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About the author:

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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Manchester's Victoria Baths: A Social History

Baths & Wash-Houses: 1

In a series of articles, the creation of Manchester's 'water palace' is placed in context. Victoria Baths grew out of a concern for the physical and moral condition of the urban masses. The provision of private public baths and municipal baths are examined for their effectiveness in providing a service Mancunians.

Victoria Baths: A 'Water Palace'

In 1906 Manchester Corporation embarked upon a new phase in the municipalities' public baths provision. The Baths Committee opened its 'flagship' Victoria Baths on 7 September 1906. On the same day the Committee also opened Moss Side Baths at an estimated cost of £13,000; in contrast Victoria Baths (VB) had cost about £59,000.

The marked difference in expenditure was calculated to display to the inhabitants of Manchester, Lancashire, and Great Britain the wealth and industrial might of ' '. The cost of VB had raised a great many social and political issues for the Council who were the guardians of an industrial enterprise that had evolved since the First Industrial Revolution (c.1750-1850) within Lancashire's cotton mill-towns.

The manufacturing of cotton goods stimulated industrial growth and ingenuity led by the new middle classes known as the "Manchester Men". Their efforts created both personal and national wealth but at a terrible social cost for the labouring classes. Economic migrants flocked to the countries new urban-industrial districts in search of work in an innovative factory-system that promoted new manufacturing techniques. The new and ever-improving tireless technology created mass production techniques at a cost to the health of the masses.

The moral and physical condition of the urban population was of great concern to social reformers throughout the nineteenth century. Not least was the prospect of community unrest as witnessed in many urban districts throughout Britain. Protests and riots initiated by social inequality concerned those with political influence and encouraged those without it to struggle for emancipation. In the period 1839 to 1842 the *Chartists'* demands for social and political influence had been rejected by central government. In 1819 a series of localised riots had been met in Manchester with a military solution known as the "Peterloo Massacre"; a minor confrontation when compared to the French Revolution of 1789 to 1799.

The ravages of deprivations had disproportionately affected the labouring classes. The provision of public baths and wash-houses was a prosaic but practical addition to the social reform movement of the long nineteenth century. This series of articles serves to highlight the context of VB as a beacon to twentieth century industrial and social progress. The origins and development of VB are examined in terms of Manchester's place in the industrial heritage of the built environment of urban-industrial Manchester.

A Beacon of Enlightenment:

VB represents a period in the history of Manchester that reflects the townships' industrial development in the late-nineteenth century. The site and situation of the 'twin towns' of Manchester and Salford are regarded as the administrative hub of a range of industrial districts in Lancashire. The counties cotton mill-towns not only attracted factories to produce textiles but also a vast range of light and heavy industries. Accordingly, a specialized work-force increased the region's population density resulting in the creation of slum districts and associated physical and moral decay. The threat of the masses rising up in protest was problematic for the ruling classes in terms of unionized strike action and even violent protest.

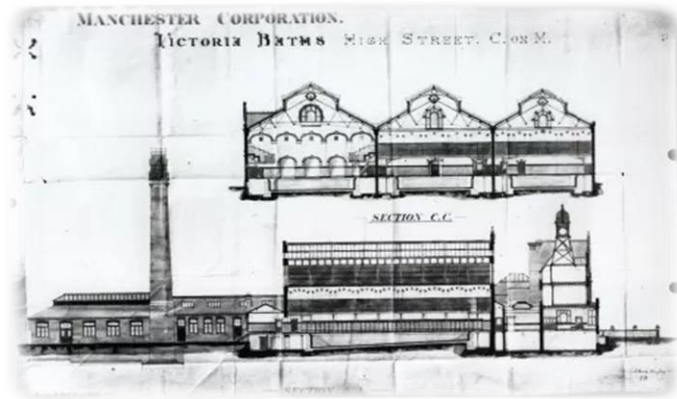


Fig.1: Cross section of Victoria Baths, 1906.

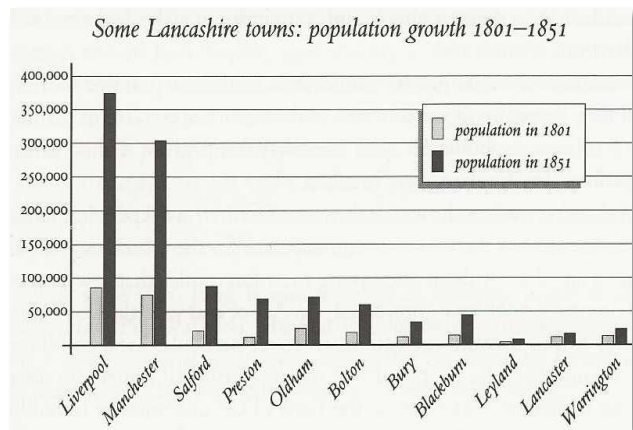


Fig.2: Growth of the 'Labouring Classes'.

Free Trade:

A policy that does not restrict the importation or exportation of goods and services.

Laissez-faire economics:

Laissez-faire economics is an economic theory dating back to the 18th century that opposes any government intervention in business affairs.

Municipal Socialism:

Municipal socialism is a local government policy aimed at spending local rates to benefit the local community.

The origin of VB can be attributed to the early Victorian era. The *1846 Baths and Wash-Houses Act* was part of a comprehensive and far-reaching strategy to improve living standards for the masses. The provision of public baths by municipal authorities was problematic mainly due to the financial burden expenditure would place upon the local ratepayer. The middle classes would essentially be paying through their rates for facilities they would not necessarily use. The British nation had prospered on the doctrine of *free-trade* derived from *laissez-faire economics* which was based upon non-intervention by government. However, times were changing with greater competition from abroad forcing a more liberal attitude to trading relations. In many of Britain's industrial districts local governance began to be driven by notions of *municipal socialism* for the benefit of a predominantly working-class population. Hence, the rise in funding municipal projects.

By 1900 Manchester Corporation was fully committed to improving the living standards of the town's inhabitants. The care and general well-being of the masses was reflected in a rolling programme of building projects that provided employment and social services. VB represented a renewed drive to improve the health and hygiene of Mancunians in that the establishment was to become the 'flagship' of a growing trend in the provision of municipal public baths. Enlightened local politicians took a pride in their own and others achievements as well as that of the regions industrial accomplishments. As a result, VB was designed to satisfy a practical need whilst conveying Manchester's wealth generated by Mancunians of all social orders.

End.