

## Working Papers on Professional Natationists

*Dave Day*  
*Manchester Metropolitan University*  
[D.J.Day@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:D.J.Day@mmu.ac.uk)

### Paper 1 (April 2014).

#### From Oldham Baths to American Vaudeville and Beyond: The Finney Family

##### Abstract

During the course of the nineteenth century, professional natationists, male and female, became a significant feature of the sporting and entertainment landscape of Britain. Individuals taught swimming, competed for prizes, exhibited in swimming baths, and, as the century progressed, increasingly became part of the music hall and vaudeville circuit where they demonstrated their talents in large tanks situated on stage. This transition from sport to entertainment was essentially a function of the limited number of participants and the resultant lack of opportunities for regular and profitable competition. Professional swimmers were forced to consider alternative means of presenting and selling their skills and the invention of portable crystal tanks enabled natatorial entrepreneurs to make a living at home and abroad. Their skills were often passed on through families and the 'Beckwith Frogs' were prominent in this respect, although they were not unique. Other aquatic families followed their example and, in cases such as the Finneys, even began to receive almost the same level of respect and support from the paying public. The origins of the Finney family lay in the North-West of England where they were living at 3 Hughes Court, Blinnington, Stockport in 1861. John, registered blind but formerly a brass iron founder, was accompanied by wife Martha and sons Samuel, William, John, and two-year old Timothy,<sup>1</sup> the first of the family to become a professional swimmer. In 1880, he was among those who entered for the 'Swimming Championship of the World' on Monday 12 July over 8 miles off Liverpool.<sup>2</sup> This working paper outlines the life courses of the Finney family members, chronologically and thematically, over the next sixty years with a particular emphasis on the competitive performances of the best known Finney, James, and on the family's collective incursions into the late Victorian and Edwardian entertainment industry, both in Britain and abroad.

##### James Finney the competitor

James Finney, was reportedly born into the family on 21 June, 1862<sup>3</sup>, and described as a professor of swimming engaged by the corporation to teach swimming, rescued two men at the Oldham Baths in August 1880, having plunged in 'without undressing himself...amidst the cheers of the bystanders'.<sup>4</sup> In September the same year, a swimming match took place opposite the gentlemen's bathing machines in Llandudno between 'Professor' Finney, W. Smith, a printer, and J. Langstrath, and the way in which they were tossed about by the huge waves was 'anything but pleasant to look at'.<sup>5</sup> James was still living with his family in 1881, at 14 Waterloo Street/Road, St. Peters, Oldham, when his occupation was recorded as 'Teacher of Swimming' on that year's census. Among the other family members was twenty-three-year-old brother Timothy, now married and a baker, and nine-year old sister Mary R. (Rhodes) who was later to become another key feature of the Finney swimming fraternity.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 1861 Census RG9/2571/36/17 3 Hughes Court, Blinnington, Stockport

<sup>2</sup> *Liverpool Echo*, July 8, 1880, 1.

<sup>3</sup> BMD Births July Quarter 1862 Stockport. Baptised 16 October 1864 along with Timothy and sister Sarah.

<sup>4</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, August 30, 1880, 3; *Manchester Weekly Times*, September 4, 1880, 6.

<sup>5</sup> *North Wales Chronicle*, September 18, 1880, 5.

<sup>6</sup> 1881 Census. Oldham, St. Peters, 14 Waterloo Street/Road. RG11/4066/37/22

On August 11, 1882, James, a twenty-one year old 'swimming master', married Mary Fell, a confectioner two years his senior, in Prestwich,<sup>7</sup> less than two weeks before he took on Willie Beckwith, the leading professional swimmer of the age, over a mile in the Hollingworth Lake, Rochdale, for £50 a-side, and the *Sporting Life* champion cup, value £50. Beckwith was 28, 5ft 4½in and 126lbs, while Finney was 21, 5ft 6in and 145lbs. James had been 'tutored by Howarth of the Southport Baths'<sup>8</sup>, and was already best known for swimming 112yards 6ins underwater, 'the greatest distance ever known'. The poor weather meant an attendance of only around 1,300 spectators and the betting was 2 to 1 on Beckwith. The course was 220 yards to the lap and was regulated by means of buoys placed twenty yards apart, attached to which were ropes which each man touched at the far end before turning. The rope extending the length of the course was measured on land and carefully tested in the water so that any records could be accepted without doubt. Unfortunately, several boats were allowed to congregate outside the ropes and added to the roughness of the water. Finney won the toss for choice of sides and selected the right which gave him the advantage of the rope going up and a look at Beckwith on the return journey, since both contestants swam on their left side using the overhand stroke. After all the 'care possible had been bestowed on them', and their bodies well rubbed with an 'oleaginous fluid', they were rowed to their respective boats. Professor Fred Beckwith was in his son's boat and Mr Plant was in Finney's, with R. Watson from the *Sporting Life*, acting as referee. At the end of the first lap both men touched the buoy rope at the same time. An exciting race ensued and was kept up half way down the course at which stage both men seemed to ease their pace and the champion of England (Beckwith) led his opponent by about twenty lengths at the finish. Their arrival on *terra firma* found both in rather and exhausted condition as the cold water temperature (about 50 degrees) had affected them severely. This championship had been looked forward to with a great deal of interest but it did not end satisfactorily, as, after the race, Finney claimed, in writing, that Beckwith had fouled him in the second and fourth laps by taking his water and giving him the 'wash of water'. The referee, after referring to the conditions governing the contest, judged that the fouling and interference had not been deliberate, as by the agreement it was necessary to be in order to cause disqualification, and he therefore ordered that the race be swum again on 31 August.<sup>9</sup>

The 1883 professional one mile swimming championship had six starters. Willie Beckwith, who was in America, did not compete. First prize was a cup, valued at £30, and £10, which was won by Finney, with Collier second. The time was 29min 27½sec, well behind E.T. Jones' 25min 22¾sec over the Thames course on 10 September, 1877, and not as good as the amateur record of 29min 25½sec held by Horace Davenport.<sup>10</sup> In September, James also won the 500 yards Swimming Championship of Lancashire at Oldham, by forty-four yards from Collier, in 6min 53sec.<sup>11</sup> In October, Willie Beckwith returned from the USA, without having made much money, to be met by a challenge by Finney.<sup>12</sup> Finney allowed Beckwith the choice of baths, for which he received £10, while the men agreed to share the gate money after expenses. Since the metropolitan baths were closed at that time of the year it was decided to swim in the 20yards tank at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster. Subsequently, three races, each for £100 a-side, were arranged to take place on December 17, 19, and 22, over one, two and five miles respectively. The course was roped down the centre to keep the swimmers apart. These matches caused something of a sensation in the swimming world as both were 'flyers of the first water' and had gone into strict training. The races started each evening at 9 and admission cost 2s, or 3s in the reserved seats.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> BMD Marriages

<sup>8</sup> 'Southport' and 'Stockport' appear almost interchangeably in the newspaper reports that make up the Finney narrative and highlight the difficulties of relying on these sources. More work needs to be undertaken with respect to this aspect of the Finney story.

<sup>9</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, August 27, 1882, 8; *Manchester Guardian*, August 28, 1882, 4; August 30, 1882, 7; *Penny Illustrated*, September 2, 1882, 10; *Graphic*, September 2, 1882, 223; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, September 3, 1882, 6; *New York Clipper*, September 16, 1882, 420.

<sup>10</sup> *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, September 1, 1883.

<sup>11</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, September 29, 1883, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Bell's Life*, October 20, 1883.

<sup>13</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, November 11, 1883, 5; *Observer*, December 9, 1883, 1; *Penny Illustrated*, December 15, 1883, 13.

Willie Beckwith had been 'before the public' since making his first appearance aged four as 'Baby Beckwith, the Wonder of the World' on 27 August 1862 and he was now the premier British professional swimmer, just as his father had been. The services of his old mentor J. Lavender had been engaged for these contests and most of his preparation had been undertaken at the William the Fourth at Streatham. On the Monday evening, he stood 5ft 4in and turned the scale at 8st 3lb. Finney, who was 5ft 6½in and weighed 9st 4lb, did his work in the Oldham neighbourhood under S. Plant, who brought him to the post as fit as possible. Both men got through their arduous preparation in a manner which gave every satisfaction, and their friends expressed themselves confident as to the result, although the reports of the great things done by the Lancashire man must have made supporters of the Londoner a little anxious.<sup>14</sup> Both men looked the 'picture of health' when they appeared on the diving board for the first race, but Finney soon showed that he was less 'polished' as a swimmer. He had a fine sweep of his legs but he screwed his body considerably. Moreover, he could not swim straight, a real disadvantage in the small Aquarium whale tank, and he kicked the side repeatedly. Finney got the best of the start but Beckwith drew away at every length and when half the distance had been covered in 13min 17sec he was said to still have half a minute on his trial time. Beckwith won by 28 (22) yards in 27min 15sec (37sec), the fastest time for a mile in still water. The Manchester division were much 'chapfallen' by the defeat of their man, because they were under the impression that they could not lose the race. Odds of 60 to 50 had been laid on Finney before the start and 650 even laid on him for the rubber.<sup>15</sup>

Beckwith won the second match over two miles by 24yards, in 54mins 39sec, four minutes better than the previous best, although, given the shortness of the bath, it was considered unlikely that the time would be accepted, since the turns in tanks 'upset all estimates of a man's actual powers for a straightaway contest'.<sup>16</sup> Finney had been expected to atone for his defeat in the first race and betting was 9 to 2 on Finney. The men dived in simultaneously at 9.30 and Finney, the first to rise, maintained a slight lead for eighteen laps but then Beckwith drew level and pulled away to lead by nearly two lengths at the end of a mile, completed in 26min 56sec. Finney, swimming in the 'most plucky manner', had reduced his disadvantage by nearly half a length at a mile and a half, completed by Beckwith in 40min 42sec. Beckwith's time at a mile and three quarters was 47min 35sec and he swam on in 'magnificent style' whilst Finney, who continued to 'keep too much under water', was unable to decrease the gap. Finney had not swum up to his reported form, his turning being slow, whilst he lay very low in the water and his style compared unfavourably with the easy machinelike movement of his rival, whilst his steering at times was most erratic. He had yet to learn something before he could hold his own with Beckwith, especially over short distances. Nevertheless, the manner in which he moved at the end of the two mile race suggested that he had stamina and he was expected to reverse matters in the five mile contest.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Beckwith had won the first two races easily, a large crowd attended the third race and speculation was brisk with the result confirming the 'north country' men's faith in their man, who not only won but surpassed his opponent's performances in the first two races, suggesting that he could not 'have been himself' on previous occasions. Beckwith, on the other hand, seemed stale, and looked as if he had focused his efforts on the two shorter events, by winning which he had 'secured the bulk of the bets that had been laid'. Beckwith was a firm favourite and before they had gone half a mile £50 to £5 was being laid on the Londoner. However, Finney, who swam in much better form than previously, began to draw away and he led by twenty yards at a mile, completed in 26min 24sec, considerably faster than in the previous mile race. He increased his lead with every length and when he had swum three miles twenty-eight laps, Beckwith, who was 160yards behind, gave up.<sup>18</sup> This three match series with Beckwith

---

<sup>14</sup> *Bell's Life*, December 22, 1883.

<sup>15</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, December 22, 1883, 7; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, December 23, 1883, 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Leeds Mercury*, December 20, 1883, 7; *Manchester Guardian*, December 20, 1883, 8; *Graphic*, December 22, 1883, 615.

<sup>17</sup> *Ipswich Journal*, December 22, 1883, 10; *Bell's Life*, December 22, 1883.

<sup>18</sup> *Bell's Life*, December 29, 1883; *Observer*, December 23, 1883, 5; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, December 23, 1883, 8; *Manchester Guardian*, December 24, 1883, 8.

was long-remembered and led to a number of attempts to bring the men together again. After the two mile race the principal supporter of Finney had offered to match him to swim Beckwith, one mile in open still water, for £1,000 per side, during May. Finney subsequently signified his willingness to accept Beckwith's challenge to swim one mile in open water, for £500 or £1,000 a side and offered the Londoner £10 to swim at Hollingworth Lake, or half way between 'house and house', but Beckwith declined to swim out of London.<sup>19</sup> In January 1885, it was being reported that Finney wanted to swim Beckwith over one mile for £100 a side and he would allow Beckwith £20 if he agreed to swim in Blackpool.<sup>20</sup>

In May 1884, E.T. Jones of Leeds beat Finney easily by 40 yards in 6min 54sec over a quarter of a mile in Waterloo Lake, Roundhay Park, Leeds. Jones then declared he would like to join both Finney and Beckwith in a one mile sweepstake. In response, Beckwith felt obliged to challenge the winner and commentators expected to hear of these old opponents being matched again, the last time having resulted in a win for Beckwith.<sup>21</sup> In August, Finney and J.J. Collier of Salford met in front of 4,000 spectators for the mile championship on Hollingworth Lake with Collier winning easily in 28mins 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>secs, the fastest time on record in still water.<sup>22</sup> Finney was more successful in the annual 220 yards race for the Championship of Scotland at Dundee on Wednesday 17 December, winning a splendid race by five yards in 3mins 2sec, as well as first prize for ornamental swimming, in front of a large crowd.<sup>23</sup>

After 'much paper warfare', an agreement was reached in March 1885 between Finney and Collier to swim one mile in open water for the Professional Swimming Championship. Efforts were made to persuade Jones and Beckwith to enter and to make a sweepstake of it, in which case a well known patron of the sport offered to add £70 to the stakes. Finney and Collier met at Hollingworth Lake in May for the Cup and £100 with Finney retiring and Collier completing the distance in 37min 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>secs.<sup>24</sup> Nuttall later recalled of Hollingworth Lake that the water, which had springs in it, was always cold because it drained from the hills around it. When Collier and Finney competed, the temperature of the water was only 43 degrees and both men were almost paralysed with cold. Although Collier finished the distance, Finney had to be assisted by the referee's boat and both men were semi-delirious.<sup>25</sup>

In June 1885, Finney accepted Collier's challenge to contest for the 500 yards Championship of Lancashire, but could only race in Blackpool baths or in the sea because of his engagements in that town.<sup>26</sup> When the men did compete for the trophy at Salford baths on 31 August the event ended 'in an unpleasant manner'. Because Collier did not turn up at the appointed time, Finney was ordered to swim over but when he found out that the trophy would not become his own property he refused to start and a 'scene ensued'. Eventually, he was persuaded to enter the water but, after he had completed half the distance, Collier, who had been delayed, made his appearance and another 'unpleasant, unseemly squabble' resulted.<sup>27</sup> On Friday 23 October 1885, 'Professors' Collier, Finney, Beckwith and Jones competed over one mile at the Lambeth Baths for Mr Topping's £100 prize and sweepstake of £25, resulting a prize list of £140 for first, £40 for second, £20 for third and £15 for fourth. Collier was 25, stood 5ft 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>in and weighed 147lbs. Beckwith was 28, stood 5ft 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in and weighed 119lbs. Finney weighed 176lbs and stood 5ft 6ins. Jones was 35, stood 5ft 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in and weighed 175lb. The 40 yard course was roped and the temperature held at 70 degrees. Collier won by fifty yards in 27min 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>sec, the best time for a bath of a good size although enclosed baths were considered by some as 'very unsatisfactory waters for important contests'. Finney was second in 27min 48sec, forty yards ahead of Beckwith whose time was

---

<sup>19</sup> *Bell's Life*, December 22, 1883; December 29, 1883.

<sup>20</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, January 18, 1885, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, May 17, 1884; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, May 18, 1884, 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, August 30, 1884, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Bell's Life*, December 20, 1884; *Penny Illustrated*, December 27, 1884, 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Bell's Life*, March 14, 1885; *Penny Illustrated*, May 23, 1885, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Chums*, June 1, 1898.

<sup>26</sup> *Bell's Life*, June 9, 1885.

<sup>27</sup> *Bell's Life*, September 2, 1885.

28min 37sec. Describing the event as 'probably the most memorable race ever chronicled in the annals of swimming', one reporter noted that Collier's performance was unparalleled and that, if records accomplished in 'washing' tubs of twenty yards long were excluded, it was the 'finest exhibition of legitimate mile swimming ever witnessed'.<sup>28</sup>

The challenge issued by Beckwith in April 1886, to swim anyone from 200 yards to 500 yards, was promptly accepted by Finney, the very man he had expressed himself most desirous to meet. There was a general lack of faith in the challenges issued by professional swimmers because they seldom led 'to business' and commentators observed that professional swimming was not as well patronised as it should be mainly because of the 'paper talk' that always preceded any important match. The champion, Collier, for example, seemed unable to find an opponent and was having to confine himself to 'what we may term the humdrum part of his profession'. It was a surprise that the swimmers themselves had not had the sense to see that the continual cry of 'wolf' caused the public to look suspiciously on any *bona fide* contest and it was noted that this 'stupid custom' had been abandoned in the match made between Finney and Beckwith.<sup>29</sup> It was wonderful how quickly this contest had been arranged, without the enormous amount of letter-writing and badinage usually indulged in by natatory 'Professors' before a match was agreed upon. In this instance, Beckwith seemed to be in earnest and it appeared that Finney was also keen, judging by the prompt manner in which he answered the Londoner's cartel. Finney deposited a 'tenner' and wanted the match to take place on 22 May. Beckwith covered the £10 deposit and the men met to agree terms on Friday 16 April, when they arranged a match for the 500 yards Open Water Championship for £100 a side to be decided on 7 June at the Welsh Harp, Hendon. Both men commenced active training on Monday 17 May, Finney at the Welsh Harp and Beckwith in the neighbourhood of Cricklewood. The Welsh Harp was to be used by both parties, especially by Finney who was due to practice and swim all his trials in the lake. The betting at the start was 5 to 4 on Finney and the race started at 7.35 in beautiful weather. Between two and three thousand people watched Finney draw away after 100yards to win by half a dozen yards in a moderate time of 8min 5½sec.<sup>30</sup>

At Hollingworth Lake, in May 1887, Finney beat Collier for the One Mile Swimming Championship, winning by about 185 yards in 29 min 59½sec.<sup>31</sup> On Thursday 20 October 1887, Finney beat Collier, Willie and Charles Beckwith for the 1,000 yards Professional Swimming Association championship at the Lambeth Baths, winning by fifty yards in 14mins 43¾sec, the best time on record by 12½sec.<sup>32</sup> In November, James and Willie were reported to be 'hard at work' for their six-days' contest of ten hours a day at the Lambeth Baths. As was normal at the Westminster Aquarium, ladies were admitted and a band was in attendance. The race ended on 2 November, Beckwith being in such poor health that he was forced to retire. Finney, who had a lead of four miles, 29½ miles to Beckwith's 25½ miles, was awarded the stakes in the middle of the week.<sup>33</sup> In May 1888, Finney wrote from the Margate Marine Palace Baths to challenge Collier for the *Sporting Life* championship cup and any sum from £25 a side upwards at the Welsh Harp, according to the rules of the cup, on 23 or 25 June.<sup>34</sup> On 14 September 1888, Finney easily beat George Kistler for the West Coast Championship at Penzance over a mile for £50 a side in 29min 26¾sec, despite going off a course which involved swimming around a flag-boat and back to the Battery

---

<sup>28</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, September 20, 1885, 6; *Birmingham Daily Post*, October 24, 1885, 5; *Graphic*, October 31, 1885, 486; *Penny Illustrated*, October 31, 1885; *New York Clipper*, November 14, 1885, 553.

<sup>29</sup> *Bell's Life*, April 22, 1886.

<sup>30</sup> *Bell's Life*, April 14, 1886; April 16, 1886; *Graphic*, April 24, 1886, 439; *Leeds Mercury*, May 15, 1886, 5; *Graphic*, June 12, 1886, 635; *Penny Illustrated*, June 12, 1886, 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, May 21, 1887, 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Leeds Mercury*, October 21, 1887, 8; *Graphic*, 29 October 1887 p. 482.

<sup>33</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, November 12, 1887, 7; *Leeds Mercury*, October 29, 1887, 7; *Penny Illustrated*, October 29, 1887, 10; *Glasgow Herald*, November 3, 1887, 11; *Penny Illustrated*, November 5, 1887, 3; *Aberdeen Daily News*, January 3, 1888, 2 (America?).

<sup>34</sup> *Era*, May 19, 1888, 12; *Penny Illustrated*, May 26, 1888, 6.

Rocks. R. Watson, the experienced 'swimming chronicler' of the *Sporting Life*, was starter and referee.<sup>35</sup> In October, Finney came third behind Nuttall and Collier, who then announced he would accept Finney's challenge to swim him over one mile in any 'fair bath in England', within a month, for £100 a side.<sup>36</sup>

Nuttall and Finney, who had twice won the Challenge Cup, competed at Brighton for the professional one mile championship and £50 a side on 30 August 1890, swimming half a mile out from the West Pier towards the Chain Pier and back. Finney's speciality was sea swimming and the rougher it was the better for him normally, but Nuttall gave him no chance and, swimming in grand style, he won easily by about 100 yards in 28min 7½sec. Finney had beaten Nuttall at Llandudno the previous season and swam a great race but was beaten on his merits by the fastest and best swimmer of the day, if not 'the very best there had ever been'.<sup>37</sup> Finney subsequently issued a challenge to the world to swim one mile in still open water, one mile in the sea, ornamental swimming, underwater swimming and long distance swimming, from five miles up to six days, for any sum from £100 upwards, the winner of three out of five events to be declared the champion all-round swimmer of the world.<sup>38</sup>

At the Westminster Aquarium annexe on 1 December 1890, a large crowd assembled to witness the opening heats of a professional handicap promoted by Professor Beckwith. Handsome money prizes were being offered, and the conditions were that each of the eight competitors would swim against every one of the others in heats of half-a-mile on the American principle. The competitors, with the starts allotted by W.J. Innes, were Joseph Nuttall, of Stalybridge (champion of all distances up to a mile), scratch; James Finney, of Oldham (ex-champion), 25sec start; J.F. Standring (ex-amateur champion), 55sec start; H.R. Taylor, 1min 25sec; E.J. Kirk (champion of Exeter), 1min 30sec; A. Richardson, 1min 35sec; W.G. Harrison, 1min 45sec; and Jules Gautier (champion of France), 2min start. Some interesting racing took place in the opening stage when Taylor beat Kirk by 18yards in 14min 40½sec; Standring beat Richardson by 8yards in 14min 30½sec; Finney beat Gautier by 40yards in 13min 51½sec; and Nuttall beat Harrison by a yard in 13min 14sec.<sup>39</sup> The second round of this American Swimming Tournament was swum on 2 December with both Nuttall and Finney 'having matters all their own way' in their respective races. By the end of the evening both men, along with Standring and Taylor, had recorded two wins. The competition was brought to a close 'in the presence of a very large company' on 6 December when Nuttall beat Finney easily in 12min 17sec to claim first prize overall.<sup>40</sup>

Finney and Nuttall were matched to swim one, two and three miles in the sea at Blackpool on November, 3, 4, and 5, 1892, for £200, the winner of two out of the three to take the stakes. They were to toss for the choice of which race should take place first. Finney publically stated that if he was successful he would retire from competing, as he had been before the public for some seventeen years,<sup>41</sup> but he was racing again a year later when he met James McCusker over one mile in the sea for the world's championship. McCusker, 24, nearly 5ft 10in tall and weighing 173lbs, had won the American mile championship on 13 September 1891. In July 1893, the men competed over a mile to the north of Blackpool North Pier for a stake of £200 a side. The American had been training at Blackpool for some weeks and was the acknowledged favourite. A large crowd gathered on the pier, the North Shore, and in steamers and pleasure boats. The race was unexciting for spectators because, after they dived in, all that could be seen was the regular flash of arms in the sunlight and the swimmers' heads. Each swimmer was accompanied by a boat in which were his trainers, a council of advisers, and men carrying his colours. The American soon showed his superiority and he was never fully extended, coming home an easy winner in 33min

---

<sup>35</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, September 22, 1888, 7; *Evening News (Sydney)*, November 1 1888, 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, October 27, 1888, 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Observer*, August 31, 1890, 3; *Penny Illustrated*, September 6, 1890, 7; *Morning Bulletin*, October 25, 1890, 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Morning Bulletin*, October 25, 1890, 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Observer*, November 30, 1890, 2; *Daily News*, December 2, 1890, 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Daily News*, December 3, 1890, 3; *Observer*, December 7, 1890, 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Referee*, November 1, 1892, 4.

4sec. Although both used the overhand stroke, McCusker's action was not as high as Finney's and his head never disappeared while the Englishman, though his stroke was much straighter, was lost to sight at the end of every stroke. Once more the 'British Lion's tail' had been twisted by 'Brother Jonathan'.<sup>42</sup>

A 'boom in swimming' seems to have occurred in 1897. In July, when the Life Saving Society organised a series of races and displays at the West India Docks, London, in the presence of their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of York, the German, Swiss, Dutch, American, Australian and British champions, including Finney and Cavill, were all in the metropolis.<sup>43</sup> In September, recriminations were still going on with regard to the race at Blackpool between Tyers and Percy Cavill. Apparently Finney had never lodged an objection against the decision but simply claimed the race on behalf of Tyers. It was alleged that when the men had swum half way Finney called out to F.M. Whitehead, the starter, who was in a boat accompanying the swimmers, that they would finish between the flagstaff already standing and the end of the Victoria Pier. Whitehead agreed and conveyed these instructions to Ernest Cavill, who was 'acting as coach' to his brother. Therefore Tyers made a bee-line for the goal whilst Cavill who went too far out to sea could not possibly have got back to finish according to the new arrangements.<sup>44</sup> In November 1897, it was announced that Ernest Cavill, the Australian professional swimming champion, Finney and Daniells, English professionals, would be leaving England for South Africa where they would stay for three months, exhibiting at Capetown, Johannesburg and elsewhere, before going to Australia.<sup>45</sup>

On 1 September, 1898, James swam from Blackpool to St Anne's in a rough sea in front of many thousands of people and followed by a number of boats, accomplishing the distance in six hours and winning £300. Finney started from the North Pier soon after 2.30 and, after waiting at half way for the tide to turn, he arrived at St Anne's Pier at 8 p.m., quite fresh and well despite covering close on ten miles. The conditions of the wager meant that he had to wait for an hour for enough depth of water to land and he spent the time swimming and floating, accompanied by ex-amateur champion J.H. Tyers, before Nuttall joined him for the final swim to shore. Finney performed as usual at the Tower Circus later that evening. It had been a 'capital effort' and one which added to his world-wide reputation. To swim in such a sea required great stamina and the feat proved that Finney was in fine physical condition. For a number of years he had been considering swimming the Channel and this 'latest effort should give him much encouragement'.<sup>46</sup> Reflecting the ongoing marginalisation of professional swimmers by an increasingly powerful A.S.A., not everyone benefitted from Finney's swim. At the Northern Counties Executive Meeting in October, J. Fielding, the Blackpool champion, appeared to support his protest against the action of the Blackpool Club in refusing to allow him to compete in the championship on the grounds that he had lost his amateur status by swimming with Finney in the latter's swim for a wager from Blackpool to St Anne's. The facts were admitted by Fielding and he was referred to the A.S.A. rule, which was very definite in such a case, so the Executive had no option but to dismiss the protest. As Fielding made no application for reinstatement, he remained a professional swimmer.<sup>47</sup>

Although there were intermittent challenges and competitive swims over the next few years this effectively marked the end of Finney's serious swimming. In July 1904, James was in Blackpool coaching Haggerty, who was due to attempt the Channel in August, and, in September, he was competing again in Blackpool, but this time in a bowls tournament.<sup>48</sup> Throughout his competitive career Finney had been

---

<sup>42</sup> *Rockford Daily Spectator*, June 29, 1893; *Manchester Guardian*, July 17, 1893, 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Edinburgh Evening News*, July 3 1897, 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, September 23 1897, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Evening Post*, November 17, 1897, 5; *Grey River Argus*, November 17, 1897, 2; *Wanganui Herald*, November 17, 1897, 3; *Star*, November 17 1897, 3; *Cootamundra Herald*, November 20, 1897, 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, September 2, 1898, 9; September 5, 1898, 9; *Grey River Argus*, September 6, 1898, 4; *Wanganui Herald*, September 3, 1898, 2; *Evening Post*, September 3, 1898, 5; *West Coast Times*, September 5, 1898, 2; *Otago Witness*, December 29, 1898, 22.

<sup>47</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, October 24, 1898, 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Nottingham Evening Post*, July 15 1904, 6; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, September 26 1904, 12.

generally regarded as an 'astute campaigner'<sup>49</sup> and this was reinforced in September 1884 when a Grand National Swimming Festival was proposed and James was included among the suggested participants.<sup>50</sup> From now on, however, he was to concentrate on other forms of aquatic performances to earn his living.

### **Finney the aquatic performer**

Writing in 1899, Watson observed that Finney's exploits were quite fresh in the memories of all who took an interest in aquatic sports. He had proved more than a match for the phenomenon, Joey Nuttall, in salt water and would probably prove superior to that 'wonder' in rough water of any kind. Marie Finney had added 'fresh lustre' to the family fame and the Finneys were set to rival the Beckwiths as a household of swimmers. Watson did provide a caveat though since whether James, the 'flower of the flock', could, when he reached Professor Beckwith's age, be able to 'show such a record as that veteran', time alone would show.<sup>51</sup> This section of the paper follows the family in their efforts to match the same degree of public acceptance and acclaim as the Beckwiths.

On 21 October 1884, Finney took a benefit at the Corporation Baths, Oldham Road, Manchester,<sup>52</sup> and he increasingly turned his exhibition skills into a profitable entertainment. Aquatic events held in tanks in aquaria and theatres extended the earning possibilities for swimming professionals and James was described both as a graceful aquatic performer in 'the tank' and someone always worth seeing at any music hall at which he displayed his diving skills.<sup>53</sup> On April 7, 1886, Finney remained submerged for 4min 29¼sec at the Canterbury Music Hall, without aid of any kind, in front of a large audience, including 'sporting people of all descriptions'. Just before the watch registered 4min 30sec he returned to the surface to be met with 'round after round of applause'.<sup>54</sup> The following year, Finney announced that he would stake £100 that he could remain under the water longer than any other man in the world, and that he would give his gold medal to anyone who beat his record.<sup>55</sup> Many tank performers subsequently endeavoured to do better, and a few were credited with success, but there was always some doubt about the genuineness of their achievements. In 1898, however, nineteen-year-old Elise Wallenda, after a series of aquatic tricks which made up her usual nightly performance at the Aquarium, stayed underwater for 4min 45½sec, a feat timed by, among others, W. Henry, the secretary of the Life Saving Society, H. Griffin, the official timekeeper of the National Cycling Union, and J. Campbell Muir, of the Bath Club. She was rather exhausted at the finish but she quickly recovered.<sup>56</sup>

Finney constantly referred to his swimming exploits in his advertising, often being billed as having 'won more Championship races than any other swimmer in existence'. Between 1887 and 1888, James, (Champion swimmer of the World) appeared in a large tank with 'Mademoiselle Le Grande', at the People's Palace and Aquarium in Scarborough and his adverts in May 1888 recalled his 'great success at the Gaiety Palace in Birmingham'. Previewing his imminent appearance in Margate, he advertised 'lots of presentations' and noted that his medals were now hanging on his back, 'the front being full'.<sup>57</sup> In October, 1888, Finney, again assisted by 'Mademoiselle La Grande', appeared at the Middlesex Music Hall in Holborn, alongside acts such as Dan Leno 'London's favourite vocal comedian and champion dancer', and the pair were at the South London Palace in Lambeth in December.<sup>58</sup> Professor James Finney,

---

<sup>49</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, September 28, 1889, 7.

<sup>50</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, September 6, 1884, 10.

<sup>51</sup> *The Licensed Victuallers' Mirror*, November 19, 1889, 510.

<sup>52</sup> *Bell's Life*, October 11, 1884.

<sup>53</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, September 22, 1888, 7; *Evening News (Sydney)*, November 1 1888, 8.

<sup>54</sup> *Taranaki Herald*, December 11, 1909, 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Poverty Bay Herald*, August 24, 1887, 3; *Taranaki Herald*, July 23, 1898, 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, December 29, 1898, 294; *Evening Post*, February 4, 1899, 3.

<sup>57</sup> *Era*, May 19, 1888, 12; *Penny Illustrated*, May 26, 1888, 6.

<sup>58</sup> British Library Posters: Evan.1876 Middlesex Music Hall, October 15th, 1888. With an illustration of Finney's great tank performance; Evan.843 South London Palace, Lambeth, 12 December 1888.

a former champion swimmer, and the 'winner of a surprising number of medals for superior skill in swift swimming' was engaged at the Oxford Music Hall in November 1888 to give his remarkably clever and interesting diving performances in company with Marie, his 'charmingly graceful' young sister. The writer recommended everyone to see their wonderful subaqueous performances. Father Neptune himself could not surpass Finney in the ease and dexterity with which he plunged to the bottom of his glass tank and picked up innumerable coins with his mouth. He varied his accomplishments by singing 'Benjamin Binns' underwater and by enacting the fascinated German knight of legend to the bewitching Lurline of his pretty sister who looked the most captivating of undulating river sprites as she hovered over her sleeping brother, 'her brown hair floating like a fairy coronal'.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Marie Finney*

In September, 1887, an advertisement for Finney mentioned Willie and Marie, 'my brother and sister',<sup>60</sup> both of whom became renowned aquatic performers in their own right. Between November 1888 and May 1889, James and his sister appeared as far afield as Liverpool, Rochdale, Belfast, South Shields, and Oldham.<sup>61</sup> At Llandudno Pier and Baths, Finney was not only accompanied by Marie, one of the finest lady swimmers in England, but also by Willie Finney and 'baby' Finney. The family group gave a beautiful swimming exhibition, the 'greatest performance ever seen', twice daily in the Baths while James and Marie could be seen once a day in the sea. The family also taught swimming, 'terms on application to Professor Finney at the Pier'.<sup>62</sup>

Marie's greatest feat to that point had been to plunge from Llandudno Pier at low water, a distance of fifty-four feet, but, in 1889, she made a major impact on the media by diving off London Bridge. This 'captivating young lady, as lissom as a mermaid underwater', performed a very plucky feat on Friday afternoon, 27 September, and proved herself an 'exceedingly courageous damsel'. The 'comely and dexterous' Marie was seventeen last January.<sup>63</sup> Shortly before three o'clock on Friday afternoon this daring 'little Lancashire witch' walked from a neighbouring hostelry onto London Bridge wearing an Ulster and a bonnet, to all appearances out for a stroll, accompanied by her brother Tim Finney. The wind was boisterous and blowing up the river while a strong tide was running up. At a quarter to three the redoubtable swimming champion, James Finney, embarked in Dave Godwin's boat (a professional oarsman), accompanied by R. Watson. The boat was rowed into mid-stream and awaited the arrival of Marie on the bridge. Presently she was seen walking leisurely up and down, with a policeman stationed a few yards away regulating the traffic and evidently oblivious of what was about to take place. James soon gave the signal from the water that all was clear below and his sister, removing her cloak and hat, was hoisted on to the bridge, the top of which being rounded was difficult to plunge from. At the supreme moment a savage gust of wind blew her sideways but, with wonderful presence of mind, she dropped onto the parapet about 3ft below and, after poising gracefully for a second, shot off like an arrow. Making a magnificent descent, and attired in blue tights, she cleared the water without a splash and rose to the surface. Finney, wearing ordinary street dress, had dived just as his sister had mounted the bridge, and he greeted Marie with a welcome shout of approval. Marie smiled as she swam to the boat, into which she was quickly hoisted and rowed to the Swan Pier, where a demonstration awaited her, before the little heroine returned to the house round the corner, which was soon crowded. Several steamers were detained at the pier at the time and the passengers thereby secured a good view of the feat while on the bridge a great crowd assembled just as Marie rose to the surface. The police, as in duty bound, made inquiries, but they were most courteous and respectful. Throughout the whole business the most

---

<sup>59</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, November 17, 1888, 11.

<sup>60</sup> *Era*, September 10, 1887.

<sup>61</sup> *Era*, November 17, 1888; December 1, 1888; December 8, 1888; December 29, 1888; January 26, 1889; March 30, 1889; *Belfast News-Letter*, April 1, 1889; April 4, 1889; *Era*, April 6, 1889; *Belfast News-Letter*, April 12, 1889; May 4, 1889; *Era*, May 18, 1889.

<sup>62</sup> *Hartley's Illustrated Coaching Guide to North Wales*, 71.

<sup>63</sup> BMD Births January Quarter 1872, Ormskirk, Lancashire.

unconcerned of the party was Marie. This was a daring feat accomplished with the utmost coolness and nerve and crowned with complete success. It also had the effect intended and proved an excellent advertisement for Marie who, in company with James and two other members of her family had been performing to crowded houses at the Royal and Washington Music Halls. The writer went on to suggest that the family 'bids fair to make itself as renowned as the Beckwiths', thanks to the fame already gained by the eldest brother, James, the Champion swimmer of England.<sup>64</sup>

#### *James and Marie*

Subsequent advertisements referred to Professor James Finney, the champion swimmer and tank performer, and his sister, Marie, the 'heroine of the celebrated dive from London Bridge'. A large tank was especially constructed for them at the Trocadero Music Hall, Shaftesbury Avenue, in November and December 1889, prices 6d to £1 1s,<sup>65</sup> and they also appeared at the Royal Standard Theatre of Varieties.<sup>66</sup> Finney took a benefit at the Trocadero in December, when the hall was crowded with 'gentlemen intimately associated with various phases of sport'. In a special entertainment, 'some fifty or sixty favourites were announced to take part', including James and Marie in their tank exhibition, prior to which Marie was presented with a gold medal in recognition of her 'clever and plucky dive' from London Bridge.<sup>67</sup> In February 1890, James and Marie were at the Washington Music Hall in Battersea and they were in Dublin in March,<sup>68</sup> where Marie caused a sensation by attempting to repeat her feat of diving from a bridge into the river Liffey. Thousands of people assembled to watch her clambering along the battlements of O'Connell's Bridge but she was seized by a policeman, arrested and eventually fined £1. On 9 April 1890, the pair's mother, Martha Finney, died<sup>69</sup> but James and Marie were in Manchester during May and in October they appeared at the Middlesex Music Hall.<sup>70</sup> They were at The Royal in London in November 1890, when Finney remained underwater for considerably more than two minutes.<sup>71</sup> Between 20 December 1890 and the end of February 1891, James and Marie appeared at South Shields, The Royal in Sunderland, West Hartlepool, and Belfast.<sup>72</sup>

In 1891, Timothy Finney, now 32 and still a baker, born in Stockport, was living at 29 Brisbane in Camberwell, London, with wife Hannah and their seven children, while James, also born in Stockport and now 28, was nearby, at 63 Mossbury Road. Mossborough? Road, Battersea. The 'Teacher of Swimming' was with wife Mary (29), born in St Helens, children Maud (6), born in Oldham, Vera Elsie (3), born in Scarborough, Ethel Gladys (1), born in Llandudno, and sister Mary Rhodes, (19), a Teacher of Swimming born in Southport, brother William (16), an errand boy born in Southport, and niece Elizabeth Millington (19), a nurse born in St Helens.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, September 27, 1889; *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, September 28, 1889; *Belfast News-Letter*, September 28, 1889; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, September 28, 1889; *Leeds Mercury*, September 28, 1889; *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 28, 1889; *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, September 28, 1889; *Western Mail*, September 28, 1889; *Illustrated Police News etc*, October 5, 1889; *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, October 5, 1889, 9-10; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, October 6, 1889; *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror*, October 8, 1889, 1 (440?).

<sup>65</sup> *Sporting Times*, November 2, 1889; November 16, 1889; November 23, 1889; December 7, 1889; *Era*, November 2, 1889; November 9, 1889; November 16, 1889; November 23, 1889.

<sup>66</sup> *Era*, November 30, 1889; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, December 1, 1889; *Era*, December 7, 1889.

<sup>67</sup> *Daily News*, December 20, 1889, 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Era*, February 22, 1890; March 22, 1890.

<sup>69</sup> *Era Almanak*, 1890, 69.

<sup>70</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, March 28, 1890, 8; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, March 30, 1890; *Era*, May 10, 1890; October 18, 1890.

<sup>71</sup> *Era*, November 15, 1890; *Sporting Times*, November 15, 1890.

<sup>72</sup> *Era*, December 20, 1890; December 27, 1890; January 10, 1891; January 17, 1891; *Belfast News-Letter*, February 16, 1891; February 19, 1891; February 26, 1891.

<sup>73</sup> 1891 Census. Timothy RG12/464/14/22 James RG12/4331891 (433/100/35).

In May 1891, they were in Cardiff<sup>74</sup> and between October and December 1891, the pair appeared at the Royal Albert Music Hall, London, The Royal, Sunderland, and in Newcastle.<sup>75</sup> At Hastings in June 1891, swimming masters and mistresses of 'perfect competency' were regularly in attendance and aquatic sports were often staged for the entertainment of the public. Professor Finney, the well-known champion, appeared with his troupe periodically, giving performances twice a day.<sup>76</sup> In January 1892, they were in West Hartlepool and Glasgow and they were in Edinburgh in February, where Marie was given a medal, and in Dublin.<sup>77</sup> In May, they were in Cardiff and between October and November 1892 the pair performed in their wonderful tank performance at the Royal in Holborn.<sup>78</sup> In December 1892, they were the main attraction at the People's Palace, Glasgow, and they performed in their 'Grand Aquatic Display in a Crystal Tank' on the stage at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin in February 1893.<sup>79</sup> In March, Professor Finney, assisted by Marie, the 'Heroine of London Bridge', was at the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties, North Street, Belfast,<sup>80</sup> and over Christmas, James and Marie, the 'Champion Artistic Tank Performers of the World', performed at the Empire Theatre of Varieties, Bristol, where their clever and interesting tank performances were 'much applauded'.<sup>81</sup> At the Star Theatre of Varieties in Dublin the series of aquatic competitions arranged in connection with James and Marie's visit to Dublin was concluded on 2 February 1894. The feats to be performed in the water consisted of drinking milk, somersaulting and passing the body through a hoop. Twelve entered and nine competed much to the amusement of the audience. Finney acted as judge and, at the conclusion of her swimming performance, Marie was handed a very valuable present by one of her admirers.<sup>82</sup>

Finney and Marie resumed their regular touring throughout 1895. Between February and March they appeared at Newcastle-on-Tyne, Edinburgh, Glasgow, South Shields, Sunderland and West Hartlepool. When they gave their interesting tank entertainment at the Empire Palace, Edinburgh they successfully accomplished feats of diving, swimming, and coin gathering and were well received.<sup>83</sup> In April 1895, James and Marie gave a swimming entertainment and display of scientific swimming at the Empire Palace in Birmingham, where Finney demonstrated the marvellous feat of remaining under the water for three and a half minutes.<sup>84</sup> In November 1897, James, accompanied by his 'clever sister', performed at the Empire Variety Theatre, Newcastle,<sup>85</sup> and the pair appeared in their graceful swimming entertainment at the Empire Palace Theatre, Glasgow, in December 1897.<sup>86</sup>

Their standard performance was described by a commentator in *The Strand* in January 1896. James and his sister played nap beneath the water in their big tank, which held 300 gallons and cost £100. The water temperature was held at 80 degrees and the porcelain cards they used were specially made at the Staffordshire potteries. Finney picked up seventy or eighty gold-plated halfpennies in his mouth, his

---

<sup>74</sup> *Western Mail*, May 7, 1891.

<sup>75</sup> *Era*, October 24, 1891; October 24, 1891; December 12, 1891; December 19, 1891; December 26, 1891; December 26, 1891.

<sup>76</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, June 20, 1891, 13.

<sup>77</sup> *Era*, January 2, 1892; January 9, 1892; January 16, 1892; February 13, 1892; February 13, 1892; February 20, 1892; February 27, 1892; March 5, 1892.

<sup>78</sup> *Era*, May 14, 1892; October 15, 1892; October 29, 1892; November 5, 1892.

<sup>79</sup> *Era*, December 17, 1892; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, February 15, 1893.

<sup>80</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, March 13, 1893; March 15, 1893; March 17, 1893; March 18, 1893; March 20, 1893; March 21, 1893; March 24, 1893; March 25, 1893.

<sup>81</sup> *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, December 23, 1893; December 26, 1893; December 27, 1893; December 29, 1893; *Era*, December 30, 1893.

<sup>82</sup> *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, February 3, 1894.

<sup>83</sup> *Era*, February 2, 1895; February 9, 1895; February 16, 1895; *Glasgow Herald*, February 22, 1895; February 23, 1895; *Era*, February 23, 1895; March 2, 1895; March 2, 1895; March 9, 1895.

<sup>84</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, April 29, 1895, 1; *The Dart*, April 5, 1895.

<sup>85</sup> *Era*, November 20, 1897, 26.

<sup>86</sup> *Era*, December 18, 1897, 22; December 25, 1897, 20.

hands tied securely behind his back, an arduous, even painful, task even though he had remained nearly four and a half minute underwater and was the recipient of a whole museum of cups and medals whose intrinsic value alone was about £1,000. Marie was described as perhaps 'our premier lady swimmer'. Her remarkable feats included a header from London Bridge although it was not clear to what purpose except that it was duly recorded in her printed advertising material. The pair performed a variety of antics under the water, including eating cakes, drinking milk, and smoking. 'Professor' Finney (this is the generic title of these specialists) 'makes some interesting calculations as to the quantity of comestibles consumed by him underwater every year...enough to stock one of the Aerated Bread Company's well-known establishments'.<sup>87</sup>

In 1899, *The County Gentleman* noted that Finney, who had been rarely seen in London of late, would be at the London Pavilion for the six weeks following 20 February and noted that his greatest opponent, J.J. Collier, had been buried at Manchester the previous week.<sup>88</sup> In January 1900, the New London Hippodrome staged a grand aquatic carnival on 100,000 gallons of water highlighted by a 'kaleidoscopic illumination'. James Finney and the young ladies of his aquatic troupe performed in the play and these 'daintiest of naiads' made one determined to try to swim and float as well they do.<sup>89</sup> In April, the Finneys were still 'flopping about in the water here and excellent flopping it is'. The professor's muscles looked as though they would hold up the roof while Marie dived sixty feet into shallow water and 'makes you hold your breath until she is through'.<sup>90</sup> In February 1902, James and Marie were swimming at the Palace, Manchester, and in March they were at the Empire in Nottingham. While swimming was usually viewed from a utilitarian rather than from an aesthetic standpoint, the 'trick performances of the Finneys in the large glass tank of water placed on the stage are a perfect revelation of aquatic grace'.<sup>91</sup> The Holloway Empire on Monday 26 October, 1903, featured James and Marie<sup>92</sup> and the Empire Spectacular in Sheffield in January 1904 included the swimming entertainment of Finney, the champion all-round swimmer, and his sister.<sup>93</sup> There was an immense holiday audience at the Ardwick Empire on 2 January 1905 where the place of honour on the programme was taken by James, who, with the assistance of Marie, gave the remarkable aquatic performance which had made him a favourite in many places of amusement.<sup>94</sup>

Finney had now made a full transition from competitive sport to entertainment, and when the funeral of Dan Leno took place later in January 1905, the pall-bearers, all leading members of the 'Water Rats' included James, who had been a leading member of the organisation for some years.<sup>95</sup> A cursory glance at the acts that accompanied his performances emphasises this transition. Professor and Marie Finney, the wonderful tank swimmers, appeared at the London Pavilion on 30 October, 1905,<sup>96</sup> and those who arrived late at the Palace in Hull in late December 1905, found standing room only. A great holiday crowd filled every seat, and many were contented to stand. A distinct novelty was Kelley and Ashby, who described themselves as the bounding billiardists. They dispensed with the cues and balls, but on the bed of the table, which was made of India rubber and was similar to a spring mattress covered with green cloth, they gave an excellent acrobatic performance. With the help of the powerful springs the two performed some very clever feats which were all the more acceptable because they were spiced with humour. Another novel show was that given by the Finneys in a glass tank full of water. The Finneys remained as popular as ever and their aquatic exhibition delighted the audience. James succeeded in

---

<sup>87</sup> *Strand Magazine*, January 11 1896, 328.

<sup>88</sup> *The County Gentleman: Sporting Gazette, Agricultural Journal, and "The Man about Town"*, February 4, 1899, 158.

<sup>89</sup> *Penny Illustrated*, January 20, 1900, 12.

<sup>90</sup> *Judy*, April 25, 1900, 201.

<sup>91</sup> *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, February 11, 1902, 10; February 13, 1902, 1; *Nottingham Evening Post*, March 18, 1902, 3.

<sup>92</sup> *London North Mercury and Crouch End Observer*, October 23, 1903.

<sup>93</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, January 26, 1904, 5.

<sup>94</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, January 3, 1905, 8.

<sup>95</sup> *Otago Witness*, January 28, 1903, 56; January 18, 1905, 60.

<sup>96</sup> *Standard*, October 31, 1905, 11.

remaining under the water for two minutes, in which time the average person would probably drown, and among the best tricks of these artistes was picking up 61 coins by the mouth and sleeping and floating under water. Lydia and Albino gave a very clever gymnastic performance, which was aided by electrical effects. Another acrobatic act by Hans Hansen Trio was very pleasing while Princess Pauline, comedienne, established herself as a favourite by her singing.<sup>97</sup>

### **The Finneys abroad**

At its thirty-fifth Ladies Day on 10 November 1894 the New York Athletic Club began its programme with an exhibition of swimming by Professor James Finney and Marie, along with Professor Gus Sundstrom from the club. On Christmas Eve that year, the Finneys, whose aquatic act had been a sensation in America, made their first appearance at 'popular prices' at Keith's new Union Square Theatre in New York, and a week later they were a 'decided success' at Koster and Bial's Theatre, Thirty-fourth Street, New York, supposedly the finest theatre of varieties in America. Finney challenged any American swimmer for the all-round championship namely underwater, ornamental and a mile race. During his visit, Finney was made a member of the New York Athletic Club and 'enjoyed himself immensely'.<sup>98</sup>

On 13 December, 1896, a large number of members of the Boston Athletic Club were treated to a fine exhibition of trick and fancy swimming in the swimming tank by James and Marie, who were present through the courtesy of the manager of the Keith theatres, and they had never appeared before a more critical or enthusiastic audience. In the crowd were many noted amateur swimmers who led the applause and were not slow to express the opinion that they had never seen better work performed anywhere. The 'exceedingly interesting' programme consisted of eighteen different feats, commencing with a high dive by Marie, and concluding with a sham tug between them. Marie gave exhibitions of revolving in the water, spinning like a top and an imitation of a water wheel, while James imitated the diving and swimming of a seal, showed how a drowning person should be rescued and gave an exhibition of fast swimming that was 'truly wonderful as a display of strength and grace'. The pair did double revolving, double floating and pulling under and over, a most difficult operation. The Finneys were natives of Lancashire, England, and came from a swimming family 'as would seem appropriate with their names'. Surprisingly, James had an aversion to water when a youth and could not be induced to learn the art of swimming until he was twelve but he rapidly acquired proficiency and was now classed with the great swimmers in the world. In order to make his skills more profitable, he had taken Marie in hand, finding her an apt pupil. Now the pair gave public performances that won them loud applause whenever they emerged dripping from their huge glass tank, which was iron bound and large enough to allow their free movements, which were demonstrations of the grace possible to a swimmer. They glided over and under one another, their arms held close to the sides, with a simple movement of the hands, like that of the fins of a fish, the feet being crossed and used more to steer than to propel. Indeed, they seemed to the spectator to have stolen the very motion of the fish themselves. The real exhibition of staying power came after Marie had given several exhibitions of graceful feats, James had eaten cake and drunk milk at the bottom of the tank, and both had played cards and waltzed together. Then the professor filled his lungs with air, sank to the bottom of the tank and took a nap, while Marie executed several feats above him, finally making an attempt to waken him and then rising to the surface to await him, normally after around three minutes and a half. Although Finney had a record of staying beneath the surface for 4min 29¼sec, Marie, even with all her skill and practice, could stay down only 2½mins. The Finneys were due to give twice daily exhibitions at Keith's the following week.<sup>99</sup>

American-born dancer and singer Eugene Stratton (May 8, 1861 – September 15, 1918), whose career was mostly spent in British music halls, was reported to be sailing on board the *Campania* for the States on

---

<sup>97</sup> *Hull Daily Mirror*, December 26, 1905; *Hull Daily News*, December 27, 1905.

<sup>98</sup> *New York Times*, November 11, 1894; December 23, 1894; *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate* (NSW), December 29, 1894, 11.

<sup>99</sup> *Boston Herald*, December 14, 1896, 10.

Saturday 15 December 1900, as were James Finney and his sister, who were due to fulfil a twenty week tour with the Vaudeville Managers' Association, an American company similar to Moss Empires, Limited. At a farewell luncheon at Frascati's on 13 December, hosted by the Rub-a-Dubs, Finney was presented with a suitably inscribed silver flask.<sup>100</sup> The New Year shows in 1901 at Proctor's Fifth Avenue Theatre included James and Marie, in a novelty swimming act, while, at the Empire Theatre in January 1901, John (sic) and Marie Finney disported themselves in a huge tank, fronted with glass, and holding five thousand gallons of water. The way the Empire stage had been braced for the recent elephant act allowed this great weight to be carried safely.<sup>101</sup> The Finneys, the well-known family of English swimmers billing themselves as the 'natorial wonders', appeared at Proctor's Fifth Avenue Theatre, New York in May 1901. Finney was described as being 'partly amphibious' and he and his sister worked together in an act which featured evolutions such as waltzing in the water. Marie picked up a basket full of eggs while James picked up coins with his teeth from the bottom of the tank and accumulated a mouthful during a single stay under the surface.<sup>102</sup> Echoes of Finney's competitive life had been evident during this visit to America in that there were rumours in March of a match being held with McCusker, the champion of America, for the championship of the world. Finney, who was appearing at one of Proctor's theatres in New York received a challenge from McCusker and responded that he was open to swim for \$1000 a side after his twenty-week engagement with the Vaudeville Managers' Association. The Australian reporter noted that the most amusing thing was that neither Finney nor McCusker had the slightest claim to be the world's champion but that 'did not make much difference in America'.<sup>103</sup>

Given that they were in America in March it is no surprise that neither James nor Marie appeared on the 1901 Census. At 89 Kennington Road, St George the Martyr, Southwark, Mary Finney, Head, 38, Wife of Professional Swimmer, was accompanied by daughters Maud, 16, Elsie, 13, Gladys, born 3 August, 1889, and son Leonard, 8, born in Clapham. Back in Oldham, at 58 Minton Street, St Marks, James' younger brother Henry Finny (sic), single, aged 32, and born in Oldham, gave his occupation as a Professor of Swimming, 'Own Account'. Meanwhile, another brother, twenty-six-year-old 'High Diver and Swimmer' William Finney, was boarding at 14 Hartsbury Road, Battersea.<sup>104</sup>

### **William Finney the diver**

A swimmer's remuneration at the Westminster Aquarium in January 1897 was from £1 to £2 per week, for about five minutes work, and, since no swimmer was 'discharged without good cause' their engagements were practically permanent. The divers were remunerated differently. Annie Luker, who dived from 100feet, and William Finney, who dived enveloped in flames, were paid £243.15s.<sup>105</sup> In July 1897, at the Blackpool Tower, Marie dived from the 'giddy height' of a small shelf fixed under the main supports of the roof while Professor William Finney plunged headlong into the water enveloped in a burning sack, a performance of 'quite a sensational character'.<sup>106</sup> In 1901, William, referred to as brother of the well-known professional, James Finney, dived from the Tower Bridge into the Thames. The police were powerless to stop the attempt as Finney climbed up the stays of the bridge from the roadway. He intended to pick the lock of the door which leads to the top-most part of the bridge and dive from that summit but being foiled in this attempt by the police, he jumped, dressed as he was, into the Thames from about the height of London Bridge, his brother, Tim Finney, being ready in a boat below to take the diver on board.<sup>107</sup> In February 1902, William was charged at Westminster police court with disorderly conduct, having caused a crowd to assemble on the Albert Bridge, Chelsea, by advertising that he would

---

<sup>100</sup> *Era*, December 15, 1900; Shipping Manifest.

<sup>101</sup> *Era*, December 15, 1900; *New York Times*, December 30, 1900, 20; *Cleveland Leader*, January 20 1901, 32.

<sup>102</sup> *Evening Post*, May 4, 1901, 7.

<sup>103</sup> *Referee*, March 6, 1901, 7; *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate (NSW)*, March 6 1901, 6.

<sup>104</sup> 1901 Census: Mary and children (369/94/3). William (455/39/23); Henry (RG13/3819)

<sup>105</sup> *London Standard*, January 19 1897, 2; *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 6 1897, 1.

<sup>106</sup> *Era*, 24 July 1897, 18.

<sup>107</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate (NSW)*, June 21, 1901, 6.

jump into the river 'from a height of 100 feet or more'. Finney was preparing to perform the feat when he was arrested and he was ordered to find a surety on £10 for his good behaviour.<sup>108</sup>

The vigilance of the Bristol police prevented Finney from diving from the Clifton Suspension Bridge in September 1902, for a second time. When William was apprehended there was some speculation as to the charge that would be preferred against him. It was at first surmised it would be that of attempting to commit suicide, a possibility that opened an interesting field for discussion. At what point did an act cease to belong to the category of bold, but dangerous feats permissible in the name of sport or for the public entertainment, and enter the class of wilful attempts at self-destruction? It was just as well that the Bristol magistrates had not had to discuss this since such an issue would have been attended with much difficulty. On the one hand there might have been called witnesses who, from their experience of high diving, would have expressed the view that the dangers of a leap properly undertaken from the Clifton Bridge were not excessive while on the other side there would be the significant fact that of the many who have made the plunge not one man has lived. Two children and a woman had survived but in their cases it was suggested that their clothing acted as a parachute. In the end, the professor was charged, conveniently, but rather vaguely, with being on the bridge for an unlawful purpose and not giving a satisfactory account of himself. He had decided not to repeat the attempt and he was bound over not to again try 'the highest dive in the world'. The Legislature has hesitated about curtailing the individual freedom of adults by penalising highly dangerous feats, but no one will doubt that the best interests of the athlete were served by the police action in this particular case.<sup>109</sup>

In August, 1903, however, 'Professor William Finney, the well-known professional high-diver' who had dived from Tower Bridge, Albert Bridge, Chelsea Bridge and other high bridges throughout the country was in Walsall Hospital in a critical condition. William had been engaged for some years at the Westminster Aquarium, where he dived in a burning sack into a shallow tank, but, in making a thirty-foot dive into an eighteen foot by twelve foot tank containing seven feet of water at Bloxham he had struck his head on the bottom of the tank, resulting in his injuring his spinal column and in his being paralysed from just below the shoulders. Finney apparently had said there was something wrong with the platform, which prevented his diving properly, and his recovery was not expected. James and Marie were still fulfilling an engagement at Blackpool Tower when William, aged only twenty-eight, subsequently died from his injuries leaving a widow and child.<sup>110</sup>

### **James and Elsie**

The brother-sister performances ceased following Marie's marriage to Charles Hamson in 1906 and the subsequent birth of son Edwin on 16 March 1907 in Oldham. In fact, Marie died a year later, again in Oldham,<sup>111</sup> and James replaced her in his act with daughter Elsie. When the S.S. Cedric from Liverpool, leaving on 14 November, arrived at New York on 23 November 1906, among the passengers were James Finney, 44 and 5 months, married, and Vera Elsie Finney, 19 and 3 months, single, described as professional swimmers, Londoners, able to read and in good health. James, who, according to the manifest, had often been to the States, had paid Elsie's fare for her first visit to the USA. James and Elsie were due to start their eight months' tour of the United States at Keith's Union Square Theatre and they were giving their swimming exhibition at Keith & Proctor's, Twenty-third Street, in January 1907.<sup>112</sup> In June 1908, the most sensational and talked of novelty in Vaudeville, James and Elsie, Champion

---

<sup>108</sup> *Nottingham Evening Post*, March 1, 1902, 6.

<sup>109</sup> *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, September 16, 1902, 8; *Western Daily Press*, September 16, 1902, 5.

<sup>110</sup> *Portsmouth Evening News*, August 18, 1903, 6; *Manchester Evening News*, August 19, 1903, 2; *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate* (NSW), October 1, 1903, 7; *Sunderland Daily Echo*, August 29, 1903, 4; *Western Times*, August 29, 1903, 6; *Otago Daily Times* (NZ) October 22, 1903, 5; *Manchester Guardian*, August 29, 1903, 5.

<sup>111</sup> BMD Marriages April Quarter 1906 Oldham; Births April Quarter 1907 Oldham; Deaths October Quarter 1908 Oldham.

<sup>112</sup> Shipping Manifest; *New York Times*, November 24, 1906, 11; November 25, 1906, 22; January 13, 1907, 22.

swimmers of the World in the Crystal tank, commenced their performances at the Bijou on a Monday matinee. James reportedly held fifteen championship medals won in both Europe and America.<sup>113</sup> The pair were the headline act at the Grand Theatre in August in what was described as the most remarkable aquatic speciality in vaudeville. These champion swimmers appeared in a large crystal tank containing several hundred gallons of water, the only act of its kind that had been seen in the West. Finney did all sorts of feats in the water as did his 'wife' (sic). They ate and slept beneath the waves and Finney even smoked. He remained underwater two minutes or more and to all who delighted in novelties and the sport of swimming the act would be of especial interest.<sup>114</sup>

Four years later, James and Elsie were back in America. In January 1911, they appeared at the Empress in Duluth in the 'most finished swimming act before the public'. James was described as the holder of numerous world championships and having won over 100 cups, medals and trophies, more than any swimmer living. Elsie was a young lady of extraordinary grace and beauty who was recognised as the most beautiful woman that has ever appeared in the English Music Halls and she apparently 'also held several championships'. The pair had been appearing in Minneapolis where critics proclaimed them to be the greatest swimmers ever to have appeared in that city and they were expected to 'win as much favour' during their engagement at the Empress. Their performance consisted of fancy diving and an exhibition of swimming strokes, much of their work being done underwater.<sup>115</sup>

During his engagement in Duluth, the plan was to put Finney's cups and trophies on display in a prominent window on Superior Street. However, while on a visit to his daughters, Maud and Gladys, who were at the Orpheum in Minneapolis, in December 1910, James had had his trunk stolen. It contained all his gold and silver medals, including the ornamental championship medal, the six-day championship medal and The Richard K. Fox Police Gazette all-round championship medal and all his wearing apparel, leaving him nothing but what he was wearing at the time. This was a very serious loss, and Finney felt it keenly, because these medals were awarded to him after many a hard contest and could not be replaced. The matter was apparently in the hands of the White Rats' attorneys, Messrs L.L. and Fred Lowenthal of Chicago.<sup>116</sup>

### **Maud and Gladys in America**

On 30 May, 1910, Maud and Gladys Finney, 'The Mermaids' and Champion Lady Swimmers, opened their act at the Orpheum in Seattle. Gladys had first appeared in November 1900 alongside her father James at Gratti's enterprises at Charing Cross and in the Westminster Bridge Road, where she 'intelligently recited' Kipling's poem 'The Absent-minded Beggar',<sup>117</sup> and she and sister Maud were described as being as pretty as pictures. They resolutely refused to bring their very smart, black, terribly clinging, but very delightful bathing 'things' anywhere near the footlights at the Orpheum so the 'oculists and opticians of Seattle would probably benefit by the strain put on thousands of pairs of eyes this week.' To the reporter it seemed impossible that any woman could hold her breath as long as these two did. Going to sleep at the bottom of the tank seemed to be easy and, as for picking up fifty-four pennies with the mouth without coming up to breathe, that was what one of the 'Finney' girls was paid for and she did it without fuss. In addition to their well-executed tricks, the girls were so 'richly endowed by nature and so graceful and clever' that they 'presented a series of pictures of real artistic value'.<sup>118</sup>

This was Maud and Gladys' first time into the Northwest, although their father and a sister had exhibited in Seattle previously. Both girls had been swimming since they were old enough to take to the water but

---

<sup>113</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, June 28, 1908, 10.

<sup>114</sup> *Morning Oregonian*, August 16, 1908, 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, December 24, 1910, 4; January 12, 1911, 2.

<sup>116</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, January 21, 1911, 9; *Newcastle Daily Journal*, January 26, 1911, 9; *Referee*, June 7, 1911, 11.

<sup>117</sup> *Era*, November 3, 1900.

<sup>118</sup> *Seattle Daily Times*, May 29, 1910, 14; May 31, 1910, 8.

it was only four years since their father had begun their consistent training. Then, according to both of them, it was like beginning all over again, for one could learn to swim without really learning all of the possibilities of the art. For instance, few really capable swimmers could stay below the surface for two minutes at a stretch as could both the Orpheum mermaids, sink below the surface and pick up sea shells with the mouth without half strangling, or overcome the buoyancy of the water sufficiently to lie at ease on the bottom of the sea and take an apparently comfortable siesta. Having accomplished these things in the sea, they could do the same in a glass tank, six feet by three in dimensions, gracefully and in a way that brought them \$800 a week. Having brought the pair of them to both health and fortune it was no surprise that 'The Mermaids' believed it the very best system of physical culture ever invented. 'I began swimming four years ago as a health measure' said pretty Gladys. 'I was very ill: my lungs were weak and the doctor said that I should have exercise of the right kind. My father was a great swimmer and naturally he suggested swimming, so I took to the water. It was awfully hard at first but he laid out a programme for me that I managed to stay by and very shortly the sense of chill and other discomforts passed away and I could thresh about in the cold salt water for hours at a time with only a sense of exhilaration as a result. Since then my sister and I have worked out our own system and I do not hesitate to say that any woman in the world could follow it to her physical advantage. Fresh air is a marvellous cure-all but to our minds there is one that is greater and that is a combination of fresh air with fresh water.'<sup>119</sup>

'The Mermaids' and 'champion lady swimmers' were described as the best act on the Orpheum bill in Salt Lake in August 1910. Maud and Gladys were the 'personification of grace' and some of their stunts in the water seemed so impossible that it made one wonder if they were an optical illusion. Theirs was one of the most novel acts that had been seen in a long time and they were beautiful both in and out of the glass tank. The women suggested in an interview that having confidence was part of the trick. 'We can't remember when we learned to float and swim in the water with our mouths open; it came to us when we were young. Anyone can open his mouth under water without damage if he has the confidence. Water will not go down the throat unless you work the swallowing muscles yourself. The light air of this city makes our act very difficult'. The Professor noted that, 'At least ninety-nine out of every one hundred women can float in fresh water without physical effort, if they only knew it. They are much more buoyant than men. It is difficult for many men to float. For a woman to learn to float a long time in ordinary water she must learn to breathe right in the water - just, breathe naturally without fear of being drowned and not take in water as she takes in breath.' It's easy for her, if she has confidence.'

The Finney sisters ate a banana under water, opened their eyes and smiled at the audience while they played mermaid and picked up anything up to eighty-six coins from the bottom with their hands tied behind their back, despite still being young girls. One picked up forty-eight in eighty-five seconds. The tank in which they performed was made of iron, except the glass side nearest the audience. It was filled with clean water, and when the time came for the act it was pushed along on a tiny railroad track from the north wall of the stage to its position before the spotlight. The act itself looked so much like an optical illusion that a representative of *The Telegram* was sent to the stage to watch the act from behind the scenes and, through the courtesy of the theatre management and their father, he was permitted to examine the tank and watch the act throughout at close range. The girls smiled sweetly at the audience through both water and glass while under the water. They could see objects in the tank and a blur outside if a person walked directly in front of or near the glass side. Their father, Professor Finney, held so many records they would fill a column and he was blessed with an extraordinary pair of lungs. His wife was also a healthy, robust woman, and their children inherited good lungs and no fear of water for Mrs Finney was also an excellent swimmer. They had tanks built in their London home and the three daughters were encouraged to play in the water when they were little tots and to compete against each other in stunts. The eldest had joined her father in a vaudeville swimming act which went all over the West, except to

---

<sup>119</sup> *Seattle Daily Times*, June 3, 1910, 6.

Salt Lake City, a few years ago on the Orpheum circuit. She was currently in Chicago with her brother, who was taking a commercial course in school, while the father and mother travelled with the mermaids.

When all three girls and the father had summer engagements at the big city parks they had a large tank and all performed together. When they went with their father to Saltair (Salt Lake), Gladys, the younger one, dived into the briny water and several tourists gasped as they thought of the awful consequences. 'She'll strangle', 'Get some fresh water to revive her', 'Poor silly girl' were some of the exclamations of those who realised what would happen should they try that stunt. She did not hold her nose to keep out the salt water but contracted the muscles in it to keep it closed, a little trick acquired through years of practice in the water. When the little swimmer came gracefully to the surface she blinked her eyes a time or two, for they smarted, she said, and then she went on swimming and frolicking about, much to the surprise and admiration of the tourists. The girls, however, found the water hard to manage while swimming on their stomachs, for their feet wanted to fly up, like every other person's do. 'Those swimming suits used by women here are a nuisance', one said. 'They made it difficult for us in the water. Would you run a foot race in a barrel? We English girls don't swim in the funny skirts girls over here wear. Most of us swim in these (the 'sheaths' like the mermaids use at the Orpheum). Custom was different in England where 'We dress in little bathhouses and instead of taking a promenade down to the surf we are wheeled into the water. Usually English men and women do not go in the surf at the same points but English people, when we left, were becoming converted to mixed bathing at a number of beaches'. Contrary to general opinion, the girls found salt water a great tonic for their complexions and fine for their hair. We 'never put fresh water on our hair after swimming in salt but we always get our hair extremely dry after we take a plunge in any sort of water. That is why it is so fine and long'.<sup>120</sup>

Maud and Gladys returned to England before their father and sister. When the census was taken in 1911, Mary Margaret Finney, aged 47, who had been married for 29 years and had had four children, was living at 104 North Side, Clapham, with daughters Maud Evelyn Finney, aged 26, and Ethel Gladys Finney, aged 21, both professional swimmers, together with son James Leonard, aged 18, born in Clapham on 7 February 1893.<sup>121</sup> Meanwhile, at the Grand Theatre on 13 March, 'The Mermaid and the Man' featuring James and Elsie was the headline act. The Finneys demonstrated a number of remarkable stunts, James picking up 66 coins from the bottom of the glass tank with his mouth.<sup>122</sup>

### **Australia and South Africa**

Professor James Finney, who claimed to be the all-round swimming champion of the world, arrived in Australia from England, with Elsie, on 29 September 1911, by the R.M.S. Ormuz. He was the owner of more medals and trophies than he could wear at one time, although these had been stolen and all that remained as a memento of his greatness as a swimmer was a gold medal recently presented to him by the Water Rats of London. He had been awarded medals for championships in ornamental swimming, diving, long-distance endurance, underwater swimming and remaining submerged for 4min 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ secs. He claimed that it would be impossible for him to drown without becoming unconscious and if turned adrift on the ocean starvation would be the only menace. In talking to a reporter, Finney said that the development of swimming had advanced much during the past five years and the style had become much faster, although it was not as graceful as the old method. He was inclined to think that the present-day swimmer was too much a pot-hunter and too little a life-saver. He hoped it was not so, but in his opinion it was tending that way and if it was not for the life-saving societies they would be likely to forget the breast and back stroke. His advice to local swimmers was to learn all its branches, as well as learning how to crawl through the water in the fastest time.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> *Salt Lake Telegram*, August 8, 1910; August 11, 1910.

<sup>121</sup> 1911 Census; BMD

<sup>122</sup> *Morning Oregonian*, March 14, 1911, 11.

<sup>123</sup> *Barrier Miner, Broken Hill (NSW)*, October 7, 1911, 7.

Elsie Finney, billed as the 'champion lady swimmer of the world and a modern Venus in face and figure', opened in a matinee at the Tivoli on Saturday 7 October, 1911, in a crystal tank diving and swimming act with James assisting in this 'novel turn'. As a swimming and high-diving exhibition was impossible in the small glass tank which was fixed up at the Tivoli, James and Elsie contented themselves with showing the large audience what they could do as underwater acrobats. In some respects, the turn resembled the one introduced to Australia years previously by a swimmer and diver who was billed as the 'man fish'. As a sort of prelude, the Finneys went through a graceful 'gliding under and over' act before 'eating and drinking underwater', Finney polishing off a bottle of milk, and doing somersaults. With a few moments to get his breath, Finney went after a number of silver coins which had been thrown into the tank. Holding his arms behind his back while at the bottom of the tank, he came to the surface with 69 coins in his mouth and then dropped them one by one on a plate to be met with a burst of applause. Elsie gave an exhibition of 'revolving' and afterwards floated in a picturesque manner, while James 'went to sleep' under water for a remarkably long time. Elsie Finney, billed as the 'Saucy, Shapely, Swimming Sylphe' was described in December as a particularly graceful and beautiful young girl whose movements in the water were typical of the fabled mermaid. James performed many startling feats, chief of which was to remain underwater for over four minutes. It was described as an altogether wonderful act which had been a great success in the South with the Rickards management.<sup>124</sup>

When the Orient Line steamship Orama left London for Australia on 5 January 1912, James Finney, Mrs and Miss Finney were among the first class passengers contracted to land at Toulon and when the Orama arrived back at Tilbury from Brisbane on 17 February, James and Elsie, 'Theatricals', who had joined at Melbourne, had already been landed at Plymouth. On 3 May 1912, Finney's wife, Mary Margaret Finney of 104 North Side, Clapham Common, Surrey, died leaving £414 7s to James, gentleman, Maud Evelyn Fell Finney and Vera Elsie Finney, spinsters. On 12 September 1914, at The Church of St Luke in Battersea, London, Ethel Gladys Finney, aged 25, of 51, Wroughton Road, daughter of James Finney, professional swimmer, married Harry John Burr, son of a cigar importer.<sup>125</sup> This does not seem to have affected her status an aquatic entertainer though given that James and Ethel Finney, 'variety artistes', headed for Cape Town from Plymouth on 16 October 1915. A few months later, when the Saxon, from Natal, Cape Town, docked in London on 16 February 1916, Maud and Elsie Finney, 'music hall artistes', were among the first class passengers who disembarked.<sup>126</sup> That same year, on 5 April, Finney's son, James Leonard Finney, was confirmed in his rank of Second Lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps, Military Wing, having been on probation since July 1915.<sup>127</sup>

In 1917, the *Referee* recorded that Professor James Finney, who had been in Australia some years previously doing his 'man-fish' act on the Tivoli circuit, had settled down and was prospering in Cape Town, where he was teaching swimming at the Sea Point Baths, Camps Bay Baths and the City Pier. The summer season was just starting and he already had a 'fair sprinkling' of pupils. Apparently he had also recently rescued a twelve-year-old child from drowning.<sup>128</sup> On 26 July 1920, when the Balmoral Castle docked in Southampton, having travelled from Natal, South Africa, the 58 year-old James Finney was among the second class passengers, having joined the ship at Cape Town. His country of last permanent residence was shown as South Africa although his intended future residence was England,<sup>129</sup> and it was here, in February 1924, that the death was announced of James Finney, the famous aquatic performer, aged 61. The obituary observed that, though much of his work had been done in larger spaces than music

---

<sup>124</sup> *Arrow*, September 30, 1911, 9; *Times (NSW)*, October 1, 1911, 2; *Referee*, October 11, 1911, 16; *Queenslander*, December 2, 1911, 11.

<sup>125</sup> Shipping manifest; BMD; Probate London May 22, 1912.

<sup>126</sup> Shipping Manifests

<sup>127</sup> 7080 *London Gazette*, July 20, 1915; 3650 Supplement to the *London Gazette*, April 5, 1916; James survived the War and died in December 1975.

<sup>128</sup> *Referee*, January 10, 1917, 6.

<sup>129</sup> Shipping Manifest

halls, he had appeared many times at local halls and elsewhere with his daughters in a tank act. He was the holder of many swimming records and had been a popular member and official of the old Grand Order of Water Rats.<sup>130</sup> He had also made an impact on British swimming ever since his first appearance. As Watson noted in 1899, James Finney when champion of England was at least one of the best ornamental and fancy swimmers in the profession. His stay of 4min. 29<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>sec under water had been the most authentic performance of the kind, and his chief successes included the mile championship for *The Sporting Life* cup, and defeats of Joseph Nuttall, E.T. Jones, the latter's final race, and William Beckwith, for the last time in a six days' race at the Lambeth Baths, which also turned out to be Beckwith's last competitive performance.<sup>131</sup> In the end, James had outlasted them all and his family's aquatic performances at home and abroad during the Edwardian and First World War periods effectively marked the swansong of the nineteenth-century professional natationist.

---

<sup>130</sup> *Burnley Express and Advertiser*, February 16, 1924, 15.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Watson, *Comparative Generations*, In, Charles Newman, (1899). *Swimmers and Swimming or, The Swimmer's Album*, London: Henry Kemshead, 26.