



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 4 – COMMUNITY PRIDE

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The provision of Municipal Public Baths encouraged not only the 'dual-system' for sanitary hygiene but also that of physical exercise. The main beneficiaries of swimming pool provision were the working classes, particularly children. The use of swimming as a respectable form of exercise for females was recognized although the take-up rate by young males tended to dominate time in the pool.

The Victorian preoccupation with social class and gender is reflected in the dominance of facility segregation. The declaration of 'First-Class', 'Second-Class', 'Male', and 'Female' entrances and facility use dominated. The question of ethics and morality guaranteed the confirmation of social standing.

Today those Victorian and Edwardian public baths represent an era when public buildings were built to the highest technical standards. Many have now been designated part of the nation's industrial and social legacy protected by English Heritage. A visit to the 'penny-scrub', or the private slipper baths, or to do the laundry became part of the tradition for many people with a public baths serving their community.

In order to maintain the highest possible decorum local authorities established stringent bye-laws to control their customers' behavior. The facility was managed by a husband-and-wife team known as a superintendent and matron. Male and female attendants were also employed with an engineer to maintain the equipment. Many of the baths attendants could not swim which contributed to many 'deaths by drowning' in the second-half of the nineteenth century.

The total cost of a municipal public baths catering for bathing, swimming and laundry in the 1850s was estimated to be about £10,500. However, the availability of land for a new-build and access to a plentiful water supply was problematic. Thus, many local authorities maximized the size of the building leading to the pool(s) in particular being built to fit the land purchased. An impressive array of wash-tubs and drying equipment often of industrial specifications aided a strong throughput of customers. Cubicles for private bathing offered an opportunity for individuals and families to improve their personal cleanliness and thus their health and general well-being.

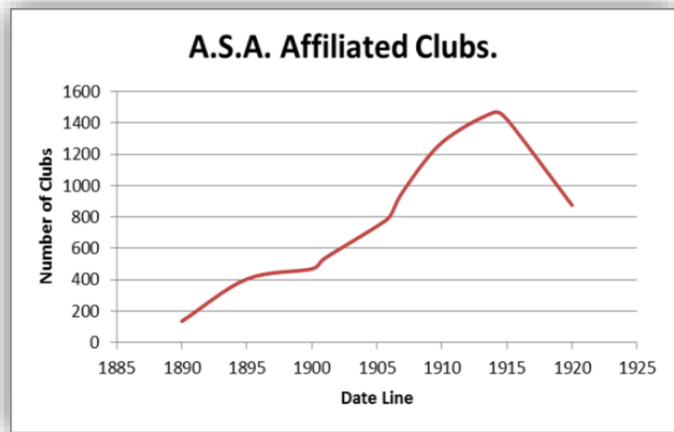
The provision of swimming pools were the most profitable part of the business, often providing a reasonable return on the councils costs. The resident swimming club(s) often double the weekly takings at gala events. The fees paid by club

members, race entrants, and spectators enabled public baths to continue to offer a full service to the community and those devotees of swimming.

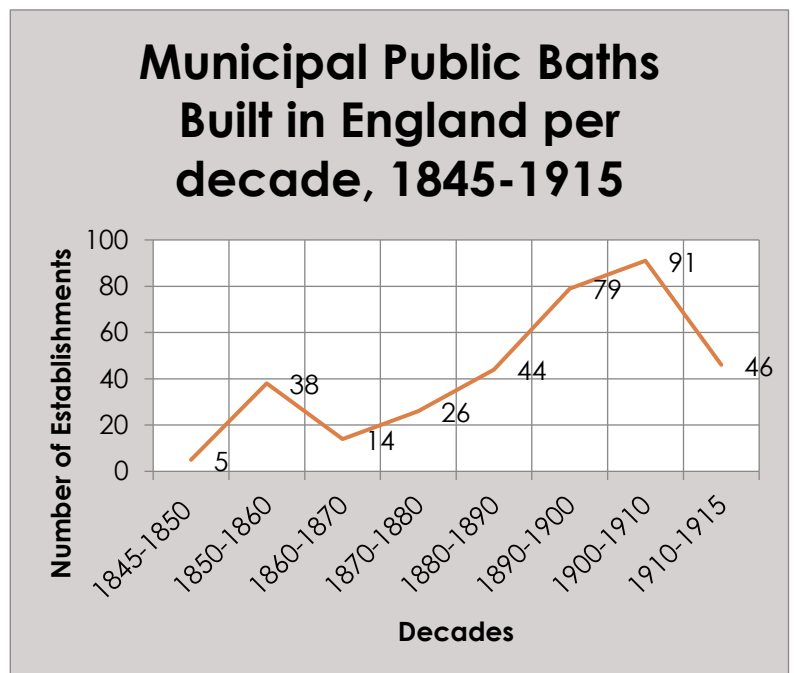
Bellhouse, a member of the Manchester Statistical Society declared in 1852 that:

“The metropolis has proved ... that with proper attention and economy, these establishments are self-supporting, and even remunerative”.

By 1853 London had 8 Municipal Public Baths with a further estimated 25 in major towns and cities throughout the nation. Thus, the ‘push’ of Central Government and the ‘pull’ of Local Government provided limited success in terms of sanitary improvements amongst the labouring classes. However, the promotion of swimming as an indoor sport and leisure activity created a commercial market for natation.



Source: ASA Minutes 1890-1920



Source: Keil and Wix, *In the Swim*, 149.