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Industrial Heritage (Part 2)

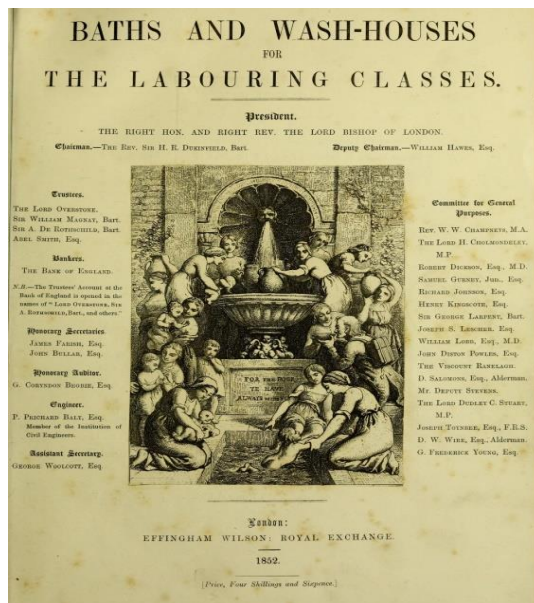
Public Baths Providing Health, Hygiene and Exercise

The *Baths and Wash-Houses Act of 1846* signalled a significant modification in Victorian attitudes towards public health. The poor health and condition of the labouring classes was increasingly raising governmental concerns at both the local and national levels. The provision of municipal public baths, stimulated by central government financial aid, announced a new age of social reforms intended to improve the physical and moral condition of the urban-industrial population.



Victoria Baths: Manchester Water Palace (Source Manchester Libraries Local Collection)

However, the ideology of *laissez-faire* economics and the notion of non-intervention in provincial politics, proved to be a hindrance. In 1852, government support for the scheme was stimulated by the *Committee for Promoting the Establishment of Baths and Wash-Houses for the Labouring Classes*. The committee's remit was to stimulate the local provision of public baths by providing advice and guidance on the financial viability of such establishments. The inclusion of facilities for swimming became a cornerstone in the uptake of the bath and wash-house scheme.



Committee for Promoting the Establishment of Baths and Wash-Houses for the Labouring Classes, 1852

By 1850 the ‘twin towns’ of Manchester and Salford had 4 privately owned public baths. Manchester had 3 baths and wash-house establishments: The Dolphin, Miller Street, and Miles Platting Baths. Salford had one establishment, the extensive Adelphi Baths. The *Dolphin Swimming Baths*, in the Red Bank district of Manchester was in annual use between May and September. Council owned, *Manchester Baths and Wash-houses*, was housed in a converted building on Miller Street, near Angel Meadows. It drew on water from an adjoining filtering pond in a manufacturing district of Manchester that contained slum housing. The *Miles Platting Baths and Wash-house* was situated in the working-class district of Miles Platting, North Manchester. The baths, built by local philanthropist Sir Benjamin Heywood, contained facilities for laundering, private bathing, and swimming.

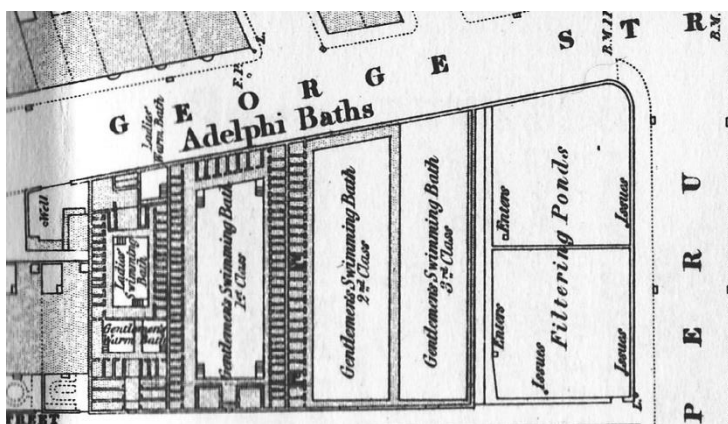


Figure 3 The Adelphi Baths built 1835 by private investment

The *Adelphi Baths*, situated in the middle-class district of Adelphi in Salford, had 3 swimming baths for males and one for females. The establishment also had private bathing facilities for both sexes. This extensive bathing facility was supplied with water from an adjoining filtering pond used by the Adelphi Silk Dye works.

The provision of municipal public baths was heavily dependent upon being financially viable. Local government tended to undertake such schemes only when it was fiscally prudent to do so. Hence, there was a patchwork pattern of provision nationally throughout the second-half of the 19th century. Lancashire benefitted more than any other provincial region due to the wealth of its cotton mill-towns, the social pressures caused by overcrowded urban-industrial districts, and the philanthropic donations of its wealthy industrialists. Manchester and Salford Corporations opted to permit public baths provision to be delivered by the *Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundry Company*. Their first establishment opened in 1856 in Salford, and was followed in 1857 by a second in the Mayfield district of Ardwick, Manchester; and a third facility in the Hulme district of Manchester in 1860.



Greengate Baths



Mayfield Baths



Leaf Street Baths

Source: *Manchester Libraries Local History*

The larger mill-towns of south-east Lancashire opted to build and manage their own establishments. In contrast to the approach taken by Manchester and Salford, many of Lancashire's wealthiest mill-towns elected to promote national health reforms through a raft of schemes such as public baths. Preston Council opened its first public baths in 1851; Oldham Council in 1854; Stalybridge Council in 1870; Ashton Council 1871; and, Tyldesley in 1876. Bolton Council led the way in 1845 when they entered into a joint venture with the Bolton Baths Company. In order to spread the burden of financing the initial build and subsequent management of the baths, local authorities exhibited financial diligence. Some elected to take out a full or partial government loan, often combined with donations from local philanthropists, and contributions from the local rates.



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Mr & Mrs Platt donated Stalybridge Baths to the town in 1870



It was financially imperative that municipal public baths made provision for swimming. Without a solid customer base, the baths and wash-houses initiative would not have survived into the 20th century. The burden of being financially self-sufficient could not be maintained exclusively from the use of private baths and laundry facilities. To this end the conditions for acquiring a government loan at a modest rate of interest were generous. From 1847 to 1899 there were five amendments to the 1846 Act. The amendments tended to mirror the evolving contemporary social and political attitudes towards public health and civic amenity provision. This was reflected in the accelerated take-up rates of new builds and the positioning of public baths in socially deprived districts. Many of the amendments were retrospective in that they reflected existing practices; the legislative process was simply playing catch-up. It was not until 1878 that central government felt it necessary to further amend the 1846 Act. The new legislation belatedly reflected the existing operational management of municipal public baths in that such establishments had been promoting indoor swimming in 'covered swimming baths', certainly since the 1850s.



Manchester's Victoria Baths, women's covered pool Source: Victoria Baths Trust

The use of Victorian municipal public baths was weather and price sensitive. The charges for using the swimming pool were set by each council, but they could not exceed nationally set maximum charges. The charge for first-class facilities could not exceed 8d, and for second-class facilities the charge could not exceed 4d, and for third-class facilities, if provided, the rate was not to be more than 2d. The 1878 Act also acknowledged that there was a lack of a suitable water-heating system that would enable swimming pools to be open all year. Thus, provision was made for the facilities to be used in the winter months for what the legislation called other 'healthful recreation'. It was suggested that a gymnasium could be established, but it was expressly forbidden to allow music or dancing.

BATHS AND WASHHOUSES Historical Archive



Sharing memories and historical material relating to the history of Baths & Wash Houses in the United Kingdom

The debate as to who should provide baths establishments was contested throughout the Victorian period with many local authorities showing a great reluctance to provide such establishments in the numbers and locations needed to satisfy demand. The utilitarian view of baths provision was based upon pecuniary profit and loss which drove the decision making process for many authorities. Lancashire's mill-towns led the way in providing public amenities, accepting that it was their responsibility to advance community cohesion, health, and welfare.