

**Day, D. (2015).** *Natational Dress: Functionality and Morality among Female Swimming Exhibitors in Victorian Britain.* SpLeisH International Sports Symposium, MMU Cheshire, February 27/28 2015.

### **Abstract**

In 1873, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* published a series of articles extolling the values of swimming for ladies (July, 1: 29; August, 1: 80) and giving advice on the best form of bathing dress, which should consist of a jacket and drawers cut in one piece, adorned with a short peplum with belt, and made out of soft blue serge, trimmed with white or coloured braid. This modest, fashionable, but essentially impractical, type of bathing outfit has been the subject of most, if not all, of the historiography surrounding female swimming costumes but it was not the only swimming dress on show during the late nineteenth century. Only two years after these articles appeared, natationist Agnes Beckwith swam twenty miles in the Thames wearing attire that combined both functionality, tight to the body while allowing freedom of movement, and public appeal, a critical consideration for female exhibitors. Agnes was one of a number of professional working-class women who made their living through demonstrating their skills in swimming baths, at the seaside, and in the music halls, and their particular form of dress was in stark contrast to the bathing costumes worn by 'respectable' women. This paper explores the various forms of this dress and the reactions, positive and negative, to outfits that always, to some degree, transgressed the acceptable morality of the period. In doing so, the author discusses the role of class, gender, space, and modes of self-presentation, in determining how these specialist forms of aquatic dress were received.

Because people operate within the constraints of their social world, social inequalities are always reflected within the sporting landscape and this was no different in the 'long' Victorian period, interpreted here as stretching from the Napoleonic Wars until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.<sup>1</sup> This period forms a flexible framework marked by continuities, innovation and diversity,<sup>2</sup> and one that has been subsequently interpreted from a number of perspectives, not least through the lens of 'separate spheres', most often employed in the context of gender relations, although this paper queries whether gender and class can ever really be separated. Society was fiercely hierarchical and class was a meaningful social reality. As a result, understanding of class is fundamental to understanding Victorian Britain,<sup>3</sup> although class boundaries were often blurred, making it difficult to be precise in our interpretations of notions such as 'separate spheres', which is often applied to the Victorian context. This idea developed during the course of the eighteenth century in a process that entailed the negotiation and eventual redrawing of the margins between kinds of knowledge, practice, and institutions.<sup>4</sup> 'Separate spheres' denotes a compartmentalized view of the world, a separation of human experience and 'forms of human association',<sup>5</sup> such as class, into identifiable areas exemplifying typical patterns of relations. Feminist histories of sport, for example, often emphasize the emerging role of the family sphere to which women were largely confined and postulate a sharp dichotomy in the nineteenth century between the feminine home and the male workplace, a separation of spheres that brought with it a basic contrast in both norms of conduct and structure.<sup>6</sup> The concept has been criticized and Poovey argued that the negotiation of

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<sup>1</sup> The Historical Association [http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary\\_resource\\_3871\\_134.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary_resource_3871_134.html)

<sup>2</sup> Moran, Maureen 2006 *Victorian Literature and Culture* London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

<sup>3</sup> Susie L. Steinbach *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* 2012 Oxon: Routledge 114, 115

<sup>4</sup> Mary Poovey, *Making A Social Body* ch. 1 (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* 8 (1986).

<sup>6</sup> Rosenberg, Anat. "Separate Spheres Revisited: On the Frameworks of Interdisciplinarity and Constructions of the Market." *Law & Literature* 24.3 (2012); Marilyn Constanzo 'One Can't Shake Off the Women': Images of Sport and Gender in *Punch*, 1901-10 *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 19, No.1 (March 2002), 31-56 32

sphere boundaries was full of fissures which resulted, at least partly, from the uneven relationship between discourse and institutional practice,<sup>7</sup> something that this paper touches on through an exploration of the intersection of class and gender in women's swimming.

### **Women's sport**

Women's sport in late-nineteenth century England was shaped by the concept of what were suitable and acceptable physical activities for men and women. The use of the physical body was constrained by the assumption that social differences involving patterns of dominance and subordination should also apply to sport, which proved a powerful mechanism for reinforcing distinctions of class, gender and the consolidation of 'separate spheres'. A lot of women's sport took place away from the male gaze,<sup>8</sup> and women were allowed to participate only within limited behavioural and spatial boundaries which confirmed the separated spheres of the sexes.<sup>9</sup> The clothes a woman wore reflected these aesthetic rules and social constraints and they also reflected social and political tensions and changing attitudes towards women's proper sphere. Unsurprisingly, the development of special sports clothing was a major area of controversy over the competing tensions between propriety and practical requirements but clothing designers, manufacturers and retailers, recognising the commercial value of the sportswoman, produced costumes designed specifically for physical activity from the 1880s. None, however, was entirely practical or comfortable, since functionality remained a contentious issue and advertisements consistently emphasised elegance, beauty, and femininity, rather than utility. Their often middle-class upbringing led late-Victorian and Edwardian sportswomen to accept costumes that safeguarded modesty,<sup>10</sup> in order to project an image of moderation and becoming femininity,<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> but women's sporting involvement was never entirely restricted by the tenets of Victorian patriarchy. Although the notion of separate spheres certainly affected the nature and extent of their involvement its influence never extended completely into the lives of all women,<sup>13</sup> such as many of those interested in participating in swimming.

### **Female Swimming Constituencies**

In some respects, swimming illustrates some of the most powerful societal checks applied to the development of women's sport since concerns with modesty and morality sometimes led to the strict segregation of the sexes while clothing was often deliberately made shapeless in order to hide the form and avoid any suggestion of eroticism. It is important, however, to recognise that there were differences in the aquatic environment that dictated how clothing and issues of morality were perceived. In 1755, Johnson defined swimming and bathing as two distinct activities. Swimming was chiefly a male activity undertaken for exercise and recreation while bathing meant little more than immersion in water by both

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<sup>7</sup> Poovey, supra note 5. See also Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel: The Market, The Individual and Communal Life* 70-71 (1996).

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves *Changing Images Of The Sporting Female 1: Before The First World War* *Sport & Leisure* July/Aug 1990

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, J. and Phillips, P. (1993). History from Below: Women's Underwear and the Rise of Women's Sport *Journal of Popular Culture* 27(2) pp.129-148 130

<sup>10</sup> McCrone, K. (1998). *Feminism And Women's Sport In Late-Victorian England* The Centre For Research Into Sport and Society, University of Leicester

<sup>11</sup> Cartriona M. Parratt, *Athletic "Womanhood": Exploring Sources for Female Sport in Victorian and Edwardian England* *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer, 1989) 142

<sup>12</sup> See Hargreaves, "Playing Like Gentlemen", 42, 50; and *Sporting Females*, p.51.

<sup>13</sup> Cartriona M. Parratt, *Athletic "Womanhood": Exploring Sources for Female Sport in Victorian and Edwardian England* *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer, 1989) 154

sexes in the hope of effecting a cure for ailments. Gradually, the distinctions became blurred<sup>14</sup> and recreational swimming became considered suitable for women since it had utilitarian value as a life saving activity, it took place in an environment that masked physical effort,<sup>15</sup> and it could provide mild, beneficial exercise in segregated surroundings.<sup>16</sup> However, women participated in a number of different ways, many of which were class related. For the purposes of this paper, those distinctions have been divided into bathing, professional natation, and serious swimming.

### **Bathing**

In 1873, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, attempted to persuade women of the utility of swimming and to provide advice on technique in order to 'enhance the pleasure of bathing'. There was no consideration here of racing or display and this was reflected in its comments on dress. Since the arms and legs should be perfectly free, so that all the muscles could come into play, the old-fashioned bathing-dresses, consisting of a 'bag open at each end, with holes for the arms,' were no longer in vogue. The best bathing-dress now was one in which the jacket and drawers were cut in one piece. A short peplum (overskirt) with belt could be added. Soft blue serge, trimmed with white or coloured braid, was the best material, being both light and warm. It was best to have long sleeves, to prevent sunburn, and plain round sleeves to the elbow, with a frill, were suitable. Great care should be taken that the whole dress was sufficiently loose with the waist at least three or four inches larger than an ordinary dress, and plenty of room allowed across the chest and shoulders. Any tightness would produce great discomfort because of the position of the body when in the water.<sup>17</sup> Four years later, the magazine was recommending the new 'Continental Bathing Costume', priced at £1 2s. 6d, made of dark blue or black serge,<sup>18</sup> while ten years later another commentator was recommending the Princess bathing and swimming costumes, which consisted of knickerbockers, tied round the waists with braid, and a high tunic with sash. Both garments were knitted, and being very elastic, fitted the figure perfectly. The wools used were navy blue and red, used for the decoration that finished off the tunic and knickerbockers. The tunic was laced up the front with red and formed an attractive and smart little costume.<sup>19</sup> In 1893, it was noted that while Englishwomen abroad were noted for their neat and effective bathing costumes, at home they still took a 'sad delight in casing themselves in a garment that resembles a sack'. Apart from the fact that was totally unsuited to swimming its extreme ugliness was sufficient to make women avoid bathing altogether. The author could not believe that the idea of a pretty, useful bathing costume was incompatible with modesty.<sup>20</sup> Five years later, another commentator observed that in no department of toilette had a greater change for the better taken place than in the bathing costume. The crudeness of the early Victorian sack-like bathing gown, which had made swimming an impossibility, had been abandoned and a wide variety of costumes could now be seen at Marshall and Snelgrove's, from the cream and the navy blue serge of

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<sup>14</sup> Julia Allen, *Swimming with Dr Johnson and Mrs Thrale: Sport, Health and Exercise in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press), 224, 253.

<sup>15</sup> Janet Phillips & Peter Phillips (1993) History from below: Women's underwear and the rise of women's sport, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27(2), p. 130; Claire Parker (2010) Swimming: The 'Ideal' sport for nineteenth-century British women, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27(4), pp. 675-689.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times* (12 November 1870), p. 6; Frances Hoggan (1879) *Swimming and its relation to the health of women* (London: Women's Printing Society Ltd.), pp. 1-8; *Otago Witness* (30 December 1876), p. 19; Patricia Vertinsky (1990) *The eternally wounded woman: Women, doctors and exercise in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 153-5.

<sup>17</sup> *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Tuesday July 1, 1873, 29. Friday August 1, 1873, 80. Swimming for Ladies.

<sup>18</sup> *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Wednesday August 1, 1877, 78.

<sup>19</sup> *Northampton Mercury*, Saturday 31 July 1886, 3. Improvements in Swimming Costumes.

<sup>20</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday September 21, 1893, 616.

the finest quality, to the flannelette, all trimmed with contrasting colours of woollen braid.<sup>21</sup> (See *Gymnastic or swimming costume, Myra's Journal*).

### **Professional natationists<sup>22</sup>**

Marshall and Snelgrove's was not an accessible emporium to all women and the gender order of late Victorian and Edwardian England left working-class women with very few opportunities or resources for leisure. State regulation, Poor Law, and factory reform did not eliminate women's paid employment but simply forced them into even lower paid, more exploitative, 'sweated' homework imposing on them a 'double load' above and beyond their domestic family responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> Although there was an expectation that wage labour would be a transitional stage for young women between school and marriage,<sup>24</sup> rather than embracing the separate spheres ideology, paid employment remained commonplace among married women<sup>25</sup> and most working-class families continued to rely on supplementary income from female and child labour.<sup>26,27</sup> Faced with workplace demands and responsibility for childrearing, cooking, cleaning, and domestic provision, working-class women worked long, exhausting hours for little material reward.<sup>28</sup> As Best points out, 'the scores of sentimental writers who enthused about The Home and about woman's place within it' were never describing a domestic situation that was anything like normal for most of the working classes.<sup>29</sup> (see table 1).

Some recognition needs to be given, however, to the diversity of female experience.<sup>30</sup> For Victorians the femininity question was less of an issue for working class women who were normally excluded from definitions of 'feminine' and concerns about physical strain.<sup>31</sup> For a very small number of working class women, sport, or, more often, sports-like activities packaged as entertainment, provided an alternative working environment and female performers appeared throughout the Victorian period.<sup>32</sup> The most prominent were swimmers who received much more public approval than other professionals partly because of their age, marital status, bodily appearance and gracefulness.<sup>33</sup> They formed a very small

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<sup>21</sup> *Le Follet: Journal du Grand Monde Fashion, Polite Literature, Beaux Arts etc.*, Thursday September 1 1898, 7. Dress in Fashionable Salons.

<sup>22</sup> For more reading see Day, D. (2012). "What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?" Agnes Beckwith, Aquatic Entertainer and Victorian Role Model, *Women's History Review* 21(3), 419-446; Day, D. (2015). From Lambeth to Niagara: Imitation and Innovation amongst Female Natationists. *Sport in History* (forthcoming); Day, D. (2010). London Swimming Professors: Victorian Craftsmen and Aquatic Entrepreneurs. *Sport in History* 30(1), 32-54; *Dave Day From Oldham Baths to American Vaudeville and Beyond: The Finney Family Working Papers on Professional Natationists Paper 1* (April 2014). *Manchester Metropolitan University*

<sup>23</sup> August, Andrew How separate a sphere? Poor women and paid work in late-Victorian London. *Journal of Family History*, 1994, Vol. 19 Issue 3, p285, 25p,

<sup>24</sup> Catriona Parratt (1998) Little means or time: Working-class women and leisure in late Victorian and Edwardian England, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 15(2), pp. 22-53.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew August (1994) How separate a sphere? Poor women and paid work in late-Victorian London, *Journal of Family History*, 19(3), p. 285.

<sup>26</sup> Theodore Koditschek (1997) The gendering of the British working class, *Gender & History*, 9(2), pp. 341, 345, 347.

<sup>27</sup> Eleanor Gordon & Gweneth Nair (2002) The myth of the Victorian patriarchal family, *History of the Family*, 7, p. 126.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Kingsley Kent (1999) *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1900* (London: Routledge), p. 180.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 100

<sup>30</sup> Eleanor Gordon & Gweneth Nair (2002) The myth of the Victorian patriarchal family, *History of the Family*, 7, p. 135.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves (1990) Changing images of the sporting female 1: Before the First World War, *Sport & Leisure*, July/August.

<sup>32</sup> Day, D. (2012). "What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?" Agnes Beckwith, Aquatic Entertainer and Victorian Role Model, *Women's History Review* 21(3), 419-446.

<sup>33</sup> Claire Parker (2010) Swimming: The 'Ideal' sport for nineteenth-century British women, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27(4), p. 682.

group, with only seven being formally listed in 1878,<sup>34</sup> although a number of previously unrecorded individuals were regularly employed in family aquatic entertainments from a young age. (table 2)

By the end of the century, female natationists were performing in front of all classes of society and these working-class women became as comfortable in the variety theatre as they were in the swimming pool. Performing in a tank, diving, and holding breath underwater were just a few of the activities engaged in by women who also swam in endurance events, raced for money, produced and performed aquatic entertainments, promoted swimming competitions, and coached or instructed swimming and lifesaving, helped by the fact that swimming teachers were increasingly confined to teaching their own sex. In 1860 the *English Woman's Journal* argued that strong-bodied steady-minded young women should be trained as swimming mistresses, thus providing a new occupation for women,<sup>35</sup> and, by the late 1870s, there were an increasing number of opportunities for those with the necessary expertise. Professional teachers at the London public baths included Fanny Easton, who was working as a swimming mistress between 1881 and 1901, Eleanor Classey, was a professional swimming teacher in Marylebone, and the Humphrey sisters, Charlotte and Jane, who spent all their working lives as swimming teachers.<sup>36</sup>

Other natationists concentrated on performance, initially as athletes, and dressed accordingly. When Agnes Beckwith swam five miles in the Thames in 1875 contemporary reports described her dressed in a tight bathing costume of rose-pink lama, trimmed with white lace and lace of the same colour, and with her long flaxen hair neatly bound by a ribbon, descriptions that formed part of a recurring theme in similar reports and which provided an acceptable and reassuring vision of femininity.<sup>37</sup> When Agnes competed against Laura Saigeman in 1879, both competitors emerged from their cubicles enveloped in Ulsters, reminding one observer of artists' models, a focus on femininity that permeated reports of the contest. When divested of their Ulsters the 'female human form divine stood out in bold relief in the semi-darkness'. Both swimmers wore a functional, and morally acceptable, 'University costume', Agnes's décolleté attire being pink, while Laura's was dark blue.<sup>38</sup> Functionality was important and when Laura raced Theresa Johnson in 1883, both swimmers appeared in 'tight-fitting swimming costumes'.<sup>39</sup>

In the late Victorian period, English amateur sportsmen created regulatory bodies that excluded both women and working class participants, especially sporting professionals, and faced by a 'double jeopardy' those working class females who had been making a living from displaying their physical talents retreated into the world of entertainment.<sup>40</sup> A swimmer's remuneration at the Westminster Aquarium in January 1897 was from £1 to £2 per week, while divers like Annie Luker, who dived from

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<sup>34</sup> *Bicycle Journal, Swimming and General Athletic Pedestrian Recorder* (21 August 1878), p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *The English Woman's Journal* (1 March 1860), V(25) p. 68. Letters to the Editor.

<sup>36</sup> *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror* (15 April 1890), p. 174; Census Returns. Easton 1881 (337/61/1818), 1891 (141/84/67), 1901 (1253/76/40); Classey (Clarrey) 1881 (1009/5/4), 1891 (96/68/26), 1901 (110/61/10); Charlotte Humphrey 1871 (165/19/30); Charlotte and Jane Humphrey 1881 (31/10/13), 1891 (22/91/11), 1901 (23/123/12), 1911 (RG14PN162RG78PN5RD2SD2ED21SN99).

<sup>37</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (2 September 1875), p. 8; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (3 September 1875), p. 2; *New York Times* (18 September 1875), p. 12; *North Otago Times* (25 November 1875), p. 5; *Grey River Argus* (9 November 1875), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Bell's Life* (27 September 1879), p. 5. The Ulster was a Victorian working daytime overcoat with a cape and sleeves often made of hard-wearing fabrics such as herringbones or tweeds.

<sup>39</sup> *York Herald*, Thursday 1 November 1883, 8. The Ladies Swimming Championship.

<sup>40</sup> Claire Parker, 'Swimming: The "Ideal" Sport for Nineteenth-Century British Women', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27, no. 4 (2010): 682.

100feet, were paid £243.15s.<sup>41</sup> While public racing between women always had its critics, ornamental or scientific swimming, was regarded as entirely appropriate for female natationists<sup>42</sup> and the demands of their aquatic displays meant that natationists were required to combine both form and function in the way they dressed and in the way they presented themselves. When Agnes performed with P.T. Barnum's 'Greatest Show on Earth' at Madison Square Garden in 1887, the 'picturesque aquatic expert' wore a flowing robe of old gold wrapped about her from her throat to her feet as she stepped out upon the platform. She kicked off her rubber overshoes and, then flinging aside the robe, she revealed her limbs encased in flesh-coloured tights and a dark-hued jersey drawn snugly about her waist.<sup>43</sup> On another occasion, she displayed a 'line of beauty and the poetry of motion in such a graceful manner as to call forth repeated applause...and near the finish a bouquet was thrown to her, which, after inhaling, she placed in the sanctity of her somewhat *décolleté* costume'.<sup>44</sup> When Maud and Gladys Finney appeared in America in 1910, they emphasised that the 'sheaths' they wore in their displays made freedom of movement in the water possible.<sup>45</sup> The constant references to costumes suggest that the appeal of female natationists to many male admirers may have much to do with their physical appearance but it is clear that their skill was widely appreciated, primarily because lady spectators would 'be familiarised with the sight of persons moving easily and comfortably in the water' and would want to 'acquire the knowledge and skill which would enable them to do the same'.<sup>46</sup>

### Swimming Clubs and Racing

While the profile of female swimming was significantly enhanced by this cultural penetration by professional natationists, that was only part of the story of female swimming in the nineteenth century. Women at all levels of society, including the aristocracy, clearly enjoyed racing and serious swimming penetrated all levels of society. Aquatic enthusiasts could be found in many levels of the social hierarchy ranging from members of the Ladies National Association for the Diffusion of Sanitary Knowledge, to the clientele of the Brighton Baths, where the subscription-book included many aristocratic ladies.<sup>47</sup>

#### *Bath Club*

By 1900, the Bath Club in London had a membership of about 300 ladies.<sup>48</sup> At the first ladies night in 1895, there were four duchesses present, along with Countesses and innumerable Ladies, and the Marchionesses of Carmarthen, Granby and Londonderry looked in during the evening.<sup>49</sup> Four years later Lady Constance Mackenzie won the gold medal and the Challenge Shield, a success she repeated in 1900 through her 'remarkably graceful and bold swimming'. The ladies dresses were black with badges of

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<sup>41</sup> *London Standard*, January 19 1897, 2; *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 6 1897, 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Hearth and Home* (6 August 1891), p. 383.

<sup>43</sup> *Bell's Life*, May 6, 1882, 6; *Liverpool Mercury*, February 8, 1887, 5; *Era*, March 5, 1887, 16; *New York Clipper*, April 23, 1887, 94.

<sup>44</sup> *Graphic* (13 October 1883), p. 370; *Bell's Life* (20 October 1883), p. 6; *Reynolds's Newspaper* (28 October 1883), p. 8; British Library. *Evan*. 983; *Penny Illustrated* (3 November 1883), p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Salt Lake Telegram*, August 8, 1910; August 11, 1910.

<sup>46</sup> *Bell's Life* (17 August 1872), p. 6; (26 September 1874), p. 8; (14 November 1874), p. 8; *Era* (18 August 1872), p. 5; (4 May 1873), p. 7; (18 May 1873), p. 3; (1 June 1873), p. 3; (10 August 1873), p. 3; (17 August 1873), p. 3; (9 November 1873), p. 3; (30 August 1874), p. 3; (11 October 1874), p. 3; (23 May 1875), p. 5; (4 July 1875), p. 5; (22 August 1875), p. 3; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (21 June 1874), p. 5; *Penny Illustrated* (5 June 1875), p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> *The Women's Union Journal: The Organ of the Women's Protective and Provident League* (1 July 1881), p. 77; *Penny Illustrated* (19 December 1863), p. 3; (11 August 1866), p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, Thursday August 23 1900, 605.

<sup>49</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday June 6, 1895, 130.

different colours, Constance wearing a badge of the Mackenzie clan. The only men permitted to be present were the fathers or guardians of the competitors.<sup>50</sup> Constance made it three wins in a row the following year by beating seven other competitors. All wore University swimming costumes of dark blue serge, each competitor being distinguished by girdles of different colours and other devices such as braid and frills on their costumes. Lady Constance had a 'dainty tartan girdle' and her nationality was further emphasised when she entered the water by the orchestra striking up a selection of Scottish airs.<sup>51</sup>

#### *Ladies Cadogan Swimming Club*

The Ladies (Amateur) Cadogan Swimming Club met at the South Kensington and Chelsea Baths, and arranged fixtures as well as holding annual championships. Members met for practice Tuesdays and Friday mornings from 11 to 1, which inevitably ruled out certain classes of women.<sup>52</sup>

#### *South Norwood Ladies Swimming Club*

The South Norwood Ladies' Swimming Club had a membership of 221 in 1896, its club colours were red and black, and the captancy competition, which<sup>53</sup> included races of 44 and 176 yards, motionless floating, spring dive, surface dive, and best breast, side, and overhand strokes was won in 1900 by Miss Lilian Feast for the second time.<sup>54</sup>

#### *Ladies' Tadpole Swimming Club*

The weekly ladies' magazine, *Hearth and Home* was particularly fond of the Ladies' Tadpole Swimming Club whose costumes were blue and scarlet and whose activities were based at the ladies bath in Kensington. Visitors to their races were regularly entertained to tea and Mrs Crocker, the swimming instructress, had an excellent reputation. Competitors could win prizes that included mother-o'-pearl opera-glasses, a Swiss clock and 'an exquisite Dresden china lamp. The club subscription was 5s and there were about fifty members. 'Foliage plants and red curtains relieve the pure whiteness of the tiles and the brown woodwork. Mrs Middleweek, the matron, was 'courtesy itself'. In 1894, Miss Lilian Wallace was elected captain for the second time, Mrs Crocker, whose able system of training' had turned many a novice into an accomplished swimmer, remained the instructress, while fixtures and matches were being organised. In August, early arrivals to the annual races caught a glimpse of Mrs Crocker, in a becoming costume of heliotrope flannel, with silk-scalloped edging to the tunic and décolletage, teaching the young how to swim. Mrs Middleweek, hospitably entertained the company to tea in her room. In December, the club held its annual dance when the younger 'Tadpoles' 'romped through the lancers in the most approved modern fashion'.<sup>55</sup> In 1895, Lilian Wallace won the captancy again. She was only nineteen and, although not of a particularly robust appearance, was a very accomplished swimmer, noted for her staying power, her coolness and judgement.<sup>56</sup> In 1896, the popular young secretary of the Ladies' tadpole Swimming Club, Miss Maud Hewitt, was presented with a handsome case containing massive brass

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<sup>50</sup> *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, Thursday, July 20, 1899, 439; Thursday, August 2, 1900, 522.

<sup>51</sup> *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Thursday 11 July 1901, 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, Saturday, May 31, 1879; pg. 4; *The Englishwoman's Review*, Friday, August 15, 1879, 359.

<sup>53</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday August 6, 1896, 479; *Hearth and Home*, Thursday August 13, 1896, 514.

<sup>54</sup> *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, Thursday, August 30, 1900, 643.

<sup>55</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday September 7, 1893, 564; Thursday October 12, 1893, 740; Thursday April 19, 1894, 792; Thursday August 2, 1894, 423; Thursday December 27, 1894, 261.

<sup>56</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday August 1, 1895, 423; Thursday June 13, 1895, 164; Thursday July 18, 1895, 354; Thursday December 12, 1895, 200; Thursday December 19, 1895, 230;.

candlesticks, inkstand, pen, tray, and paper-knife by the members of the club on the occasion of her marriage. Miss Hewitt - or I should say Mrs Archibald Sykes Morris will not resign her post as hon sec until the AGM in April. At the same time the club were making special arrangements to accommodate bicycles in the spacious corridor of their headquarters at Kensington Baths.<sup>57</sup>

#### *Women's Union Swimming Club*

The Women's Trade Union League was founded as the Women's Protective and Provident League in 1874. Members of the Club swam at the Ladies Swimming Bath, 181, Marylebone Road, on Friday Evenings, between 7 and 9 o'clock, at half price, (threepence.)<sup>58</sup> The fourth annual competition for prizes took place on Wednesday September 27 1882 at the St Pancras Baths, Tottenham Court Road. Prizes here had monetary equivalence from twelve shillings and sixpence. To 2/6 each, All the successful competitors will be allowed to choose their own prizes, which will be presented at a social meeting to be held at the close of the season; due notice of the same will be sent to each member.

#### *Suffragettes*

The *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* (SAWWW), published in 1913 contains self-penned biographies of more than 650 women active in suffrage societies, almost 50 per cent of whom included an item on recreations with 178 mentioning sport. Evidence indicates that many middle-class Edwardian women enjoyed a wide range of hobbies and suffrage activists were no different from the rest.<sup>59</sup> As a teenager, Emily Davison won a medal for swimming and was said to have been offered lessons for nothing by a 'champion swimmer' at Brighton if she would become professional.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Schools*

The importance of swimming as a part of the physical education of girls was recognised to the extent that swimming competitions (an annual event of the Girls' Division of the London Pupil Teachers' Association) which took place lately at the Hornsey Road Baths. Nine of the twelve School Board Pupil Teacher Centres competed,. Seventy-five pupil teachers gave in their names for the various races. Representatives of six centres entered for the Challenge Shield, which, after a keen competition, was won by Marylebone, closely followed by Chelsea. Mrs Easton, instructress at the Hornsey Road Baths, kindly acted as starter. The encouragement of swimming among elementary teachers is an important branch of the work of the Pupil Teachers' Association and one that ought to grow and prosper.<sup>61</sup> Mrs Crocker carried out a most successful display and entertainment by her host of little pupils from the School Board before a crowded audience.<sup>62</sup> The London Schools Swimming Association annual competition at the Shoreditch Baths in 1899 featured displays of ornamental swimming by members of the Perseverance Ladies' Swimming Club. The Association, which taught about 40,000 children, needed £100 a year but

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<sup>57</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday January 23, 1896, 406; Thursday March 19, 1896, 717.

<sup>58</sup> *The Women's Union Journal: The Organ of the Women's Protective and Provident League*, Friday July 1, 1881, 77. *The Women's Union Journal: The Organ of the Women's Protective and Provident League*, Sunday October 1, 1882, 81. Women's Union Swimming Club.

<sup>59</sup> Kay, Joyce (2008) 'It Wasn't Just Emily Davison! Sport, Suffrage and Society in Edwardian Britain', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25:10,1338-1354.

<sup>60</sup> Stanley, Liz with Anne Morley. *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*. London: Women's Press, 1988. Stanley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, 12. It is not clear what the authors meant by 'professional'; see further refs, 114.

<sup>61</sup> *The Woman's Herald*, Thursday September 28, 1893, 502. Girls' Swimming Competition.

<sup>62</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday October 18, 1894, 813.

was currently £20 down on that figure and was making an earnest appeal for support.<sup>63</sup> The eight annual entertainment of the London Schools Swimming Association was held at Lambeth Public baths on September 28, 1900. Competitors came from 500 schools and races included a 44 yards handicap for girls under thirteen, an 88 yards championship for girls under fifteen, a girls diving championship and the 100 yards junior amateur girls' championship of London as well as team championships.<sup>64</sup>

#### *Temperance Associations*

After a "Y" Branch of the British Women's temperance Association was started in Burslem in 1896, it started a swimming club, to retain members and keep them interested has proved a most fruitful source of membership and the club now numbers about forty. This amateur swimming club, composed of young girls, has had the honour of holding the first amateur swimming entertainment ever given by women before women. The whole entertainment was planned, organised and carried out entirely by women, whilst women and girls formed the audience and donated the prizes.<sup>65</sup>

#### *Ravensbourne Swimming Club*

The eighteenth annual festival of the Ravensbourne Swimming Club was held on Saturday September 29, 1900. The attendance was enormous and competitors came from as far apart as Portsmouth, Leeds, Glasgow and Jersey. In the final tie for the first Ravensbourne ladies' water polo challenge shield the Swansea ladies beat the Jersey ladies by 4 goals to 2.<sup>66</sup>

#### **Formalising the swimming costume - function and decency**

Regretting that women did not take swimming more seriously one commentator in 1896 emphasised that he did not mean the 'fashionable dip at the seaside' which had long since been an occasion for the 'display of feminine charms in the daintiest costumes, generally made so as to almost entirely prevent a free use of the limbs'. Because the costume was 'an all important matter in the eyes of the lady', the first consideration was to acquire something that combined 'grace with lightness'. A perfect swimming costume would actually be 'little good for any other purpose' so ladies thinking of learning to swim would have to 'sink their vanity for once'.<sup>67</sup> Coincidentally, only ten days later, a conference was convened to consider the question of establishing a regulation swimming costume for women in recognition of the large and increasing number of ladies' swimming clubs affiliated with the Amateur Swimming Association, and the growing popularity of ladies swimming competitions. The main points to be taken into consideration were that the dress shall be perfectly fitted to appear in, both in and out of the water and in mixed assemblages, and that it should in no way impede freedom of movement.<sup>68</sup>

The regulations for men's costumes were as follows:- That at all meetings where costume is to be worn, and in all ASA championships, except the long distance championship, all competitors must wear costume ( to be known as the 'Amateur Swimming Association costume') in accordance with the following regulations:- (a) Only black, red or dark blue costumes shall be worn. (b) Drawers shall be worn underneath the costume. (c) Trimmings may be used ad lib. (d) The shoulder-straps of costumes shall not be less than 2in. Wide. (e) All costumes shall be buttoned on the shoulder, and the armholes

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<sup>63</sup> *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, Thursday, October 26, 1899, 968.

<sup>64</sup> *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, Thursday, November 1, 1900, 985.

<sup>65</sup> *The Woman's Signal*, Thursday October 22, 1896, 263. A Girls Swimming Display.

<sup>66</sup> *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, Thursday, November 1, 1900, 985.

<sup>67</sup> *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Friday 11 September 1896, 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Hull Daily Mail*, Wednesday 21 September 1898, 3. Ladies Costumes for Swimming.

shall be cut no lower than three inches from the armpit. (f) In the front the costume shall reach not lower than two inches below the pit of the neck. (g) At the back the costume shall be cut straight from the top of shoulder to top of shoulder. (h) The costume shall extend not less than eight inches from the crutch downwards, and shall be cut in a straight line round the circumference of the leg.<sup>69</sup>

Under the presidency of Miss Cashmore of Birmingham, the ladies present agreed on certain recommendations. It is understood that the costume recommended will take the form of a close-fitting navy blue, black, or red dress, cut straight across the neck, back, and front, with a sleeve shaped to the arm not less than 3in long from the shoulders; and the 'continuations' must not be more than 3in. Above the knee. Frills may be added if desired but they must not be reckoned in the length of the dress.<sup>70</sup> It was eventually agreed that the costume should be of navy blue, red or black stockingette, trimmed according to the fancy of the wearer. The upper part of the dress is to be cut straight across the back and front. With high neck, and sleeves shaped to the arm not less than four inches from the shoulders. The knickers must not be more than three inches above the knee. Frills may or may not be added, but are not to be reckoned on the length of the dress.<sup>71</sup> With the addition of a short sleeve and certain restrictions as to the height of the neck and the length of the lower portion, the costume agreed upon is practically identical with male dress.<sup>72</sup> The great recommendation, however, was its cheapness, as it was announced that it could be produced in quantities of not less than one dozen at a fraction over two shillings each, in the various sizes required by the wearers. Of course, where there are so many working women's clubs, this question of cost is a grave consideration.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

As far as the male organisers of amateur swimming were concerned there were always limits as to what was acceptable in and out of the pool. When four women competed in the first Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) Ladies Championship on 28 September 1901 it was only over 100 yards and, by 1904, the ASA, which recognised twelve distances as record events for men, still had only one record distance, the 100 yards, for women.<sup>74</sup> Changes did take place within this notion of 'separate spheres' though. One observer, who attended a Leander gala in 1917 where he watched the ladies swimming events, noted what a change had taken place during the last twelve years. He remembered the surprise there had been when he once attempted to obtain admission to some ladies' swimming sports at Kent Street in the old days. They could not hear of such a thing as a gentleman being present!<sup>75</sup> When a correspondent to the *Hull Daily Mail* in 1912 objected to the sight of men and women bathing together it was maybe a sign of the changing times when the letter drew a flood of replies from 'aquatic enthusiasts' who were 'greatly surprised' that any 'sane person' could take offence and deriding the author for not understanding the difference between 'swimming' and 'bathing' and for proposing skirted costumes. In something of a double-edged sword, one letter applauded the idea of mixed swimming since it encouraged ladies who were too timid of the water by providing the support of male friends who could swim.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Hearth and Home*, Thursday, August 25, 1898, 592.

<sup>70</sup> *Morning Post*, Monday 26 September, 1898, 6. Lady Swimmers and their Dress.

<sup>71</sup> *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, Tuesday 27 September, 1898, 6.

<sup>72</sup> *London Standard*, September 28, 1898, 3. Swimming Costumes for Ladies.

<sup>73</sup> *The Girl's Own Paper*, Saturday, November 26, 1898, 136. Frocks for Tomorrow by 'The Lady Dressmaker'.

<sup>74</sup> *Amateur Swimming Association Handbook* (1904) (London: ASA) p. 118.

<sup>75</sup> *Sports Argus*, Saturday 15 September 1917, 1. Leaves of my Notebook re Ladies swimming by Nomad.

<sup>76</sup> *Hull Daily Mail*, Thursday 06 June 1912, 7. Letters.