

Working papers on professional natationists, paper 2, 2014

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Professor George Poulton: Natationist and Entrepreneur

Origins and Swimming Career

George Poulton was baptised in Hanover Square, London in 1824 by his parents George, a tailor, and Elizabeth.¹ By the time he was nineteen, George was competing in the premier swimming events of the 1840s which were concentrated at the National Baths in High Holborn. In July 1843, George reached the final in the British Swimming Society's races for young swimmers and it was on occasions like this that he was able to observe experienced natationists like Harold Kenworthy give their exhibitions of 'scientific' swimming.² Two years later George, described as a 'pupil' of Mr Kenworthy, was competing in a combined swimming championship consisting of swimming, diving and floating. In the event, he won the overall competition, largely as a result of his performance in the floating section where 'nothing could surpass the elegance of the postures, the freedom of the action, or the sculpture-like display of the figure, as seen motionless on the surface of the water'.³ After races at the Holborn Baths in July and August, 1845, George joined Kenworthy in demonstrating a variety of 'astonishing evolutions in swimming, diving and floating'.⁴ In September, Poulton 'excelled in scientific and swift swimming' and won the overall cup after combining with Kenworthy in throwing himself 'into every possible attitude on the top of the water, with the same freedom as if they had been operating on *terra firma*'. Prizes were awarded at the first annual dinner of the Holborn Bath Swimming Club later that month.⁵ At a series of matches in May 1846, George joined a number of others, including Kenworthy, in a 'beautiful display of ornamental swimming', and George subsequently appeared in a swimming entertainment conducted for the benefit of Kenworthy later in the month in an evening that included a pedestrian match in the water. At the annual dinner in July Kenworthy described Poulton as one of the best swimmers in the country.⁶

A year later, 'Mr George Poulton of the National Baths, London', was working in the North-East and giving lessons in the art of swimming at the Public Baths, Northumberland Street. The lessons were given in the large tepid bath, kept at a temperature of 85 degrees, and every attention was paid to the safety, comfort, and instruction of the pupils who paid 3s 6d per lesson.⁷ When Newcastle Swimming Club held their first match of the season on 21 June 1847, George went through a varied display of ornamental and scientific swimming.⁸ He also continued to compete, beating an amateur, Mr I. Wright, over three miles in the Tyne, accomplishing the distance in forty-five minutes for a £5 stake in front of a large crowd which included the Claspers, renowned professional oarsmen.⁹

Having been engaged as swimming master for two years at the public baths in Newcastle, George organised a grand swimming fete in July 1847 which included many of his pupils, who did him great credit as a teacher of the art, and some of his own exhibitions of 'scientific swimming'. In the tradition of professional swimming masters he also donated prizes.¹⁰ Commentators noted that swimming in Newcastle had been considerably improved, both in terms of speed and science, by late 1847, partly as a result of Poulton's work.¹¹

¹ 1824 Baptismal Registers, Saint George, Hanover Square, Middlesex, 9. No 71. George Poulton to George, a tailor, and Elizabeth Poulton.

² *Era*, Sunday July 23, 1843

³ *Era*, Sunday July 6, 1845.

⁴ *Era*, Sunday July 13, 1845; *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, Sunday August 3, 1845.

⁵ *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, Sunday September 14, 1845; *Era*, Sunday September 14, 1845; Sunday September 28, 1845; *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, Sunday, September 28, 1845.

⁶ *Era*, Sunday May 17, 1846; Sunday July 26, 1846; *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, Sunday July 12, 1846.

⁷ *Newcastle Guardian and Tyne Mercury*, Saturday June 5, 1847, 5.

⁸ *Newcastle Guardian and Tyne Mercury*, Saturday June 12, 1847, 4; *Newcastle Journal*, Saturday June 12, 1847, 2.

⁹ *Bells Life*, Sunday July 4, 1847, 8; *Era*, Sunday July 4, 1847, 5.

¹⁰ *Newcastle Courant*, Friday July 23, 1847.

¹¹ *Newcastle Courant*, Friday August 20, 1847.

Following the end of his two-year contract, George spent some time at the Albion Baths in Leicester where he taught swimming at the cost of one guinea for six lessons.¹² By 1851, George was back living with his family at 30 Kingsland Crescent, Hackney, Tower Hamlets and calling himself 'a stationer and librarian' although he married Anne Maria Cullingford in Shoreditch, a year later.¹³ He was clearly still involved in swimming and he had become swimming master at the Albion Baths in Kingsland by July 1854 when he took a benefit at the baths. The evening began with George swimming one hundred and sixty feet under water (twice the length of the bath) followed by swimming a length with his hands and legs bound. He then swam eighty feet in only four strokes and did the same distance backwards. He then gave some 'fine specimens of scientific swimming' and floating, illustrating a dead man, 'The Crucifix', 'The Dying Gladiator', turned eight summersaults (sic) in the water without touching the bottom. He drank a bottle of milk, which he did by holding the bottle in his mouth, and with arms extended immersed himself about six inches below the surface and rose after swallowing the contents. He then smoked a pipe while under the water, the bowl only remaining a little above. In fact, he appeared to be of that amphibious nature that the water to him was as much his 'element as *terra firma*'. Subsequently, Beckwith won a twelve lengths race for a silver cup by twenty yards.¹⁴ A year later, George was at the baths giving a display of diving and fancy swimming,¹⁵ but, by then, he had also seemingly established himself in Manchester. He fixed his annual benefit to take place on 20 September, at the Leaf Street Baths, Manchester. A challenge cup, value £20, distance 500 yards, open to the world, and other prizes, were given for various distances.¹⁶ From this point on, Poulton was a firm fixture in the Manchester district as a teacher, an exhibiting swimmer, a publican and a sporting entrepreneur.

Teaching and Venues

Regular advertisements over a period of forty years informed the Manchester public, who were exhorted to learn to swim before they went to the seaside, about where to go to get the benefit of the Professor's teaching skills. Swimming, 'this necessary and healthful Art' was taught by Poulton, Champion Scientific Swimmer of England, at Mayfield, Greengate, and Leaf Street Baths in a few easy lessons at a cost of one guinea. The programme had been established by 1858 and enquiries should be addressed to Leaf Street where there was fresh hot water every day. Increasingly, both sexes were included and Poulton began to advertise daily teaching classes for ladies and gentlemen.¹⁷

Swimming Baths

Adverts for the Greengate, Mayfield and Leaf Street, Stretford Road, swimming baths, first class 6d, second class, 2d, appeared throughout the 1860s.¹⁸ Greengate Baths, one of the first 'modern' swimming baths, was designed by local architect Thomas Worthington, who was also responsible for the Albert Memorial, Minshull Street Crown Court, Chorlton Union Workhouse (Withington

¹² *Leicester Journal*, Friday May 19, 1848, 2.

¹³ 1851 Census HO 107/1504; 1852 Jan-Feb-Mar Marriage to London, 1c Page 306.

¹⁴ *Era*, Sunday July 30, 1854, 13. <http://www.hackneysociety.org/documents/spaces18-191.pdf>

¹⁵ *Bells Life*, Sunday September 16, 1855, 8.

¹⁶ *Bells Life*, Sunday, September 16, 1855, 8.

¹⁷ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday April 4, 1863, 12; Saturday April 11, 1863, 6; Saturday April 25, 1863, 6; Saturday May 2, 1863, 6; Saturday May 9, 1863, 6; Saturday May 16, 1863, 6; Saturday May 30, 1863, 1; Saturday June 6, 1863, 4; Saturday August 23, 1862, 1; Tuesday August 2, 1864, 1; Monday August 8, 1864, 1; Thursday July 6, 1865, 1; Saturday July 15, 1865, 5; Thursday July 27, 1865, 1; Thursday August 3, 1865, 1; Saturday August 5, 1865, 1; Saturday June 23, 1866, 1; Thursday June 28, 1866, 1; Thursday July 12, 1866, 1; Saturday July 14, 1866, 3; Tuesday July 24, 1866, 1; Tuesday August 7, 1866, 1; Saturday 29 June 1867, 1; Monday 01 July 1867, 1; Tuesday 2 July 1867, 1; Thursday 4 July 1867, 1; Friday July 5, 1867, 1; Saturday 6 July 1867, 1; Thursday 11 July 1867, 1; Tuesday 16 July 1867, 1; Saturday 27 July 1867, 1; Tuesday June 19, 1877, 1; Wednesday June 20 1877, 1; Tuesday June 22, 1880, 1; Saturday September 17, 1881, 1; Wednesday December 29, 1880, 1; Thursday August 10, 1882, 1; Monday August 14, 1882, 1; Saturday December 22, 1883, 1; Tuesday September 25, 1883, 1; Wednesday December 26, 1883, 1.

¹⁸ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday April 4, 1863, 12; Saturday April 11, 1863, 6; Saturday April 25, 1863, 6; Saturday May 2, 1863, 6; Saturday May 9, 1863, 6; Saturday May 16, 1863, 6; Saturday May 30, 1863, 1; Saturday June 6, 1863, 4; Saturday 29 June 1867, 1; Monday 1 July 1867, 1; Tuesday 2 July 1867, 1; Thursday 4 July 1867, 1; Friday July 5, 1867, 1; Saturday 06 July 1867, 1; Thursday 11 July 1867, 1; Tuesday 16 July 1867, 1; Saturday 27 July 1867, 1.

Hospital), Prestwich Union Infirmary (Crumpsall Hospital). The newly formed Manchester and Salford Baths & Laundry Corporation financed the build in 1855 as their initial business venture. It was considered such a success that they went on to open further sites, including the Victoria Baths on Hathersage Road. Greengate baths was founded on the original site of the Salford Union Workhouse and opened in 1856. The initial success was unfortunately shortlived, as the rising price of coal combined with local poverty and rising unemployment took its toll and by the time the climate changed, rival companies were sprouting up and Greengate never really repeated its initial successes.

In September 1859, Professor Poulton, swimming master, took a benefit at the Greengate Baths, Salford, when he went through his unrivalled swimming feats and prizes were contended for by his pupils.¹⁹ In 1860, Poulton, 'teacher of swimming', took another benefit at the Greengate Baths during which he 'went through a variety of evolutions in a surprising manner and elicited the warmest applause from an assemblage of nearly two hundred persons'. Included in the evening was a race for a silver medal by the professor's pupils, won by Mr Williamson.²⁰ Twenty years later, Poulton gave an exhibition to some of his pupils at the Greengate Baths on July 24 1880 and offered a gold medal for general excellence in the art of swimming, which was won by nine-year-old J.J. Meakin, who 'performed some wonderful feats under water for one so young'.²¹

In 1856, the Mayfield Baths (Swimming Bath, Wash Bath, Turkish Bath) was opened by the Manchester and Salford Baths & Laundries Company and the professor quickly included the facility into his portfolio. At the Mayfield Baths on 3 September 1858, a large and respectable audience assembled to witness the feats of Professor Poulton of London and to see the contests for three silver medals given for the encouragement of the art of swimming and diving. Precisely at 7 p.m. Professor Poulton appeared on the platform and took a standing plunge of nearly 50 feet on the surface of the water; after which he went through some wonderful evolutions in swimming and floating, illustrative of the dead man, the dying gladiator and other scientific postulations. Eighteen somersaults were thrown while wholly immersed in the water and were received with unbounded approbation. The amphibious practitioner closed his performance by eating a cake, drinking a bottle of milk and smoking a pipe under water, amidst the immense applause of the spectators.²² In October 1866, a number of swimming races were arranged at the Mayfield baths by the Manchester Society for the Promotion of the Art of Swimming and Poulton exhibited his skill. There was not a good attendance, however, and one reported hoped that the 'efforts of this young and promising association' would be met with a better response in the future.²³

Swimming gala, Corporation Baths, Mayfield, by professional and amateur swimmers. Professor Poulton, Lizzie, Harry and his sister, brothers Ernest and Willie and others. This day (Thursday) 7.30 p.m. Admission, 6d.²⁴

Poulton was given a benefit at the Mayfield Baths on Thursday 26 October 1882 and he opened the programme by performing his natatorial feats. In April 1883 he and some of his pupils, male and female, gave an exhibition in the ladies' swimming bath.²⁵

J. Aspinall of Eccles and T. Mathers are matched to swim a race of 12 lengths of the Mayfield Baths, Manchester, on Tuesday evening next, between eight and nine o'clock for £10 a side. Mr Whittaker is appointed stakeholder and Professor Poulton referee.²⁶

¹⁹ *Bells Life*, Sunday September 25, 1859, 6.

²⁰ *Bells Life*, Sunday October 21, 1860, 7.

²¹ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Monday July 26, 1880, 8; *Bells Life*, Saturday July 31, 1880, 8.

²² *Bells Life*, Sunday September 5, 1858, 5.

²³ *Bells Life*, Saturday October 20, 1866, 9.

²⁴ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Thursday September 21, 1882, 1.

²⁵ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday October 28, 1882, 7; Saturday April 21, 1883, 14.

²⁶ *Bells Life*, Sunday, November 13, 1859, 7.

The Manchester and Salford Baths & Laundries Company opened a third facility in 1860, the Leaf Street Baths (Swimming Bath, Wash Bath, Turkish Bath).²⁷ In July 1860 Poulton performed some of his feats and presented a beautiful silver medal of Leander crossing the Hellespont for the winner of the main race of the evening. The Professor's pupils won the medals and he believed that another of his pupils was the quickest swimmer in the world. George then gave a 'specimen of his powers' by swimming twice the length of the bath at an almost incredible rate. Mr Dunn from the Baths and Laundries Company, stated that the receipts of the Stretford Road Baths since their opening had been equal to the other two establishments of the company. The entertainment closed with three cheers for the professor, who thanked the audience for their patronage, and engaged to do all he could to promote the art of swimming in this city.²⁸ In 1861, Poulton fixed his annual benefit to take place on Friday 20 September at the Leaf Street Baths. A challenge cup, value £20, distance 500 yards, open to the world, and other prizes, were donated by the professor.²⁹ Leaf Street was subsequently the venue for races, open to the world, over 500 yards or twenty lengths of a bath, for the Manchester Champion's Challenge Cup, value £25, in 1862 and 1863. Poulton, described as the Champion scientific swimmer of England, and who could be contacted at the baths, organised the events, gave aquatic demonstrations and presented a 'first-class Victoria and Albert medal', for an all England 200 yards race for boys under 20 years old.³⁰ On 17 June 1864, Poulton organised a series of races at Leaf Street, including a 400 yards race, open to all England, which was won by Meakin from P. Johnson. Aspinall of Middleton won the diving match, by going more than 60 yards, and the professor performed some extraordinary evolutions in the water.³¹ E.B. Mather challenged 'Professor Poulton's prodigy (Meakin)' over 500 yards in the Leaf Street Baths for from £25 to £100 a side in October 1864. He also offered to swim P. Johnson for not less than £25 a side in six weeks from the challenge emphasising the period of time professional swimmers needed to prepare for such contests.³² A year later Poulton organised a race for the Lancashire Silver Cup, which he also provided, open to men resident within 100 miles of Manchester, which was won by Mather from Meakin, Johnson not appearing because he had hurt his knee. *Bell's Life* gave praised Poulton for the arrangements made but regretted that a 'considerable want of courtesy' had been manifested by a 'nameless individual to the members of the press'.³³ Poulton's Lancashire Champion Cup was swum for again at the baths in October 1865. Poulton's entertainment began with his display of some 'of those extraordinary feats in the water which have gained for him so large a share of swimming notoriety' followed by various races and then the main event, the race for the Cup over 300 yards. This time Mather's only opponent was P. Johnson, Meakin being an absentee although he had entered. Mather eventually defeated Johnson by eight strokes and thereby made the cup his personal property, having won it three times in a row.³⁴

A year later a Manchester and Salford Association, founded in April 1865, handicap at the baths saw 24 entries compete over 100 yards (four lengths). The 'celebrated Professor Poulton of Manchester' (teacher of swimming at the baths) officiated as starter and handicapper.³⁵ In September 1866, Mather undertook a challenge to swim 500 yards (20 lengths) in eight minutes for £20 at Leaf Street with Poulton acting as stakeholder, timekeeper and referee. The betting was 6 to 5 on time. Mather accomplished half the distance in 3min 45sec and 16 lengths in 6min 15 sec but resigned at the end of 17 lengths, completely exhausted.³⁶

²⁷ These three baths were purchased by Manchester City Council on 29 September, 1877. Source: Carl Evans Baths and Washhouses Historical Archive <http://www.bathsandwashhouses.co.uk/archive>

²⁸ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday July 21, 1860, 9.

²⁹ *Bells Life*, September 15, 1861, 7.

³⁰ *Bells Life*, Sunday April 27, 1862, 7; Sunday May 18, 1862, 6; Sunday July 5, 1863, 3.

³¹ *Bells Life*, Saturday June 25, 1864, 7.

³² *Bells Life*, Saturday October 8, 1864, 2.

³³ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Wednesday July 26, 1865, 4; *Bells Life*, Saturday July 29, 1865, 7.

³⁴ *Bells Life*, Saturday October 21, 1865, 9; Saturday November 4, 1865, 7.

³⁵ *Bells Life*, Saturday July 7, 1866, 9.

³⁶ *Bells Life*, Saturday September 15, 1866, 9.

Although swimming baths were beginning to appear around the country professional swimmers preferred to organise their serious championship matches in open water for most of the nineteenth century. When Mather and Johnson, both from Manchester, competed over one mile for £25 a side on 28 May 1864, the event took place in the river Mersey. Poulton engaged a steamboat, starting from St George's Pier, Liverpool, to leave at 4 p.m. on the day so that spectators could follow the race. Tickets and further information could be gained at the Manchester Baths, Mayfield, Greengate and Leaf Street.³⁷

Bellevue Gardens

In September 1858, Professor Poulton, described as being of the Mayfield Baths, Manchester, took advantage of the large lake created by Jennison at the Bellevue Gardens to perform 'some singular and surprising feats, and to exhibit his method of saving the lives of drowning persons. John Jennison junior, assisted by the Professor, established a novel swimming sweepstake around a 340 yards course marked out by posts which competitors had to swim outside. The race was won by Aspinall of Eccles with three of the eleven competitors being disqualified for swimming inside the posts. The sport afforded considerable amusement to those present and the aquatic feats which Professor Poulton subsequently performed were loudly and deservedly applauded.³⁸

On 13 August 1859, Poulton, assisted by another good swimmer, showed the best way of rescuing a drowning person in the large lake at Belle Vue Gardens. The exhibition was for the benefit of the widow and family of Patrick Ford, who lost his life in trying to save two boys at Moss Side. About 2,000 persons paid to see the feats of Professor Poulton. The receipts were £22. The swimming professor threw himself over the side of a boat into the water and, after being below for a few seconds, his assistant dived after him, and supporting the head of the pretended drowning man he swam upon his back to the side of the lake, about 40 yards. The professor was none the worse for having simulated drowning and he afterwards performed many feats on the water.³⁹

Four years later, a large number of people assembled at the Gardens on Saturday 22 August to witness two swimming races for prizes given by the proprietor, Mr Jennison, taking place in the five acre lake. Six swimmers entered for the first race over half a mile, twice round the course, for £4 which was won by P. Johnson by ten yards with Meakin (a pupil of Professor Poulton) in third just ahead of Gurr of London. Johnson also won the swimming steeplechase in which competitors had to go over two and under two hurdles once around the course.⁴⁰ Poulton provided a handsome cup at Belle Vue for a swimming race for youths under eighteen a year later, which was won by J.B. Johnson,⁴¹ and he repeated this in August 1865 when Johnson won again. These events attracted many of the best swimmers in the country including Frederick Beckwith, Harry Gurr, and David Pamplin from London, although the steeplechase was won by E.B. Mather of Manchester. One reporter noted that the 'liberality of Mr Poulton' merited a word of commendation.⁴² Poulton was present again when these races were repeated in 1866 and 1867.⁴³ He was still involved ten years later when the thirteenth Annual Swimming Gala took place in the Zoological Gardens on Monday 27 July, 1874, commencing at 4 p.m. First event was a swimming race, open to all comers, over half a mile, twice round the Large Lake. Then, Professor Poulton's boys' race, open to boys under 18 years of age; once round the lake, a quarter of a mile and an aquatic steeple-chase, open to all comers; diving and

³⁷ *Bells Life*, Saturday May 21, 1864, 6.

³⁸ *Bells Life*, Sunday September 5, 1858, 5.

³⁹ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday August 20, 1859, 7.

⁴⁰ *Bells Life*, Sunday August 30, 1863, 6.

⁴¹ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Wednesday August 17, 1864, 2; *Bells Life*, Saturday August 27, 1864, 7.

⁴² *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday August 19, 1865, 1; Monday August 21, 1865, 4; *Bells Life*, Saturday August 26, 1865, 7.

⁴³ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday September 8, 1866, 10; Saturday August 17, 1867, 12.

swimming, once round the Lake. Admission, 6d. after four p.m., 1s.⁴⁴ The event also took place in 1876.⁴⁵

Hollingworth Lake

The professor also organised swimming galas at another outdoor venue, Hollingworth Lake, Littleborough. In 1865, the gala included a great quarter of a mile race open to All England and was attended by Gurr (Champion of England), David Pamplin and 'their trainer' Mr W. Woodbridge. In August 1866, the 'amphibious' Poulton undressed himself while swimming in the water.⁴⁶ In 1868, Professor Poulton's Great Swimming Gala and Aristocratic Fete at Hollingworth Lake, the Hollingworth Lake Company gave a silver cup for a 400 yards swimming race, Mr G. Garwood of the Lake Hotel gave a silver medal for a youths 200 yards race and there was a great duck hunt with 20 'real live ducks' all put in the lake at once. There was also walking the pole for two live pigs with bands of music, and dancing on the green and platform. Cheap trips by the Lancashire and Yorkshire railway. The 'amphibious' professor demonstrated his 'evolutions' in the water.⁴⁷ The professor took a benefit at Hollingworth Lake in August in front of 6,000 spectators and after the races he swam with his hands and feet bound together and performed some 'wonderful floating feats'.⁴⁸ Grand Swimming Gala, Hollingworth Lake, on Saturday next, July 17th, at five p.m. Swimming races, Great Duck Hunt. Professor Poulton and the MAN FISH perform at six p.m. prompt. Professor Poulton's swimming races and Great Duck Hunts, Hollingworth Lake, Saturday next, July 17th, at five p.m. Great sport.⁴⁹ One reporter noted of one of these fetes on Saturday 28 August 1869 that it figured prominently among the many annual galas and festivals around Manchester, both in the large number of competitors and the talent displayed. Poulton undressed himself while swimming on the surface of the water, and ate a sponge cake, drank a bottle of milk, and smoked a pipe under the water, all of which were appreciated by the spectators. He then displayed double floating with Mr J. Wilkinson. The most amusing contest of the day was 'walking the greasy pole for two live pigs' for which fifty competitors entered.⁵⁰

Outside Manchester

In the 1860s, Poulton had a regular engagement at the New Royal Albert Baths, Burnley, which seated 550 spectators, and he gave a number of prizes including the Burnley Champion Challenge Cup (value £10), open to residents living within 25 miles. As well as exhibiting his 'skill and proficiency in the scientific and useful art', the professor organised a duck hunt. In 1868, Harry Gurr, Champion of England, acted as the duck, 'catch him who can'.⁵¹

At Cornwallis Baths, Liverpool, in 1859, Professor Poulton went through some extraordinary evolutions in the water and elicited great applause.⁵² Poulton performed his wonderful feats of natation at the Market Street Baths, Everton, Liverpool in October 1864 at a benefit for W. Boston, who was well known in aquatic circles and had a reputation as a bird fancier,⁵³ Both Gurr and Poulton appeared at the entertainment provided by the professor at the Margaret Street Baths, Everton, in September 1866 which included a race over 12 lengths open to All England for a handsome cup given by the professor. Gurr again acted as the duck for the duck hunt with 5s given to W. Hood who caught him in two minutes. After the pair had demonstrated their scientific and well-executed evolutions in the water, the company adjourned to Mr Rose's, Bath Hotel, Spencer Street, and partook of a most sumptuous supper provided by the worthy host.⁵⁴ The second meeting of the

⁴⁴ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday July 25, 1874, 1.

⁴⁵ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday July 29, 1876, 1.

⁴⁶ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 19, 1865, 6; Saturday August 11, 1866, 2.

⁴⁷ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 1, 1868, 10.

⁴⁸ *Bells Life*, Saturday September 5, 1868, 10.

⁴⁹ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Thursday July 15, 1869, 1, 8.

⁵⁰ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Monday August 30, 1869, 3.

⁵¹ *Bells Life*, Saturday May 21, 1864, 6; Saturday May 6, 1865, 7; Saturday April 14, 1866, 7; Saturday September 5, 1868, 10.

⁵² *Bells Life*, Sunday September 4, 1859, 8.

⁵³ *Bells Life*, Saturday October 8, 1864, 2;

⁵⁴ *Bells Life*, Saturday September 15, 1866, 3.

Liverpool Association was held on Wednesday evening at the Cornwallis Street Baths when there was a large attendance. During the evening Professor Poulton went through his usual feats, although suffering from the effects of sunstroke.⁵⁵ Poulton and Gurr were at the Margaret Street Baths again in September 1868.⁵⁶

In May 1861, Poulton, 'champion scientific swimmer of England' went through his 'extraordinary water role of performances' at the Kent Street Baths, Birmingham,⁵⁷ and he was both at the Northwood Street Baths, Birmingham, and at the Nottingham public baths in September 1865 where he displayed motionless and scientific floating in a 'manner highly creditable to him'. He also smoked, ate, and drank with his head beneath the surface and showed the spectators a specimen of his diving capabilities.⁵⁸ George was at the Northwood Street Baths in Birmingham in October 1865 when he and Little Harry Gurr (the Champion) gave an extraordinary display of feats in the water.⁵⁹ A year later he was back at the Kent Street Baths where he managed a programme of races and gave his scientific feats in the water, which were 'so well-known and thoroughly appreciated by the public as to need no descriptive repetition'. Professor Poulton acted as M.C. and starter.⁶⁰ In September that year, a large concourse of people assembled on the banks of the enclosed Kirby's Pool, Bristol Road, Birmingham, to witness aquatic performances supervised by Professor Poulton who demonstrated the variety of evolutions undertaken by a drowning man and then presented the prizes to the race winners at the end of the event.⁶¹ On Wednesday upwards of 3,000 persons were at the Aston Hall, Lower Grounds, Birmingham, to witness a gala which had been got up by Professor Poulton.⁶² In July 1867, he organised another aquatic fete at the same venue and joined J. Wilkinson from Australia in demonstrating 'various evolutions on and under water'.⁶³ At the Kent Street Baths, Birmingham, in 1871, Professor Poulton and Mr Harry Keel of Birmingham exhibited feats of ornamental swimming, diving, eating, smoking etc. Master J. Poulton also delighted the assembly with various feats and came in for a share of general applause.⁶⁴ A year later, the professor took part in an aquatic entertainment at Morecambe.⁶⁵

Poulton, Gurr and another swimming professor, W. Woodbridge, were at the Park Baths, Halifax, Yorkshire, in August 1865,⁶⁶ and 'Professor Poulton of Manchester', with his associates, displayed some extraordinary feats in the water when the Wellington Street Baths, Leeds opened on May 1 1869 under the management of professor Johnson, late instructor in swimming and manager at the Oriental Company's Baths, Cookridge Street, Leeds. Mr Thompson's band played a selection of music during the afternoon.⁶⁷

It is a measure of the professor's national reputation that he was at a meeting about the conditions that should apply to a national Champion Challenge Cup, hosted by the London Swimming Club in August 1863. The meeting agreed on the minimum amount of any wager for a challenge, that the distance should be two miles in the Thames between the bridges of Putney and Kew and that the management should be entrusted to the London swimming Club. Some subscriptions had been received and among those nominated to gather further subscriptions was Professor Poulton of the Mayfield Baths, Manchester.⁶⁸

⁵⁵ *Bells Life*, Saturday June 8, 1867, 7.

⁵⁶ *Bells Life*, Saturday September 5, 1868, 10.

⁵⁷ *Bells Life*, Sunday May 12, 1861, 7.

⁵⁸ *Bells Life*, Saturday September 30, 1865, 7.

⁵⁹ *Bells Life*, Saturday October 28, 1865, 7.

⁶⁰ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 18, 1866, 7.

⁶¹ *Bells Life*, Saturday September 15, 1866, 3.

⁶² *Bells Life*, Saturday August 4, 1866, 7.

⁶³ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 3, 1867, 6.

⁶⁴ *Bells Life*, Saturday June 24, 1871, 9.

⁶⁵ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 31, 1872, 10.

⁶⁶ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 19, 1865, 6.

⁶⁷ *Bells Life*, Wednesday May 5, 1869, 8.

⁶⁸ *Bells Life*, Sunday, August 30, 1863, 6.

These trips were not without their dangers. Professor Poulton of Manchester (the champion in the water) was seriously injured by a railway collision on September 14 1864, at Bushery, whilst travelling by the express train to Birmingham to fulfil an aquatic engagement. The numerous friends of that gentleman will 'be glad to hear that he has so far recovered from the effects of the accident as to be able to leave his house for the purpose of taking gentle walking exercise'.⁶⁹ They were also not without their organisational difficulties. In October 1865, Poulton organised, and performed in, a gala in Lancaster which Gurr was scheduled to attend but, in the event, he was nowhere to be found. *Bell's Life* noted that Gurr, in thus disappointing the public who are the supporters of swimming must do himself harm and that he ought to be able to give a good explanation for his absence.⁷⁰

Club Activities

When swimming clubs were formed in the mid-nineteenth century they often turned to the swimming professors for instruction and organisational advice. According to one report in 1859, Manchester Swimming Club consisted of a body of gentlemen who 'for some time past have profited by the services of that eminent professor of the art of swimming, Poulton'. Following a race evening at the Mayfield Baths in November 40 gentlemen sat down to dinner at the Brunswick Hotel, Piccadilly, and the chairman presented a handsome gold watch and chain, value 35 guineas, to Professor Poulton as a token of the estimation in which he was held by members of the club and others, and in acknowledgement of his services. The inner case of the watch bore the following inscription:- 'Presented to Professor Poulton by his pupils and friends. Manchester, 8th November, 1859'. In returning thanks for the gift, the professor said that in the course of another year or so members of the Manchester Club would be able to compete with any swimmers in the kingdom. The health of Professor Poulton and others toasts were subsequently drunk. The company did not break up until an early hour.⁷¹ After Poulton, 'skilful both as a teacher and swimmer', exhibited his skills at the Hulme Baths in October 1860, three spirited matches took place for medals given by the Manchester Swimming Club. In awarding the prizes, Professor Poulton spoke of the success of the Manchester Club, which has for its patron the Mayor of Manchester, and which he said, in another year, would be second to none. As it was, its members had won prizes in Gibraltar, Birmingham, London, Liverpool, and other places.⁷²

Poulton as Publican

1861 Census RG9/2881 36 Lister Street, Chorlton, Upper Medlock, Manchester

George Poulton, 37, teacher of swimming, born in Middlesex. Wife, 33, born in Suffolk, three children born in Middlesex and one in Lancashire.

The professor was running the Griffin Inn, 20 Medlock Street, Hulme by 1865 and entries for his galas at Hollingworth Lake from that point onwards could be made at his house where the trophies for fishing and swimming could be seen and competitors from different parts of the country would meet up with their friends.⁷³ Entrants for Poulton's gala at Hollingworth Lake in August 1868 were directed to Professor Poulton, Griffin Inn, 20, Upper Medlock Street, Hulme, Manchester.⁷⁴ At a swimming match at the Greengate Baths in March 1871 Poulton officiated as referee and he was being referred to as 'mine host of the Griffin Inn, Upper Medlock Street, Hulme' and his address in the 1871 census was given as 22 Vine Street, Hulme, Manchester.⁷⁵ Later that month Poulton of the Griffin Inn, acted as starter at the Leaf Street Baths, Manchester, and discharged his duties 'most efficiently'.⁷⁶

Publican as Sporting Entrepreneur

In the tradition of sporting publicans, the professor involved himself in sports other than swimming.

⁶⁹ *Bells Life*, Saturday October 29, 1864, 7.

⁷⁰ *Bells Life*, Saturday October 21, 1865, 9.

⁷¹ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday November 12, 1859, 6; *Bells Life*, Sunday, November 13, 1859, 7.

⁷² *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Saturday October 13, 1860, 9.

⁷³ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 19, 1865, 6; Saturday August 11, 1866, 2; Saturday August 22, 1868, 7.

⁷⁴ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 1, 1868, 10.

⁷⁵ *Bells Life*, Saturday April 1, 1871, 9; 1871 Census RG10/3997 taken on April 2.

⁷⁶ *Bells Life*, Saturday April 29, 1871, 9.

Great Angling Match (Open to All England). Professor Poulton will give three handsome cups to be fished for at Hollingworth Lake, Littleborough, Yorkshire, on Monday, August 28. Entrance fee 5s each, including dinner and free fishing in the lake. The entrance money must be sent in postage stamps or cash on or before Friday, August 25 to Professor Poulton, Griffin Inn, 20, Upper Medlock Street, Hulme, Manchester, where the prizes can be seen and every information obtained.⁷⁷

Poulton, of the Griffin Inn, also sponsored shooting matches in 1865 at the Copenhagen grounds in Manchester. He presented a magnificent two-handled cup, with salver, stand and globe for gentlemen amateurs on 27 December. The cup had two shields, one representing a gentleman shooting and the other left blank for the name of the winner. Entries could be made at Griffin Inn, where the prize could be seen, and cost 10s. Competitors were required to shoot at 7 birds each and the animals provided by My Hayes proved to be 'first-class flyers'. The reporter concluded by complimenting Poulton on his desire to promote sport.⁷⁸

George gave a splendid cup, salver, shade and stand, plus prize money, for a half-mile pedestrian handicap at the City Grounds, Manchester, on Saturday 19 June 1869. Entries could be made to P. Waddacor at the City grounds or to George at the Griffin Inn, where the cup could be seen behind the bar.⁷⁹ IN addition to 'being an adept in the art of natation', Poulton was described as an 'ardent admirer of outdoor pastimes'. The race was won by Buttery from Sheffield, with J. Nuttall of Manchester in second, and J. Irving from Hulme in third, in front of a disappointing crowd of 400.⁸⁰

Poulton the Champion

Part of Poulton's involvement with other sports was a need for the professional to constantly keep himself in the public eye and George never forgot to emphasise his swimming skills by issuing challenges. He was clearly not a speed swimmer but an ornamental or scientific swimmer as his challenges over a period of twenty-five years emphasise. In 1860, Professor Poulton of Manchester will swim any man in England a scientific match for £25 a side either at the London Baths, London, or the Mayfield Baths, Manchester, and give or take £3 for expenses. If Woodbridge means swimming why does he not cover the £5 now at *Bell's Life*? Surely the Lambeth Bath is large enough for Mr. W. To try his skill, being 122 feet long. This is the second time Professor Poulton has sent £5 to *Bell's Life* and he hopes Mr W. will now come forward. Professor Poulton gives two aquatic entertainments at the Corporation Baths, Nottingham, on Monday and Tuesday evening next, at seven o'clock, when prizes will be given for swimming and diving and some first-rate sport is expected.⁸¹ Ten years later, Professor Poulton of Manchester will swim Marquis Bibbero a match at scientific swimming, for £25 or £50 a side. The editor of *Bell's Life* to be stakeholder. Marquis Bibbero does not profess to gamble but will swim Professor Poulton a swimming contest in the St George's Baths, Liverpool, for a gold medal of any value, the loser to pay for the medal.⁸² In 1874, Professor Poulton of Manchester will swim any man breathing, bar neither country nor colour, a match for scientific swimming, for £50 or £100 a side, point for point, or trick for trick. Two minutes time.⁸³ In 1883, Professor George Poulton, the celebrated scientific swimmer, on Wednesday swam twenty-one yards, at the Mayfield Baths, Manchester, on his back, in one stroke, starting in the water from the shallow end.⁸⁴

His expertise was clearly valued by the wider swimming community. When a public exchange of letters took place over the origins of the overhand stroke took place in 1875 Henry Gardener, whose mentor was Professor Beckwith, claimed 'to be the first to use and bring it to perfection by winning the championship with it at Manchester'. He believed that Professor Poulton of Manchester might be

⁷⁷ *Bells Life*, Saturday August 19, 1865, 7.

⁷⁸ *Bells Life*, Saturday December 9, 1865, 7; Saturday December 16, 1865, 7; Saturday December 23, 1865, 7; Saturday December 30, 1865, 8.

⁷⁹ *Bells Life*, Saturday June 5, 1869, 7; Wednesday June 16, 1869, 7; Saturday June 19, 1869, 7.

⁸⁰ *Bells Life*, Wednesday June 23, 1869, 7.

⁸¹ *Bells Life*, Sunday, October 21, 1860, 7.

⁸² *Bells Life*, Saturday July 16, 1870, 7; Wednesday July 20, 1870, 1.

⁸³ *Bells Life*, Saturday July 18, 1874, 5.

⁸⁴ *Illustrated Police News*, Saturday July 21, 1883, 4.

among those who knew the originator of the stroke.⁸⁵ Poulton replied from the Leaf Street Baths in December that it was 'impossible to say who was the inventor of the stroke but he recalled that a young midshipman named Robinson had won a race with it at the Holborn baths in 1842. For Poulton the best exponents of the stroke were E.B. Mather and J.B. Johnson.⁸⁶

In 1881, George, a teacher of swimming, and his wife Maria, children Emma, Frederick, Mary, Amy, George and James, were living at 26 Tamworth Street, Hulme, Manchester.⁸⁷ Judging by a letter he sent to the *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* in August, he was based at the Mayfield baths. He pointed out that reports of a death by drowning at the Mayfield baths was inaccurate and that the incident had taken place at the Leaf Street baths. It was also inaccurate to say that the water of the Mayfield baths was 'murky' and that the attendants could not swim. On the contrary, they were 'excellent swimmers'.⁸⁸

At the Christmas distribution of prizes for the Manchester Commercial Schools in 1865, it was noted a swimming class had been formed during the half year under professor Poulton and from 12 to 15 boys had learned to swim. First and second prizes for swimming were among those presented.⁸⁹

The professor was involved when a private swimming bath for Manchester was proposed in 1884. It was suggested that a company be formed to negotiate for the purchase of a site when sufficient capital had been subscribed.⁹⁰

Like many professors, George displayed considerable longevity in his swimming activities. The 1891 census records the 67-year-old as a swimming master living with his wife and family, including grandchildren Claud, Robert, and Florence, at 36 Granville Street, Moss Side, Manchester,⁹¹ and Poulton continued to organise the annual swimming gala at the Mayfield Baths that year, an event which now included a ladies race. Despite his age the professor gave exhibitions in ornamental and scientific swimming.⁹² George eventually died in 1898, aged 74.⁹³

⁸⁵ *Bells Life*, Saturday December 4, 1875, 10/7.

⁸⁶ *Bells Life*, Saturday December 18, 1875, 9.

⁸⁷ 1881 Census RG11/3936

⁸⁸ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Wednesday August 24, 1881, 7.

⁸⁹ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Wednesday December 20, 1865, 3.

⁹⁰ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Tuesday July 22, 1884, 4.

⁹¹ 1891 Census RG12/3200

⁹² *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Wednesday September 23, 1891, 4.

⁹³ BMD: 1898 Jan-Feb-Mar Death of George Poulton, 74, Chorlton, Lancashire. 8c Page: 545