the Kidderminster Shuttle in October 1893 proposing the establishment of a swimming club in the town. The letter was from Alfred Foster, the district representative of the Swimmers Life Saving Society and the focus of the Society was on developing various swimming arts 'as would be of assistance to persons attempting to save life'. The Club would also arrange lectures to this end in 'the art of Natation'.

Mr Foster, along with Messrs Garlick and Edwards, attended a meeting of the Baths Committee in March 1894 and negotiated a deal for their use of the pool by the Club. The Committee were approached by a lady – Miss Coleman – offering swimming lessons for ladies at the pool. The Committee were happy for her to do this on a private basis with individual students. A further letter from the Addenbrooke household regarding the Girls' School swimmers managed to persuade the Committee to alter ladies hours to better meet the scholars' needs.

All of this positive activity did not however distract some members of the Town Council from the matter of their favourite bathing bugbear – the Turkish Baths and the losses it was making. At the request of the Council a census was taken which indicated that that there were some 100 regular users – about a dozen of these from outside the town. The Baths Committee was giving serious thought to the closure of the Turkish Baths but granted a stay of execution for 12 months, and with the appointment of a new baths superintendent in late 1894, hoped that he might sweat that particular asset just a little more vigorously<sup>54</sup>.

The suspended sentence for the Turkish Baths came out of a more general review of Town Council expenditure suggesting that the both the Turkish and general baths operation should cease and that the Mill Street operation be confined to swimming in the summer months only. The Kidderminster Shuttle weighed in against the Turkish Baths specifically, arguing that if there was a commercial case for the facility the private sector would soon provide it. This in turn generated a flurry of correspondence in the paper in support of the baths from the Turkish contingent.



The Baths Committee commitment to review the status of the Turkish Baths after twelve months seemed to peter out despite periodic nagging from Councillor Purkiss who had chaired the initial review. The monthly reports to Council from the Committee struck a more upbeat note with the Chairman regularly exhorting his colleagues in the Chamber to set a better example for the Town as a whole through making regular recourse to Mill Street themselves.

The new superintendent, Herbert Tommis, was something of an evangelist for the swimming and lifesaving aspects of his responsibilities (but as he had been appointed from Yorkshire, questions were, perhaps inevitably, asked as to whether there was not a Kidderminster man who might have been given the job). Mr Tommis, was encouraged to offer swimming lessons to those requiring them and to attend exhibitions on swimming and life saving<sup>55</sup>.

The growing enthusiasm for the use of the pool for swimming from so many different quarters must have meant that when, in September 1895, the Baths were the subject of a visit from the Medical Officer of Health, David Corbett, and the Inspector of Nuisances, the wind was taken abruptly from the Committee's now billowing sails. The wide range of deficiencies identified are perhaps best summed up in the concluding words of Dr Corbett's report ' ... from the whole appearance of the baths they must have been built when sanitary science was young'<sup>56</sup>.

Corrective action was put in place but the simple fact was that the Baths buildings were indeed now well over forty years old. This independent assessment of their general adequacy from the perspective of public health allied to the growing enthusiasm for swimming emboldened the Committee to address – again- the fundamental problem – the unfitness for purpose of Mill Street Baths.

It is probably useful at this point to look at the actual number of users of the swimming pool and how this had developed over the long term. The, frankly astonishing, figure reported in that, now long ago, first month of opening (3,378 swimmers) was, as noted, probably a one-off generated by the simple and overwhelming novelty of the existence of the baths – and it may well have been inflated by people using the pool as simply a cheap way to wash themselves rather than actually to swim.

In later years, a few other factors need to be borne in mind. Swimming was – and remained for a long time for most people - a summer time activity. The pool seems only to have been open between April and September. It also seems fairly clear that the number of users serves almost as a human thermometer – warm springtime and hot summers generated significantly more users. Finally there were periods when the figures simply weren't reported systematically, so (until the 1890s) the statistics are a little patchy.

In the 1870s, numbers of swimmer-users in a good year were of the order of 2500 people with perhaps a thousand less in (presumably) cooler years. In the early 1880s, peak numbers of the order of over 7000 in a year were experienced and close to 4000 in low years.

From 1891, monthly user figures were reported and the annual statistics reveal a total of some 14-15000 people swimming by 1898 and 1899<sup>57</sup>.

The elderly building and its other facilities were thus suffering the added challenge of a vastly increased throughput with all of the implications and consequences that this would inevitably have for unavoidable wear and tear.

Meanwhile requests for dedicated access to the pool continued to arrive. From St. John's swimming club, from St Mary's gymnasium, St. John's Institute and from the New Meeting school (returning to



the fray); an approach for a Lady Teachers Swimming Club – with the particular request that ‘the water be aired to suit the less robust’. By June 1899, the Committee was happy to leave all arrangements of this kind in the hands of the superintendent.

It is instructive to have some insight into the actual experience of those swimmers, particularly perhaps, the elementary school children taken to Mill Street to be inducted in to the invaluable skills of ‘natation’. Happily such a record exists, from just a little later than the turn of the twentieth century and recorded by the Reverend H Hodgkinson who went on to be headmaster of both the New Meeting School and St Mary’s School. He records school visits to the Mill Street pool as a boy.

‘The baths were approached by four or five steps with ornate pillars on each side. As we reached the top step we could smell the water and after a few steps along the corridor it was visible; slightly green in colour and dotted with cigarette ends and orange peel. Changed and ready for the water, we lined up round the bath and did a swimming drill on dry land. Finally in alphabetic order we were allowed down the steps, put into a belt which was suspended from an overhead track and taken the length of the bath, from there we could watch the next victim. Those whose names were in the first half of the alphabet had a belted struggle each week but those in the latter half attended the baths for the whole of the season without once entering the water.’<sup>58</sup>

We can assume that the Reverend Hodgkinson may be indulging in just a little whimsy in this description. He concludes his account on a more positive note

‘No one seemed to get any of the diseases attributed to contaminated water’.

The issue of the provision of new baths continued to bubble away – Councillor Holloway, such a long time advocate, was by now again chairman of the Baths Committee and was teased a little by Councillor Ray as to whether he had any plans to meet the need by resurrecting his plan for adapting the old sewage tanks or for using the abandoned reservoir<sup>59</sup>.

Another opportunity to explore the opportunity to create new baths did in fact present itself with the occasion of Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897<sup>60</sup>. As happened ten years previously, the Town Council convened a public meeting to consider options to mark the momentous event – it might, said the Vicar of Kidderminster at that event, be a thousand years before another monarch would celebrate such an extended regnal duration. (He could not be expected to forecast the longevity of Victoria’s great great grand-daughter.)

Despite the debacle of the Golden Jubilee, the suggestion of marking this further Jubilee with new swimming and general baths was promptly forthcoming – and some of recriminations on the topic from the failure ten years previously were aired once again. However, the decision had been made that the Diamond Jubilee would be marked by supporting the most disadvantaged of Her Majesty’s subjects and the Infirmary was selected as the beneficiary of Jubilee activities.

However the need for new baths was endorsed in the meeting by Alderman Parry who noted that, although the time was not yet quite right, new baths might well be forthcoming in a matter of only a few years. This was an interesting variation on ‘the state of trade’ issue. The Shuttle had noted at the beginning of 1897 that there was an improving air of prosperity around the carpet trade and the town generally and warned that ratepayers might have to be mindful of the Council coming forward with a new wave of ambitious plans for the use of their money. (Parry owned the Shuttle)

Notwithstanding this warning, the Shuttle itself welcomed the idea that the Town Council should acquire the site of Caldwell Castle noting that among other benefits that this would bring, that part of the land acquired was the most suitable location anywhere in the town for new baths.



The general mood of positivity towards swimming and new baths was particularly underlined by a quirkily idiosyncratic article in the Shuttle, in May 1897, entitled 'Can you Swim' which described a visit to the Mill Street baths<sup>61</sup>.

The piece is, to say the least, an odd meditation on swimming prompted in part by the author's observation of a chapel notice close to the Baths enquiring 'Are you Saved?' and progressing to the notion that a similar sign asking 'Can you Swim' on the Baths wall might be a sensible encouragement to those who might otherwise be lost through drowning.

A description of a visit to the Baths ensues and the plainness of the architecture remarked upon; the Lilliputian dimensions of the swimming bath reported ('It is a nice enough baths for one') and the skills and porpoise-like grace in the water of the Baths Superintendent, Mr Tommis, commended. A discourse on the philosophy of swimming with Tommis that would not have disgraced Plato and Socrates is reported. Tommis' possession of the 'rare knowledge' of method by which facility in the water may be obtained is duly noted. The author quits the Baths tossing a French penny into the water, tempting a couple of lads to dive for it.

It is not clear to what extent this piece would have encourages any non swimmer to learn the esoteric art much less to approach the slightly intimidating Mr Tommis for lessons given that he – and swimming – appear to exist at an elevated and daunting level.

**Swimmers' Life-Saving Class.**  
**T**HE COURSE OF INSTRUCTION consists  
of ACTUAL PRACTICE with LIVING  
SUBJECTS, as follows :  
1—HOW TO RESCUE THE DROWNING.  
2—HOW TO EFFECT A RELEASE IN THE  
EVENT OF BEING CLUTCHED.  
3—HOW TO RESUSCITATE THE APPAR-  
ENTLY DROWNED, AND PROMOTE  
WARMTH AND CIRCULATION.  
In addition, a general knowledge of the Structure  
of the Human Chest, and the Functions of Circu-  
lation and Respiration is imparted.  
Entrance Fee, 1s. Subscription, 2s. 6d. (This  
includes all Fees).  
Further particulars may be obtained from  
Mr. H. TOMMIS,  
Public Bath, Mill-street,  
or Mr. A. J. FOSTER,  
37, Church-st., Kidderminster.  
5795

*Tommis and the Life Saving Club promoted skills in swimming and life saving*

Meanwhile on less elevated levels of existence, in August 1897 – and another hot spell – the baths were so overcrowded that users were being turned away. The upshot of this on one occasion was that a dozen or so boys – there being no French pennies on offer presumably that day - availed themselves of the canal as an alternative and were duly each fined 2/6 for their temerity – which sum, the Baths committee chairman pointed out would have provided each of the lads with thirty sessions at the pool – and the Baths with income of £7 10s had it all been directed to then.



At around this time it is possible to sense a number of strands drawing together. Swimming in general was becoming a popular activity that was well beyond the capacity of the Mill Street baths to satisfy – this included demands from individuals and also from schools and other bodies. The Mill Street baths were not only too small but inadequate on a number of other fronts.

George Holloway the Baths Committee Chairman, was now the longest standing member of the Town Council, approaching his eighties, and no doubt, like many of those who have spent a long time in public service, not disinclined to see that record of service given a concrete form to provide something of a personal legacy. He had begun his long political career as a leading light in the Chartist movement in the 1840s pressing for universal suffrage and other constitutional reform. His status as a ‘civic treasure’ was endorsed by the Shuttle as the century ended acknowledging that he had played ‘no inconspicuous part in making the history of Kidderminster during more than half a century’. Concluding his political career with a commitment from the Council to new Baths would surely have been a crowning achievement for him, especially as he had been an advocate of new facilities for swimming and for general bathing for very many years.

In January 1898, he and his committee began to look at possibility of a site on the Caldwell land being used to house a new baths. It was described as being in a location just below the floodgates and the Borough Surveyor presented some plans for this in March. With the Town Council now controlling the site this was clearly the preferred option. It had been regarded as a suitable site by Arthur Coomber the Surveyor for a long time and the Baths Committee had enquired as to its availability for a baths development as long ago as 1880.

In January 1899, Alderman Holloway’s ‘civic treasure’ status was formally endorsed in the presentation to him from his colleagues on the Council, to mark his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, of an armchair. It was perhaps a two edged gift. Maybe it hinted that some of his fellow members thought that time was approaching when the eminent member might choose to spend at little more of his time comfortably by his own hearthside rather than on his feet and agitating in the council chamber. He for his part was not at all disposed to give up the fight for new baths.

He might have been encouraged by a letter from a Walter Hartwell<sup>62</sup> in the Shuttle in March that same year decrying the poor swimming facilities on offer. Hartwell noted that for a town of some 27,000 people, a pool only able to accommodate some 15 people actually swimming at any time was wholly inadequate. He concluded his letter with a call to action ‘a new swimming pool we want and a new swimming pool we shall have’.

Holloway was certainly pressing the case with some resolution. In April, as he submitted his Committee’s report he insisted that with an upturn in the town’s economic position that the ‘time is not far distant when a committee would have to be appointed to select site for new baths’ and in deed called for action to set up such a committee. Alderman Tomkinson asked, caustically, one assumes, if the new baths were in the budget. Councillor Weston rebuked Holloway telling him that it would be some time before his ideas could be realised.

Outside the Chamber, though, enthusiasm for swimming continued to grow. The Life Saving Society and the Baths Superintendent were offering life saving classes. On a more radical note, a father wrote to the Shuttle regretting that the absence of any mixed bathing at the baths meant he was not able to instruct his daughter in swimming<sup>63</sup> (mixed bathing had recently become more acceptable on seaside beaches, but these, he said, were not places where his daughter might learn to swim). On a similar tack the School Board discussed the need to provide opportunities for girls to learn to swim and volunteered its support for Holloway’s efforts to provide a new pool<sup>64</sup>.



Holloway returned to the fray in June, describing the baths as being in a dilapidated condition and raised the possibility that land in the grounds of Caldwell Castle might suit. The Council was in the process of acquiring this land to allow long heralded road improvements – and the bridges over the river and canal to accommodate them- to proceed. Alderman Adams joined him arguing that this was an opportune moment to pick up the baths issue as there were no other pressing calls for resources. The Mayor observed that there was no resolution before them relating to new baths and so the matter could not be discussed.

The Mayor however was in a rather delicate position, for, in this year – and the next- the office was held by Edward Parry, the owner and founder of the Kidderminster Shuttle. The idea that some land at Caldwell might be released for development as a new baths had already been advanced in the Shuttle itself. More generally the Shuttle has been active in pressing the case for new baths over some years and had, of course, been scathing in the extreme about the failure of the Golden Jubilee scheme and the lack of resolve from the, then, Mayor, leading to the abandonment of the scheme. Parry was perhaps beginning to wonder if his own Mayoralty might suffer a similar fate.

A piece in the Shuttle in July 1899 may well have precisely reflected Parry's quandary. It notes the 'universal demand' for baths and the passion for swimming. A good set of baths to meet this would however cost of the order of £7000 but was worth this burden and sacrifice as any man of 'intelligence and patriotism' would concede. But it would be a burden and there would have to be an acceptance of that fact. Concluding the piece the author questioned if the current rush of enthusiasm would survive a full appreciation of that cost - or even persist beyond the spell of warm weather then being experienced.

In the same month the Baths committee held a special meeting to focus expressly on the issue of 'the advisability of erecting New baths and consulting an expert there on'. When Holloway pressed the case at full Council, the mayor again insisted that it was not in order for the Council to consider sites for a new baths before it has determined that there was a fundamental case for such baths to be built. Holloway clearly thought that he was being tied up in obfuscating procedural knots. After expressing his general disappointment at this, he announced with heavy sarcasm, as the Council meeting was about to close, that he was not sure if he was acting in line with correct procedure, but that he was resigning from his post as Chairman of the Baths Committee<sup>65</sup>.

The saga continued at the next Council meeting in August when further information was provided by the Baths Committee who had met and tried to persuade Alderman Holloway to withdraw his resignation. They also came back with a motion for council reporting that 'the existing public baths are totally inefficient to afford the accommodation now required and to recommend erection of New Baths on more suitable site'.

Mayor Parry seemed to be searching for more long grass in shaping a stroke in response to this<sup>66</sup> – he had to peer hard as his term as mayor still had some sixteen months to run. Everyone, he asserted, was aware of the need for new baths. But this recommendation was short and vague. What was needed at this stage was a report that dealt more fully with details of the accommodation to be provided, including the site, operations and other matters. He moved that the Baths Committee be instructed to return with this – and, to be fair, this sort of solid business case for the new Baths had not yet been provided. Councillor Killingbeck noted, contradicting Councillor Adams views earlier in the year, there were other significant calls on the Councils resources – further developments to waterworks and new bridges. Perhaps he thought, seeding the long grass on behalf of Mayor Parry, something might be possible in two or three years' time?



The Deputy Mayor, supporting the Mayor's proposal, dredged up the notion of some facility making use of the river. Samuel Stretton was no longer there to respond but Councillor Holdsworth stood in for him in effect observing, though he would once have supported this idea. that the state of the river would have to improve somewhat before that was an option. The Deputy Mayor wanted to emphasise that the Baths Committee should not think that the Mayor's resolution gave them carte blanche to be cavalier and return with a scheme with large costs either now or in a few years.

At the September council meeting the baths issue was aired again. Councillor Griffin suggested that the matter should be deferred as Holloway was not attending – this suggestion should perhaps not be taken entirely at face value. Thomas Griffin was a very new member of the Council at this point – he was to remain one for most of the next forty five years and we will encounter him again. He was generally a doughty opponent or resister of proposals regarding the baths for much of this time.

By this time the Baths Committee has visited the Caldwell site and decided that it was their preferred location – the alternative idea of using the Cattle Market site, they had rejected. They were firmly, of the opinion that the Council as a whole needed to select a site as other issues of cost and operation could only be addressed in the context of an actual preferred site. Councillor Talbot, a member of the Committee, argued in Council for the Cattle Market site – Caldwell, he argued, was not close enough to the residential heart in the town centre. Other members were now happy to discuss the proposals in finer detail – they asked if the idea being proposed for a swimming pool only or did it involve the wider issue of bathing. A consensus seemed to emerge to the effect that currently the focus was solely on swimming but that any proposal might have scope to take on board other activities at some future time. Councillor Ray acknowledged the need for new baths and floated – not for the first time – the notion that the redundant reservoir off the Stourport Road might be pressed into service in some way. It was reported that the suggestion provoked laughter in the Chamber<sup>67</sup>.

The Baths Committee busied itself in trying to move forward a suitable site and looked to meet with the General Purposes Committee on the issue but a new problem arose with a legal judgement, elsewhere in the Courts, which suggested that it would be *ultra vires* for any council to use land it had acquired for any specific purpose, other than the express one for which it was purchased ie the road improvements in the case of Caldwell. This rule, if confirmed in law, would rule out Caldwell as a location for new baths. While waiting to learn if this judgement would indeed be confirmed by a higher court, the Committee sought out a new alternative. One presented itself in the form of land lying between Corporation Street and the river. Enquiries indicated that this would be available at some 3/6 per square yard.

The Committee returned to council with a proposal to acquire this site. The Mayor (with November and his release from the Mayoralty only seven months away) noted that the site has been for sale recently at only 2/6 per yard. Also he wondered, in coming back to Council only with a proposal to acquire a site, if the Committee had discharged the brief that they had been given. Where was the information on other costs and operations, he asked. Holloway, back in the Chamber now, complained of dilly-dallying. The Mayor insisted that there was no antagonism to the baths in principle but that they needed fuller information on the costs. Michael Tomkinson suggested that the Council as a whole should visit and consider the suitability of the site now being proposed. The motion that the Council proceed to purchase the Corporation Street site was withdrawn by the new Baths Committee chairman, Councillor Talbot.

The Mayor's suggestion that there was no antagonism to the baths may have been disingenuous. Opposition to the baths proposal was, in fact, organising itself and doing so in a way that was both



more covert and at a higher level than that presented by the small traders and shopkeepers who had overturned the proposal in 1887. On May 12, the Shuttle published a brief letter from John Brinton himself (the acknowledged leading figure in the town's carpet industry) who made abundantly clear that he, at least, was deeply antagonistic to the baths proposal. He referred to the debt already incurred in purchasing and servicing the Caldwell land. 'Surely a scheme such as this *last*' [the baths] he suggested 'can wait until the town debt is *lighter*.' (These are Brinton's own italics in the letter as printed in the newspaper). He also noted that he had first hand knowledge that level of rates on town were already effectively barring the introduction of more than one new industry and that any further increases would be injurious to the economy of the town.

A week later another Shuttle correspondent resurrected the spirit of '87 with a call for ' a deputation of ratepayers to represent the feeling of manufacturers and tradesmen against an outlay so great and so uncalled for'. Nothing could be so 'wild and uncalled for' as the new baths<sup>68</sup>.

Notwithstanding this upsurge of negative comment in the press, the Baths Committee diligently continued to carry out the instructions in the Mayor's resolution of April. Specifically they invited architects to present detailed plans and costings for a new swimming baths and design the baths in such a way that they might be enhanced in time to include other facilities<sup>69</sup>. Two Kidderminster practices- Meredith and Pritchard, and Gethin and Son- were invited to make submissions as was a Mr Hill who had designed baths for Aston in Birmingham and also the practice of Lewis Shepherd. There was a commitment that the firm providing the preferred option would be awarded a prize of £10 for the plans. In the event only the two local firms did make proposals.

These were featured in the Shuttle in some detail on July 21 1900. Both architects has exceeded the initial brief providing plans that included slipper baths in in both instances and also Turkish Baths in the case of the Gethin and Son scheme. Meredith and Pritchard proposed both a first and second class swimming pool and was designed to be convertible into a gymnasium in winter time. Gethin and Son has some 27 slipper baths across both sexes and classes; Meredith and Pritchard did not specifically quantify this element. Their overall cost was estimated at £3350 for swimming pool alone and £6650 for the entire scheme. Gethin and Son did not quote a price but in fact were judged to be the winner of the competition – presumably the view of the Baths Committee was that their one-pool plan would have been less expensive.

In any event, these proposals formed the basis of debate in the Town Council earlier in that week. It was a debate that the newspaper described as having generated a temperature so high that 'had it been possible for the members to take a plunge into the proposed new swimming bath it would have been exhilarating and probably convincing.'

The Mayor was deeply sceptical about the costs projection that the architects had provided – the estimate of £3500 would as like as not come out nearer £5000, he insisted. Other members reported on the temperature regarding the matter in the town. The Deputy Mayor essayed a small joke – he didn't want to throw cold water on the baths idea but proceeding with it would get the Council into hot water. Maybe the matter could be deferred for another six months (by which time, he didn't say, he would be out of the direct firing line). Councillor Pensotti spoke anxiously of a ratepayer's deputation being got up to meet the Council on the matter. The Mayor reported the horror of ratepayers at the rashness proposed. From the Baths Committee, Councillor Adams insisted 'we are all socialists now' and insisted that the costs to ratepayers would be not more than 1d in the £. Other calls on the ratepayers and councils resources were highlighted in response to this. Councillor Holdsworth sought a middle way – the swimming issue was one that only presented itself in the



summer, he argued, the baths were indeed desired but there was a timing issue, perhaps it should be returned to in a year or two.

The coup de grace however was probably the contribution from Michael Tomkinson, a past Mayor, of course, and the man who had championed the Free Library to its successful conclusion a few years earlier. Echoing to an extent, John Brinton, and presumed, one suspects, to speak on behalf of the major manufacturers, he, in essence, fulminated against the proposal. It would he said 'emulate the worst period in the conduct of the business of the town' at a time when it was Just emerging from a burden that had 'hung like a dark cloud'. There was commitment to the bridges and to waterworks investment and in his view Kidderminster already possessed better swimming accommodation than any comparable town. Ultimately, a motion from Councillor Holdsworth that the matter be deferred for six months was passed – by 10 votes to 7.

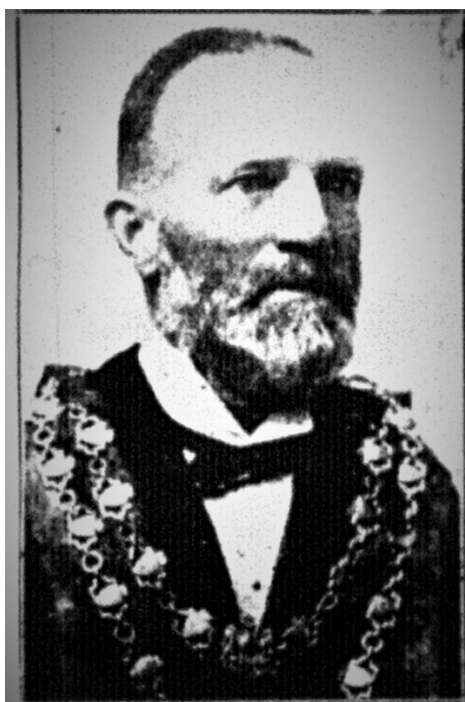
With that the public debate on the matter fell silent but it is difficult not to imagine that heads were scratched, private consultations were held and mental agility expended on diligent attempts to square the circle by which the desire to meet genuine public appetite for a better swimming facility could be met without inciting the wrath of the major ratepayers.



## Chapter 7 A Bigger Splash - Into the clear, fresh, open air

Some resolution did in fact arrive, with the dramatic flourish of a Boys Own adventure story and the glorious escape which releases the hopelessly trapped heroes with the line 'with one bound they were free'.

In the middle of September Councillor Ray came to the Council with a recommendation – the fruit no doubt of all of the headscratchings<sup>70</sup>. (It might be worth noting in passing that – if judged by swimmers using the pool – 1900 was a slightly cooler summer than has been 1899 which had seen the greatest number of swimmers ever).



*Joseph Ray*

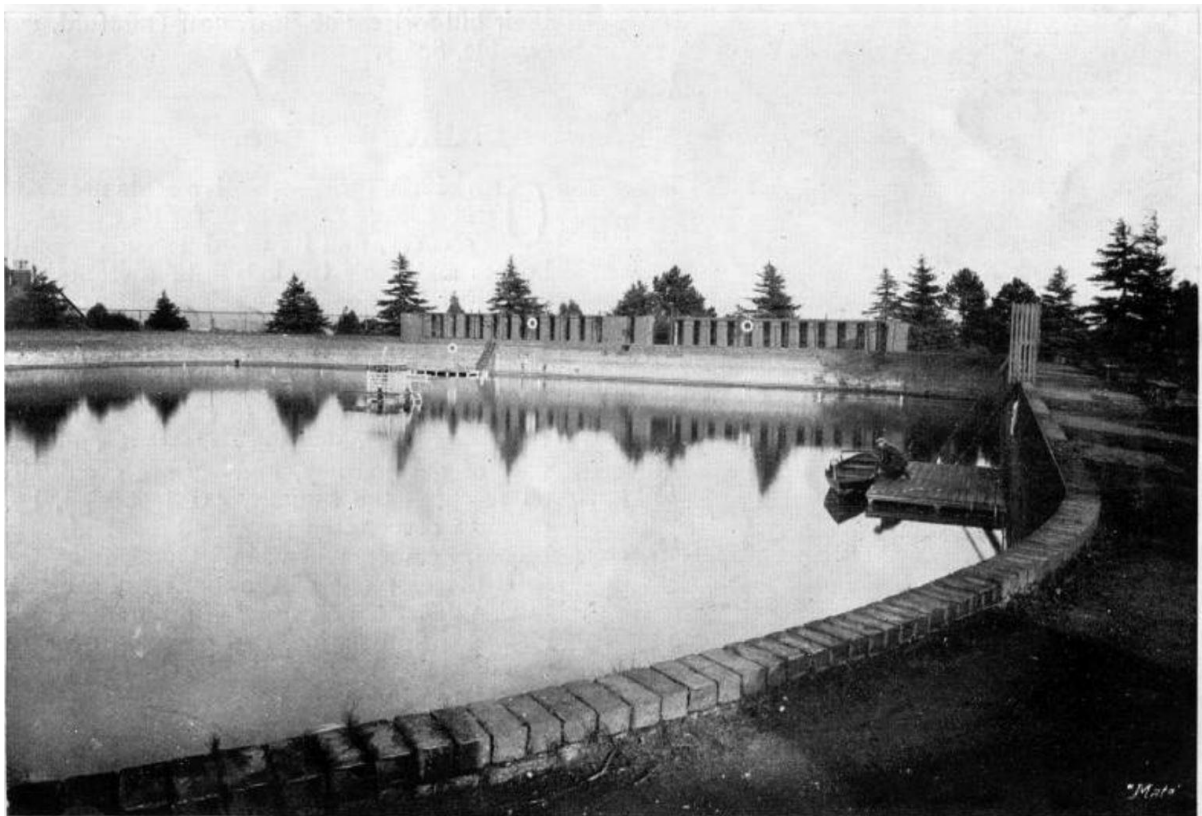
Ray opened his address saying that it was the case that the provision for swimming in town was not adequate. There had once been informal facilities at Puxton (so close, of course, to the heart of Councillor Potter) but no longer. It was illegal to swim in the canal. He was convinced however that the old reservoir did provide an opportunity to create a stop gap facility which would suit. Ray had raised this idea in council on a number of previous occasions, most recently, as already noted, prompting laughter in response. Ray's resolution required the Council to approve the use of the old reservoir as a swimming pool. Presumably Ray's motion to the Council had been cleared with Parry and other senior members of the Council before he tabled it. The Finance Committee which consisted of the Mayor and the other Committee Chairman would have been a suitable forum but there is nothing recorded from that quarter – perhaps smoke filled rooms somewhere in the town afforded the opportunity for discrete words and nods sufficient to bring the proposal into the Chambers.

Certainly, this time the Chairman of the Baths Committee welcomed the idea warmly<sup>71</sup>. Ray also proposed that the Baths Committee be given a budget to provide some equipment to enable the reservoir better to function as a swimming pool – this included dressing sheds, a diving board and ladder steps into the pool for the less intrepid.



The proposal met the fundamental need of the town at this time for a place where, in warmer summer weather in particular, the thirst to swim might be slaked. The reservoir was some 60 metres square in area – and so provided a total swimming area very many times that of the Mill Street pool (which was some 8 metres by 5). The capacity problems at Mill Street in the summer would be much alleviated. It is also fairly clear from Ray's statement that the reservoir was already used for 'outlaw' swimming by some of the youth of the town – indeed he admitted that he had used it himself to confirm that it would be a suitable proposal. There must have been some satisfaction in finding a purpose for, and the prospect of some revenue from, the reservoir which had stood redundant for some 14 years and which was itself one of the causes of the dark cloud of debt which Michael Tomkinson had alluded to a few months earlier.

A report to the Waterworks Committee some time before had expressed concern at the high jinks and other activities at the reservoir. It had more recently been the site of a suicide of a young woman by drowning and an agitated letter to the Shuttle from a local resident had complained about the poor management of the area <sup>72</sup>. Bringing the site under much more active management by the council might address some of these issues. The reservoir actually sat outside the town boundary at this time in the Kidderminster Rural District Council area, though discussions between the two authorities about revising boundaries were just beginning and when these concluded more than a decade later, the pool would actually find itself inside the town boundary. There appears, though, to have been no consultation with the Rural District Council about the proposal and issue of planning permission for this new use seems not to have been relevant at all.



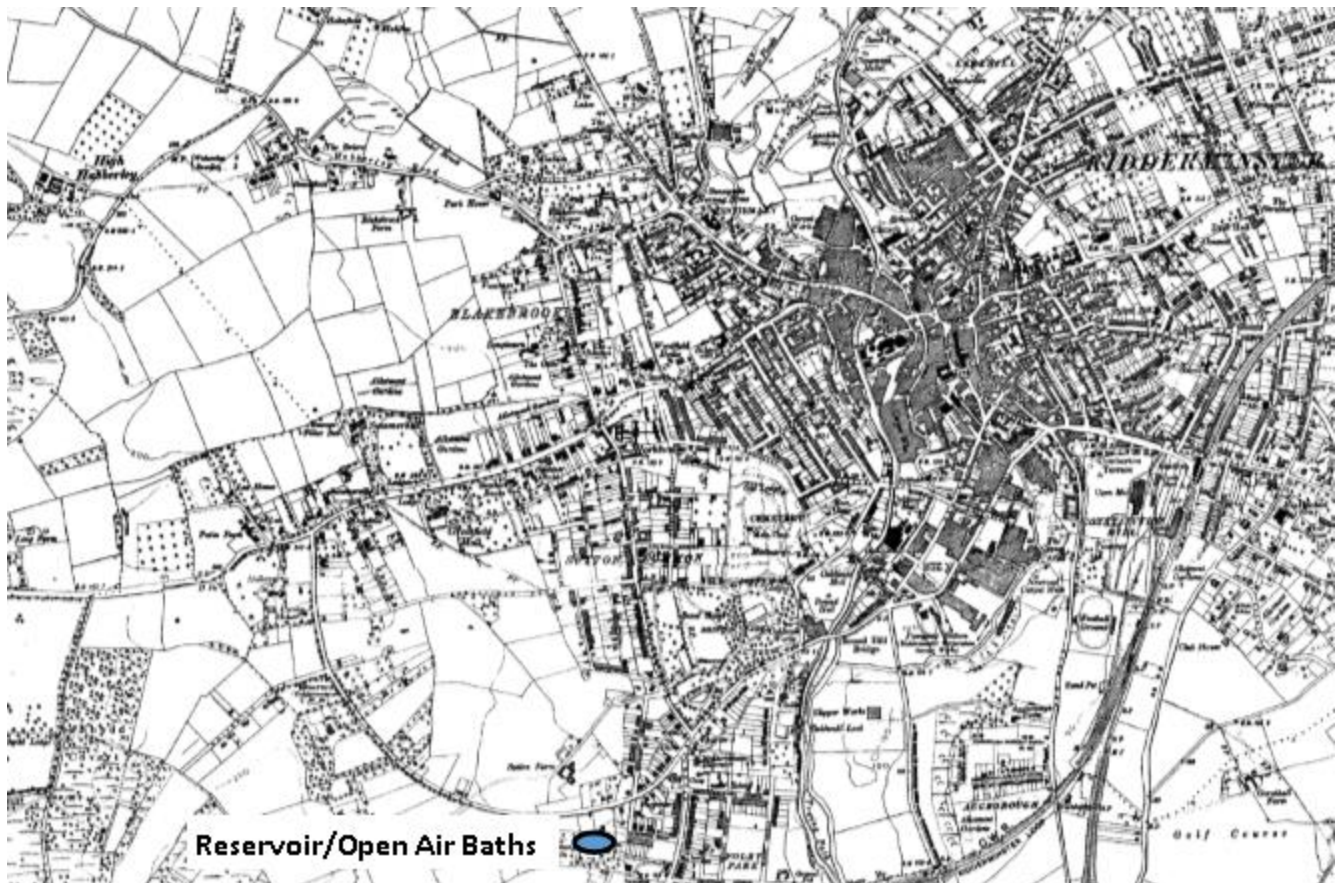
*Figure 13. The Open Air Pool c 1907*

Open air swimming facilities were certainly a considerable novelty in 1900. 'Liquid Assets', a history of open air pools and lidos in England, reports only a dozen or so in operation across the country at this time. Four of these were in Liverpool, two in Birmingham (Cannon Hill Park and Sutton Park) one



at Alexandra Park in north London and one each in Manchester, Winchester and Reading. All of these seem to be in a more general parkland or public leisure setting.

There were fine views across the town from the reservoir site looking to the Malverns, the Clents and Kinver Edge and people already did visit to take advantage of that prospect. These views had been seen as a selling point for housing land in the area – along with the crucial fact that being outside the town boundary meant rates were lower – but at this time there had been very little interest in such opportunities. As a consequence, very few people actually lived in close proximity to the pool which might have been seen as a disadvantage for a proposed popular attraction. There was some scattering of housing at the junction of Stourport and Sutton Park Roads, also along the Stourport Road and on the Foley Park estate just to the east of the Stourport Road but the concentration of population in the town was some way away to the north. The Caldwell site had been seen as too far from the town – but the reservoir was much further - a good thirty minutes walk from the centre.



*Figure 14. As this map shows the open air pool was some way from the then centre of the town*

However, an electric tram service had just begun to operate between the Town and Stourport and its route ran along Stourport Road directly past the entrance path into the reservoir. This transport link was certainly to become a factor in stimulating housing and other development in this area in the subsequent two decades and the view was probably taken that it would bring the new pool closer to the Town. Time, of course, would tell. Indeed within a very few years, Joseph Ray was actively promoting development himself as a landowner in Foley Park – just perhaps, there was a



little more than an interest in the public good in drawing some additional attention to this particular area.



*Figure 15. An electric tram on Stourport Road – the entrance to the open air pool is on the left just beyond the tram*

One final curious point regarding this stage of the story centres on councillor Ray himself. He had, in fact, almost drowned when the town suffered probably its most severe flooding, in 1886. He was swept away by the water and survived by clinging to a tree in his garden in Mill Street. He perhaps had a very personal reason to encourage the development of swimming skills among the local population.





*Figure 16. The picture shows the baths and Mill Street during the floods of 1886 in which Joseph Ray almost lost his life.*

The Baths Committee moved swiftly to have the pool in operation before the end of the summer swimming season and the pool was open for swimming from 15 September<sup>73</sup>. 1000 handbills and 250 posters advertising its existence were printed and distributed. A boat was procured as a safety vessel and an attendant hired to supervise activity. Notices forbidding diving into the pool were posted. A bell tent was acquired to provide temporary changing facilities. The Committee had decreed that the wearing of bathing drawers was to be absolutely compulsory in the pool).



*Figure 17. This plan of the open air pool dates from 1930 as part of a scheme for improvements that were in train*

The pool itself had a formal opening event which took place on 22 September. Mayor Parry, perhaps delighted that he was now able to regard a partial resolution of the interminable baths question as



one of the achievements of his mayoralty, presided at the event. He paid proper acknowledgement of the efforts of George Holloway and the incumbent Baths Committee Chairman Councillor Colonel Talbot. He hoped that the new baths would result in a situation where every boy in the town was taught to swim. And, he swiftly added, mindful of the need to maintain his Liberal credentials and perhaps recalling the urging of the School Board ‘... every girl too.’

Councillor Ray had earned the honour in the light of his innovative proposal of being the first person to swim officially in the now formally adopted pool and he was followed by about a hundred others. In the weeks before the pool closed for the winter in October a couple of hundred more people paid 1d to experience the privilege.

There was a small swimming competition part of this opening event involving some of the elementary Schools – won by boys from New Meeting School and in describing the event the Shuttle provided some background to the history of the reservoir and its operation. They must also have provided some comfort to the residents of Stourport by advising that the common belief that that town was still supplied from the old reservoir was erroneous.

Councillor Ray’s efforts on the part of the Town’s swimmers may have had a perverse impact at the Council elections a few weeks later in November where he was defeated in the Rowland Hill ward by Thomas Garlick - another member of the Baths Committee and one of the officials of the Kidderminster Swimming Club. ( Joseph Ray was soon to be elected again to the Council and was in fact Mayor when the First World War ended and had the honour to announce the Armistice and preside over the town’s celebration of that event).

Their brief initial experience of operating the open pool for a few weeks in late summer over, the Baths Committee began to busy themselves with preparation for fitting out the pool on a proper scale for activity in the summer of 1901. Their initial budget for this ran to £212 and caused some opposition – a few members jibbed at the idea of doing more at the pool than simply opening it for general public use. In the end a budget of £90 was approved which was spent on a hand rail, dressing boxes, steps, life saving equipment and a punt (the punt borrowed in September was damaged and the Council met half the costs of repairs).

The decision was also taken to fence off just a quarter of the total area of the reservoir for swimming. This prompted a petition to the Council from prospective users requesting the entire area be available for swimming but this was turned down by the Committee. We can probably detect influence of the wise and cautious Herbert Tommis, the experienced life saver in this decision, anxious about safe management of such a huge expanse of water – and the possibly reckless enthusiasm of bathers too eager to take advantage of their liberation from the very close confines of the Mill Street pool. Even a quarter of the reservoir provided a swimming area some twenty times greater than Mill Street and one which is very generous even by 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards.

The Baths Committee also explored the possibility of a deal with the Tramway Company for a special fare to the pool but this was not forthcoming for some time. The Company explained that if a line that was being proposed at this time between Kidderminster and Bewdley was built they would be reviewing their overall fare structure and might be amenable to consider special fare arrangements in respect of the pool. (This Bewdley line was never built and it was 1910 before a joint tram and baths ticket was introduced between Oxford Street and Foley Park. The tramway did make a contribution to the smooth management of the pool long before this; the Baths Committee agreed, in May 1901, to pay the baths superintendent’s fare between the town and Foley Park to undertake



his management responsibilities. A year later the Committee struck a deal with the Tramway Company for the transportation of towels to and from Foley Park.)

However while moving ahead with these arrangements the Committee was not losing sight of the notion that the Open Air Pool was agreed only as a stop gap on the journey to full scale new baths. In March 1901 Councillor Clibbery of Baths Committee emphasised that the Council would still soon face the question of the erection of new baths. Councillor Ellis Talbot said that they ‘...would continue to urge the immediate necessity of new baths until the work was carried out’

The Open Air Baths opened for the summer season on May 25 – with free entry on the day – fitted out with all of the added equipment and facilities. The press advertising that the Baths Committee sanctioned promoted it as the largest open air pool in the County. The advent of these novel swimming facilities in Kidderminster may have had repercussions in Stourport. The company which had long provided summer swimming from pontoons in the Severn had announced In January that the service would not operate in 1901, but by the beginning of the summer season, alongside the advertisements of the Foley Park pool were similar advertisements from Stourport Town Council who had taken on management of the facility on the Severn.



*Open Air Baths advertisement- May 1901*

The Committee was in the process of refining its management of the open air pool. Women's swimming was to be positively encouraged and ladies only facilities were announced to operate between 10 am and 12 noon on Tuesdays and Fridays and these facilities were to be advertised. It was determined that dogs were not to be permitted in the pool at all. Other occupants that were to be encouraged were fish<sup>74</sup> - an offer from Councillor Phipps to supply fish was gratefully accepted. This may have been a nod in the direction of 'wild swimming' which was to become very popular by the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. More likely however, it picks up on the suggestion the Mayor had made at the opening event that the pool might be used for angling during the winter, when there would be no swimming.

The wide open spaces of the new pool meant that one of Alderman Holloway's long held ambitions could finally be realised and competitive swimming could take place (Holloway had raised the idea of such competitions a decade or so earlier but this was always a forlorn idea for the cramped Mill Street pool). The First Annual Aquatic Sports promoted by the Kidderminster Swimming Club took place on August 24 1901<sup>75</sup>. The principal attraction was the presence of Mr J H Derbyshire, the amateur champion of the world at 100, 150 and 220 yards and the holder of the world record at each of these distances. The posters advertising the event reassuringly said that Mr Derbyshire had promised to attend. He was to compete in an open handicap 60 yard race. There were a number of other racing competitions including school team races, a 60 yards members handicap and a quarter



mile race for Championship of the Club. Other attractions were a swimming exhibition by the estimable Mr Tommis and a water polo match between Dudley and Kidderminster. Ladies were positively encouraged to attend.

**Kidderminster Swimming Club**  
(Affiliated to M.C.A.S.A.),  
THE CORPORATION BATHS, STOURPORT ROAD  
THE FIRST ANNUAL  
**Aquatic Sports**  
(Under A.S.A. LAWS),  
Will be held on SATURDAY, AUG. 24th, 1901,  
Commencing at THREE o'clock.  
LIST OF EVENTS:—

- 1—60yds. SCHOOL TEAM RACE (five Swimmers). Open to Scholars attending any School in Kidderminster. First Prize, Five Silver Medals; Second Prize, Silver Medals. Entrance Fee, 2/6 each team.
- 2—60yds. MEMBERS' HANDICAP. First Prize, value £1 10s.; Second, £1; Third, 10s. Entrance Fee, 1s.
- 3—QUARTER-MILE RACE FOR CHAMPIONSHIP OF CLUB. First Prize, Gold Centre Silver Medal; Second, Silver Medal.
- 4—60yds. OPEN HANDICAP. First Prize, value £4 4s.; Second, £2 2s.; Third, £1 1s. Entrance Fee, 1s. A Special Prize, value £4 4s. will be given for the fastest time made.

**J. H. DERBYSHIRE**  
(Amateur Champion of the World at 100, 150, 220 Yards, and holder of the World's Records at these distances) has definitely promised to compete).

5—EXHIBITION OF SWIMMING by Mr. H. TOMMIS, holder of the Life Saving Society's Diploma of Special Merit.

6—WATER POLO MATCH, Dudley v. Kidderminster.

ENTRIES to T. C. V. GARLICK, Hon. Sec., Somerleyton Avenue, Kidderminster, not later than Monday, August 19th, 1901.

TICKETS: 2s.; 1s.; Sixpence. Children, Half-price.  
Ladies particularly invited.

TRAMS to the Gates every few minutes.

#### *The First Swimming Gala – August 1901*

The Shuttle reported<sup>76</sup> that it was a pleasant and instructive afternoon. Mr Derbyshire, it recorded, was, no doubt in deference to his status, over handicapped, but won the scratch race comfortably despite a stroke which was reported as peculiar and exhausting. (One suspects that only Tommis would have been qualified to proffer such a technical judgement.)

Councillor Garlick, the Honorary Secretary of the Swimming Club would have been heartened, one hopes, by the positive response to the event – and even more by the regular appearance of the name Garlick among the winners of junior races.

Through the first year of full operation the open air baths had just under 9,000 users – this compares with just over 10,000 at Mill Street over the months when the two baths were both open and 12,000 at Mill Street over the year as a whole. The open air baths total exceeded that of Mill Street in July. The mood in the Council Chamber was upbeat and the (outlandish) notion of covering the reservoir



(for winter use?) was even raised. Alderman Holloway announced his view that the baths were an outstanding success and the new Mayor, Councillor Adams, more measured, ventured the opinion that it was an evident success and a 'step in the right direction'. Adams had of course been a vocal supporter of the construction of new baths and presumably still regarded that as the ultimate objective.

That the number of users of the new baths was lower than that of Mill Street needs to be viewed in the light of the fact that Mill Street was well known, very much in the centre of the town and close to the concentration of population, while getting to Foley Park required either a journey to and from by tram (tripling the cost of a swim to 3d) or a walk of some 30 minutes each way. The take up seems very positive when this is considered.

However the reservoir had one downside which became evident in the first year and which was to impact on the baths operation for the rest of its existence. There was no filtration or other treatment of the water in the pool in this first year. These 9,000 users left what might decorously be called a heavy 'organic load'. (One might recall that Mayor Tempest Radford's baths scheme would have provided washing baths for small boys prior to bathing – the new baths created a rather larger scale and more varied problem). Dr Moore in the Council Chamber referred rather indelicately to the risks of bathers 'stewing in their own juice'. There were complaints about the murkiness of the water from users. The reservoir's tendency to support weed growth that had hampered its role in water supply may have been exacerbated by that organic load to say the least. In future years the experience was that those warm bright summers that encouraged swimmers were just as encouraging to weed growth. Councillor Talbot, however, assured the Council that the green film that appeared on the surface of the baths water was not injurious but a reflection of the actual purity of the water.

The response was to engineer a process that means that water could be sluiced through the baths to freshen it without the need to regularly empty and refill. A deal was struck with the Drainage Committee to provide up to 10,000 gallons of water (per week, as required) and new outlet pipes were put in place to allow this to happen<sup>77</sup>. As was almost inevitable there was a typical rigamarole of proposed refereeing back and deferment but the expenditure of some £98 was approved and the work undertaken by Thomas Vale and Company.

Before that work was done there was scope for another initiative to be put in place – the use of the baths as a skating rink whenever it actually was cold enough for the pool to freeze over. It seems likely that this may have been another 'outlaw' activity that had grown up spontaneously over the years that the old reservoir was dormant. Certainly when Edward Parry, speaking at the opening event in September 1900 had mused aloud about possible uses of the baths in winter time, an anonymous voice from his audience had called out 'Skating'.

With the pool under the Baths Committee active management, it was possible that this could go ahead in a rather safer fashion. It was agreed in November 1902 that the pool would be drained for skating to a depth of no more than one foot which would have meant that the consequences of anyone falling through the ice were much less calamitous than they would have been if the water were at its normal depth of 6 feet. A charge of 3d was to be made for skating and of 1d for children under the age of 14<sup>78</sup>.

The winter of 1901/02 doesn't seem to have been cold enough for the pool to freeze and the first skating activity was in 1902/03. After that seems that every two of three years a cold spell brought folk out onto the ice. There doesn't appear to have ever been any provision for hire of skates at the



pool, we can only presume that there were a lot of owners of skates or that they could be hired elsewhere. In January/ February 1903 nearly 1200 skating tickets were sold. In 1906/07 a prolonged cold spell brought the numbers up to some 2000 and there were 1500 the next winter.

George Holloway died at the age of 85 in 1904. One hopes that although his campaign to deliver a new swimming pool did not succeed, he died satisfied that his long and tenacious fight had at least resulted in a greatly improved opportunity to the people – and the children of the town- to learn to swim and the practice their skills. Notwithstanding the insistence of Messrs Talbot and Clibbery when the open air baths first came into operation, that they were not giving up the struggle for a new baths building, the first decade of the twentieth century saw a concentration on swimming matters rather than bricks and mortar.

Possibly the most significant of these was a decision by the Education Committee to meet the cost of swimming lessons at Mill Street for the children in the towns elementary schools. This was agreed for 1904<sup>79</sup>. The energetic Mr Tommis had already at the end of 1902 suggested to the Baths Committee - and had their approval for- a proposal that children able to swim 25 yards would have free entry to the Mill Street Pool in 1903 and that children gaining a life saving qualification in the course of 1903 would have free entry in 1904 <sup>80</sup>. Interestingly, Tommis' proposal referred to 'scholars' and the committee resolution to 'boys' but it was soon clear the opportunity was open to both boys and girls. In fact, fifty boys and eight girls were eligible for free swimming for 1903 as a result of the initiative<sup>81</sup>.

Other signs of Mr Tommis' central role in affairs came with a resolution that decisions about the operation of the baths for skating when appropriate were delegated to him; he was also called upon to convene an Aquatic Sports Committee to ensure that the swimming gala should continue when organising this seemed to get beyond the capacity of the Swimming Club itself. Yet another measure of his accomplishment and impact was the success in young people gaining life saving awards. The publication of tables of success in this regard began and for the next decade or so Kidderminster was able to boast it was the most successful place in the Midlands in this regard, hugely over shadowing Birmingham in this regard.

There was an annual event at which the awards were presented generally with attendance of the Mayor and actual handing over of awards by the Mayor's wife. It is difficult to avoid an impression that acquiring life saving skills was seen as a real benefit (a social good, if you will) which justified the existence of the swimming pool in a way that children simply having fun in the water did not. An article in the Shuttle in November 1902<sup>82</sup> specified the skills and techniques of life saving that the children were acquiring to pass the tests and earn their free swimming passes.

Mayors and their wives handing out the awards to the children were often obliged to confess that they themselves were not able to swim. The more enthusiastic might have been minded to avail themselves of the series of instructions – from Mr Tommis, of course, that were published in the Shuttle in May 1904<sup>83</sup>. These would appear to the lecture notes that Tommis used in the classes he ran at the Town Hall in for those looking to learn to swim in advance of actually encountering the water.

The swimming gala, under the auspices of the baths committee and Mr Tommis' Aquatic Sport Committee,<sup>84</sup> became an annual summer event from 1904. One slightly novel feature was the early introduction of competitive swimming for girls and women. A shield as a trophy for girls' team swimming was donated in 1902 by Lucy Baldwin, the wife of the future Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, and it was competed for from 1905 onwards. Mrs Baldwin had been something of



sportswoman as a girl herself, playing for the first women's cricket team, the White Heather Club and in fact first met her husband-to-be on the cricket field.

Competitive swimming for adult women was still in some eyes a sensitive activity. The very first women's national swimming championships has been held in Scotland in 1892 but women's sports, including swimming, were nonetheless still seen as a delicate matter in 1905. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this was the very restricted range of event open to women when the Modern Olympics were introduced in 1896 (archery, tennis and croquet). There were no women's swimming events at all until 1912. Pierre De Coubertin, the inspiration and driving force behind the Olympics, had grave reservations about women and sport.

Swimming presented additional problems with regard a trade off between 'modesty' and athletic efficiency. In 1899, the Amateur Swimming Association of England, approved a costume (as suggested to them by a committee of ladies) for ladies taking part in galas with mixed spectators but the first such event did not take place until 1901. It is not unreasonable to see Kidderminster as being relatively advanced in having women's swimming events in their gala as early as 1906.

Generally there does have been an appetite and eagerness from women to swim and for the Baths authorities (Tommy again perhaps) to encourage women to be involved. George Holloway had been keen to provide such facilities at Mill Street from 1886 and the open air baths had exclusive sessions for ladies from its first opening and extended the hours of these sessions in 1902. Provisions for spectators and a charge for spectators had been also been introduced in May 1902 with a swift amendment of the regulations to the effect that men could not be spectators at the ladies only sessions<sup>85</sup>. Issues of modesty were probably also the basis for a regulation banning photograph at the baths at all times and for the erection of canvas awning around the pool.

However by 1907 a rather more radical proposal was brought forward and enacted – provision for a session of mixed bathing<sup>86</sup>. The male side of the mix was, at first, restricted to relatives of ladies participating and the charge for men at these sessions was 2d in contrast to 1d for women but it would seem that this was a highly novel idea for a municipal pool. It seems to have been agreed and approved in Kidderminster without any demure or controversy but mixed bathing would seem to be still have been most unusual in public venues.

Mixed bathing had made some inroads at some seaside resorts – Bexhill on Sea boast that with mixed bathing from 1901 it was the first place to allow it – though Torquay stakes a claim that it was permitted there from 1899. Swimming pools seem to have been a different matter and even as late as the early 1930s none of the London County Council open air pools permitted mixed bathing – not even for parents and their children. Manchester did experiment with mixed bathing in some of its conventional pools but not until 1913 – restrictions there included an requirement that although 'mixed' when in the water, ladies and gentlemen should enter the water from opposite sides of the baths. When, in the 1920s there was a suggestion at Tonbridge in Kent to allow some limited mixed swimming, for members of the swimming club, it was met with some significant local resistance with a local councillor expressing his anxiety in these terms "By making girls look like wet terriers, mixed bathing stops more marriages than any other cause and much unrest in the country due to the barbarous license in woman's dress". Another resident demonstrated her concern by climbing onto the diving board and haranguing swimmers<sup>87</sup>.

All in all, Kidderminster seems to have been well to the fore in its attitude to this innovation- the hours for the mixed session were increased in 1909 and the increased receipts it seemed to be generating were noted in council.



Generally through this first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there seems to have been a softening of attitude and maybe a growing realism from the majority of councillors on the topic of swimming and the public baths generally. The baths needed subsidy but so did public baths across the country – the ongoing issue of the Turkish Baths was generally subdued. The health benefits of bathing generally and the advantage of children learning to swim were to be encouraged<sup>88</sup>.

On the sidelines it might be noted that in 1906 Stourport Town Council sought permission from the Local Government Board to borrow £309 for refurbishing the floating baths on the Severn<sup>89</sup>. In making the case to the Inspector they indicated that some 3500 people used the facility in a good fine year – including people from Kidderminster. A 'good' year for the Stourport Road baths at this time would have been around 4500 users. It seems unlikely though that many people would have travelled from Kidderminster to Stourport just to swim in the river as opposed to using the Open Air Baths - although perhaps there might have been a sense that the 'moving' water of the river was a healthier option than that of the intermittently changed pool.

The new Stourport river baths were opened by John Brinton in May 1907<sup>90</sup>. He expressed the hope that they might be used for swimming classes for girls as well as boys - as had been long the case at Mill Street in Kidderminster.



## Chapter 8 Battle rejoined

The period of quiet over the issue of a new baths building after the open air baths were first available was beginning to draw to an end. The first mutterings were heard in April 1909 at the awards ceremony for children who had passed their 25 yards test or had been successful in lifesaving examinations. Alderman Taylor, who presented the awards, was in an expansive mood. 46 people had won life saving awards in the previous year – this made a total of 82 in the previous four years while across the rest of the region the number was only two. He reported that the Baths Committee had approved a decision to allow free swimming for all elementary school children in the open air pool on one day each week. He concluded saying although the Mill Street Baths were ‘tumbledown’, that it would be a very heroic man who was prepared to stand up in the council chamber and argue for new baths to be funded from the rates. Perhaps, he mused, philanthropic individuals might be found who could provide the necessary finance <sup>91</sup>.

A few months later though <sup>92</sup>, exasperated possibly by the fact that the full Council had in fact declined to approve the proposal for children’s free swimming in the open air pool, the Alderman actually did raise the same idea in the Chamber ‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘one day some philanthropist would erect for the town some new baths and then they would be able to offer better facilities for bathing’.

In July 1910, the Council had before it a letter signed by all of the head teachers of the town’s elementary schools urging the desirability of erecting new public baths as the present accommodation was ‘quite inadequate’, now that so many children were being taught swimming. A letter on similar terms from the secretary of the Baxter Church Physical Culture Club was also tabled.

Joseph Ray, whose inspiration had seen the transformation of the old reservoir into the open air baths was the Chairman of the Baths Committee at this point. He was generally seen as a stalwart of the faction in the Council committed to low spending and low rates and perhaps inclined to see the price of everything and the value of nothing. Despite being the originator of the open air baths proposal, he had been loathe to spend very much on enhancing the facilities it offered.

He quite probably surprised the Chamber, therefore, that July, by opening his remarks <sup>93</sup> with the observation that the time might be opportune for considering the construction of new baths and that as this was the considered view within the Committee he wanted to take the temperature of the mood in the Council as a whole on the matter. He tied the idea – with presumably a conscious echo of the 1887 Jubilee proposal - to the notion that a memorial to the lately deceased King, Edward VII, was being considered and that new baths might be a suitable candidate

In fact the Baths Committee had again been actively exploring the idea of new baths for some twelve months <sup>94</sup>. Interest from other parties in acquiring the Mill Street site had been tested (J Humphries had expressed an interest. They had premises immediately adjacent to, and behind the baths, the other neighbours in the Town Mills were not interested).

The architects who had participated in the competition in 1900 had been approached again to explore their interest and for revised costings. Pritchard and Pritchard were still a little peeved that in that competition, they had been given slightly different instructions than had the other participants (with regard to the inclusion or not of a Turkish Baths in the scheme) but did provide costs for different alternatives.



These suggested that new baths with swimming pools of a sensible size, together with an increase in the number of slipper baths plus accommodation for the Baths Superintendent (it seemed to be a given that he should have, in effect, a tied cottage) would be some £5000<sup>95</sup> – this would be in rates terms, Alderman Ray suggested, a charge of three farthings in the pound. (The options considered did include – at higher costs – the provision of a separate women's pool. Mixed bathing might be acceptable in the open air but not yet, it seems, in enclosed baths)

Ray reminded his colleagues of just how old the Mill Street baths were and that they were in very poor condition. He also turned back to the original role of the baths as a public baths focused on hygiene and self respect. He was particularly exercised by the inadequate facilities in terms of slipper baths for women, as had been Tempest Radford, with just two 'second class' baths for women which had been used by over three hundred ladies in the previous two months. Changing facilities for women were also inadequate.

He concluded that they should not worry about the costs as, if financed over fifty years, the burden would fall on future generations rather than their own.

Councillor Adams seconded the proposal and agreed that this was indeed an opportune time to revisit the question of new baths and that a special sub committee be set up to examine it in detail. Mr Adams echoed Ray's emphasis on the responsibility to meet the needs of their industrial town – older workers houses did not have bathrooms; there were now many women in the work force returning grubby from their daily labours. He was – also perhaps recalling the problems of 1887 – not sure that voluntary contributions to the capital costs should be pursued. The council – and the ratepayers – should bear the true cost.

Alderman Taylor, surprised perhaps that an heroic colleague had indeed been willing to stand in the Chamber and argue the case for building new baths on the rates, said that, although he had long maintained the need for better facilities, he thought that the cost that had been indicated was too high. Alderman Pensotti concurred with this view. He also noted that the proposal to extend the borough boundaries was under active consideration. In a little while perhaps there would be a broader local tax base across which to spread the costs.

The general mood of the meeting seemed to be – as often before – that new baths were important, but perhaps the second or third most important issue facing the Council, and that if a fairy godmother were to present herself in the chamber perhaps she could be asked to deliver it. But otherwise to defer.

Alderman Ray was asked if he would withdraw the resolution but said he was not minded to do that and would be content to move to a vote even if his was the only vote cast in favour. In the end a slightly modified motion was passed which recognised that the present public baths were unsatisfactory and inadequate for the need of the town and agreeing to set up a special committee to work with the Baths Committee.

This committee returned to report back to council with the recommendation that the matter be deferred until the beginning of the next financial year<sup>96</sup>. Alderman Ray expressed the hope that something would be done after March and indeed further underlined his commitment to the idea by moving to raise it again as soon as the new financial year commenced. He again made the point that the need for new baths was an urgent issue and that medical and sanitary reports regarding Mill Street underscored this. The Baths Committee were required to return to the Council in September with their proposals and in April stressed that they were now in 'deadly earnest' about the issue. Mr Toomis had slightly earlier in the year expressed his concern to the Education Committee that the



lack of the best swimming facilities were possibly deterring parents from having their children taught to swim<sup>97</sup>.

The Committee were indeed moving on. In July they met on site at Caldwell Hall<sup>98</sup> – which seemed again to the favoured location to build a new set of baths and instructed the Borough Surveyor to work up plans and costings. The Committee also arranged to visit new baths at Stourbridge which were seen as a modern and local beacon of excellence.

The Borough Surveyor duly completed his task and In September<sup>99</sup> produced his findings. A full suite of baths – two swimming pools, an increased number of slipper baths than at Mill Street ( though still providing more facilities for male than female users), superintendents accommodation and boiler house had an estimated cost of £11,000. A single swimming pool (100 feet by 30 feet) alone, perhaps £4,500. The costs even on this estimate could be further reduced (by £500) by having it not all built in brick – but the surveyor doubted if this option would be funded by the sort of long term loan that the Committee were hoping to use if they did proceed on that basis. The baths could be accommodated on the site without encroaching on the other significant development that the Council had in mind for it – a fire station.

The Committee advised council in September they would bring proposals to their next meeting. Alderman Ray assured the full council that the council committee were earnest- some had visited the Stourbridge Baths which ‘ compared with their own were really beautiful’

Alderman Tomkinson however always alert to which way the wind was blowing – and perhaps having forgotten with the passage of time how enthusiastic he had been in new baths a decade or two earlier – commented a little sourly that “if youth did not care or had not strength to walk [ to the open air baths] then let them go without the bath.’<sup>100</sup>

Before that September meeting, the Mayor, Alderman Johnson, had written to the Committee Chairman<sup>101</sup> suggesting that they defer any recommendation for a further twelve months. This was the proposal that they did put to Council (invoking the review of borough boundaries as a particular reason) but this did not preclude what the Shuttle delighted in reporting– and not for the first time– that ‘a lively exchange on the baths’ had taken place.

In September, Alderman Ray expressed his disappointment at the proposal to further defer any consideration of new baths. He again raised his concerns about the poor facilities for women and contrasted the quality of the baths in Kidderminster when compared to the new baths in neighbouring Stourbridge. Mr Tandy and Dr Evans introduced the novel idea for the Chamber that the – now booming - State of Trade was itself a strong reason for investing in new baths. Mr Danby scorned this idea – there were other calls on funds that were imminent, not just the borough extension but also more investment in sewage management. (The Baths and sewage treatment seeming to be locked forever in a duel for resources). Councillor Dalley for his part produced the curious argument that the baths couldn’t be as inadequate as suggested because so many people continued to use them. Alderman Tomkinson congratulated the committee on their decision and stressed the need to act with caution avoiding lavish expenditure.<sup>102</sup>

Councillor Cooke, on behalf of the Baths Committee stressed that the members were as committed as anyone in the Chamber to the provision of better bathing and swimming facilities - but that the present was ‘an inopportune time’.

The consideration of new baths was to be deferred for a further twelve months.<sup>103</sup>



There were further discussions in the course of the 1912 about options for the Caldwell Hall site. Alderman Ray was anxious that nothing should be done that would preclude the site being used at least in part for the new baths which he continued to promote.

After the deferral, the next significant action did not come until the very end of 1913 when the Town Council decided to act on the issue of slipper baths if nothing else and instructed the Baths committee to come back with proposals<sup>104</sup>. The Borough Surveyor drew up plans to provide a total of eight additional slipper baths at a cost of some £300 but which would require taking the Superintendents living quarters on the first floor of the Mill Street premises to accommodate them.

When this proposal was reported to the Town Council in January 1914 it was decided not to take any further action on this specific proposal. A further 'lively' discussion on the wider issues of the baths did break out. There was a suggestion that as the Council was looking to raise finance for some new investment that the need for new baths be wrapped up into any future borrowings. Alderman Dalley argued the need for new baths accommodation. Alderman Ray returned to his themes of the inadequacy of bathing facilities for women in an industrial town of some 27,000 people. Councillor Wright took a different – and perhaps particularly eccentric view – we should learn from the Japanese<sup>105</sup>. There, he said, people simply dig a hole in the earth and bathed there. Costs of £10,000 for new baths were, he insisted, monstrous.

A month later in February, the Baths Committee Chairman, Councillor Cooke advised that his Committee would be bringing a proposal to the Council shortly. The matter was returned to several more times in the next few months with Alderman Ray tirelessly repeating his concern about the inadequate provision for women. Mr Cooke reiterated his view that most members recognised the need for new baths accommodation – but that meeting the associated costs was quite another issue.

In June however, the Baths Committee concluded its review and considering estimates that it had of costs and of the range of service to be provided, determined to take a fresh proposal to the Council – that new baths be erected on a site to be determined and at a cost of no more than £8000<sup>106</sup>.

The debate on the proposal had a slight element of drama. Mr Cooke in proposing it, cited the intensive use of the swimming pool by schoolchildren and also contradicted an emerging view that with newer homes being built with bathrooms that the need for public baths had diminished – this was not the case, as the 'working classes... had no baths in their homes'. He confessed that he had not always supported the building of new baths but that he had been persuaded by experience and facts that he was wrong.

The Shuttle reported that after Cooke concluded his speech there was a long pause and silence in the chamber before Alderman Ray rose to second the proposal. He repeated some of the recent history going back to Tempest-Radford's proposal and the issue of over crowding and waiting times. He introduced a new line of argument in mentioning the cleanliness (or otherwise) of the water in the swimming pool and suggested that Mill Street baths were in 'a generally dirty and insanitary state' suggesting that if the baths were in private hands the Health Committee would long ago have closed them.

The view was expressed that the matter could be resolved by the simple expedient of adding a few slipper baths rather than building something to contain a larger swimming pool. The excellence of the Stourport Road open air pool was duly noted – this had graduated (in the eyes of some members at least) from being the largest in the county to having the status of the largest in the country.



As so often before, the matter found itself enjoying the support in principle of many members (and from their opinions as reported in the debate, support of the people of the town, generally) but with the Council unwilling to give the matter priority against the other financial challenges that were being faced at the time.

The council resolved that the Baths Committee and the Finance Committee report on costs of new baths taking account of operating savings, increased receipts and other circumstances and report back in September. The Baths Committee determined that the architect's estimates from 1900 would not be a suitable base for this exercise and resolved to set up a sub committee to obtain particulars as to accommodation, site and costs<sup>107</sup>. (The Shuttle bestirred itself slightly on a topic on which it had once been fiery, to issue a rather lukewarm commentary on the debate which succeeded in getting wrong both the date of the Mill Street baths opening and the scope of Tempest-Radford's 'offer' to the town in 1887.)

The annual Aquatic Gala for 1914 was held a few days after the Council meeting at the end of July and the Shuttle reported on the event on August 6. The usual local contests took place and special attractions on this occasion were an attempt by Mr O L Bergandorf to set a 60 yards record and also a swimming exhibition by G W Houghton England's premier scientific swimmer who, it was promised, would complete his performance with the 'human torpedo - a feat no other aquatic artist or performer can equal'. The Kidderminster Military Band played. Alderman Ray's wife presented the prizes and did not miss the opportunity to advance her husband's views in stressing the urgent need of the town for new baths accommodation,

It has become something of a cliché in drama and fiction to paint a picture of England and indeed Europe, heedlessly enjoying the languor of many fine summer days in 1914 while hurricane and tempest gathered just beyond the horizon. This was perhaps just such a day in Kidderminster. Reading the report of the gala in the Kidderminster Shuttle (Mr Bergandorf, by the way, failed in his record attempt) one's eye trails down the page and finds the headline of the story immediately beneath the gala which says, baldly 'Austria declares war on Servia' (sic)

And with that the whole world plummeted into disaster.

When the Town Council did meet again in September, all of Europe was, of course, at war. It was agreed that with regard to the suggested new baths in the present state of affairs it would be well not to proceed any further for the present<sup>107</sup>.

Alderman Ray seconded this but with the provision that when the war was over he hoped they would at once reconsider the matter and take it in hand.



## Chapter 9 War –and the consequences of peace

Along with all of the other resources and energies of the Council, and the town more generally, the Baths were pressed into a form of war service. Through the later months of 1914 and onwards both the Mill Street baths and the Open Air Pool (even in January) were made available to the army to provide for fitness training and other activity for regular soldiers and territorials<sup>108</sup>. The Mill Street Pool had in fact been freely available for territorials from the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Worcester Regiment since 1909 after a request from their commanding officer. Soldier billeted in the town had free access to the Baths for washing and it was noted that the boilers were kept in operation – and staff made available – to ensure that troops could take advantage of this.

Generally party politics were in suspension for the duration but squabbles did break out briefly over the costs of maintaining the Turkish Baths ('why can't they go to Birmingham for that?') and the high costs of the general contract for coal for the baths. When a member suggested that the boiler should be replaced as Councillor Cooke had advised its aged inefficiencies were the cause of these costs, Cooke retorted that it would be better to replace the baths as a whole.

The baths made another fleeting appearance when the Town Council was approached in October 1916<sup>109</sup> to provide information for a national research project being undertaken into public health issues which had a particular focus on provision of public baths and wash houses. The study was undertaken under auspices of a foundation bearing the name of Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie, a Scot who amassed a huge fortune in the steel industry in the United States had then devoted himself to devoting much of that fortune to philanthropy, was a figure of global renown. The Baths Committee in making their response to the survey were also mindful that they had long held the view that an obliging philanthropist might be the fastest route to new baths and so did not neglect the opportunity to present their own worthy cause to the Foundation.

It is improbable that their plea reached the desk of Mr Carnegie.

The research itself – essentially the work of one woman, the indomitable Agnes Campbell -was a pioneering work of public policy research<sup>110</sup> all the more remarkable for having been carried out through war time. Its conclusions would however not have surprised the Baths Committee. The provision of baths and wash houses were a vital social service, it reported - and they were not deliverable on a commercial basis.

The statistical data in the report does allow some comparison to be made between activity in Kidderminster and on a broader national front and in particular with by selecting results from broadly comparable communities ie industrial towns of c 20,000 population.

Kidderminster was one of 29 towns in the population range 20-50000 included in the survey which had a swimming pool and one of only three with both a covered and an open air pool. It was towards the bottom end of the 'league table' when use of the swimming facilities per head of population was taken into account. It was also probably slightly flattered by this statistic as the population base was the 1911 census and we know that the rather tightly drawn borough boundary at this date was soon to be expanded to take in areas – such as Foley Park – which already fell into the natural catchment area of the Open Air Pool in particular<sup>111</sup>.

On the other side of the equation we know that the Mill Street swimming pool was tiny which constrained usage and it is also apparent that many of the towns performing well on this statistic



had pools that were both more recently built, were larger than Mill Street and provided, no doubt, a much more pleasant and inviting environment.

The statistics also provide a little light on George Holloway's observation a couple of decades or so earlier about the lack of enthusiasm for bathing among Kidderminster folk generally. The results show that the use of the public bathhouse in Kidderminster was higher than in these comparable towns. This may suggest a welcome appetite for personal hygiene – but perhaps might also be the result of the fact that a large proportion of Kidderminster homes still had no bathroom and that this absence of domestic bathing opportunities resulted in greater recourse to the public baths<sup>112</sup>.

The Report also details access to swimming pools for lessons provided to elementary school children. The Kidderminster details are not recorded but it is clear that Kidderminster was far from alone in its commitment to this activity. Certainly also a number of very large cities ( Birmingham and Manchester, for example) had schemes similar to that in Kidderminster providing free access to swimming pools for children passing swimming competency and life saving tests.

The role of the Town Mayor in initiating, or indeed obstructing development, such as new baths, in the town, had been evident on a number of occasions in the story so far. The appointment of a new Mayor was, very exceptionally, a matter of some controversy in November 1917. The fact that the events that surrounded the appointment of the Town Mayor became public was perhaps a first harbinger of the changes that the long years of war had already brought about and of the disruption of a settled order that would continue even when the conflict ceased.

The candidate who provoked this controversy was none other than Joseph Ray, who has already featured quite prominently this narrative. It is probably worth briefly revisiting the role a Town Mayor in a place like Kidderminster before reporting the controversy itself.

At present in most English local authorities, the role of Mayor, or Lord Mayor, is a purely honorific one, typically filled by a long standing councillor as a mark of diligence and long public service. It is a non political role often taken in rote by members of alternate parties and the Mayor spends his or her single year of office gracing events across the community and representing the authority in other ways. (The situation has been slightly confused by the very recent creation of directly elected mayors, first in London and then more recently for a number of England's other larger conurbations. These are executive and highly political positions. The Lord Mayor of London (as distinct from the Mayor of London) exists in yet a different and somewhat unique category which need not detain us here).

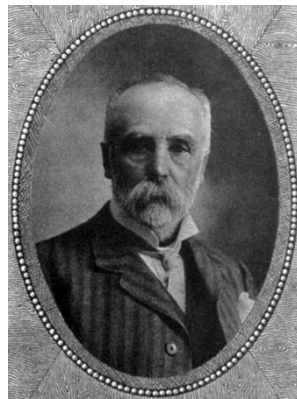
The set up in Kidderminster in 1917 was still as had been established in 1835. The Town Mayor in Kidderminster was something close to an executive chairman, appointed from the largest political group in the Council and generally serving for a two year period – though required to be formally re-elected for the second year. The actual election of the individual to serve would take account of some of the same issues as apply to the Mayor today in terms of personal high regard but it was an explicitly political role. The decision as to who would be suitable to be nominated as Mayor was generally taken privately by the Council members and not a matter of public debate -much less of public discord

For the years of the Great War the normal political process of the Town Council had been put into suspended animation to enable unity on the Home Front. The Municipal Year at this time ran from



November to October and Michael Tomkinson had served his fifth and final term as Mayor stepping down in November 1914. He was succeeded by Reginald Brinton (1914-16) and then by J H Watson who was mayor for through the 1916-17 Municipal Year. Watson was willing to serve a second term but the idea was also mooted that in spirit of wartime bi-partisanship, perhaps a Liberal member might take on the position. The outgoing mayor, Watson, exceptionally, reported in open council, the events of the private meeting convened to agree the next Mayor. The Shuttle reported that this was a meeting that proceeded with some zest.

Mr Watson indicated that, after some confusion at the private meeting, his understanding has been that Alderman Ray – who had secured the backing of the two Brinton brothers- was the only candidate willing to stand<sup>113</sup>. The Messrs Brinton each took some umbrage at having been identified in this way. Alderman Grosvenor indicated that in addition to the notion of a Liberal mayor, the idea that Albert Moule as a ‘representative of the working classes’ might be prevailed upon, but by then Ray had secured commitments of support. Moule had been a leader of the Carpet Weavers Association but was avowedly Conservative in outlook and in due course took some issue with the Socialist tendencies of the Labour Party which was shortly to make its appearance on the local political stage.



*Michael Tomkinson*

Alderman Tomkinson, five times Mayor and recently honoured as a Freeman of the Borough intervened. He stressed that he had no personal prejudice against Mr Ray but that the position of Mayor called for ‘a man of business, a man of tact and a man of courtesy’. Alderman Ray was not a man ‘suited for the position of Mayor’. He indicated that he would cast his vote against him – and indeed did so. His was the only objection. Mr Wright, we are told, then made some insulting remarks about Tomkinson but the Shuttle spared all blushes by not reporting them.

At the formal Mayor making, however, Tomkinson did pledge his support for the new Mayor<sup>114</sup>.

At this distance in time, it is not possible to confidently judge the cause of Tomkinson’s antipathy to Ray. It is probably worth noting that the role of mayor – particularly since the 1880s - had been usually held by one of the acknowledged leaders of the carpet industry. It was also somewhat dynastic in character with a number of sons succeeding their fathers to the post in the fullness of time. Ray was not part of the carpet aristocracy which may have counted against him. The impression is also that he may have been lobbying too openly for the position which might have been regarded as unseemly.

Tomkinson was a high minded fellow – of his many successes in his public life, which were just as significant as those in the commercial sphere, the long campaign to set up the Free Library was perhaps the most concrete. He was a great authority on Japanese art and one of his final efforts as a



fund raising event for the Free Library was a public lecture on the culture of Japan. That somewhat esoteric topic probably speaks precisely of the man and his mindset.

Ray, in contrast, had caused some delighted local scandal a year or so earlier, when his daughter took action for breach of promise against a reneging fiancée. One cannot image that such washing of private linen in public – or the lengthy, and no doubt avidly consumed, column inches generated as a result in the Shuttle – would have been at all to Tomkinson's taste.

Change however was afoot – and no doubt was being hastened by the wider changes that the war would bring about. Within less than twenty years, first a Socialist and then a woman, would occupy the position of first citizen.

As we have noted Ray had become an eager convert to the cause of the baths in the years immediately before the Great War but had agreed that the issue needed to be put into abeyance for the duration of the conflict. His parting shot, though, on the issue in September 1914 had been that once the war was over that it should be taken up at once and put in hand. With the additional authority that his appointment as Mayor gave him he was more than as good as his word and even before the war was over he was reminding the council that the need for new baths was one of 'the first necessities of the town having regard to the welfare of the people' and that a report from the Baths Committee should be made<sup>115</sup>. Councillor Cooke, his head shaking no doubt, was of the view that nothing could be done with the Mill Street premises. The Baths Committee did come back in due course proposing no action but in the subsequent debate the possibility of the baths being constructed as part of a war memorial was raised<sup>116</sup>.

Ray had had the privilege and of announcing the end of the war to the townsfolk and presiding over the public celebrations. He was re-elected as Mayor in the middle of November 1918 a few days after the armistice was formally declared. There were passing references to the misgivings expressed the previous year but it was agreed that he had discharged his responsibility in 'an excellent manner'. He was happy to be supported by his wife and family at the annual council meeting; they had not attended the previous year as he had clearly been anxious about the ructions that might attend his nomination and appointment.

With regard to the Baths issue, Mayor Ray was determined to use his position as an ex-officio member of all council committees, to the extent of regularly taking the chair at the Baths Committee, to press forward his agenda and on Christmas Eve 1918 the Baths Committee determined to consider a new baths building at their next meeting. The committee, to the evident dissatisfaction of the Mayor, were inclined to focus on the relatively modest costs that might be incurred in adapting the existing premises to provide additional slipper baths. They enquired as to the robustness of the foundations and their capacity to support any extension – in particular to accommodate an increase in services to ladies. A scheme that would make use of the Superintendent's living accommodation to allow for this was considered<sup>117</sup> and it was agreed to seek sanction for expenditure of £1000 to this end. Mayor Ray – in the chair – was not happy with the proposal and it was examined twice but he was not able to persuade the committee to look to something more ambitious.

When the matter came before full council Ray again voiced his unhappiness with it. Was it sensible he asked his colleagues to spend such a sum when there was the urgent need for new premises. He did not feel that raising a loan would be a problem and that it could be consolidated with needed investment (as ever) in the sewage system. There was a chorus of support for this view. Councillor Woodward thought that the issue of new premises could not be deferred any further. Councillor



Pensotti pressed for something new and up to date. Councillor Brinton proposed that the matter be referred back to the Committee with an instruction to look at new baths<sup>118</sup>.

The Mayor, and the pro-baths party more generally, did have a new string to their bow. Kidderminster along with every city, town, village and other community across the land was taking on the sombre task of deciding how, most suitably, the sacrifice of those who had lost their lives in the recent conflict might be properly recorded – some 600 Kidderminster folk were dead or missing. The Mayor had convened a meeting to take the public mood on this grave topic in January. Stanley Baldwin had already promised a gift of £5000 towards the memorial.

The general mood of that meeting was that improvements in the town's medical services – particularly for children would be the most suitable such memorial but other possibilities were raised and debated over the next few months. Almost inevitably, the issue of the baths also found its way into the frame. One of the particular proponents of this notion was Louis Tolley who was at this time the secretary of the Kidderminster Trades Council. (Mark his name, it will recur). The idea was supported by a number of councillors at public meetings but the general view was that needful as the town was of new baths, these should be met from the rates rather than from any other finance<sup>119</sup>. The notion was finally scotched possibly due to a contribution at one of the public meetings from Councillor Thomas Griffin who voiced the view that, a Town Baths was simply not sufficiently heroic a memorial to reflect the courage and sacrifice of the fallen<sup>120</sup>.

In the end the proposal for the War Memorial was for a tripartite approach; a piece of statuary alongside which the names of the dead could be set; a standalone children's wing for the Infirmary and a Comrade's Club for the use of returned heroes. The cost of this was estimated at some £38000 and an invitations for public subscriptions was made (with donors able to select to which of these three elements they wished their donation to be applied) to supplement Baldwin's gift of £5000.

However this appeal was – perhaps even more surprisingly – less successful than Mayor Tempest-Radford's efforts for the Jubilee baths had been some thirty odd years before. In November 1919 the memorial committee scaled back the plans to include only the statue - which still stands. (That this should be an Angel (of Peace) was at the suggestion of the sculptor who also had to advise the committee at about this time that the foundries were so busy casting other memorials that they would have to wait some time for theirs to be completed.)

In April despite the instruction from the Council regarding a plan for new baths, the Baths Committee has brought back again their plan for adaptations which would allow for additional slipper baths alone – and also require new arrangements for housing Mr and Mrs Tommis. The Council heard precisely the same arguments as they had had in March. The Mayor again pressed for new baths; the committee was criticised for not following the Council's instruction to plan for new baths and in the end – as often – a resolution to defer for three months was passed by just one vote.

The debate seemed to leave the baths committee confused as to what it had been instructed to do and it turned again – to Mayor Ray's continuing disappointment - to focus on adaptations and brought proposals to this end back to council in May and July. The town had been lacking a Borough Surveyor which had also hampered progress as there was no one to draw up detailed plans or supervise subsequent works. We also encounter the intriguing spectacle of Councillor Griffin pressing for new baths – which as we have seen had not generally been, and was not often in the future, to be his approach to the issue<sup>121</sup>.

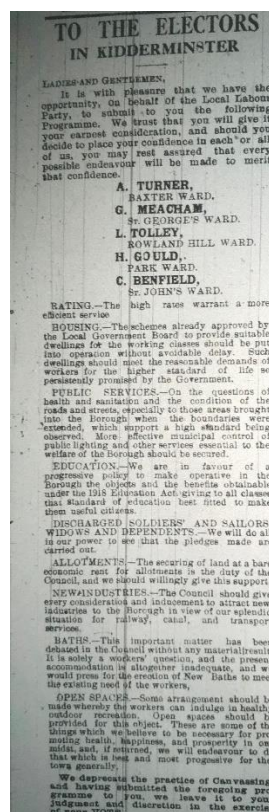
The town council elections in November 1919 made very clear one of the irrevocable changes that the War had set in motion. The 1918 Representation of the People Act had greatly extended the



right to vote to in effect include all men aged over 21 and many women aged over 30. Other political changes were afoot and in Kidderminster the Labour Party rang a slate of four candidates in four wards – two were elected, including Louis Tolley who as we have seen was already a vigorous advocate of a new baths for the town. Town Council candidates previously did not fly under advertised party political colours in their election appeals – though their position was always only too evident to any who followed local politics and the earnest card-marking of the Shuttle. The Labour candidates also issued a joint manifesto – such a manifesto at all was quite an innovation in Town Council elections<sup>122</sup>.

Tolley stressed the need for improved bathing facilities in his speeches during the campaign, going so far as to suggest that the Council should appropriate a house in every street and fit it out as a local bath house making the service so much more locally accessible. (There is a clear echo here with the importance placed on bathing in the ‘Working Man’ handbill from 1853.)

The Shuttle agonised a little over this the emergence of a new strand to the politics of the Council. There was a welcome for the presence of working class representatives on the Council but regret that the existing Councillors who were displaced were themselves seen as being quite progressive – Councillors Talbot and RS Brinton. Quite how progressive, with regard to Brinton, was revealed when it transpired that Louis Tolley’s employer was not prepared to allow him time from work to attend council meetings and dismissed Tolley when he made good his commitment to his electors to do just that. Reginald Brinton promptly offered him a position at their works and the opportunity to pursue his council duties while employed there<sup>123</sup>.



*The Labour Group Manifesto , 1919 – improved baths provision was a very specific proposal*

The enhanced slipper baths facilities finally came into operation in 1920 and the problems faced by the Tommis’ regarding their ‘usurped’ accommodation were resolved in December 1920 when they were offered one of the first houses built by the Council ostensibly as part of the ‘Homes for Heroes’



campaign<sup>124</sup>. Councillor Wright complained that none of these house (six were built) had in fact been occupied by the returned soldiers for whom they had been intended.

In general it would seem that though the 1920s the challenge to the town and to the Town Council was one of deciding whether what had been regarded in the pre-war years as 'normal' life would now return or alternatively what it was that might constitute the 'new normal'. The arrival of Louis Tooley and his group of fellow Labour members with their very public intention to operate as a group were clearly a manifestation of that 'new normal'.

The Shuttle, in an article in 1923<sup>125</sup>, identified one of the challenges that the Town Council faced as the fact that there were now vocal and persistent interests that were eager to have their opinions taken proper account of in a way that hadn't been the case ten or twenty years earlier. The views of the Chamber of Commerce, the Trades Council, the National Farmers Union and others each had a right to be weighed by the Council in determining its response to the new environment and there were new challenges to be tackled.

Housing was perhaps the most pressing of these issues. There were continuing arguments around the role of the Council in encouraging new housing – and using central government subsidy to address any failings in the market. Alongside this there were debates as to whether the need was for houses for owner-occupiers or for tenants- a lively topic for a decade or more. The Shuttle also flagged the issue of the baths and of the popularity of swimming among younger people as an area where action might be required<sup>126</sup>.

This observation was probably prompted by the fact that there has been a yet another recent flurry of concern about the losses made by the baths operation (and as so often previously, the costs and appropriateness of a municipal Turkish baths facility in particular) but also about the condition of the Mill Street Baths – by this time fast approaching its seventieth year of operation.

Changing social attitudes saw a gradual extension of mixed swimming at the Open Air Baths until by 1925 only one afternoon session was single sex and by 1927 even this had disappeared. The annual award of free swimming certificates to elementary school children passing the swimming tests continued as did the award of trophies to the schools which has the highest success levels for both boys and girls. The external world impinged on the operation of the baths when, in 1926, the miners' strike, which continued for many months after the brief national General Strike, disrupted coal supplies and meant that the baths were closed for a while on Mondays and Tuesdays in October.

One other aspect of the old normalcy was the return of the Swimming Club. It had commenced activity again in 1919, but it was not until 1924 that the annual gala at the Open Air Baths was reinstated<sup>127</sup>. In that year there was some concern that the number of entries into competitions was rather subdued among the schoolchildren, notwithstanding the success of the efforts that has gone into classes teaching swimming. Tribute was paid to Joseph Inston, the swimming club secretary, for his great efforts in bringing the Gala back into operation. His energy must indeed have been prodigious because in addition to organising and overseeing the event he also won the men's 60 yard open event.

The Gala took place in 1925 again with over 1000 people in attendance who were provided with a 'magnificent day, magnificent gala and magnificent sport' according to Alderman Waite, the chair of committee<sup>128</sup>. There was a much larger entry than in the previous year and the programme included the novelty races which were had always been a feature (these were the men's top hat and umbrella and the women's nightdress and candlestick races – the imagination boggles just a little as to what these were) and a water polo match. Inston surpassed himself not only winning the scratch race



again but also scoring twice in the water polo match - though this was not enough to prevent a 5-2 defeat for the Kidderminster side. The event also featured – as it had done since the very first Gala in 1901 – a demonstration by Herbert Tommis of his many skills on and under the water. Sadly though this was to be his very last appearance at a Gala event. He observed to an acquaintance as he concluded his exhibition that he had felt unwell, and he died a few months later<sup>129</sup>.



He had served as the Superintendent of the Pool since 1894 and his dedicated service was noted in Town Council. His commitment to encouraging boys and girls (and indeed adults) to learn to swim was huge and his success in the cramped and unprepossessing environment that the Mill Street baths offered was exceptional.

The Mayor in his tribute said that the services Tommis had rendered were an asset difficult to estimate and that he was owed a debt of gratitude. One of the people paying fulsome tribute to Tommis was Louis Tolley who had served on the Baths Committee for much of his time as a councillor. He said that he knew no man who had served the corporation and the town in such an unassuming manner and left such qualities behind him as had Mr Tommis.

Not long after Tommis' death another member observed triumphantly that the education committee's spending on supporting the schools swimming lessons was 'the best money Kidderminster ever spent'. Mrs Tommis took on the superintendents role on an interim basis and was keen to continue but the Council preferred the traditional arrangement where a married couple together did the work and the indefatigable Mr Inston (together with his wife) moved from the Swimming Club to the Baths Superintendent role.

Tolley actually lost his seat in elections in November 1925 after six years on the council but bounced back quickly winning a by election in September 1926 and becoming vice-chairman of the Baths Committee. In that position he requested (in January 1927<sup>130</sup>) that the previous plans for a wholesale new baths development drawn up by the Borough Surveyor be brought back to the Committee and be reconsidered. There was also an approach to the Unemployment Grants Committee in London enquiring about the possibility of financial assistance from that quarter towards the building of new baths. The economic depression that persisted through much of the 1920s had found government willing to support investment that generated employment via this route. (The dismal state of the Baths had flared again a year or so earlier with even Thomas Griffin recalling Mayor Tempest -Radford's bold plans in Victoria's Jubilee year and railing at the baths now as a disgrace to the town – and even proposing that the Caldwell Hall site would be an excellent location for a replacement)



The response from the Grants Committee was not encouraging<sup>131</sup>. Their official's response suggested that unemployment in Kidderminster was not as grave an issue as elsewhere in the country and also that the construction sector was not seen as one in particular need of support. It was also pointed out the Council needed to appreciate that such financial support as might ever be available was only, in effect, a subsidy to borrowing costs rather than meeting any part of the capital investment required. It would seem that in the light of this advice it was not seen to be worth pursuing the matter further.

Speaking at the 1929 Swimming Gala<sup>132</sup>, Alderman RS Brinton spoke positively of the improvements to the open air baths and a few weeks later confirmed his view of the need for new baths and underlined that the idea had the full support of the council notwithstanding certain difficulties which had to be overcome.

Then the man who was determined to overcome them presented himself.

Louis Tolley had lost his seat again in November 1927 - none of the Labour Party candidates were returned at that election – but he stood and won again in 1928 and appears to have come back determined (having spent much of the previous decade as a Town Council member) to do something that would truly make a difference to the town. Addressing the Swimming Club Annual meeting in the throes of this contest he reminded them that he had made commitment to a new baths in his very first election campaign in 1919. He managed to secure the position of chairman of the Baths Committee In November 1929<sup>133</sup> and set about almost immediately to use all of the leverage that that afforded him. He said on appointment as chairman that “in a nutshell, the baths were a disgrace to the town. The time had come when they would have to think about the erection of new baths”.



## Chapter 10 'A very expensive man'



*Louis Tolley – in 1931*

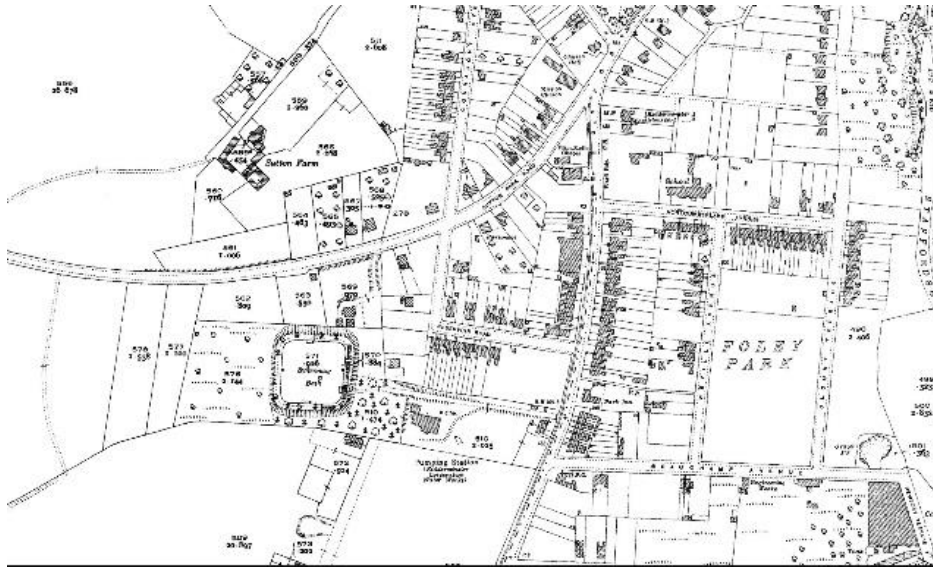
Before looking in detail at the campaign Tolley waged, and the rather extraordinary drama within the Council Chamber over the succeeding two years or so, it might be worth taking stock by assessing the status of both swimming and the facilities that the town offered by 1929.

The most recent campaign to build a new pool and baths had occurred immediately before the First World War when the Mill Street facility was fifty five years old and its condition was the subject of regular disparaging by members of the Council. Between 1910 and 1913, the average annual number of users of Mill Street was just over 15000, and of the Open Air Pool, 5600. For the period 1925-29 these comparative statistics were 17,200 and 11,300. (The use of averages over the period hopefully smooths out, to an extent, the peaks and troughs at the Open Air Pool that were always weather related). By the late 1920s, activity at Mill Street was dominated by the use of the pool for school classes. The numbers using the Mill Street Pool were only slightly higher in the 1920s than they had been in the 1890s; with much capacity being pre-empted by the school classes there was almost no scope for further expansion of numbers there. The growth in activity at the Open Air Pool does seem to highlight a real growth in the popularity of swimming as an activity as does the success of the annual gala after it came back into operation in 1924. The Mill Street Baths were now some twenty years older than during this previous baths debate and hardly ever referred to other than to be described as a disgrace to the town. The figures would certainly seem to support both the fast growing eagerness of Kidderminster people to swim and the inadequate nature of the facilities on offer for this<sup>134</sup>.

Tolley began his campaign with what might be seen as a ranging shot – aimed at declaring his intent and also testing the nature and scale of the resistance. His first action concentrated on the Open Air Pool. It was not suitable or safe for smaller children and he proposed that there be a number of alterations to encourage their use. This included having a portion of the pool set aside for small children and protected for their use. He also proposed that a sloping bank be created that would be a safer means for small children to enter and leave the pool than jumping in or using the existing steps.



Tolley also had the Town Clerk contact Clement Dalley, a member of the Council and owner of adjacent land to the pool, to enquire about the purchase of a strip of land that would allow access to from the Sutton Park Road to complement the existing route from Stourport Road. The Town Council was undertaking large scale housing development on Sutton Farm just off Sutton Park Road, the Baths Committee wanted presumably to ensure that new potential users could get to the pool as easily as possible<sup>135</sup>.



*Figure 18/19. These maps from 1928 (above)-*



*and 1936 indicate the housing development close to the open air pool since 1903 and during the 1930s. Providing access from Sutton Park Road clearly made sense.*





*Figure 20. This aerial photograph, from 1932, also highlights recent development on Sutton Farm estate close to the open air pool( seen in the very centre of the photograph)*

Finally, the officers were asked to look at means for a more regular changing of the water and the scope for introducing filtration of the pool water. The tendency of the pool to support growth of weeds does not seem to have really been controlled since it was identified as a problem in 1901 after the first full summer of operation. For good measure the Committee also proposed installing a water shoot and improvements to the diving facilities. Quite a programme of action for the first Committee meeting under his chairmanship in December 1929 – and he was just beginning<sup>136</sup>

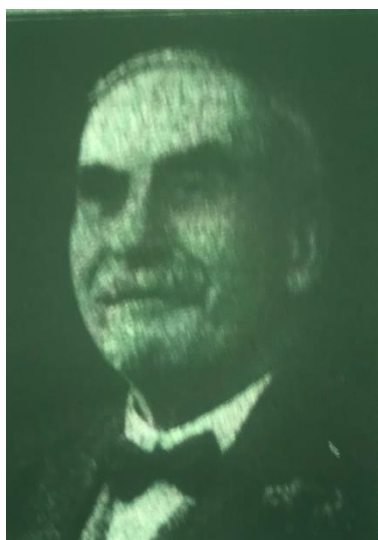
Exactly one month before Tolley took the chair of the Baths Committee for the first time however, the Wall Street Crash began. In due course, the global economic crisis that this brought about was to throw into stark relief, in both positive and negative ways, events in Kidderminster together with Tolley's ambitions for a new baths and swimming pool.

Presenting his first report to the full council in January 1930<sup>137</sup> and seeking approval for tiling the Mill Street Baths, Tolley again urged the need to move quickly to consider the need for new baths to replace Mill Street. Just over month later he was back in the Council Chamber<sup>138</sup> with the proposals for the adaptations to the Open Air Pool. It was now described as a paddling beach and had a price tag of £469 as estimated by the Borough Surveyor. A grant of £120 towards these costs from the Unemployment Grants Committee was assumed (conditional on the use of local labour). The proposal was approved with no one speaking against it other than Alderman R Brinton who cautioned the need to appreciate that the reservoir might, in an emergency be required again for its original purpose.

If Tolley did indeed regard this proposal as a ranging shot then he did not have to wait too long for some return fire. The annual meeting of the Kidderminster and District Property Owners Association took place at the beginning of April<sup>139</sup>. The association secretary J R Taylor fulminated against the



paddling beach proposal calling it an 'idiotic thing' and a waste of money. "What sensible mother", he asked, "would send her child to paddle hour after hour; she would be building up trouble." Alderman Thomas Griffin, attending the meeting and being reconfirmed as chairman of the association, offered his views. It was 'a silly thing' he said but the chairman of the Baths committee was keen on it. Many people had expressed opposition and there were scores of places which could be made into paddling pools without interfering with the Open Air Bath. It was a pet idea of the chairman and only carried by small majority. But, he assured the members of the association, the council did not waste money.



Alderman Thomas Griffin

It is interesting to speculate a little as to why this might have been a 'pet idea' of Louis Tolley. One part of the building of a new world that had been brought into being as a reaction against the horrors of the first world war was the sense of the benefits for children, in particular, of regular exposure to the benefits of sunshine, fresh air and exercise. It was to take hold equally vigorously in both the Soviet Union and in the fascist states as well as in the democracies. In England and in the Labour Party it seems to have a resonance within the Independent Labour Party (at this time a more radical group within the wider Labour Party where it gave rise to movements such as the Woodcraft Folk). Tolley was certainly a member of the ILP at one point and he actually chaired a meeting of the ILP in Kidderminster in 1927 where the principal speaker was Oswald Mosely. (Mosley was on his curious political journey from the Conservative Party to the British Union of Fascists. He paused for a while in the ILP on whose behalf he contested with Neville Chamberlain for the Ladywood constituency in 1924 and later won a by election in Smethwick in 1926). A, perhaps, much more congenial leading light in the ILP was George Lansbury, a radical Christian socialist who was to lead the Labour Party in the 1930s and who, in 1930 was a member of the then Labour Government with the office of First Commissioner of Works. One of his achievements was the creation of the Serpentine Lido in London which opened in 1930 and is regarded as the first lido to operate in the UK. The London Labour Party was committed to the creation of a chain of lidos across the City<sup>140</sup>.

It is possibly not too far fetched entirely to see Tolley's programme at the Open Air Baths as an attempt – within the constraints of the Baths themselves and of the resources available to him to pick up on the ideas in the political circles he was part of an effort to bring about a prototype lido – the results were possibly the first such facility in England.



At the next Town Council meeting, Tolley certainly took some considerable umbrage with Griffin's remarks at the Property Owners Association regarding this 'pet idea'. It was, he said, referring to the report of the Associations meeting in the Kidderminster Shuttle, 'with a keen sense of disappointment that he heard of one public man taking advantage of another'<sup>141</sup>. He took particular issue with Griffin's claim that the proposal was passed with only a small majority. Tolley claimed it was unanimous. Griffin was adamant that he would stick by every word and that he had not voted for the expenditure. The Town Clerk advised that there had not been a named vote but that there had been no one voting against the proposal. A certain tension between Tolley and Griffin surfaced regularly for the next year on so on matters related to the Baths. (A few months earlier, on the occasion of their Golden Wedding Anniversary, Alderman Griffin and his wife had been presented with a gift by the members of the Council. Speaking at that event, Tolley has noted that his admiration of Griffin was as an opponent "always fighting which gave others a chance to fight... when battle was over he was willing to continue as friends; he liked such an opponent." The next few months would certainly test that qualified endorsement.)

In May, Tolley advised the Council that the works at the Open Air Baths were completed and proposed a formal opening event. Neither the Mayor or Deputy Mayor were available and Tolley was concerned that a formal opening in their absence might be a damp squid. Tolley's Labour Colleague, James Ferguson, suggested, teasingly, that Alderman Griffin might take on the task. In the event, it was agreed that Tolley himself should do the honours and this he proceeded to do on May 30<sup>th</sup><sup>142</sup>.

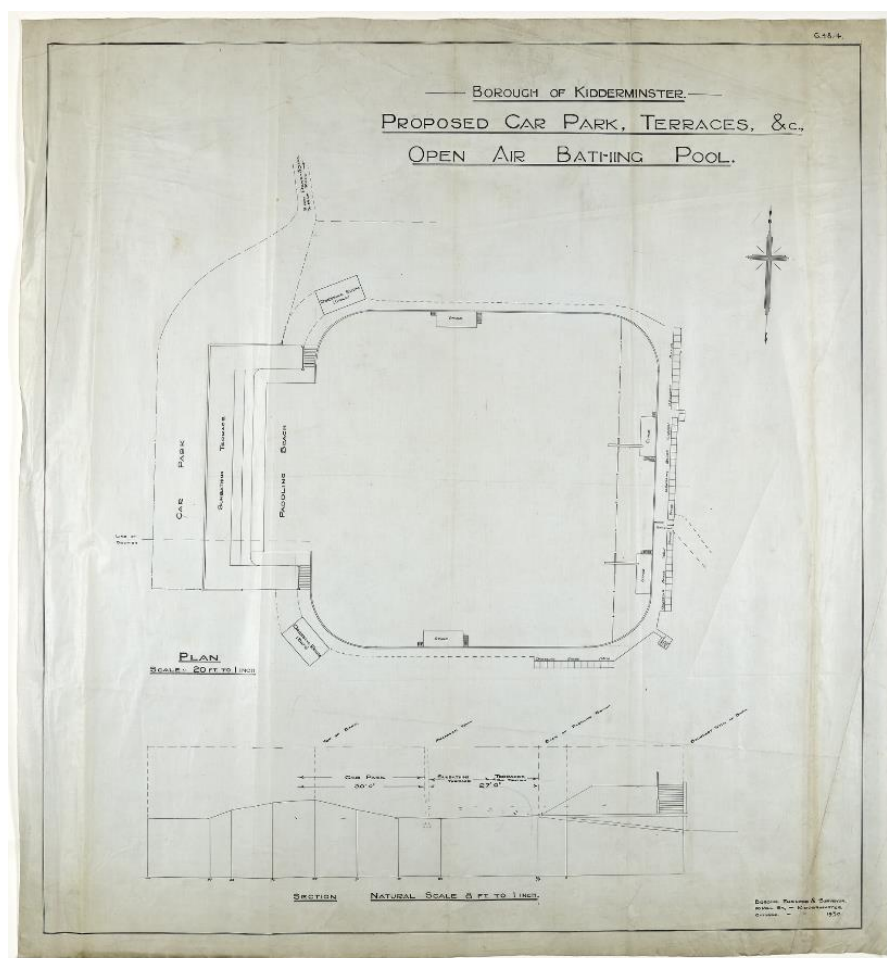
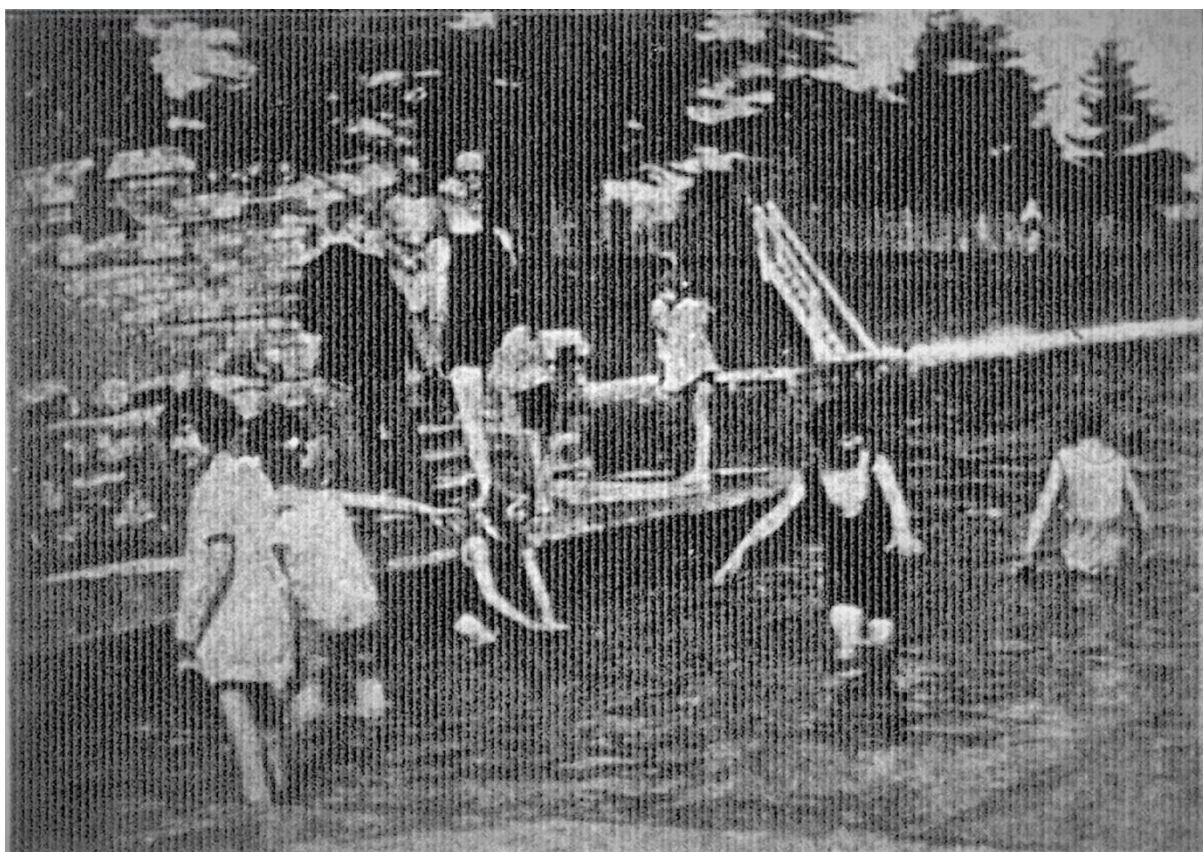


Figure 21. Plan for Open air pool and paddling beach 1930





*The Paddling Pool in operation in 1930*

Thomas Griffin was indeed gracious (or maybe just provocative) enough to attend and proposed the vote of thanks in which he confessed (that activity being good for the soul, he said) that he was one of those who did not think the expenditure justified but that he hoped it would be well patronised. He congratulated the Borough Surveyor on his works . He took the opportunity to note that the baths water which had been clear when he dropped by a few days earlier was cloudy with vegetation and expressed his preference for a covered bath. Tolley, in his own remarks, had taken the opportunity to stress the need for new covered baths worthy of the town to replace Mill Street which he said were 'the worst baths in the country'.





*Figure 22. The Open Air Baths paddling pool 1930*

The Baths Committee were continuing their own investigations and negotiations to bring those new baths about. The Borough Surveyor had already been instructed to prepare 'block' plans to assess the scope for new baths to be built on a site in Radford Road adjacent to St George's Park<sup>143</sup>. The plan for the purchase of land from Clement Dalley, off Sutton Park Road, had also progressed and Tolley went back to Council for approval to conclude this. He presented the purchase as an opportunity not only to improve access to the pool but also creating a development opportunity for more housing. The council were reluctant to approve and sought to defer the matter for another month. Councillor Wright referred to Tolley as having proved to be 'an expensive man since becoming Chairman of the Baths Committee'. Tolley in his turn expressed his disgust at the reluctance of the Council as a whole to come to decisions over matters that had already been in train for months. He pronounced himself proud to be described as an 'expensive man'. The baths are now a disgrace and he told the Council "If you ask me to take on the role of Chairman I want the baths to be a credit to the town or I don't want anything to do with it".<sup>144</sup>

Then, with the month of deferral having duly passed, Tolley came back to the Council seeking the permission to acquire the land. He grumbled that, despite the opposition to the idea the previous month, no members had troubled themselves to visit the site to try to properly establish the scope for development. In addition the roadway would enhance the income potential from the Baths themselves where the other recent improvements were already generating more users.

Alderman Griffin took issue with this<sup>145</sup>. Greater usage, he said merely reflected the fact the Baths Committee had taken it upon themselves to open the pool on Sunday afternoon. He had recently been walking down Sutton Park Road on Sunday afternoon and found himself thinking that Kidderminster Harriers must be playing there and scoring a goal every five minutes from the uproar that was being generated. By what authority has the extension to the pool opening into the afternoon been taken, he asked when it was not possible to permit games on St Georges Park on Sundays? Local residents, he said, had asked him to take the issue up. Alderman R S Brinton conceded to Griffin that there was some noise – he lived on Sutton Park Road close to the pool- but insisted that what he heard was the happy sound of people enjoying themselves in a healthful way.

The Town Clerk advised members that as the Sunday hours at the pool were an extension to an existing provision for Sunday activity that discretion over this lay with the Committee. A resolution



to refer the issue of land purchase back to the Committee was lost with the provision that no purchase be made until after April 1931 in the forthcoming financial year).

At the beginning of September the Baths Committee<sup>146</sup> were advised that the possibility of grant aid towards new baths seemed much better than it had done in earlier years. The scale of business downturn in the UK, where existing economic problems had been magnified by the Wall Street Crash, was such that the Labour Government, elected in 1929, was actively considering programmes of public works to stimulate activity. The Committee hoped that they might be able to access support from this quarter. The Borough Surveyor was instructed to begin to prepare an application for support to building new baths with a projected cost of £25,000. Councillor Woodward asked that a scheme for slipper baths in the north end of the town should also be considered but could not find a seconder.

In October a short list of sites<sup>147</sup> for new baths were considered by the Committee. These were in Mill Street (on a site then being used as a car park), at Caldwell, Oxford Street, Blackwell Street and Radford Avenue). The committee agreed to request the Mayor to call a special meeting of the full Council to consider the matter in detail. This meeting took place in due course and the Committee's preferred location of the Caldwell site was endorsed.<sup>148</sup>

Also in October, the Council was invited by the Ministry of Labour to submit a list of schemes that might contribute to the national programme of public works. Some further work at the Open Air Baths were included but the major element was the proposal for new baths at an estimated cost of £20,000. The Shuttle noted the complete list that the Finance Committee has assembled and reported that the largest and most important was a new public baths. The Shuttle was rather more guarded and constrained in its opinions than it had been in Victorian times but was emboldened to offer the observation that "Kidderminster Baths seem out of date and inadequate compared to other similar towns."

The list was first considered by the Council in November. Councillor Grosvenor, the chair of the Finance Committee, noted that projects such as the baths would need to be supported by a loan but he felt that this could be done without any significant impact on the rates. He urged that the Council should support the measures to increase employment.

Alderman Griffin opposed any spending on the Open Air Baths, the water of which he said turned green in twenty four hours and was 'like pea soup'. He was he said in favour of new baths but not the scheme proposed. He found no seconder for a resolution striking the Open Air Pool proposal. Tolley reminded him that he had reported earlier in that very council meeting that sampling had confirmed the purity of the pool water.

The proposal for new swimming baths had stirred considerable opposition among the Ratepayers and Traders Association<sup>149</sup>, who were, no doubt, recalling their forbear's victory over the Jubilee Baths in 1887. They had written to the Town Council regarding their concerns about the new Baths and other projects being considered for grant aid. They set about organising a petition to demonstrate the extent of public opposition to the plans.

Tolley, on this occasion, was having no truck with the Association. When their letter of objection was considered at Council he stressed his own strong objections to anybody claiming to represent public opinion when, as he understood, only some twenty people attended their public meeting. After a brief discussion it was agreed that the Association be advised that the decision to seek the grant aid was a unanimous one of the Council.



Tolley took the opportunity at the Swimming Club AGM in December<sup>150</sup>, which he chaired, to urge his audience to support the proposals – he was presumably preaching to the long converted at the meeting but eager, no doubt, to use the press to get a wider audience for the issue. He was particularly concerned to convince listeners and readers that the costs of the proposal in terms of the rate bill were being overstated. He insisted that the new baths, with their greater capacity and greatly improved environment, would generate an operating surplus, meeting some of the financing costs and requiring a lower charge on the rates. It was an argument he was to work very hard for much of the next twelve months.

Then, also in December, the issue was further debated in Council on a resolution from the Finance Committee seeking authority to have loan approval from the Ministry of Health for the cost of the new pool – technically a separate issue from the application for grant aid. The Council would not be able to draw down the grant if they could not borrow the money against which any grant aid would be paid. The opposition to this resolution was led by George Eddy who argued that the past poor financial performance of the Baths provided no case for new investment. He would much prefer to see the sum involved given over to new house building. Tolley, in responding, acknowledged that the public baths were not a paying proposition but that they needed to be regarded as an aspect of wider social services. He was confident that the new swimming baths would generate greater interest and income leaving the operation as a whole requiring no more contribution from the rates than at present- and they would be a credit to the town.



*George Eddy- 1931*

Supporting Eddy's view were a number of members arguing variously that there was no public enthusiasm for the baths proposal; that new slipper baths alone on the Radford Avenue site ( closer to that part of the town where few homes had their own bathing facilities) would cost less and meet a more urgent need; and that the Council should not have its priorities – and rates setting- driven by the availability of Government grant. On the other side was the view that here was a golden opportunity to provide future generations with the amenities of life which this Council's predecessors had failed to do.



The Finance Committee resolution requesting authority to seek the loan was rejected by nine votes to seven<sup>151</sup>. Louis Tolley said that in view of the small attendance at the meeting he was giving notice of his intention to bring the matter back to the next meeting.

The Shuttle reported the result of this vote but noted that 'the question of new baths will have to be faced in Kidderminster in the near future. Adequate baths are as necessary in a town the size of Kidderminster as are other social services.'

The Traders and Ratepayers Association took great comfort from the Council decision and placed an advertisement in the paper to advise that they would not issue any further petition forms while thanking the 'great number' of ratepayers who had signed the petition and asking that completed forms be returned as soon as possible.

Louis Tolley's determination to bring the matter back to the Council quickly was no idle threat. Indeed the Council found itself in almost permanent session as he pursued his objective of building new Baths with both determination and some guile.

When he next brought the matter before the Council in January 1931<sup>152</sup>, it was with a resolution that the Council approach the Ministry of Health seeking sanction to raise a loan to finance the baths project. The debate which followed was largely on exactly the same terms as a month earlier. Tolley stressed again that the provision of suitable accommodation for public bathing was a vital social service and advised members that the Mill Street premises were literally falling about users' ears. He stressed that his calculations indicated that the cost in rate terms was not great.

The Mayor (Alderman Stewart-Smith) made clear his anxiety about the expenditure falling on the Council and ratepayer but felt obliged to support the Finance Committee who had brought forward four schemes to be presented for finance aid from the Unemployment Grants Committee. Two had been turned down and perhaps they should now make a specific bid on behalf of the Baths which had been on the original Finance Committee. This proposal became the substantive resolution. George Eddy and Deputy Mayor Tomkinson repeated their profound opposition and took issue with Tolley's accountancy and arithmetic – Eddy, in addition, expressed his astonishment that the idea was back in front of them having been rejected only weeks before. However when the vote was put the resolution to present the Baths scheme to the Unemployment Grants Committee was approved by eleven votes to nine. The scheme was back on track – but for how long?

At the February council meeting Tolley advised that he expected to be in a position to present fuller details and plans of the Baths scheme at the next meeting. By this time – the March meeting of the Council – the Ministry of Health has also been in touch with the Council asking that they be provided with plans covering the need for the scheme, costs of construction and operational equipment, current users numbers, proposed charges and any other pertinent detail.

Tolley suggested that this matter could be left with the Baths Committee<sup>153</sup> which could communicate directly with the Ministry. One presumes he was loathe, if he could avoid it, to come back again to full Council with the inevitable risk, given the narrowness of recent votes in each direction, of having his proposal rejected once again. Possibly, he was also hoping that if he could get the matter approved by the central government that would give him some additional sway with some of the opposition in the Chamber. He didn't get his way with this – the Council insisted that they be provided with these plans and financial information before they were despatched to Whitehall. If nothing else, the decision over charges for using the pool, which the Ministry required as part of their review, would lie with the Council.



The plans came before the Council in April<sup>154</sup>. In summary they were for a pool of 75 feet by 30 feet; 13 slipper baths each for men and woman; filtration system and boiler. The history and present condition of the Mill Street baths were set down (curiously the Mill State baths were stated as having been built in 1850 – perhaps the views was that making them even more antique than they actually were might stand the application in better stead). Income, expenditure and proposed charges as well as uses of the different elements of the operation, including the Open Air Baths were provided.

Tolley asked for approval and to move to seeking loan sanction – the Clerk advised that the next step if approved would be a public enquiry by a Ministry inspector. George Eddy repeated his objections and profound reservations based chiefly on the international economic situation and the grave situation facing the British economy and public finances. He hoped the Government, if the proposal were to get to them, would turn it down. Councillor Ferguson, in a counterpoint to this, cited the views of John Maynard Keynes on the role of public expenditure in stimulating demand during economic downturn – possibly the first time the opinions of that eminent economist were aired in the Kidderminster Council Chamber. Councillor Grosvenor, supported by Alderman Griffin, sought a deferment for twelve months. Tolley wrapping up the debate insisted that the general expression in the town was in favour of new baths. In all schemes of progress, he said, it was claimed that time was not opportune. However in his form view, ‘It was the optimist who had made England what it was today’.

The resolution was carried by 12 votes to ten after a second vote has to be taken following a dispute as the accuracy of the first.

A week or so later the Traders and Ratepayers Association re-girded their loins with a call that they must fight ‘tooth and nail’ against new baths proposal<sup>155</sup>.

The Ministerial Enquiry that the Town Clerk had anticipated opened at the beginning of June<sup>156</sup> – the Traders and Ratepayers Association as the objectors were represented by Counsel. Evidence was given by the Town Clerk, Borough Treasurer, Borough Surveyor and the Baths Superintendent. Councillor Tomkinson spoke against the proposal and Councillor Woodward in favour. Mr Perks of the Traders and Ratepayers Association – which he reported as recently formed and with some 180 members – said their enquiries found most people dead against the baths idea. They did not wish to hinder progress but the scheme was not justified at the present. He conceded, when asked by the Inspector, that the existing baths were neglected and that he had ‘seen better baths but did not know that he has seen any worse’.

The Inspector in his questioning of witnesses regretted that there was no evidence of the strength of local opinion either way on the proposal. Councillor Austin in his evidence recalled the failure of Tempest-Radford scheme nearly forty years earlier which he attributed to the timidity then of some councillors in the face of public resistance. Councillors now had an improved outlook and the current protest from the Ratepayers and Traders had been organised without foundation on facts and figures.

Mr Perks of the Traders Association concluded stressing support for the new slipper baths proposal but affirming the Associations view that this was not the time the expense of a more or less luxurious type.

The inspector concluded his enquiry and visit to Kidderminster by inspecting by visiting Mill Street and the proposed site of the new baths.





*Figure 23. This aerial photograph from 1930 shows the site the ministry inspector would have visited- it sits opposite Brinton's offices (which are in the centre of the photograph) and alongside the canal*

While awaiting the Ministry's response following the enquiry, matters were a little more subdued for a month or so. The Chamber of Commerce had very much left the running with regard to the business community's views on the Baths proposal with the Ratepayers and Traders group. The Chamber did trouble itself enough at the end of June to write to the Council with a suggestion that the Council, appreciating that there was a pressing need for economy to be practiced should recognise this by 'suspending all schemes that were not immediately necessary'. Alderman Griffin proposed that the letter and Chamber resolution should be recorded on the minutes. Tolley, discerning a rather watery rat poorly concealed, speculated that the Chamber had in mind the rejection of a very specific scheme rather than a more general call for economy. The council resolved merely to acknowledge the letter<sup>157</sup>.

The Ministry of Health were in contact with the results of their enquiry only a week later. The Minister approved<sup>158</sup> the Council's proposals and had advised the Unemployment Grants Committee of this. Subject to decision of the UGC and the submission of final plans and tender documents loan sanction would be forthcoming to a maximum of £20,000. Two weeks later a communication from the UGC confirmed that grants aid would be provided ( Specifically the grant met 100% of interest costs of the loan for first seven years and 50% of interest for up to a further eight years. The UGC's additional conditions required that employment on the scheme be restricted as far as possible to married men with dependants and that the work be actively commenced by 1 August 1931 and completed with twelve months.)

The Mayor confirmed to George Eddy that the scheme has been approved by a majority vote in the Council. Louis Tolley told members that the Baths Committee had anticipated the favourable responses and had work in hand to meet the conditions of the UGC.



Within a further few weeks, in August, however, a crisis at national government level erupted which would, in short order, bring down the Labour Government which had been elected a little over two years earlier. The Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald and Chancellor Philip Snowden were faced with unrelenting pressure to curb public spending and disavowed any approach of using a deficit spending approach but they could not persuade their own Party to change its opposition to cuts in spending. A national government, led by MacDonald but with all party participation, was established and a very early general election loomed. It was seen as inevitable that the general election would bring to power a Government committed to even more rigorous public expenditure restraint.

Tolley and the pro-Baths element were no doubt desperate to press ahead with the scheme fearing that the grant support that was essential to it might be snatched away with a change in policy. The opposing group were no doubt looking to find ways of delaying any progress expecting that a new government might indeed do exactly that.

The Traders and Ratepayers certainly tried to reenergise their own campaign<sup>159</sup>. Meeting in September the Association reported that their officers had written to Government Departments and to Ministers expressing their concern but had had little more than holding replies. The Ministry of Health and the UGC had essentially only confirmed their approval and commitment to the scheme. The Association recognised that the fact that they had not been able to present a firm statement of general public opinion at the enquiry had counted against them. In fact, they suspected that such local opinion was at best apathetic or it was eager for the town to have access to the grant aid on offer. The idea of putting up candidates – or at least to ensure that electors were aware of candidates' positions – at the forthcoming November elections was canvassed but rejected. Mr T J Pugh was of the opinion that people would not poll on a single issue. In the end, the Association, noting that tenders for the major contracts related to the scheme were due to come before the council in a matter of a few more weeks, wrote to the Council respectfully urging the Council to rescind the baths scheme 'in view of the urgent need for economy, national and local...' They also encouraged members of the Association to attend the next Council meeting.

At that meeting in September, Tolley presented, for approval, tenders submitted for the main works of the project – the construction of the baths building and separate tenders for each of the heating and the filtration plant. The fact that there were seventeen tenders received for the construction work itself highlights, perhaps, the dearth of work in that sector. The Traders and Ratepayers Association resolution was also before the Council. Tolley was at some pains to underline that, consistent with the requirement of the UGC grant, some preliminary work clearing the site and putting in sewers and water mains was underway. He also indicated that the obligation to take unemployed people from the unemployment register for the main works would be met. The burden of his argument was that the Council could address the pressing crisis of unemployment and at the same time provide the town with a necessary and valuable long term asset by pressing on with the project.

The Mayor supported the resolution. He recognised the anxiety about unnecessary expenditure but the grant aid would allow, he felt, the replacement of the Mill Street Baths, which disgraced the town, with a more productive asset. The town would look absurd in the eyes of the world if, after going through the enquiry process and even beginning preliminary works, they were to act as their predecessors almost half a century earlier had done and simply abandon the idea.

The Deputy Mayor (Geoffrey Tomkinson, son of the redoubtable Michael) took a contrary view; the national financial crisis had worsened since the scheme had been approved and he had no faith that this sort of project would really hire local labour. In any event he took the view that spending public



money on schemes such as this with the aim of bringing down unemployment had been shown not to work. He proposed an amendment to the effect that the scheme be deferred for twelve months. George Eddy spoke, concentrating largely, as previously, on the current, and growing scale of the national economic crisis and the need to reduce public expenditure in the light of this. He envisaged national unemployment growing from the then level of 2.8 million to over three million within a few months. He clearly saw no role for public spending in reducing this though conceded, presumably as a matter of vital social services, that new slipper baths might be provided. Alderman Griffin took the view that the argument from those favouring the resolution were those of the failed Labour Government which has been the very cause of the current crisis. He supported the amendment.

As indeed, just, did the majority of his colleagues. The amendment proposing a deferment was approved by 12 votes to 11<sup>160</sup>.

Tolley said with some bitterness that the decision had made a laughing stock of his committee. With mounting sarcasm he suggested that Members voting for the amendment should be congratulated on achieving that end. Councillor Grosvenor assured Tolley that the twelve members who had voted for deferment did fully appreciate the effort that has been made by the committee. Tolley, with the endorsement of the mayor, took the opportunity to pay particular tribute to the work to date of the Borough Surveyor, on the scheme.

The revolving door of approval and rescinding of the baths proposal did not seem to have generated any great hullabaloo outside the Chamber – as noted the Traders and Ratepayers had found public opinion apathetic. This last decision did at least stimulate one angry letter to the Shuttle which took issue with what the writer saw as the decision of the Council to turn a deaf ear to the new National Government's appeal to local authorities to continue schemes aimed at alleviation of unemployment. The writer expressed the desire that at the very least a scheme to replace the slipper baths should continue.

It was clear however that the supporters of the entire bath scheme were not wholly daunted by the vote in September. The precise discussions – in more smoke filled rooms, perhaps, are veiled to us, but it seems likely that they involved the Mayor, Louis Tolley and one, or more of the Brintons, at very least.

In any event at a meeting on October 14, the Mayor announced that he would be calling a special meeting of the Council to consider the Baths issue<sup>161</sup> – and specifically the availability of grant aid – with this meeting to take place on October 20. The rationale for this appeared to be further communication between the Baths Committee and the UGC had indicated that if the UGC could be assured by November 1 that the works would begin by mid November then their offer of grant aid would stand. Otherwise the assumption was that the grant would not remain available after the proposed twelve months deferment and would be lost to the scheme and the town. The case for a special meeting seemed to be to ensure that all members were fully apprised of the grant position in reaching a very final decision. It does appear however that there may have been a less high minded purpose.

The proposal for the special meeting caused some lively debate about its appropriateness and procedural niceties. There was a suggestion that any further discussion be held back until after the approaching Council elections at the beginning of November. The country was by now also in the throes of a general election campaign with that election itself scheduled for October 27. However the expectation was that the national election would bring about a change in Government and might



mean that the financial support for the scheme would be withdrawn. The 'Baths' party saw the risk in any deferment. In the event and despite misgivings, the special meeting was agreed.

By this time the phrases 'Town Council' 'baths' and 'heated discussion' must have been permanently set up by the Shuttle's printers, and the meeting on October 24 did not disappoint in this regard. The event opened with issues of standing orders being bandied back and forth across the Chamber. Alderman Griffin argued that the 'five days clear notice' had not been followed. The mayor insisted that he had followed procedures in exercising his prerogative to call meeting. Griffin was continuing to make his case, when another member cited a recent example when this prerogative had been used.

'There were no Socialists in power then' said Griffin

'Don't talk idiotic' came an anonymous retort 'they are not in power now.'

'A good job too' said Griffin. A further attempt to intervene by Griffin prompted another anonymous request that he 'be a sportsman.'

The issue about standing orders was something of a smokescreen (issuing from another set of smoke filled rooms, perhaps). The Deputy Mayor, who had put down the resolution deferring the baths at the previous meeting, was away on holiday; the baths proponents were back at full complement (one member had missed the previous vote) and also had the mayors casting vote if required. Lyndon Johnson, when he led the Democratic Party in the US Senate, famously remarked that the most important thing in politics was the ability to count. With only 23 votes at stake, the arithmetic in the Kidderminster Council Chamber was not too demanding. There was now a majority, on the day, for the Baths side.

This was confirmed when Tolley moved that the minute from the previous council deferring the Baths scheme be rescinded. This was passed by 12 votes to 11<sup>162</sup>.

Tolley then moved that the tenders for the elements of the work which has been provided to the previous meeting be approved. Councillor Grosvenor, at the very least as dab a hand at arithmetic as President Johnson was to be, opened his speech by noting that on the basis of the vote to rescind the minutes this resolution would be passed but wished to make a range of points. As chairman of the Finance Committee, he had brought forward the very first resolution almost a year before, promoting the baths scheme – and it had lost. He admitted that he had now changed his mind. In that first instance, the intention has been to support the Government and its desire to reduce unemployment. He has now come to believe that the approach he argued for them was misguided and that the Baths project – a luxury not a necessity – should not proceed.

He aimed his arguments at his fellow Conservative members in the hope that those who continued to support the scheme might have a considered change of heart similar to his own. He had especially hard words for the Mayor, and the prospect of the scheme being passed by his casting vote. His mayoralty, Grosvenor said, 'would be disgraced by the fact of the scheme being pushed through'. He proposed that the Mayor be asked to call a town meeting to obtain the views of the ratepayers.

For other members, these debates had taken on some of the character of a long running theatrical drama. They spoke the familiar lines that they had uttered on previous occasions. George Eddy spoke of the national economic crisis; others referred to the absence of popular support for the scheme; yet others returned to the theme of the civic disgrace that the Mill Street baths presented and the dismal account they gave of the ambition of the town.



Grosvenor's motion for a town meeting was lost – by 12-11. Griffin gave notice that he would bring a resolution that that decision be rescinded to the next Council meeting. This left Tolley to wrap up the debate on the tenders. He appreciated the support from across the board within the Council and insisted that his championing of the Baths was not a political matter but geared, as was that of all those supporting it, on the real needs of the community. He particularly appreciated the support of the Mayor. His resolution was carried.

As the meeting concluded there was some discussion of the final sealing of the contract. The view appeared to be that the results of this vote needed to be communicated to the UGC so that they could finally be in position to finalise their offer of grant. Griffin asked if the matter would then come before the Council at its next meeting in November. Grosvenor insisted that no contracts could be sealed before the final decision of the UGC.

The general election held on October 27 ended in a victory for the coalition national government but it resulted in a de facto Conservative administration (with Conservatives holding 470 seats (having gained 210) and Labour and its allies reduced to a rump of 52 -from over 240) in the House of Commons. The Baths issue, lively as it was in the Council Chamber doesn't seem to have had any bearing (or airing) during the general election campaign in Kidderminster which perhaps suggests that it was seen as a purely a local government issue – the fact that the proposal had cross-party support in the Council Chamber may also have muted it as a consideration.

The Town Council elections held a few days after the general election, though, mirrored its results - all of the four Labour candidates lost. The Shuttle attributed this to the national problems facing Labour rather than local issues. Louis Tolley was faced by candidate who did make something of the Baths situation - the other Labour candidates didn't have this explicitly to contend with. Tolley lost on a very high turnout by a mere 29 votes (1003 to 974). Opposing him was T J Pugh who, curiously, had advised the Traders and Ratepayers against making the Baths an issue in the local elections – and then went on successfully to do just that in his campaign against Tolley.

As a result of the Town Council elections, the arithmetic in the chamber had changed significantly. Alderman Griffin had already advised his intention to try to strike out the October decisions and looked to carry this out. A motion over his name appeared on the Council agenda for the November meeting seeking that the resolution regarding the baths be rescinded and that the subject be put in abeyance for twelve months. However when the Council did meet they were advised that Griffin wished to substitute another motion. This was because following the October resolution, contracts had in fact been sealed and compensation would be due to contractors if the Council were to withdraw. ( The Borough Surveyor, himself, had been instructed by the Baths Committee on October 28 to have Thomas Vale and Co., the successful contractors, begin work as soon as the UGC grant was confirmed<sup>163</sup>.) Griffin now said that their aim must be to give the baths scheme every assistance and try to carry it out without an increase in the rates by finding savings in other ways.

The resolution he did submit included the words 'the present Council wish to protest against the methods adopted to rush it through' while accepting that it was too late to alter but also insisting that the September decision to defer the scheme should have been maintained. This time the debate was not overly heated, though some members were all for taking the consequences of abandoning the contract while others were proud to have committed themselves to it. George Eddy, noting that they all just left the Annual Remembrance Day service, hoped that they had not returned to the Chamber to institute a recrimination day. Members, he said, were aware of his opposition to the baths; but they should now move on. He would not vote for the motion. Griffin concluding the debate asked for a unanimous vote in support<sup>164</sup>. He did not get it. The motion was



carried by twelve votes to eight. All of the members of the pro-baths group who remained on the council voted against – with the exception of the Mayor who was clearly looking to stand above the fray.

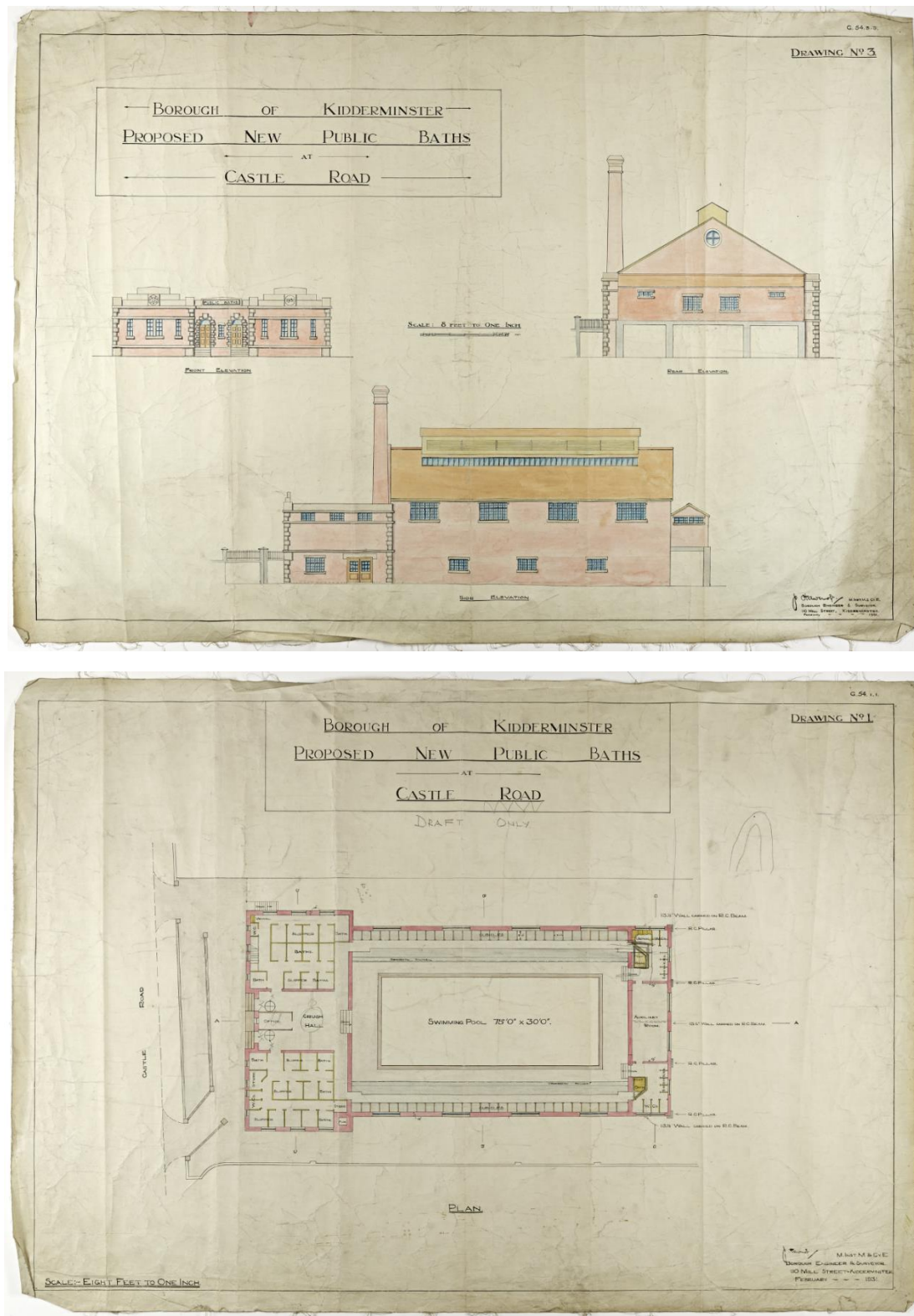


Figure 24. Exterior and Interior plans for Castle Road Baths – 1931



## Chapter 11 Calm after the storm

George Eddy, mindful perhaps of the notion that ‘time heals all wounds’, sought to expedite the healing process by quickly offering to donate, to the Baths Committee, a pair of clocks to adorn the new Baths building<sup>165</sup>. There was rapid progress with the scheme and as the construction got underway a foundation stone laying ceremony took place on January 6 1932. The Baths Committee had commissioned such a stone the previous September, underlining their confidence and determination to proceed and had intended that it should bear the names of all of the Committee. A letter in the Shuttle after the final approval had suggested (with the author disavowing any support for Louis Tolley’s political leanings) that the stones should at least bear Tolley’s name<sup>166</sup>. In the event there were two stones, one bearing the name of the Mayor William Henry Stewart Smith and the other that of his wife, Violet. This was probably appropriate after all as, notwithstanding Tolley’s energy and passion for the project, it had perhaps been the willingness of the Mayor to use the raw political power his role gave him to push the scheme forward that finally made all of the difference. Both the Mayor and Councillor Meredith speaking at the stone laying acknowledged Tolley’s work in bringing the scheme forward – Tolley himself was not present.

Tolley was out of the public eye for some time— the King over the water as it were – but he did speak at the annual swimming gala when it was held in July<sup>167</sup>. He hoped that the new baths (then shortly to open) would generate an even greater enthusiasm for the activity and membership for the Club and the new baths would itself be a location for the gala in the future and for other competitive events.



*How the Kidderminster Shuttle reported the new Baths opening*





*Figure 25. Castle Road Baths - interior*

The baths themselves did open to a degree of enthusiasm and acclamation that must have seemed surprising given the vehemence of the arguments about the proposal through the previous year. The formal ceremony on August 20<sup>th</sup> included the Baths Superintendent, Joseph Insom and his family 'breaking the water' and swimming the first length in the new pool<sup>168</sup>. Alderman R S Brinton at the opening spoke highly of Louis Tolley's ardent advocacy. Tolley, he said, to applause, must be indulging in legitimate pride to see the scheme completed. He also commended Councillor Anton, Tolley's successor as chairman of the Baths Committee, who was not convinced initially of the benefits of the baths but, said Brinton, had thrown himself cordially into the work of carrying the scheme through. (Brinton also referred to the many Roman baths he had seen in various parts of the world which may account in some way for a curious joke piece on Roman bathing practices- attributed to Seneca- which appeared alongside the extensive coverage of the baths opening ceremony in the Shuttle.





*Figure 26. William Stewart Smith*

The Mayor in his speech said it had been a pleasure to do anything he possibly could for the good of the town. The erection of the baths was a move towards progression and an advertisement for the town. The Shuttle noted that at the opening those who opposed the baths combined with its protagonists to wish the undertaking success. It was a happy sign that all alike were prepared to sink their differences and to work for the highest good of the municipality.



*Mayor and guests at the opening ceremony*

One of those who had long expressed reservations was still finding issues to trouble him with regard to the baths. This was Alderman Griffin who initiated a slight spat in October 1932<sup>169</sup> taking issue with Councillor Grosvenor in his role as Chairman of Finance Committee over the way in which the actual loans for the baths had been raised back in the previous November. His attempt to censure Grosvenor in Council proved impossible as Grosvenor was absent from the meeting. Grosvenor then



took to the pages of the Shuttle to explain the matter, noting in passing that it was curious that Griffin should return to the issue after such a gap in time but so swiftly after Grosvenor had had occasion to offer some criticism of Griffin himself. Louis Tolley's two edged comments at the Golden Wedding celebration describing Griffin as someone who was always fighting spring swiftly to mind.

Tolley, himself, was keen to have the opportunity to reengage in tussles with Griffin but the electors of St George's Ward denied him the opportunity – he lost a fight for the seat there with Harry Cheshire in November.

Overall the entire debate on the Baths for the twelve months from November 1930 to November 1931 resembled nothing so much as a slow-motion penalty shoot-out with one side taking the lead, then being pulled back, then falling behind before emerging to a final breath taking triumph. To recap the sequence briefly; the baths proposal was endorsed by the Finance Committee in November then rejected by full Council in December. It was approved in January and again in April and then accepted by Government in July. It was rejected by the Council (or more properly, deferred) in September and then approved in October. A final attempt to overturn this decision failed in November. Then, by August 1932, the Baths were operating and everyone seemed delighted at the outcome. An extraordinary twenty months or so.

The failure of the Tempest Radford project back in 1887 was cited on a number of occasions during the permanent debate in 1931. I have suggested that in fact that scheme could never have been built on the budget Temple-Radford had anticipated. The scheme that was completed in 1932 was rather more modest in scale than the Jubilee project which had envisaged three sizeable swimming pools as well as Turkish Baths and slipper baths – the Castle Road baths had just one pool and no Turkish Baths facility. Tempest Radford's projected costs of £4,500 would have equated to some £9,000 in 1932 prices whereas the baths actually cost £20,000.

The Castle Road scheme did however confirm one issue that was current at Tempest Radford's time and for all of the subsequent debates on building a new baths – that new baths would never be built if all of the cost were to fall on the ratepayers. The proceeds of a local subscription fund or a generous benefactor which has been anticipated in the past as the source as a major slice of the funds required were replaced by 1931 by the contribution of the national exchequer in the light of the grave national and international economic crisis. This approach was, as we have seen a matter of deepest contention in 1931 – it would have been utterly inconceivable in 1887 that such funding might be available. This dramatically underlines just how the public debate on economic and social policy had changed in the intervening half century or so. (By precisely the same token though, it is just as striking to realise that the arguments on cutting public expenditure that raged in the Kidderminster council chamber in 1931 were to surface again in 2008 in the wake of the next comparable economic crisis.)





*Figure 27. The frontage of the Castle Road Baths has been retained as part of recent reuse of the site as a residential development*



## Chapter 12 Last Acts – and some last rites

Through 1932 the Baths Committee, in addition to supervising the building of the new baths, found their considerations turning to a very familiar issue. After the heat and light generated by the baths debate the most pressing matter was the steamy old chestnut of the Turkish Baths and specifically the costs of running the Turkish Baths at Mill Street for a tiny and shrinking group of paying customers. On December 10 it was announced that the Turkish Baths would be closed until further notice<sup>170</sup>. Clement Dalley wrote to the Shuttle, advising the Turkish Baths dwindling band of users that if they wanted to have the service maintained they would need to make their feelings known<sup>171</sup>.

The perilous situation of the Turkish Baths continued to be a focus of attention through 1933. The idea of replacing the Turkish Baths with foam baths was examined and such a facility was installed – but at Castle Road because the cost of necessary adaptations at Mill Street to accommodate them was seen as too high<sup>172</sup>. When this was being debated the possibility of simply subsidising the costs of transporting customers to Droitwich to use the medical baths facilities there was considered. Some members argued that the new baths and the costs incurred in building and operating them were essentially for the use and benefit of younger people in town. Older people used the Turkish Baths and were also entitled to some services at the baths.

Louis Tolley took advantage of the public platform that his chairmanship of the Swimming Club afforded him in these years. Speaking at the AGM in March 1933<sup>173</sup> he recalled that it was only three years since he had assumed that chair and the success in that time was extraordinary. He had confessed himself to be an agitator on behalf of the scheme at the previous AGM but was proud of what had been delivered and lauded the support of the swimming club membership and their contribution to that achievement.

Inside the Council Chamber the performance of the baths in terms of both use and finances was kept under close scrutiny – the view of individual members of those matters did seem to be deeply coloured by the position that they had taken in the decision to build the new baths in the first place. Supporters such as Councillors Ferguson, Todd and Austin had occasion to note the numbers swimming and the general enthusiasm for the baths; Councillor Grosvenor, in contrast, observed that the increase in receipts was paltry compared to the costs of operating and financing the facility<sup>174</sup>.

The issue of low usage of the pool in winter time exercised the Shuttle in January 1934. The editor noted that the idea of a temporary floor to cover the pool and allow alternative uses in the winter when swimming was not so popular had been raised when the construction of the baths was beginning but had not been pursued. Activities such as badminton and dancing both had eager adherents and might provide scope for lettings and income if such a floor was in place. The editor also noted that in Stafford the Council was enthusiastically promoting their baths facility by advertising it and having some success in increasing trade<sup>175</sup>. Might this be something that Kidderminster might consider. (The editor did not go so far as to suggest a suitable medium for such advertising but perhaps had in mind that a weekly newspaper with wide circulation in the town might be just the thing.)

The issue of better promotion of the baths was taken up a few months later in letters to the paper which brought to the surface a variety of issues which were debated in an inevitably somewhat



confused and contradictory manner - though all seemed to centre on increased popularity of swimming and of the facilities at Castle Road.

The Mill Street swimming pool had been kept on chiefly to provide swimming classes for school children. The small size and shallowness of the pool were suitable for the elementary schools (notwithstanding the observations of the Reverend Hodgkinson which were reported earlier) but not perhaps for older children. This matter was raised specifically by the Headmistress of the Girls' School in her letter to the paper. She notes that swimming was recommended as an activity in latest advice on physical education but she also mentioned the disruption that taking children to and from the pool in the middle of the school day created. She also mentioned in passing that many parents were reluctant to have their daughters use the open air baths. Other matters being raised at the time concerned the extent to which the existing use of the pool by school classes was preventing access by adults; by the extent to which the new pool seemed to be proving to be almost a visitor attraction in its own right with users arriving from as far afield as Worcester and Dudley – again crowding out local people (and ratepayers) from the pool which they were financing. Finally the wider popularity of water based leisure was being evidenced by a proliferation of private lidos in the area dampening enthusiasm for the open air baths. A number of these new lidos were attached to licensed premises which might have given pause for thought on safety grounds.

These developments were all discussed in a lively council debate initiated in June<sup>176</sup> by Councillor Tomkinson who was pressing for senior school children to be allowed to use the Castle Road baths for lessons at times when they were otherwise not heavily used. After a somewhat discursive debate, which took in many of these other issues, the council determined to make no change but to continue with the current arrangements.

In the course of the debate, Councillor Anton, still the Baths Committee chairman, volunteered a suggestion that it might be order to close the Mill Street baths and build a new small pool solely for swimming lessons at Castle Road. It's not clear whether he was being sincere or provocative – the Shuttle certainly thought the notion striking enough to conclude its report of the proposal with an exclamation point!

The Baths featured in the November elections that year. George Eddy, in his address to prospective electors specifically included his commitment to pressing for adaptations to the baths to provide a temporary floor for other wintertime activities<sup>177</sup> – a measure which he had, as he said, argued for time after time, and most recently in the previous July. He also included other commitments and his achievements while in office. Eddy was most unusual in this regard – as a professional business man he no doubt thought it as necessary to lay a proper prospectus before the electorate as he would do with his shareholders. (Other candidates tended to rely on very well worn address material going back to Victorian times which presented them as being urged by friends and acquaintances to stand and only in the light of this suppressing their natural modesty and reluctance enough to allow their name to go forward). Eddy's approach was even more remarkable as he was standing unopposed in that year.

The other significant development in the 1934 elections was the return to the council chamber of Louis Tolley, who, in many regards picked up at his first meeting in November exactly where he left off in 1931. He took issue with Eddy's presentation of the costs and losses of the baths - specifically the treatment of the financing costs. When the loans were paid off 'the baths would be seen as a great public asset'. Tolley was supporting the Baths Chairman Councillor Anton in insisting that the baths should be seen as a social service which couldn't be expected to generate a surplus- an



interesting view as Anton was, as he made clear, someone who had opposed the expenditure on the new baths when Tolley had first urged it upon the council.

The year 1935 saw the final closure of the Mill Street Baths. The effort to help manage the costs and losses of the Turkish Baths element has resulted in a scheme where season tickets would be bought in advance by customers but the numbers coming forward to buy a book of a dozen tickets were never even a full handful. The baths finally closed in October<sup>178</sup>. For a number of years as we have seen the baths resembled nothing more than a loyal ancient pet whose fate could never be long denied but whom ties of affection kept preventing the inevitable. Then the inevitable could be postponed no longer.

What had become apparent earlier in the year was that Councillor Anton's conversion to the merits of the baths was indeed genuine – and his proposal for a separate small pool for learners was quite serious. The Shuttle again dusted off the familiar lines of type and the headline 'the battle of the baths' was brandished one more time<sup>179</sup>.

The proposal for the small baths was a direct result of the closure of Mill Street and the concern that the Castle Road pool (over six feet deep at its maximum) was unsafe for the elementary school children. The suggestion also included enhanced foam baths but not, to the disappointment of some members, new Turkish Baths facilities.

In truth rather than a 'battle of the baths' the events of 1935 were more a final skirmish where the forces of sound financial management (as they saw themselves) were determined to resist any further incursion. George Eddy raised his standard of good business practice and argued that no rational accountant could contemplate undertaking further expenditure on baths when the most recent investment was clearly losing money. Eddy was supported particularly in his endeavours by Councillor Burcher. The other side of course had their own financial arithmetic. Councillor Anton maintained that avoiding the losses being made on Mill Street would more than pay the loan charges on the smaller pool. Louis Tolley argued that giving over more time and space to children's classes in the main pool at Castle Road would result adult users paying a higher price being displaced and income foregone.





*Figure 28. This aerial photograph from 1938 shows the Castle Road baths centre left facing Brinton's offices*

In essence, the position of Eddy and others was one of this far and no further with regard to baths provision – the previous campaign, he said, had provided the town with a Rolls Royce facility and now the baths committee was seeking a baby Austin to run alongside it. The rear guard resistance was almost as protracted as had been the case in 1931. The committee first brought their proposal for the small pool to Council in April. It was debated, then variously deferred and brought back in June, July and September and eventually defeated on the basis of a compromise that provided for the use of Castle Road for school swimming lessons, with some safety features, for an experimental period – but the matter was never revisited and the experiment became a permanent measure<sup>180</sup>.

A couple of points are intriguing. For the first time, with regards to a baths proposal the 'state of trade' was not invoked as a reason for avoiding expenditure. Eddy and his allies were happier to use the bulwark of the accounts as the basis of their case for resisting the investment. The fact is that by 1935, the town's economy seemed to have recovered well from the crisis of a few years earlier and so the old war cry might have had little impact. The massed forces of the Ratepayers and Traders did not feel the need to energise themselves against the proposal – perhaps assured that rational argument would see it off. On the other side of the argument, notwithstanding the fact that through 1935 some thought was being given to marking the Silver Jubilee of the accession to the throne of George V, no one raised the idea that the children's pool might be a way of marking that event. In previous decades every attempt had been taken to hang the baths proposals as celebration of some aspect or other of the reigning or late departed monarch's reign.



As the 1930s progressed, the baths, swimming and the swimming club generally became no more than a standard and unexceptional feature of the town's life. Castle Road hosted county swimming championships on a number of occasions which must have further underlined the quality of the facilities on offer. The swimming club's own gala drew competitors from outside the town and as well as the senior schools own annual competitions there was at least one works swimming club which had its own annual gala. There had been a sense in the early days that swimming, as a pure sport, was perhaps undervalued by many councillors. It was not seen as being as character building as was the hurly-burly of the football or rugby field but if that mood has existed the essential athleticism of the activity finally displaced it.

However in 1937, Louis Tolley was obliged to face one unavoidable fact – as popular as swimming had become it was not yet regarded as a winter activity. In the light of usage, the baths committee ( of which Tolley was again chairman) proposed that the baths close in future from October 1 to March 31. The Committee also moved on George Eddy's longstanding proposals to install a sectional floor which could be used to cover the pool through these winter months and allow the opportunity for other activities<sup>181</sup> (Tolley suggested badminton and dancing, and boxing was to become another). In responding to the proposal, Eddy felt obliged to remind Tolley that he has proposed this from the outset – and also noted the continuing losses of the baths operation. Tolley fell back on his long standing defence – the fact that the baths had to be regarded as a social service and that nowhere in the country did they fully cover costs.

The floor was installed and the baths, in their new winter role as an Assembly Hall were opened by George Eddy, who was Mayor, in October<sup>182</sup>. Eddy took the opportunity to remind those present of his own championing of such a facility even though he had resisted the original baths proposal. He also provided a brief but thorough resume of the financial challenges that the baths presented.

The arrival of the Castle Road baths had left the other of the town's swimming facilities exposed in more sense than one. The reluctance of parents at the Girls Grammar School to allow their daughters to swim there was noted already. When the council was debating the notion of a children's pool in 1935, Alderman Grosvenor had noted that although the Foley Park baths might still be the largest open air pool in the Midlands they could no longer claim that it was the finest. Though people might delight in open air swimming, he acknowledged that the water looked unappetising compared to that in the new baths. Alderman Griffin had long before noted the poor appearance of the water – a 'pea-souper'- on a number of occasions in debate. Finally there has been the arrival in the area of competition for the open air swimming market with the opening of a number of lidos – George Eddy had referred to six of these -with one reported as costing £25000- in the council debate. One of these was attached to the Dog public house in Harvington and marketed itself as catering 'for those people who value personal hygiene and are just a little particular with whom they bathe' and as a place where you could be sure of meeting 'a select crowd.' Thus, distinguishing itself, perhaps, from the elderly and less appealing facilities on the Stourport Road.

Announcing the closure of the open air baths<sup>183</sup>, Tolley, once again Chairman of the Baths Committee said they were forced to the decision after long consideration – there were falling numbers using it and at the same time putting it into the best of order would require investment they were not prepared to make. He acknowledged that the water had become contaminated from time to time but it had always been free from disease. The baths, he said, had served their purpose but that purpose no longer existed and the site could be put to other uses. Its ownership was transferred to the Estates and Development Committee.



It is worth noting perhaps that the matter that was most exercising the mind of the Council as the open air baths did close was the need again for huge investment in the management of another new sewerage scheme – this time one that would be commissioned jointly with Bewdley and Stourport with a cost of some £162,000. As the Stourport Road reservoir was retired for the second time, that matter, the need for an effective, modern sewerage system, which had brought it into being almost 70 years previously, was once again at the head of public concern.

The Mill Street baths were demolished in 1935 and the site developed by local coach operators, Whittles, as a garage for their fleet. The site is now occupied by a fitness centre which is at least slightly appropriate to its historic use.



*Figure 29/ 30. The Whittles garage built on the Mills Street baths site is on the extreme right of this photograph with their name board above the large doors. The photograph dates from c 1960.*



*Whittles garage is in the very centre of this aerial photograph – again the light name board just about identifies it.*





*The former Baths Location in Mill Street in 2019 ( there is something oddly appropriate that, once again, it houses activities devoted to health and wellbeing)*

The old reservoir site however remained undeveloped until 1957 when the decision was taken by the Drainage and Waterworks Committee that, in light of the shortage of housing land, the approval of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government be sought for appropriation of the site for housing purposes<sup>184</sup>. The Borough Surveyor reported in October 1957<sup>185</sup> that the site had been drained and the Ministry's approval was forthcoming in June 1958. Some seventy houses were eventually built on the site in the early part of the 1960s<sup>186</sup>.

Louis Tolley, Alderman Tolley by this time, was still a member of the Council (he had been since his re-election 1934, serving as Mayor three times and he had also been the MP for Kidderminster from 1945-50) as indeed was Alderman Sir George Eddy. Tolley was, in fact, chairman of the Baths Committee and a member of the Drainage and Waterworks Committee which finally sealed the old reservoir's fate as it were. One can't but wonder if a wry smile crossed his face at the very final departure of the pool that had played quite a signal role in the early days of his long political career in the town.





*Figure 31. Some seventy houses including those above, extending Summer Road, were built on the drained reservoir and adjacent land in the early 1960s*



## Chapter 13 Taking the long, long view

The eighty or so years covered in this story, from the middle of the nineteenth century almost to the outbreak of the second world war were perhaps the first phase of a process of ever more rapid social and technological change that has, if anything, accelerated over the next eighty years that bring us to the present day.

With regard to technological development a striking pair of facts highlight the scale and range of that change. In 1851, Kidderminster was not even connected to emerging national railway network; by the early 1930s, the town council were giving serious thoughts to the idea of airfield to service the town. This wasn't wholly fanciful – directors and chairman of the leading carpet manufacturers were, by this time, travelling regularly to Australia, New Zealand and across the Atlantic maintaining and extending business. Making those journeys directly by air would have been an appealing option.

In terms of social change however, the process was, if anything, even more dramatic. The Mill Street Baths project was initiated by a member of the landed gentry motivated perhaps by a sense of noblesse oblige (and maybe by the opportunity to discomfort his Liberal political opponents). Their long debated replacement was led to final success by a man from the ordinary streets of the town anxious to provide services to the which the folk of Kidderminster were seen as being entitled (and, to be fair, no doubt, happy to discomfort his own political opponents.)

The change in the general political environment over those eighty years was huge. In 1862, there were only a few hundred ratepayers and voters, who (when early abandonment of the Baths was being pressed by the council to save money) volunteered the fact that they were happy to continue to bear the financial burden for the greater public good. Within a very few short years as the extension of the franchise brought more, and less well off, people into the electorate, the willingness to bear these sort of costs was diminishing as the response to the first proposals for a town sewage scheme and later Mayor Tempest Radford's Jubilee Baths made only too clear.

Another compelling change over the period was in the role and status of women. The Baths as public bathing facilities were clearly first conceived of as a service essentially for working men – the operatives. The 1851 Memorial and then the very limited provision of slipper baths for women that the baths provided makes this clear. By the 1880s however changes in carpet manufacturing were creating employment opportunities for women though they were paid less than were men (a development which provoked profound opposition from the male weavers). It was this radical change in the towns business circumstances which energised Tempest Radford and then Joseph Ray to provide enhanced bathing facilities for the growing number of working women- though these were very slow to actually be provided.

One might see this slight increase in the economic independence of women as leading to demands for better and more suitable access a range of other facilities and services in the town. It was certainly the case that women and girls began to expect to have the opportunity to use the Mill Street swimming pool- a modest but real advance towards equal opportunity. This fact, together with the eventual extension of the vote to women, brings together one other neat connection in our story. The Addenbrooke family were, in the 1890s, pressing the Baths Committee to improve access to the pool for the students at the Girls School. By 1935, Miss C E Addenbrooke had become in fairly short order, the first female town councillor and then the first female town mayor. (Though it should perhaps also be acknowledged that only one other woman was to occupy the position by



1973 and major local government reform which materially diminished the significance of the Town Mayor's role.)

The operations of swimming pools also give their own clear evidence of the changing relationship between the sexes. The early introduction of mixed bathing in the first decade of the twentieth century at the Open Air Pool was a singularly advanced move by the Town Council occurring long before it was allowed in what might be regarded as more sophisticated communities.

Much more generally, the baths' story illuminates changes in the role and purpose of education in the town. The financial support of the Education Committee for swimming lessons and the encouragement given to children to gain certificates does reveal the sense in which education was evolving, even in the elementary schools, from the rote of reading, writing and 'rithmetic to a wider development of the skills and ambitions of children (notwithstanding the somewhat unprepossessing environment of the Mill Street pool as reported by the Reverend Hodgkinson).

The dilution of some previously fixed social attitudes can also be detected. The decision from the outset in 1855 to open the Baths for a limited period on Sunday morning met opposition that was defeated in the Town Council but even in 1930 allowing the open air pool to operate on Sunday morning was contentious. The requirements of Sunday observance may have been reducing but were far from abandoned.

The First World War was of course a profound experience for the town and the nation. One of the most evident and rapid consequences was the further extension of the franchise (including an initially limited scope for women to vote) and allied to this, no doubt, the election of a small number of Labour Party councillors. It was the energy and determination of this group, and Louis Tolley, in particular, that brought about the new baths scheme. It could not have been achieved without the whole hearted support of other members of different political positions who clearly felt that Kidderminster would never be recognised as a forward looking town with the dilapidated Victorian facilities were provided in Mill Street. The view that the quality of community and public facilities together with the sense of place that these engendered were significant benchmark for the town had been emerging through the last decades of the nineteenth century. The fact that the Town Council had to take this board and organise the resources to achieve these standards was perhaps first fully realised with the tangled debates over the Castle Road baths in 1930-31.

Tolley, and the Labour Group, were determined to present the new Baths projects as bringing an essential social service to the town. It is almost certainly the case that for them it was something of a second best goal. They would far rather have tackled the housing conditions in the town, resolving far deeper social problems through better houses for rent but they seized the opportunity that the Baths presented.

Then there was, as noted in the introduction, the Council and the town's great shibboleth 'the state of trade'. There seems little doubt that the collapse in economic activity and the dramatic experience of depopulation, through the 1850s, in the wake of the power loom crisis, left those who experienced it gravely scarred. The civic and business leaders through the following half century carried that experience and memories of it with them and no doubt every individual business failure in the town reawakened anxieties about the possibility of a new collapse and contraction. The sense of vulnerability left many with an easily stirred sense of pessimism (if business were bad, nothing should be done to make it worse; but if it wasn't bad now, any action might undermine the brief good times).



Those with the opportunity to form a fuller perspective had a quite different impression. The Reverend Richard Burton, from his vantage point as headmaster of Kidderminster School, set down in his History of Kidderminster a quite different scene, Looking back in 1890 to changes since the 1860s he reported the long view that saw that 'trade increased to an enormous extent. Many acres of ground were covered with large and well appointed factories, affording employment to thousands of workers and keeping the builders busy in the erection of new streets.'

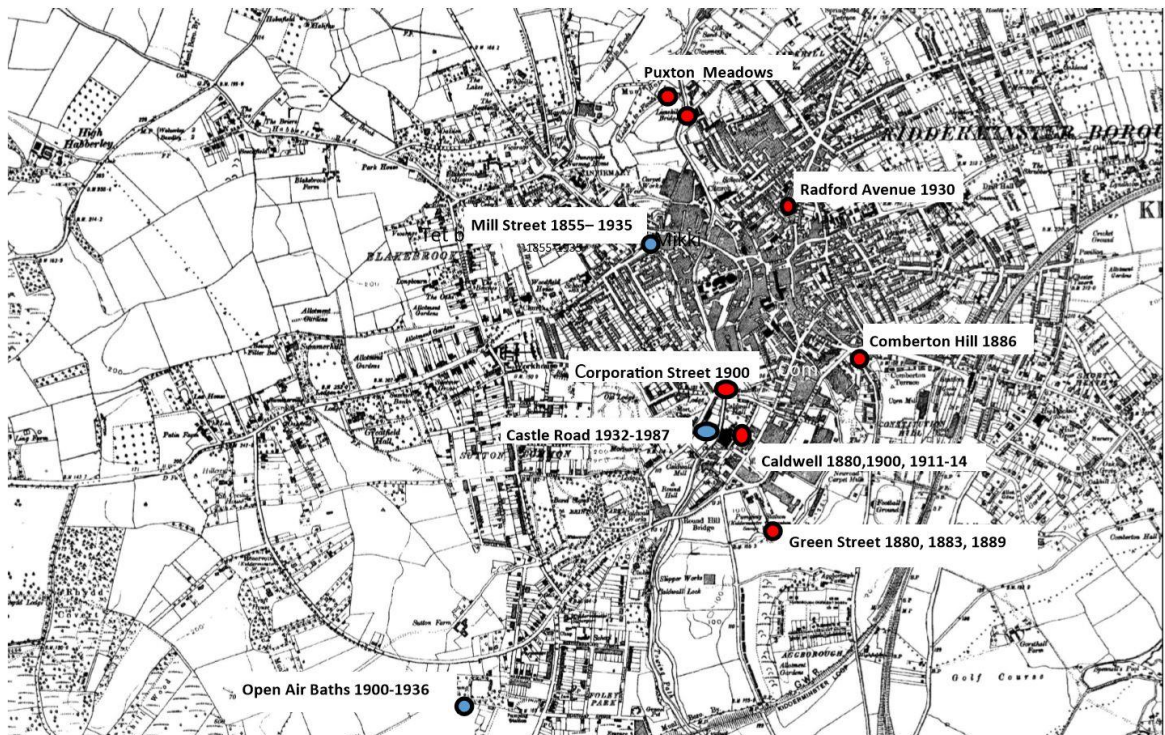
By the 1930s, the 'state of trade' had perhaps been overtaken as a benchmark for activity for the town council by George Eddy's brisk managerial approach with a firm eye on the civic balance sheet and profit and loss. What also emerged was a sense of the town council having increasing responsibility not just for the hard infrastructure (the sewage and water management systems) that has absorbed so much energy and capital up to then, but also for the softer elements of the community's life and well being – of which leisure, culture (and a swimming pool) were necessary components.

In conclusion then, the Town Council found itself unwittingly coping with radical and dramatic transformation as Kidderminster evolved over these eighty years from a place with an economic and social structure still clearly reminiscent of medieval times to become an industrial community. They had to achieve this with the limited financial and human resources available to them and with no real map to steer by (and a sense that the landscape was in such upheaval that any map would have been redundant as soon as it was drawn).

I hope this swimming pool saga fairly records the very interesting times they endured.



## Kidderminster Baths and Swimming Pools – 1855-1938



- Baths location 1851-1936 actual
- Baths locations 1851-1936 proposed



# Appendix 1 - Swimmers using Kidderminster swimming pools 1890-1937

1890	10197
1891	12364
1892	9967
1893	12052
1894	8877
1895	12111
1896	9389
1897	7788
1898	14164
1899	15018
1900	13733 ( includes 284 users of Open Air Pool – September/October)

	Mill Street	Open Air – Stourport Road
1901	12236	8783
1902	11218	4770
1903	13133	2221
1904	12528	4797
1905	14704	4964
1906	13707	4916
1907	13267	2829
1908	14686	4566
1909		
1910	14167	3764
1911	15780	10085
1912	14582	3746
1913	16210	4708
1914	*	
1915	*	
1916	*	
1917	*	

- Figures for some of the War years are distorted by uses by troops and reservists

1918	15060	5813
1919	13859	11190
1920	12124	6816
1921	15661	19827
1922	11189	11178
1923	11118	8939
1924	13117	6760
1925	15576	12185
1926	16958	12167
1927	17344	7133
1928	16773	13961
1929	19324	7278
1930	18606	20732
1931	19082	13719



	Mill Street	Open Air Baths	Castle Road
1932	19491	23547	12963*
1933	15323	15570	34033
1934	13284	15344	30472
1935	12955	14684	26483
1936		7214	24189
1937			49026

\*Castle Road Baths opened August 20 1932

By way of comparison, the pool at the Wyre Forest Leisure Centre at Silverwoods had ‘casual users’ at an annual level of some 100,000 early 2018 – ‘casual users’ excludes school classes, swimming club users and other specialised activities.



## **Appendix 2**

### **Brief biographies of some of the personalities who played a significant role in the story of Public Baths.**

#### **Henry Chellingworth**

Henry Chellingworth (1818-1865) was a substantial land owner with his home at Park Atwood, Trimpley, a few miles outside Kidderminster. The 1851 Census records him as being a landowner with six children, a household of seven staff and the same number of agricultural workers working an estate of 500 acres. He was only recently elected to the Town Council in 1851 when he initiated the process leading to the building of the Mill Street baths. He was, for some years afterwards, a significant figure in local Conservative political circles which may have been the reason he was charged (together with his brother in law, Alfred Talbot) with a role in inciting the riot which followed the general election hustings in 1857 when the victorious Liberal candidate was attacked by a murderous mob and severely injured. Chellingworth was acquitted of any offence. His sudden death was reported in February 1865 when he was described as a resident of Amer ( India) though his death took place in London.

#### **George Holloway**

George Holloway (1819-1904) was the son of a veteran of the Battle of Trafalgar whose long involvement in both the commercial and the public life of the town together with his approach to his responsibilities in both fields saw him awarded the soubriquet 'Honest George'. He was a leading light in the 1840s in local activity in the Chartist movement, a national campaign to extend the franchise and effect other political reform, which failed in the short term although most of its objectives were ultimately delivered. He worked variously as a weaver, then a manufacturer in the carpet industry and a publican ( where political machinations regarding his Chartist activities resulted in his license being withdrawn) before going into business as an auctioneer. First elected to the town council in 1853, he served, with some occasional interruptions, until his death in 1904

#### **John Brinton**

John Brinton (1827-1914) joined the family carpet business at the age of 15 and became a partner only six years later (on achieving the age of 21 and the legal powers to act in such a role). His father and elder brother ( both Henry) each died in 1857 and as a result he took on the direction of the company which he did with huge success steering it to a role as the dominant company in the town and its carpet business which it continued to occupy for a century after his death. He served as Liberal MP for Kidderminster between 1880-86 but split from the Gladstone wing of the party in opposition to Gladstone's policies on Irish Home Rule. He donated the site of Brinton Park to the town in 1887 as a memorial to his wife.

His sons Reginald ( 1869-1942) and Cecil ( 1883-1970) ran and maintained the reputation of the business after John stepped down and also continued the tradition of public service to the town with each being long standing councillors and each serving as Mayor.



### **Edward Parry**

Edward Parry (1828-1926). Parry, born in Stratford upon Avon, came to Kidderminster in 1855 to be minister at the New Meeting Chapel. In 1871 he founded the Kidderminster Shuttle, a weekly newspaper which first appeared in February of that year. The paper was a steadfast supporter of the Liberal Party and the political lines in both national and international affairs promoted by William Gladstone. Parry gave up the editorship of the paper in 1890 and devoted himself to a deep engagement in local politics and civic affairs. He was a member of the Town Council for many years and was Mayor in 1900 and 1901.

### **Samuel Stretton**

Samuel Stretton (1831-1920) served as a surgeon in the Crimean War and then came to Kidderminster where he was chief surgeon at the Infirmary for many years. He was very active in promoting issues of public health as the town grew seeking to ensure that wider issues other than simply business and commercial requirement shaped policy.

### **Thomas Tempest Radford**

Thomas Tempest Radford ( 1835-1901) was a Derbyshire man and an engineer who had business interests in Kidderminster related to both iron works ( Stour Vale) and the carpet industry including the Carpet Manufacturing Company. He was mayor in 1875 and in 1876, when the new Town Hall was opened, as well as in 1887 which saw his painful experience with the Golden Jubilee Baths project.

### **Michael Tomkinson**

Michael Tomkinson ( 1841-1921) was yet another individual who combined great business acumen with a deep commitment to wider public service in the town. He had founded a rug making business with William Adams in 1869 but his great breakthrough came in dashing across the Atlantic ( as much as one could 'dash' in those sea-borne days) to secure patent rights to a Royal Axminster loom which was the basis of real prosperity for his business. He was member of the Town Council for thirty years and mayor on seven occasions becoming a freeman of the borough in 1916. He was instrumental in the conception and delivery of the Free Library which opened in 1894.

### **Thomas Griffin**

Thomas Griffin (1857-1944) was the son of Benjamin Griffin, a cobbler who served as parish clerk and sexton at St John's Church for some 35 years. Thomas Griffin had a wide range of business interests including housebuilding and ownership. He was first a freelance carpet designer with the firm of Edward Perrins and ran that business with Perrins' widow for some years. He later established the Empire Carpet Company (in 1907) and relocated it from the town centre to new premises in Foley Park in 1912. He was first elected to the Town Council in 1898 and was a member of the council for a total of forty years as a councillor, then as an Alderman (from 1923) and served as mayor in 1925/26.

### **Joseph Ray**

Joseph Ray (1858-1928) was born in St Neots, Huntingdonshire and relocated to Kidderminster as a young man. He was a baker and confectioner running his own business with a number of shops in the town. He was first elected to the Town Council in 1888 became an Alderman in 1907 and was Mayor in 1918 and 1919. He was also a county councillor and a longstanding JP



**George Eddy**

Sir George Eddy (1878-1967). Born and educated in Kidderminster, George Eddy joined the firm of B Hepworth and Company, which supplied chemicals to the carpet and other industries, rising to run the business after the death of the founder. He was a member of the council for forty years and sought generally to bring solid business principles to its finances and management. He was extensively involved in non-political community activities across the town including a long association with Kidderminster Harriers FC. He served as mayor on four occasions and became a Freeman in 1951 having been knighted in 1947

**W H Stewart Smith**

William Stewart Smith (1881-1937) was a member of another of the town's carpet dynasties. His father and grandfather had been owners of Richard Smith and Sons which had amalgamated with Mortons to form the Carpet Manufacturing Company in 1890. William Stewart Smith chaired this company from 1923 until his death and was both Town Councillor and Mayor as had been his father.

**Louis Tolley**

Louis Tolley (1889-1959) was an engineer by trade and served in a number of trades union and labour organisations before being one of the first Labour members of the council, elected with two party colleagues in 1919. He was the effective leader of the group on the council and was a member for much of the 1920s. He stood unsuccessfully for Parliament in the snap election of 1923 and was then continuously a member of the town council from 1934 until his death. Elected to Parliament as the member for Kidderminster for the 1945-50 Parliament, he had been Mayor of Kidderminster in 1941, 1942 and 1943, was an alderman and was honoured as a Freeman of the Borough in 1957.



## Notes and Sources

This has no pretensions to be a work of 'academic' history – my aim has been to do no more than to record, in an accessible detail, a rather fascinating story.

Mostly that story has been drawn from the Town Council and Committee minute books and from the reports in the local press – Berrows Worcester Journal and the Worcester Herald up to 1870 and then the Kidderminster Shuttle which made its first appearance in 1870. The Shuttle in those days provided an almost Hansard-like dedication to recording the debates in the Council Chamber. The Town Council and Committee minute books, substantial leather bound tomes and written in a variety of patient copper plate hands seem almost works of art themselves in these days of anonymous and characterless typescript.

I have tried to set down key dates and source in the main text as I progressed but below have noted references related to the some of key events should anyone want to track their way through the background. Any significant sources other than local press and the Council minutes are also flagged up below.

### Source Books

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A History of Kidderminster, Rev. John Richard Burton, Elliot Stock, 1890

Public Baths and Wash Houses, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, Constable, Edinburgh, 1918

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A History of Kidderminster, Nigel Gilbert, Phillimore and Co Ltd, 2004

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## Notes

KS – Kidderminster Shuttle

‘The State of Trade’

1. Reported in ‘A Social History of Swimming 1800-1918 p 55
2. See Public Baths and Wash Houses, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust

Testing the Water

3. Kidderminster Town Council Minutes, May 1851
4. Berrow’s Worcester Journal, July 3 1851
5. Berrows Worcester Journal, May 22 1851
6. See various Town Council minutes from 1835 onwards
7. See Kidderminster since 1800, p 9
8. Berrow’s Worcester Journal, August 14 1851
9. See A History of Kidderminster. pp 110
10. Worcester Herald, May 22 1852
11. Observations on Baths and Washhouses, Ashpita and Whichcord 1852
12. Baths and Wash Houses Committee, February 1853
13. Berrow’s Worcester Journal, June 18 1853, ‘The Weavers’
14. Worcester Herald, June 1853
15. Berrow’s Worcester Journal, July 7 1855
16. Town Council Minutes, August 1 1855
17. A History of Kidderminster, p 110 , Kidderminster since 1800 p 9
18. Town Council Minutes January, February 5 1862

Getting up a head of steam

- 19 See [www.victorianturkishbath.org](http://www.victorianturkishbath.org)
- 20 KS, 1 May 1875

Water, water, everywhere

- 21 [www.choleraandthethames.co.uk](http://www.choleraandthethames.co.uk)
- 22 Worcester Herald, Inspectors views, July 31 1869; Home Secretary’s decision November 20 1869
- 23 Kidderminster since 1800, p138
- 24 KS October 4 1877
- 25 KS, September 13 1879
- 26 KS October 11 1879, Baths Committee minutes September 1879, February 1880
- 27 Baths Committee Minutes, February, May, June, 1880
- 28 KS May 8 1880
- 29 KS August 5 1882
- 30 KS February 10, February 24 1883
- 31 KS May 5 1884
- 32 KS June 23 1884



- 33 Baths Committee Minutes Dec 14 1883
- 34 KS, March 22, Baths Committee Minutes 1884 1884 visits
- 35 KS, May 26 1877
- 36 KS, September 6 1884
- 37 Minutes of Drainage and Waterworks Committee, May 1885
- 38 See A Social History of Swimming 1800-1918, p12
- 39 KS April 17 1886
- 40 KS, June 12 1886

#### Jubilee - and an Insurrection

- 41 A History of Kidderminster, p 125-7
- 42 KS, January 15 1887
- 43 KS, January 8 1887
- 44 KS, Feb 5
- 45 KS, Feb 5 1887
- 46 KS, December 31 1887
- 47 Baths Committee Minutes February 14 1884
- 48 See Great Lengths – the historic indoor swimming pools of Britain pp 82-85
- 49 KS October 29 1887
- 50 KS July 6, 1889
- 51 Drainage Committee minutes April 1890
- 52 KS, April 12 1890

#### The Art of Natation

- 53 KS, Sept 13 1893
- 54 KS, September 22 1894
- 55 Baths Committee Minutes, April 23 1895
- 56 Baths Committee minutes, September 29 1895
- 57 See appendix 1
- 58 See Kidderminster since 1800 p 117
- 59 KS, June 27 1896
- 60 KS, February 27, 1897
- 61 KS May 8 1891
- 62 KS March 4 1899
- 63 KS June 3 1899
- 64 KS, July 8 1899
- 65 KS, July 22 1899
- 66 KS, August 1899
- 67 KS, September 16 1899
- 68 KS, May 19 1900
- 69 Baths Committee minutes, June 12 1900

#### Into the clear, fresh, open air

- 70 KS, September 15 1900
- 71 Baths Committee minutes, September 12 1900
- 72 KS May 4, May 11 1895



- 73 Baths Committee minutes, September 17 1900
- 74 Baths Committee Minutes, June 5, July 3, 1901
- 75 Baths Committee Minutes July 27 1901
- 76 KS August 31 1901
- 77 Baths Committee minutes 25 September 1901, February 12 1902
- 78 Baths Committee minutes November 20 1901
- 79 Baths Committee minutes June 9 1904
- 80 Baths Committee minutes October 8 1902
- 81 KS November, 15 1902
- 82 KS February 25 1903
- 83 KS, May 23 1903
- 84 Baths Committee minutes June 29 1904
- 85 Baths Committee minutes June 2 1902
- 86 Baths Committee minutes, May 27 1902
- 87 See <http://www.tmactive.co.uk/about-us/history-of-tonbridge-swimming-pool-from-1910> , The Spectator, July 18 1931 ( Open air swimming in London), Manchester Evening News, 17 July 2014 '100 years ago Withington Baths allowed mixed bathing! Here's a look back at Manchester's famous bathing spots...', A social history of swimming 1800-1918 pp 31-23, p72
- 88 KS March 24 1906
- 89 KS February 7 1906
- 90 KS May 18 1907

#### Battle rejoined

- 91 KS, 11 April 1909
- 92 KS June 12 1909
- 93 KS July 9 1909
- 94 Baths Committee minutes July 1909
- 95 Baths Committee minutes August 29 1910
- 96 Baths Committee minutes September 13 1910
- 97 KS, January 21 1911
- 98 Baths Committee minutes, July 1 1911
- 99 Baths Committee minutes, September 12
- 100 KS September 2 1911
- 101 Baths Committee minutes September 26 1911
- 102 Baths Committee minutes September 12 1911
- 103 KS September 30 1911
- 104 Baths Committee minutes December 1913
- 105 KS, January 17 1914
- 106 Baths Committee June 23 1914
- 107 KS, September 26 1914

#### War ... and the consequences of peace

- 108 Baths Committee minutes October 6 1914, November 10 1914



109 Baths Committee minutes October 3 1916  
 110 Public Baths and Wash Houses, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust  
 111 Table IXE, Public Baths and Wash Houses, Carnegie  
 112 Table IIIE, Public Baths and Wash Houses, Carnegie  
 113 KS, November 10 1917  
 114 KS, November 17 1917  
 115 KS, July 27 1918  
 116 KS, September 21 1918  
 117 Baths Committee minutes, 24 February 1919  
 118 KS, March 8 1919  
 119 KS, March 1 1919  
 120 KS, April 19 1919  
 121 KS, May 31 1919  
 122 KS October 25 1919  
 123 KS, December 13 1919  
 124 KS, February 8 1920  
 125 KS April 28 1923  
 126 KS, March 21 1923  
 127 KS, August 25 1924  
 128 KS, July 25 1925  
 129 KS, October 17 1925  
 130 Baths Committee minutes, January 18, 1927  
 131 Baths Committee minutes February 4 1927  
 132 KS, August 3 1929  
 133 KS, November 16 1929

‘A very expensive man’

134 See appendix 1  
 135 Baths Committee Minutes, November 28 1929  
 136 Baths Committee Minutes, December 24 1929  
 137 KS, January 30 1930  
 138 KS, March 8 1930  
 139 KS, April 12 1930  
 140 See Liquid Assets  
 141 KS May 3 1930  
 142 KS May 31 1930  
 143 Baths Committee minutes, February 18 1930  
 144 KS, June 28 1930  
 145 KLS July 26 1930  
 146 Baths Committee minutes September 2 1930  
 147 KS October 15, October 22 1930  
 148 Baths Committee minutes October 21 1930  
 149 KS December 13 1930  
 150 KS, December 6 1930  
 151 KS December 13 1930  
 152 KS January 10 1931  
 153 KS, March 7 1931  
 154 KS April 4 1931



155 KS April 18 1931  
 156 KS June 6 1931  
 157 KS June 27 1931  
 158 Baths Committee minutes, July 7 1931  
 159 KS, September 19 1931  
 160 KS, September 19 1931  
 161 KS, October 17 1931  
 162 KS, October 24 1931  
 163 Baths Committee minutes October 28  
 164 KS, November 14 1930

#### Calm after the storm

165 KS January 9 1932  
 166 KS November 21 1931  
 167 KS July 23, 1932  
 168 KS, August 20 1932, August 27 1932  
 169 KS, October 15 1932

#### Last Acts- and some last rites

170 KS, December 10 1932  
 171 KS, December 24 1932  
 172 KS, February 24 1933  
 173 KS ,March 4 1933  
 174 KS, April 1 1933  
 175 KS, January 13 1934  
 176 KS, June 30 1934  
 177 KS, October 27 1934  
 178 KS, October 19 1935  
 179 KS, April 6 1935  
 180 KS, September 21 1935  
 181 KS, February 6 1936  
 182 KS, October 16 1937  
 183 KS, April 9 1938  
 184 Drainage and Waterworks Committee 10 September 1957  
 185 Drainage and Waterworks Committee, 10 October 1957  
 186 Estates and Development Committee, June 1958

#### Sources of Images and Plans

Figure 1– Royal Institute of British Architects

Figure 2 – Welcome Collection

Figure 3 – Baths and wash-houses, Bilston, near Birmingham: with a plan and key to the buildings. Wood engraving, 1852. Credit: [Wellcome Collection](#). [CC BY](#); Ashpitel and Whichcord *Observations on Baths and Wash-houses* (1851)



Figure 4 – Wyre Forest District Council/ Worcestershire County Archive and Archaeological Service

Figure 5 – Robert Barber

Figure 5 – Robert Barber/ Bob Millward

Figure 6- Punch Magazine

Figure 7 – Kidderminster Town Council

Figure 8 – Robert Barber, Bob Millward

Figure 9 – Michael Loftus

Figure 10 – Robert Barber

Figure 11- Robert Barber, Bob Millward

Figure 12- Michael Loftus

Figure 13- Robert Barber, Bob Millward

Figure 14 – copyright Ordnance Survey, [www.old-maps.co.uk](http://www.old-maps.co.uk)

Figure 15 - Melvyn Thompson

Figure 16- Robert Barber

Figure 17 - Wyre Forest District Council/ Worcestershire County Archive and Archaeological Service

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Figure 22– Robert Barber

Figure 23- copyright Historic Environment Scotland

Figures 24- Wyre Forest District Council/ Worcestershire County Archive and Archaeological Service

Figure 25– Robert Barber

Figure 26 -Kidderminster Town Council

Figure 27 – Michael Loftus

Figure 28- copyright Historic Environment Scotland

Figure 29/30 – Melvyn Thompson

Figure 31 – Michael Loftus



