



PROFILE

Dr Keith Myerscough

Keith has written extensively on the social and cultural aspects of swimming. His PhD thesis was titled '*Commercial Swimming in Nineteenth Century Lancashire*'. Aspects of central government legislation on health reforms and how they were implemented by regional government are discussed. Lancashire influenced both public baths provision and commercial swimming as a branch of the entertainment industry. Blackpool, as a working-class holiday destination served to promote *Grand Water Shows* for its Victorian visitors from the wealthy cotton mill-towns in Lancashire.

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MUNICIPAL PUBLIC BATHS: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY 2 – AN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPERATIVE

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The 1846 Baths and Wash-Houses Act was intended to improve "the health, comfort, and welfare of the inhabitants of towns and populous districts".

The physical and moral condition of the labouring classes occupied the thoughts of many members of the new middle classes and the landed gentry. It was imagined that by improving living conditions in the overcrowded slum areas of urban-industrial districts that the inhabitant's general level of well-being would improve. The notion of a healthy mind in a healthy body and that cleanliness was next to Godliness could be achieved with the implementation of a whole raft of sanitary reforms. The provision of private baths and laundry facilities served to promote such notions.

However, the take-up rate of the 1846 Act raised concerns with Central Government. The case for sanitary reforms had been made by the work of many eyewitnesses and official reports such as those of James Kay in 1832, Edwin Chadwick in 1842, and Friedrich Engels in 1844. The need for local governance in improving standards of living was generally accepted but several barriers had to be overcome:

- a) The burden of financing provision fell on the shoulders of local ratepayers who often viewed the labouring classes as the 'undeserving poor'.
- b) The 'great unwashed' were seen to be poor because they were indolent. The notion of self-help and self-improvement were admirable qualities to have.
- c) The adoption of Central Government legislation was viewed as diminishing local governance. The permissive nature of the 1846 Act was an illustration of how the status quo could be maintained.
- d) The maintenance of public facilities was often seen as poor business practice. Hence, they had to be financially profitable and not a burden on the rates.

Influential publications:

James Phillips Kay: 'The Moral and Physical Condition of the working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacturing in Manchester', 1832.

Edwin Chadwick: 'Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain', 1842.

Friedrich Engels: 'The Condition of the Working Class in England', 1844.

'Natator', *Penny Satirist*:

"I will not allow any working man to say he cannot afford threepence. Let him take a glass of gin a-day less, and bathe once a-week during the summer ..."

August 1837.

The provision of public baths, wash-houses, and swimming pools predates the 1846 Act. Many clubs or societies were established by swimming enthusiasts largely from the middle classes. By the 1830s indoor swimming facilities were steadily growing in number adding to the tradition of swimming in the sea, rivers, canals, and lakes.

The use of bodies of water within urban districts was problematic due to the hazards associated with pollution. The nation's extensive canal system presented dangers linked to their industrial use. The low temperatures associated with lakes and reservoirs also presented a risk to life.

The use of the sea at beach resorts had encouraged a health tourism industry from the 1750s onwards. Both males and females generated an industry associated with 'taking a dip' for medical reasons, real or imagined.

By 1800 swimming was undertaken as a sport, a leisure activity, and a recreational pursuit. The 1846 Act simply took advantage of people's desire to use swimming as a form of physical activity.

Public baths provision by local authorities was unable to keep pace with population growth in urban-industrial districts. From 1846 to 1860 only 43 municipal baths were built with an additional 40 baths being added between 1860 and 1880. However, a rapid acceleration in provision did occur between 1880 and 1900 with the construction of 123 baths establishments.

Each municipal public baths established at least one swimming club in order to maximize use and income.

End.