



## The 'Penny Scrub': Stalybridge Corporation Baths:

Keith Myerscough March 2022

The *Baths and Wash-Houses Act of 1846* was intended to improve the physical and moral condition of the labouring classes.<sup>1</sup> By the 1850s the success of the *factory system* in Britain as a means of maximising production had served to establish specialist manufacturing districts.<sup>2</sup> Lancashire provided all the necessary requirements for the processing of raw cotton yarn into cotton goods. Manchester was known as 'Cottonopolis', a designation it had gained as the administrative centre of 'cotton Lancashire'.<sup>3</sup> The growth of Stalybridge from a rural idyll into a typical Lancashire cotton mill-town was due to its geographic location and climate; it was also ideally positioned on a network of canal and railway routes.<sup>4</sup>

Nineteenth century Britain was the 'work-shop of the world' but that had come at a social cost reflected in the living standards of the poorer classes.<sup>5</sup> Public baths provision was established as part of a raft of social reforms that were intended to improve the moral and physical health of the nation. Health reforms passed into legislation throughout the nineteenth century as either permissive or compulsory acts of parliament. Britain had become a powerful industrial nation due to its devotion to *laissez-faire* economics; the level of community provision reflected ideologies of self-help, self-sufficiency, and above all self-determination. Lancashire's major cotton mill-towns, led by wealthy self-made businessmen, saw the wisdom in making improvements in sanitary provision for their work-force. The provision of public baths and wash-houses in Lancashire rivalled that of London. However, the permissive nature of the 1846 Act and the additional cost to the local ratepayer resulted in a patch-work of provision throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>

The question of providing baths and wash-houses had been discussed by the Stalybridge Borough Council 'for many years' before they made the decision to go ahead in 1868.<sup>7</sup> The Stalybridge Corporation baths opened on Saturday, 7 May 1870; some 24 years after central government had placed the 1846 Act on the statute books.

### Stalybridge Corporation Baths



Source: Tameside Local History Centre



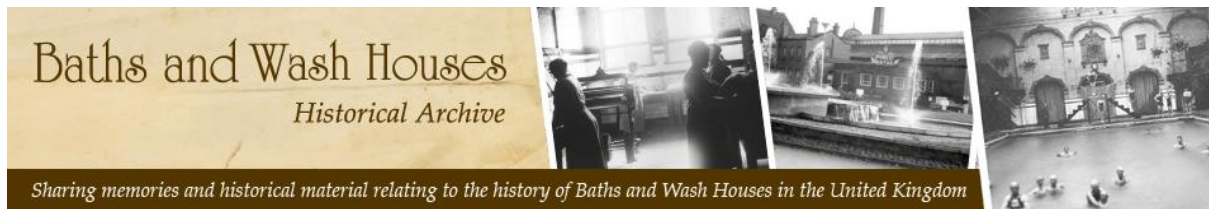
In common with other local authorities, there were a number of factors to consider. Local ratepayers were to bear the brunt of expenditure on town improvements at a time when compulsory social reforms had placed a heavy burden on their shoulders.<sup>8</sup> Despite government loans being available at favourable rates many local councils thought that the poor, the ‘great unwashed’, would not use the facilities in the numbers needed to make the establishment profitable. It was for this reason that financially prudent local councils also provided profitable swimming baths in their establishments. Central government intervention in local matters also made local government uneasy as they wanted to maintain control over civic society. The Cotton Famine of the 1860s had placed many cotton operatives in Stalybridge in a financially desperate position. The American Civil War had resulted in a drastic downturn in trade placing many workers in abject poverty and poor health. The suffering of cotton workers and their families had caused Stalybridge mill owner Robert Platt to pay the full capital-build costs of £7,000 and an annual maintenance grant of £100 in perpetuity, for a public baths.<sup>9</sup>

**Only the Dedication Stone Remains on the Original Site**



*Source: Keith Myerscough collection*

Local newspaper reports regularly informed readers of boys being taken in front of the magistrates for bathing in the Huddersfield Narrow Canal as it ran through the town. The River Tame was also used by women to bathe in and to wash clothing – the objection being that they did so on a Sunday. The town celebrated the opening of the public baths with a ‘Grand Demonstration’ of local community groups parading around the town.



### An Invitation to the 'Grand Demonstration': May 1870



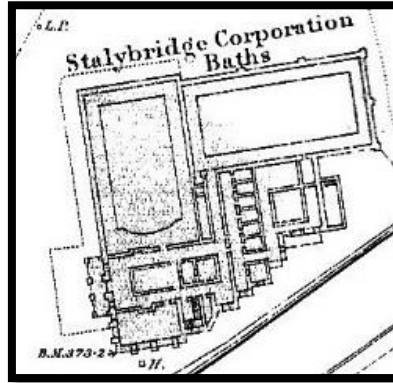
Source: Tameside Local History Centre

As many as 25,000 people were said to have taken part in the celebrations, many of them coming from other local townships. There was a banquet held at the Town Hall with 70 dignitaries sitting down to a repast of soup, various cuts of meat, fish, and deserts.

Situated on a prime site in the town centre known locally as the Plantation Ground, the public baths was bounded by the River Tame and the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. The public baths had two swimming pools; the first class pool being 75 feet by 28 feet and the second class pool measured 60 feet by 24 feet. In addition, each pool had a number of private slipper baths attached and there was also a Turkish Baths provided. The baths superintendent was provided with rooms for his family which included free heating and lighting. The management of the facility followed the norm in that local councils engaged husband and wife teams to run the day-to-day affairs of the baths. In the case of the Stalybridge Baths it was necessary for the superintendent to liaise with the council's public baths committee, the swimming club, and the baths' employees. From 1879 to 1936 a series of husband and wife teams managed all aspects of the public baths provision.<sup>10</sup>



**The ‘Penny Scrub’: Built on the Plantation Ground**



Source: O.S. Map, 1872

Due to the involvement of the local borough council the *Stalybridge Reporter* carried a weekly report on the usage made of the facilities.

**The Baths Income in the First Nine Weeks**

Week ending	Date	Bathers	Fees		
			£	s.	d.
15th	May, 1870	2183	73	13	8
22nd	„	2152	46	10	7
29th	„	1934	37	3	2
5th	June, „	1292	20	14	8½
12th	„	1483	23	0	1½
19th	„	2752	45	13	11
26th	„	2752	37	2	8
3rd	July, „	1240	22	1	3
10th	„	1834	22	19	4
Totals ..		17622	£328	19	5

Source: *Stalybridge Centenary Handbook, 1857-1957.*

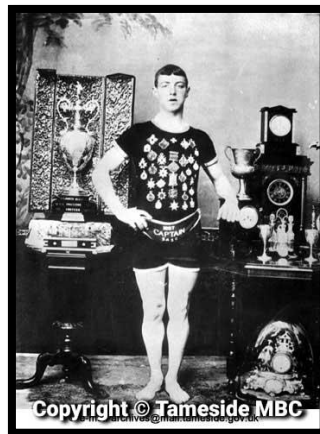
In the first nine weeks of operation the establishment received £328-19s-5d in fees from 17,622 ‘bathers’. From May 1870 to October 1915, the public baths provided the local community with a means to exercise and cleanse the body, and launder their garments. The baths were modernized and refurbished in 1915 at a cost of £6,400 with a new water filtration plant and the upgrading of the heating and lighting systems. In March 1925 mixed bathing was introduced and schoolchildren received swimming lessons as part of their school curriculum.

The gift of the public baths by the Platt family to their local community fulfilled all expectations as laid out in the Baths and Wash-Houses Act of 1846. Undoubtedly, it provided the means to improve personal health through sanitary means. It also provided a sense of social capital for the urban dwellers of Stalybridge in that it gave them a community focal



point and a pride in the achievements of its swimming club. Not least was the national and international fame it brought to the mill-town chiefly through the aquatic exploits of Joey Nuttall, the “*Merman of Stalybridge*”.<sup>11</sup>

**Joseph ‘Joey’ Nuttall: Captain of the Stalybridge Swimming Club**



*Source: Tameside Local History Centre*

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Baths and Wash-Houses Act of 1846, 9<sup>o</sup> & 10<sup>o</sup> Victoriæ Reginæ, Cap.74, 769-80

<sup>2</sup> Generally refers to the manufacturing of goods by a division of labour in a purpose-built factory. Cotton mills are an example of such a process.

<sup>3</sup> John Walton, in *Lancashire: A Social History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) used the term ‘cotton Lancashire’ in reference to the major cotton mill-towns located in southeast Lancashire.

<sup>4</sup> See: Samuel Hill, *Bygone Stalybridge*, (Stalybridge: Samuel Hill, 1907).

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Disraeli used the term ‘Workshop of the World’ in a speech he gave to describe the manufacturing capacity of industrial Britain in the House of Commons in 1838.

<sup>6</sup> Committee for Promoting the Establishment of Baths and Wash-Houses for the Labouring Classes, *Public Baths and Wash-Houses: Suggestions for the Building and Fitting Up of Parochial or Borough Establishments*, (London: Ivington, 1850).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Public Baths’, *Stalybridge Centenary Handbook, 1857-1957*, edited by John W. March, (Stalybridge: Stalybridge Corporation, 1957), 97-9.

<sup>8</sup> The 1865 Sewage Utilisation Act; the 1866 Sanitary Act; and the 1875 Public Health Act were believed to encroach upon civic autonomy. See: Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City*, (London: Orion Books, 2004), 306-12.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Public Baths’, *Stalybridge Centenary Handbook*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Myerscough, *Joey Nuttall: Champion Swimmer of the World, The ‘Stalybridge Merman’*, (Bury: Keith Myerscough, 2021).