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Getting excited over a load of hot air local history & the Victorian Turkish

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Getting excited over a load of hot air: local history & the Victorian Turkish bath

Malcolm Shifrin

If anyone had told me six years ago that I would become a reader of *Local History Magazine* (or even have heard of it) I should have laughed dismissively. At school I had given up history for no better reason than dislike of its teacher. Yet I had not, later, felt particularly disadvantaged by such a short-sighted decision. Now I find, with something of a shock, that it is already five years since I started researching the history of the Victorian Turkish bath and first realised how satisfying such a project could be.

My little acorn was a small coloured pane of glass no more than 15cm square which I discovered in the City of Bath. It was part of a door panel in the reception area of a health club with which, for a short time, I became involved. On a deep red background was a yellow monogram consisting of a highly decorated letter **B**. I was told that there had once been a Turkish bath in the building.

I went to the local library and found two interesting items. One was an 'advertorial' from an 1893 directory, *Ports of Bristol*. It described Charles Bartholomew's Turkish baths at 2 Edgar Buildings, although by that time the baths were actually owned — most appropriately, one cannot help feeling — by a Mr Tapp. The writer mentioned that Bartholomew had also owned establishments as far afield as Worcester, Birmingham and Manchester. But he omitted to mention the largest establishment which was situated in nearby Bristol, fearing, perhaps, to publicise the local competition.

The second item to fuel my enthusiasm was a file containing copies of two letters written in 1971 by



Window pane with Bartholomew's logo

a Mr Leonard Park to the then City Librarian, Peter Pagan. The writer was interested in the fate of the Turkish bath in Edgar Buildings because his father had managed them for Bartholomew between 1888 and 1890. After Bartholomew's death, William Park had bought the Worcester establishment from Bartholomew's executors. Leonard ran them with his father, and later on his own, until they were purchased by the local authority, for whom he acted as baths manager until his retirement in 1959.

The hot dry air, or Turkish, bath was re-introduced into the British Isles in 1856 by David Urquhart, an eccentric and charismatic Scottish diplomat and sometime MP for Stafford. Such baths became widely known as Turkish baths because that was where Urquhart had first come across them. But the famous establishment at Baden-Baden, for example, is known as the Römisch-Irische Bad because such baths are de-

scended from the *thermae* of the Romans, and because the first modern example was built (to Urquhart's design) by an Irish doctor, Richard Barter, at his hydropathic establishment near Blarney in Co. Cork.

Charles Bartholomew had been one of Urquhart's working-class political disciples and claimed that his Bristol establishment was the first such bath to be built in England since Roman times. Although this claim was untrue, Bartholomew does seem to have been the first of his protégés to tell Urquhart that he intended to start a Turkish bath.

I consider myself most fortunate to have met Leonard Park. He was (as, indeed, was his wife) over 90 years old at the time, and I saw in him a direct link with Urquhart. Park related many fascinating stories about Urquhart and Bartholomew which had been passed on by his father, and he showed me many interesting documents dealing with the Worcester establishment.

Further encouragement came as a result of meeting Janet Priest, a member of the health club at Edgar Buildings. She happened to mention that her grandfather, Henry Hunt, had managed Bartholomew's Turkish baths on those very premises, first for Mr Tapp, and then for Robert Herriott, until (in 1907) he himself became the proprietor. Henry's son Edward (Ted) had been given his first Turkish bath at the age of 18 months and started working with his father when he was 19 years old. Ted, who had himself known Leonard Park, ran this establishment until it closed in 1961.

Janet Priest gave me an introduction to Norman Ashfield who, although a great-grandson of Henry

Charles Bartholomew, in mid-life

Hunt, was virtually the same age as herself. Between the ages of five and fifteen they visited the Turkish bath frequently (until it closed in 1961) and were able to give me an extraordinary picture of the workings of an establishment which, in the 1950s, seems to have changed very little from its earliest days. Ted's two sisters, Ellen and Winifred (Wyn), looked after the baths on women's days, acted as masseuses and, late at night after the baths had closed, saw to the washing and drying of the towels.

I was, by now, totally hooked on Turkish baths, and I soon discovered that very little appeared to have been written about them. Yet they seemed to impinge on so many aspects of Victorian life — not only, as one might expect, on architecture and building technology, but also, for example, on political pressure groups, the co-operative movement, early limited liability companies, the Baths & Wash-houses Acts, advertising and publicity, fringe medicine, contemporary attitudes to the working classes, and women's charities. I became determined to document the history of the Victorian Turkish bath.

And what, it may be asked with some justification, is the connection between such research and *local* history? Surely Turkish baths are no different from any other subject — railway systems or country houses, to take but two examples — where an activity, or the manifest results of an activity, are to be found in a number of different localities.

I found very early on that there was indeed a difference, though it is neither intrinsic to Turkish baths *per se*, nor is it necessarily other than a temporary difference. For while there may be data about *some* Victorian Turkish baths, we know *very* little about *the* Victorian Turkish bath. The subject is still too unstructured to allow a general picture to be sketched.

Such a subject — of which there are, of course, many — deals with a category of activities which seem to have three main characteristics in common. First, the activity has not yet been studied in any depth so that it lacks a foundation upon which to build. Second, the activity has either ceased, or is in the last stages of decline such that what remains is not typical of the activity during its heyday. Third, it lacks — and, in fact,



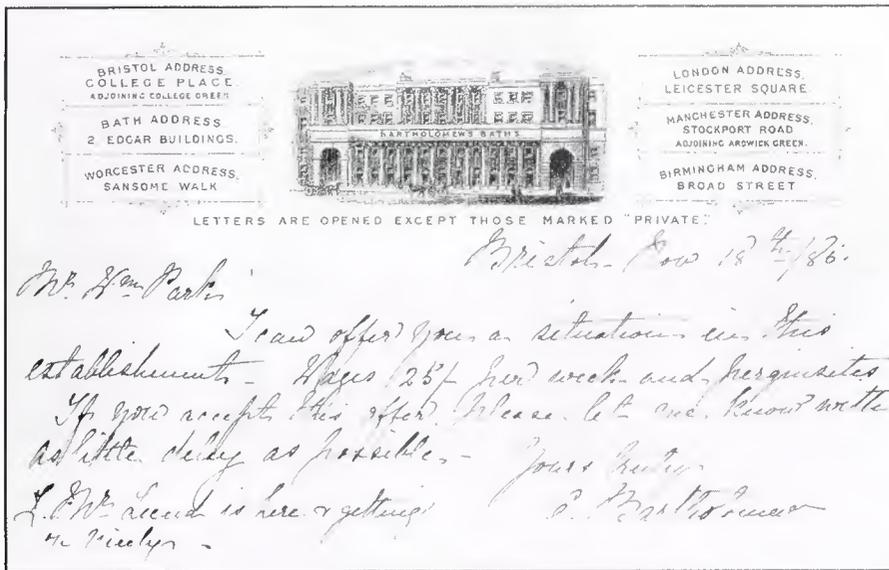
never had — a recognised body of practitioners who might have generated a specific, easily identifiable literature on the activity and its development.

This contrast — between Turkish baths, and railways or country houses — is significant. A multitude of railway companies developed in a relatively short period, many of them afterwards merging into larger organisations; a specialist technology with its own literature soon emerged; and, probably from the beginning, enthusiasts set up groups to encourage those with similar interests in, for example, specific engines, lines, or liveries.

And the student of the country house is well served in that, in spite of periodic demolition activity, so many examples remain to be studied at first hand. The effect of such good fortune can clearly be seen if one examines, for example, the bibliography of more than 350 references in Mark Girouard's classic

work, *The Victorian country house*. It is interesting — but not surprising — to find that there are so few bibliographic references to what are thought of as standard local history sources. Rather, he refers most frequently to histories of specific buildings and collections of documents still to be found within them, to biographies of those for whom they were built and discussions with their descendants, to studies of their architects and of their plans and drawings at the Royal Institute of British Architects, to books and periodicals on architecture and the building trade, as well as to more popular magazines like *Country Life*.

True, Girouard has used a handful of local newspaper articles, one or two directory entries, and an occasional book on local history, but none seems essential to his research. So, whilst there will always be scope for garnishing this type of subject with snippets from published local history sources, documentation of



Letter from Charles Bartholomew, appointing William Park as a bath attendant in the Bristol establishment at a weekly wage of £1.25 plus perks.

the subject does not appear to be dependent on their use.

By contrast, research on the Victorian Turkish bath is, initially at least, almost totally dependent on documents to be found in the local history library or record office.

Since 1856, when Urquhart and Barter built their first bath, nearly 600 establishments have been identified which were opened during the twelve decades which followed. But there are probably less than twenty-five still open, of which perhaps only half a dozen are Victorian. It is extremely difficult trying to locate those which are still open — try looking up Turkish baths in the *Yellow pages* or *Thomson local guide*.

The most recent book wholly devoted to Turkish baths — on how to design them, written for architects — is over 100 years old. It is true that, over the years, innumerable pamphlets have been published, frequently rehashing the same material, often in the same words. But there is little information about specific establishments. There are no professional or trade organisations devoted to their promulgation; and, though I still hope to be proved wrong, there are no societies or groups of people currently interested in them.

Although I have found the BT31 class at the PRO, Kew, very useful for discovering information about limited liability companies which were set up to run Turkish baths in England and Wales, it does have its limitations. There is no easy way into the files unless the name of the company is already known. Even then, it can be very disappointing because at some stage a random selection of files has been destroyed as an economy measure and, within each file, only those records for every fifth year are retained. I have not yet reconciled myself to the random destruction of files such as those for the important (first) Savoy Turkish Baths company (which would have answered a number of so far unresolved questions) while, at the same time, so many files have been retained which contain but a single sheet of relatively useless information.

And so it is that one finds that

Below: Portrait of David Urquhart, c.1874. From *David Urquhart: some chapters in the life of a Victorian knight-errant of justice and liberty* by Gertrude Robinson (BL:010856.e.35). Copy reproduced by permission of The British Library.



one has become, willy-nilly, involved in research into local history, and that the specific area of one's interest is ... everywhere.

This is particularly difficult for the unfunded researcher. Local historians studying some aspect of an area in which they live or work have a relatively easy task with so many of their sources being fairly close to hand. Of course, many local historians will deny this, but 'relatively' is the significant word here.

Perhaps some type of network is needed to enable those working on similar types of subject to co-operate. In the course of my research I have, serendipitously, come across several items on, for example, ice-rinks which, for obvious reasons, I never bothered to note. But perhaps there is someone else out there working on a history of ice-rinks who has come across many irrelevant references to Turkish baths.

It would be unreasonable to expect someone to spend valuable time seeking out references on a wide variety of subjects. But if a list of those needing information on local aspects of such general subjects were to be published from time to time in *Local history magazine*, then an extremely useful service might come into being.

There are obvious affinities between certain subjects. In the course of searching for local data on Turkish baths I regularly come across information on swimming pools, spas, hydrotherapy, the water-cure and, less frequently, teetotalism and anti-vaccination campaigns. It would not have taken too long to note down brief bibliographical references as I found them, and it would have been well worth while if I was already in contact with someone who needed them, and who would reciprocate.

There are, no doubt, some who would argue that this is what the Internet is all about. Possibly — and in due course. But there are still, in practice, many who, like me, feel that this is a rather high-tech time-consuming solution for an experimental project. More importantly, there is a certain advantage to be gained in having thinking time made available by the need to await postal deliveries.

Of course, *Local History Magazine* already has its useful 'Help Wanted' section in 'Noticeboard', but most requests seem to be for help with quite specific problems. This is understandable because without first



having made contact with an enquirer, much time and energy could be wasted in forwarding information which was already to hand.

The interest-list concept, however, ensures that an initial contact is made to discover, first, what information gaps need to be filled and, second, that each of the participants had an opportunity to benefit. It would be interesting to know what other readers think.

The author would like to thank Leonard Park, Janet Priest and Norman Ashfield for their illustrations and encouragement.

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Top: The Hunt family in 1917. Standing, left to right: Edward (Ted); Henry; [Leonard]. Seated: Ellen; Alice; Winifred (Wyn), Seated on Alice's knee: Janet Priest's mother, Muriel [Leonard did not work at the baths.]

Above: Ticket for Bartholomew's baths