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*The Victorian Turkish Bath*

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[THE VICTORIAN TURKISH BATH: Malcolm Shifrin's Information Exchange](#)

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# The Gilded Lily



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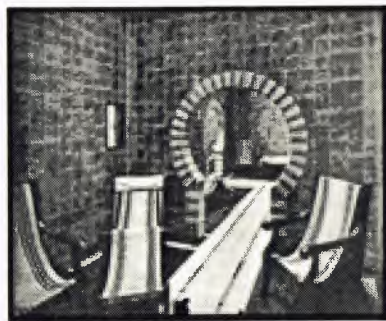
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# The Victorian Turkish Bath



By Malcolm Shifrin

Although the Victorian Turkish bath is most certainly Victorian, its origins are not Turkish, nor is it what most people first visualize when they think of a bath. Indeed, most people today have only the haziest idea as to what a Turkish bath really is.

However, a Victorian habitu  of the late 1850's or 60's understood that it was the use of hot dry air that defined this specialized bath and that differentiated it from the medicated vapor bath or the Russian bath, both of which had been available since before 1856.



The Turkish bath's second distinguishing feature was that the bathers progressed through a series of increasingly hot rooms until they sweated profusely. There was much correspondence in the medical journals of the day, some of it quite heated, if I may put it that way, about the correct temperature for each of the hot rooms. Much of the data we have is unreliable, as few writers bothered to state where they placed their thermometers, but it is safe to say that temperatures ranged from about 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the first

hot room, to as much as 240 degrees Fahrenheit in the hottest room.

It was the curative, or perhaps the palliative, effect of this high temperature that made the Turkish bath so attractive to hydrotherapists and to many doctors who had no other means of alleviating the pain of a rheumatic or gout-ridden patient.

The bather's perambulations through the various hot rooms, possibly repeated, possibly interspersed with cold showers or a dip in the plunge pool, was followed by a full body wash and massage. It was these last two processes which, taken together, were known to Victorians as shampooing.

The final part of the Turkish bath – no less important than anything that precedes it – is a period of relaxation in the cooling room. This could last up to an hour or more, and Victorians relished this part of the bath, frequently writing about it in prose of the most purple hue.

“Turkish baths are probably more adapted to the indolent and luxurious, than to those who toil for their livelihood.”

*Sir William Gull, Queen Victoria's Physician*

*Continued . . .*

A more restrained account, in the *Illustrated London News*, describes how bathers, taking a cold plunge at the London Hammam, are dried by an attendant with a warm sheet which:

*Envelops us in Eastern fashion, and we are conducted again to a couch in the cooling room, with our bodies shining like alabaster and as sleek as satin. An attendant then fans us with feathers. Coffee, pipes, sherbet, sweetmeats, and fruit are offered and a period of entire repose follows, and, in a comparatively short time, vigour returns to the frame, and sensations of unusual strength, lightness, and activity pervade the whole system.*

As the Victorian Turkish bath was really a reinvention of the ancient Roman bath, many Victorians, perhaps rather pretentiously, were fond of using Roman phrases for describing their baths – apodyterium (undressing room), frigidarium (cooling room), tepidarium (warm room), and caldarium (hot room).

Although many doctors saw the health advantages of the Turkish bath, there were many doctors totally opposed to it, seeing it as yet another quack medicine to supplant the not yet wholly professionalised doctor. Others claimed it led to indolence and would destroy the manliness that created the British Empire. However, its popularity did not wane, and it is reassuring to discover that Victorian bathers sensibly ignored the words of those such as Dr. Richardson who, in 1861, wrote to the *British Medical Journal*:

*From the use of the heated air bath as a therapeutical agent to its use as a social enjoyment or luxury, is a wide step, and a step which I, for one, hold back from taking. It seems to be the misfortune of this remedy, that its administration is for a time attended by a sensation of great pleasure and satisfaction.*

From the beginning, women were allowed in Turkish baths even though the opening times for them were generally restricted. At least twenty of London's Turkish baths made some provision for women bathers – either separate baths adjoining the men's, or a facility which was shared for a day or more per week. Hot room temperatures were usually lower in women's baths, though whether this was actually preferred by women, or merely cheaper to maintain, is not known. From the start, however, women were involved in every aspect of the Turkish bath: as patients and bathers, as attendants and shampooers, as managers, shareholders, and even proprietors.

As with most aspects of the Victorian Turkish bath, some of the more intriguing questions about its use by women await further research. For instance, did male proprietors advertise the Turkish bath as a beauty aid because they expected women to dedicate their time to making themselves more attractive to men, or were women using male approval of the bath to facilitate the management of such visits for their own enjoyment?



*The Ladies' Tea Guild would like to thank Malcolm Shifrin for allowing us to reprint excerpts from his web site, [www.victorianturkishbath.org](http://www.victorianturkishbath.org). If you are wondering about the social movement from which the Turkish bath sprang, have questions about the hand-clapping ritual, are interested in seeing early Turkish bath photos, or are curious about ladies' night in a Turkish bath, we strongly urge you to visit this most fascinating web site. Further research continues and an information exchange is encouraged.*