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

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Women and the Victorian Turkish bath

By Malcolm Shifrin

"If ladies only knew what a real and lasting beautifier the Turkish Bath is, they would abandon all agitation for 'Women's Rights,' &c, and at once build a Turkish Bath for their own special use. By using it, they would thereby render themselves so fascinating and beautiful, that there would be no resisting any appeals they might make to the weaker sex."
(Manchester-based newspaper, *Critic*, 1872)

Victorian-style Turkish baths are rare today, but at the end of the nineteenth century they were very popular among all classes of bather—though varying admission charges usually ensured that the upper classes and the 'labouring classes' did not mix. If, later, Turkish baths were more often thought of as a normal leisure activity or, perhaps, a special treat, when first introduced their purpose was to ease the pain of complaints such as rheumatism for which Victorian doctors had neither cure nor safe pain-relieving drugs, and to enable those with no running water at home to cleanse themselves. During Queen Victoria's reign alone over four hundred establishments were opened—and just over a quarter of these catered for women. But what was a 'Turkish bath' and why was it 'Turkish'? And who were the women who bathed in it, worked in it, often managed it, and sometimes owned it?

The Victorian Turkish bath is a type of bath in which the bather's body is cleansed by the action of hot dry air. It is this dryness of the hot air which primarily distinguishes the Victorian Turkish bath from medicated vapour baths, from the steam baths usually known as Russian baths or *banya*, and from the *hammams* still to be found right across the Islamic world—all of which existed long before 1856.

Bathers in a Victorian Turkish bath relax for a while in each of a series of increasingly hot rooms, usually three, moving from one to the next until they are sweating profusely. This perambulation, perhaps repeated, possibly interspersed with cold showers or a dip in a cold plunge pool, is followed by a full body wash and massage. The wash and massage, together, were known to Victorians as shampooing—a term only later applied to washing one's hair.

Finally—no less important than anything preceding it—follows a period of rest in a cooling-room, often lasting up to an hour or more. The Victorians relished this part of the bath, and frequently wrote about it in appreciative terms.

Unlike the humid and steamy atmosphere which characterises the *hammam*, there is no steam in a Victorian Turkish bath. And while it is true that many proprietors, especially during the twentieth century, also provided a separate steam room, this was in addition to the Victorian Turkish bath process and not a part of it,

just as some establishments also included a hairdressing salon or employed a chiropodist on the premises.

'And so, after much experiment, the first Turkish bath since Roman times was founded'

The first Victorian Turkish bath was built by Dr Richard Barter in 1856 at St Ann's Hydropathic Establishment near Blarney, County Cork, Ireland. Until then, establishments such as St Ann's had followed the hydropathic tenets laid down by Vincent Preissnitz. According to these, therapy for a variety of complaints comprised three components: drinking considerable quantities of (usually) mineralised water, wrapping the body in a cold wet sheet to induce a sweat (called the 'crisis'), and exposing the body to a wide range of specialised showers or douches.

Barter was inspired to establish his Turkish bath after reading *The Pillars of Hercules*, a travel book by the Scottish diplomat David Urquhart in which he related how he had discovered the hot-air bath during his travels in the Maghreb and Turkey. The *hammams* visited by Urquhart were an adaptation of the *dry laconicum* (the hottest room of the ancient Roman baths known as *thermae*). But although described by him as using *dry* air, the *hammams* were in fact quite humid. Barter, realising that the hot-air bath could be a more effective therapeutic agent than the cold-water cure, invited Urquhart to St Ann's to help him construct one. And so, after much experiment, the first Turkish bath since Roman times was built.

Barter soon began using the Turkish bath with his patients—who must surely have found it far more relaxing and sociable than being wrapped in cold wet sheets and left waiting for their 'crisis'. Barter also provided a bath for his workers at the hydro and its farm; a red flag flew when it was occupied by men, a white one when it was occupied by women. As a physician, Barter realised that the bath was more effective therapeutically when the hot air was dry. This is because the body can tolerate dry heat at a much higher

temperature than that of vapour or steam. Following his model, dry air soon became standard in all Victorian Turkish baths.

Urquhart, meanwhile, had returned to the mainland where in 1857 he helped William Potter build the first Victorian Turkish bath in England at Broughton Lane, Manchester. As acknowledged guru of what was already a Turkish Bath Movement, Urquhart went on to campaign energetically for such baths to be set up throughout the country. Potter, whose wife Elizabeth supervised the women bathers, was secretary of one of a group of workingmen's committees which Urquhart had set up to promulgate his political views. These committees, organised on a daily basis by Urquhart's wife Harriet, played a major role in promoting the Turkish bath and at least thirty-five were opened by committee members around the country.

'The Brighton Hammam... looked oriental even on the outside.

Inside, it was lavishly fitted with marble, coloured tiles and fine woodwork.

Its Alhambric hall was entered through red curtained Moorish triple arches,

and furnished with divans "pillowed in damask and silk"

Most Turkish baths were quite simple—a converted house or shop perhaps. But there were some which were purpose-built and, a few, quite grand. The Brighton Hammam looked oriental even on the outside. Inside, it was fitted lavishly with marble, coloured tiles and fine woodwork. Its Alhambric hall was entered through red-curtained Moorish triple arches, and furnished with divans 'pillowed in damask and silk.' The ladies' baths were on the first floor, approached by a separate entrance. They comprised four hot rooms with two smaller and one larger cooling-room. The latter was decorated and furnished elaborately, with 'feminine taste and elegance of disposition being, of course, considered and provided for.' However, as 'Penelope' suggested in a column which appeared in many local papers, this approach would not appeal to all women:

...there is something contrary to feminine instinct in the gregarious nature of a public Turkish bath. We like such things best at home, or at all events at some bathing establishment where we may be residing for a time...

Penelope's solution was the portable Turkish bath which was, she confirmed, easily assembled at home.

Robert Owen Allsop, the only architect to write extensively on the bath, understood that many British women, unlike their French counterparts, preferred not to get undressed or take showers in communal areas. He recommended that in women's baths more privacy must be observed. Each 'lady bather' should have a private dressing and reposing

BE CLEAN, HEALTHY, HAPPY.

The only method of obtaining perfect cleanliness, and consequently perfect health, is by the constant use of Turkish Baths.

HOT AIR BATHS AT PUBLIC RESORTS ARE OBJECTIONABLE.

Attendants, often rough and disagreeable, must be endured, heated air is inhaled, and afterwards the bather risks catching cold on his way home.

30/-

Engaged from Photo.



Take your Turkish Baths at home in a Quaker Cabinet, amid your own familiar surroundings, and breathe pure, fresh air.

A1 Pamphlet (post free) will tell you how.

THE GEM SUPPLIES CO., 6, BISHOP'S COURT, CHANCERY LANE, W.C.

Turn of the century advertisement emphasising women's supposed preference for privacy

room, even if only formed by dwarf wooden partitions; in addition, 'private shampooing recesses' should be created with partitions of wood and obscured glass. Although pretty curtains and dressing tables were often provided for women, these may have been intended to divert attention from the fact that not all the facilities in men's areas were duplicated in the women's. The women's areas, too, were generally smaller.

Women's baths also differed in temperature. Victorian women were generally considered less robust than men and so their baths were recommended to be slightly cooler. Matilda Ellington, a young servant who looked after Urquhart's children, testified on oath that she had happily spent half an hour at 180°F (82°C) in the Turkish bath at his Riverside home. Men, on the other hand, could expect temperatures ranging from 120°F to 230°F (49-110°C).

'But it is only an informed guess if we suggest that some women swam naked, just as most men did'

There are very few accounts of visits to a Victorian Turkish bath which are written by women, so there are many aspects of women's use of the bath that we know very little about. A delightful exception is the illustrated diary of Maud Berkeley, a middle-class Victorian lady born in 1859. It seems that women bathers usually wandered from room to room, just as the men did, interspersing their perambulations with showers

or a plunge into the cold pool if one was available. But it is only an informed guess if we suggest that some women swam naked, just as most men did. For although there are numerous references to 'full loose robes' or 'a kind of toga... descending from the shoulders,' no other garments are ever mentioned as being worn by women bathers, however detailed the description of the bathing process. But Robert Owen Allsop, in suggesting that 'a plain, circular bath with steps around' was most appropriate in ladies' baths as '... the true dive does not pertain,' was clearly unaware of women's membership of the burgeoning mid-1880s swimming clubs.

Personal cleanliness was almost impossible for the overwhelming majority who had no running water, including many too poor even to afford the sixpence to a shilling charged for a Turkish bath. During most of the nineteenth century, few people had their own toilets (indoors or out) and few had easily accessible running cold water, let alone hot. Additionally, there was still a tax on soap of three pence per pound which was not repealed until 1853. But the recent cholera epidemics, and the reports of Chadwick and others, were beginning to focus attention on the problems of sanitation and personal cleanliness.

It was in this context that the Ladies' National Association for the Diffusion of Sanitary Knowledge (later the Ladies' Sanitary Association) was founded in the Autumn of 1857 for 'the diffusion of sanitary knowledge and the promotion of physical education among the female sex.' It published, and widely distributed, a series of penny tracts on such topics as *The worth of fresh air*, *The power of soap and water*, and *Hints to working people about personal cleanliness*. In the mid 1860s, the Cardiff Branch of the association, realising that leaflets and free bars of soap were not enough, negotiated a special arrangement with the local company which owned the Guildhall Street Baths. This enabled them to issue Turkish bath tickets for a token sum to those they considered to be deserving cases. However, it is not known how long this scheme lasted, or whether any other branches copied it.

Even charges of sixpence and a shilling assume a different perspective when compared with the wages paid to workers in the baths. In 1891 for example, Gloucester Corporation charged two shillings for a first-class Turkish bath, but in the same year appointed a young woman to issue tickets at twelve shillings per week. A Mrs Turner was also engaged as a female shampooer, 'she to attend when required and to be paid four shillings for each day she attends.' Mrs Turner was still there in 1921 when the Corporation presented her

with a 'purse and contents as a token of appreciation'—though we are not told the value of the contents.

When Charles Booth wrote his *Inquiry into London Life* in 1896 there were around forty Turkish baths in London, employing around one hundred male and twenty female shampooers. The standard wage of a male shampooer was twenty shillings (one pound) per week, but women were paid much less, typically only fourteen shillings per week. Furthermore, shampooers, like waiters, relied on regularly boosting their wage with tips. Here women were again at a disadvantage, receiving far less in tips than their male colleagues: women bathers (mostly dependent on spending money from their husbands) had far less disposable money; there were also fewer of them.

'The range of facilities offered in Turkish baths was influenced by a particularly Victorian attitude to class'

Victorian Turkish baths were owned by individual proprietors or business partners, by companies, by private swimming clubs for the use of their members, and later, by local authorities. They were considered quite respectable and their popularity coincided with the rise of the Joint Stock Company of which many women's names are listed as shareholders in some of the one hundred or so companies whose records survive. Were any of the baths completely owned by women? Information is scarce, but it is known that some establishments were owned by women, though most usually by a proprietor's surviving widow or daughter who would previously have run the baths on women's days.

The range of facilities offered in Turkish baths was influenced by a particularly Victorian attitude to class which was enshrined in the Baths and Wash-houses Acts. These stated that if local authority swimming baths were to be provided, then it was mandatory to provide at least two classes of baths. And while this ensured that baths were affordable for 'the labouring classes,' it also served to ensure that the different classes did not have to mix with each other.

None of this applied, of course, to privately owned baths, yet the practice was almost invariably followed both in baths owned by individual proprietors and in those owned by the baths companies.

Only two Victorian Turkish baths catered solely for women: one near the Female School of Art in London's Queen Square, about which very little is known; the other opened by Bradford Corporation in 1883. The latter bath was closed thirteen years later due to lack of use. There are some one hundred plus other establishments known to have been used by women. These either provided totally separate facilities—in the same building but with separate entrances—or operated separate sessions for women on specific days or times. Whatever the provision for women, proprietors were often keen to stress that



I attribute my perfect health entirely to the Turkish bath which I take twice a-week regularly. I find it keeps my skin in excellent condition, notwithstanding the pigments one is unfortunately obliged to use on the stage, and I think for all small ailments the Turkish Baths is the best Doctor to fly to.

Lillie Langtry



'none but females' would be in attendance. Only one of the baths where facilities were shared gave women equal access, and of the fifty establishments for which occasional figures are available, over half limited women to the equivalent of one day per week. This inequality sometimes caused comment. In 1858, a letter to the editor of a local paper about the Leeds Road Turkish Baths in Bradford read:

I know it is not orthodox for ladies to be newspaper correspondents. This however is a subject in which our sex has equal interest with the gentlemen... The ladies ought to have at least three nights in the week. On the two nights of the week the rooms are inconveniently crowded, and even sometimes during the afternoons.

Such complaints were not unusual—indeed the situation today is little different. Women were told that their days were not sufficiently patronised. In 1892, the chairman of the Northampton Turkish Baths Company, apologising for the provision of just one ladies' day per week, said that,

they had found, wherever they had enquired, that the ladies had not taken advantage of those baths, and, however much they might desire to be gallant to them, they wanted to see their funds first.

It is difficult to determine what women's use actually was, for few annual reports distinguished between male and female bathers in their statistics. Undoubtedly, Dr Baxter Langley was close to the mark when he argued that commercial Turkish baths excluded women by their high prices, and that, in any publicly-funded baths, women's needs must be met.

Wealthier women were able more easily to take Turkish baths in hotels, private clubs such as the Drumsheugh Baths Club in Edinburgh, or at fashionable hydros, such as Smedley's in Matlock Bank. Many women visited such baths on their own. Dr Barter's hydro at St Ann's, for example, had been served by its own railway station since 1888, but by 1893 the number of unaccompanied women travelling there had made it necessary to add a ladies' waiting room. The station seems to have been relatively safe, whereas in 1863 an advertisement for the Matlock Bank Hydro found it necessary to threaten a ten shillings and sixpence fine for 'Any gentleman entering the ladies' bath-room.'

Although the first Victorian Turkish bath was built at St Ann's as a therapeutic agent, by the time it had crossed the Irish sea women were already being encouraged to use it as an aid to beauty. When William Potter advertised the Broughton Lane establishment, he wrote, in what was probably the first display advertisement for a Victorian Turkish bath, 'It is a beautifier of the complexion, and far before any cosmetic'. For men the emphasis was on health, with the bath advertised to relieve diseases such as rheumatism, lumbago and gout. In contrast, by the late 1880s most advertisements aimed at women emphasised only that it would 'preserve beauty' and 'render the complexion clear,' and that it leaves the hair 'peculiarly beautiful and luxuriant'. If women's health was mentioned in general advertisements, such as Lillie Langtry's testimonial promoting the Pilgrim Street Turkish baths in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, it was more likely to be in relation to minor complaints and 'inconveniences'.

A typical view held by both sexes was that women were less strong physically than men and should be careful if ever undertaking physical exercise or other exertion. As the pseudonymous author of a booklet espousing the bath declared in 1858,

to ladies, to invalids, and men of business, whose sedentary occupations preclude the possibility of healthful exercise, [the Turkish bath] was an inestimable boon.

Proprietors reinforced such attitudes, exploiting them as another way to attract custom. In 1895 Joseph Constantine reprinted advice written several years earlier 'by a medical man':

Ladies need these baths even more than gentlemen, and are more benefited by them, owing to their being more confined to the house and not getting so much exercise in the open air as men do.

Incredibly, this was reprinted almost word for word nearly eighty years after it was first written, in a booklet published by Derby Council in 1964—the *Swinging Sixties*. Here women of all ages were categorised with anyone who had 'any kind of constitutional weakness', as well as with individuals over thirty-five, all of whom were advised to seek medical advice before taking their first Turkish bath.

In truth, not all doctors liked the Turkish bath. Some saw themselves being deprived of work. Others, like Elizabeth Blackwell (who in 1858 became the first woman to have her name registered with the General Medical Council) believed that the bath should only be given under medical supervision. Proprietors were often seen as quacks by the medical profession—and indeed, some of them were. As early as 1859, William Potter somewhat coyly advertised

arrangements made at his Turkish bath 'for the special accommodation of ladies,' few of whom were yet, it seemed,

conscious of its power to mitigate the natural ills and inconveniences to which nature and an artificial mode of life have subjected them. This portion of the subject can, however, only be slightly touched upon, but a word to the wise will be sufficient.

'The Turkish bath was generally felt to be beneficial in treating irregular periods'

The Turkish bath was generally felt to be beneficial in treating irregular periods. Charles Lockhart Robertson, first superintendent of the Sussex County 'Lunatic Asylum', believed that even if its only remedial power was to restore 'suppressed menstruation' it would still be valuable. 'I have within the last two months,' he wrote to Urquhart, 'discharged two young girls cured, who for many months suffered from maniacal symptoms, connected with irregular menstrual action...' And when Edgar Sheppard introduced the Turkish bath at Colney Hatch 'Lunatic Asylum', it was welcomed by a colleague in the female department who attributed the recovery of a patient from 'puerperal mania' to her third bath. The Commissioners in Lunacy 'witnessed its application' to ensure no cruelty was involved and reported that, on the contrary, patients enjoyed their Turkish baths.

The story of women and the Turkish bath still has a hidden history. We know the names of only a few of the women who managed or owned baths, and virtually nothing about the women themselves, how they lived their working lives, or how they interacted with male supervisors of the men's baths. As for the women bathers, their experiences remain largely invisible too. Who were these women? How did they travel to the baths? Did they go singly or with friends? How did they finance their visits? Was there a social change between the 1850s and 1880s which made it acceptable to 'pamper' oneself without the need to justify the bath as a medical necessity? The search for answers goes on

Need to Know

Malcolm Shifrin enjoyed a long career as an educational librarian before embarking on an MA in modern history at Royal Holloway, University of London. Since then he has devoted much of his time to researching this fascinating but neglected area of social and medical history. You can discover more, including where today's women can still examine a Turkish bath, at Malcolm's web, www.victorianturkishbath.org

Maud: The Diary of Maud Berkeley, edited by Flora Fraser, was published by Secker and Warburg in 1985.