



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.

CONTACT

PHONE NUMBER:
+44 7792 170518

WEBSITE:
www.bathsandwashhouses.co.uk

EMAIL ADDRESS:
keithmyerscough@gmail.com

MUNICIPAL PUBLIC BATHS: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY 3 – CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

By Keith Myerscough, PhD., MA, M.Ed.

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Advocates of sanitary reform viewed the provision of public baths and wash-houses to be a civic responsibility.

The first Provincial authority to make provision was Liverpool in 1842 but it did have a 'floating bath' in the River Mersey in 1828. In London a number of 'model' baths and wash-houses had been established in the 1830s, forming the base for the design and maintenance of municipal facilities.

Despite a general acceptance of the causes of high mortality rates, initiatives to improve public health were only slowly being implemented. There had been three major outbreaks of cholera in the nineteenth century: in 1848-9 deaths amounted to 61,000, in 1853-4 26,000 people died, and in 1866 there were 17,000 deaths.

Thus, local authorities began to accept their obligations to the labouring classes. The municipal public baths scheme was but one of many social reforms to be adopted as a form of civic support. A councils' obligations in providing health, education, and social amenities served to create a form of community pride. The cotton mill-towns of Lancashire viewed their facility provision as confirmation of their wealth and good standing in the northwest of England.

In 1859 the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science declared that baths provision was "a means to improve individual and community health". Edward T. Bellhouse, a prominent Manchester industrialist, declared that 'benevolent exertion and private enterprise had been totally inadequate to establish a comprehensive and efficient system of baths and wash-houses'. Bellhouse was of the opinion that progress could only be made with local government involvement.

To this end, Central Government attempted to convince local government that baths provision could be fiscally beneficial. Under various town improvement schemes implemented during the mid to late Victorian period councils were able to apply for government loans at generous rates of repayment. However, it was rarely taken up by many local councils largely because they viewed it as placing undue pressure on their political and economic independence.

Many cash-rich northern industrial towns adopted schemes to provide public baths by combining various methods of financial provision. Private enterprise was often adopted in part or in full by business orientated councilors. Schemes to share the financial burden between the council coffers and loans from shareholders were preferred. Some wealthy

Bishop Bloomfield:

"Provision of the means for cleanliness would elevate the poor man from extreme destitution."

Hansard 1846.

Alfred Ebsworth:

"Such establishments could counteract many aspects of living in overcrowded dwellings."

Inspection of public Baths 1853.

Hugh Shimmin:

"A model sanitary purifier ... bestowing blessings, cheap, pure, and healthful on the toiling masses."

Liverpool Mercury 1856.

industrialists also donated funds as part of their philanthropic work.

In many of the major industrial towns throughout the provinces it became a matter of civic responsibility and pride to make such provisions. The building of public baths, free libraries, educational institutions, and art galleries gave status to the district and its community. In Lancashire many of the major cotton mill-towns viewed provision as a competition with their neighbours.

The process from the local agreement to make provision to the opening of municipal public baths often took many years. In 1850 the government established a committee with the sole aim of encouraging local councils to adopt the scheme. The Committee for Promoting the Establishment of Baths issued a detailed 17-page pamphlet suggesting how the provision of sanitary facilities would not be a financial burden on local finances. The information pamphlet provided a detailed account on how to build and 'fit-up' baths and wash-houses with swimming pool(s) as an essential part of the scheme. The main message was that such facilities were not only of benefit to the community in terms of social capital, but they could be financially profitable.

Thus, the provision of public baths took its first tentative steps in the 1850s and 1860s. What was a means of sanitary provision for the poorest members of society was transformed into a sport due to the inclusion of swimming baths facilities. The irony being that swimming pools were only included due to financial considerations with many sectors of society making sporting, recreational, and leisure use of the activity.

End.