

Day, D. (2016). Natational dress: functionality, fashion and the fracturing of separate spheres in Victorian Britain. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 19(2), 162-179 DOI: 10.1080/11745398.2016.1147362

In 1873, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* extolled the values of swimming for women and gave advice on the best form of bathing dress, one which preserved modesty and met the demands of contemporary fashion. This essentially impractical type of bathing outfit has been the subject of much of the historiography surrounding female swimming costumes but it was not the only swimming dress on show during the 'long' Victorian period. The women of all classes who participated in more serious swimming required something functional rather than fashionable while working-class professional natationists, who appeared regularly in water shows throughout the country, wore attire that combined functionality, tight to the body while allowing freedom of movement, with public appeal, a critical consideration for female exhibitors. Their activities and costumes challenged prevailing notions of 'separate spheres' and this paper explores Victorian aquatic dress in the context of class, gender, and social space.

Keywords: bathing; swimming; natationists; Victorian; separate spheres; class; gender.

Introduction

Because individuals operate within the constraints of their social world, inequalities such as those related to social status and gender are always reflected within the sporting landscape and that was certainly true in the 'long' Victorian period, defined here as extending from the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. This era was marked by continuities, innovation and diversity (Moran, 2006) and it has subsequently been interpreted from a number of perspectives, not least through the lens of 'separate spheres', a concept most often employed in the context of gender relations, although gender and class are inextricably linked. The notion of separate spheres developed during the eighteenth century in a process that entailed the negotiation and eventual redrawing of the margins between kinds of knowledge, kinds of practice, and kinds of institutions (Poovey, 1995), and it is characterized by a compartmentalized view of the world, a separation of human experience and forms of human association (Unger, 1986), including class and gender, into identifiable areas exemplifying typical relationship patterns. Gender histories of nineteenth-century sport, for example, often emphasize the emerging role of the family sphere to which women were supposedly confined and postulate a sharp dichotomy between the feminine home and the male workplace. These separated spheres were defined one against the other, with the home assuming significance for its difference from, and compensation for, the economic environment, a separation of spheres that brought with it a basic contrast in both norms of conduct and structure (Rosenberg, 2012).

It should be noted, however, that the concept has been criticized for its descriptive limitations and Poovey (1995) argued that the negotiation of sphere boundaries was full of fissures, which resulted partly from the uneven relationship between discourse and institutional practice and partly from the historical traditions underpinning emergent spheres. This suggests that the socially-defined margins established for appropriate class and gender behaviour, including the way individuals dressed and the activities they participated in, were much more permeable than is sometimes assumed. Because Victorian society was strictly hierarchical and everyone was aware of class, historians usually employ a

three tier model of class with the working classes obtaining their income from wages, the middle class from salaries and profit and the upper class from property, rent and interest (Steinbach, 2012,), but class was never prescribed solely by sources of income and class boundaries were often blurred. Similarly, while perceptions of what was gender-appropriate behaviour and dress may have been accepted by the majority, at least outwardly, it cannot be assumed that women of any particular class were necessarily restricted to the home or to the wearing of specific forms of clothing.

This paper uses contemporary newspapers, women's magazines, journals, and census material, to explore the stretching of prescribed boundaries in the Victorian period through the intersection of class and gender in female swimming communities. The exploration makes particular reference to professional natationists: those working-class women who earned their living by demonstrating their aquatic skills or by teaching. Use of the term 'natationist' throughout this paper rather than 'swimmer' reflects the accepted way of referring to these performers during the Victorian period and the fact that their involvement went beyond swimming as a sport and extended into the entertainment industry. In order to provide an attractive spectacle to the paying public, their dress was always more flamboyant than that of other female swimmers of the period while their need for freedom of movement in the water demanded a costume that was much tighter to the body than traditional bathing outfits. Inevitably, therefore, their dress exposed and presented the female form to the male gaze to a much greater degree than other bathing garments of the period. Although this natational costume stretched the limits of respectability, its emphasis on functionality, rather than its more revealing and morally questionable aspects, was gradually replicated by the outfits adopted by female swimmers as the 'long' Victorian period progressed. The careers and clothing of working-class natationists, and the subsequent activities of serious female swimmers from all classes, therefore raise some interesting questions about the fracturing of the separate spheres traditionally formulated around gender and social status.

Women's sport

The class and gender context of late-Victorian England shaped the concept of what were suitable and acceptable physical activities for different sectors of the population. Working-class women, for example, were often discouraged from participating in sports-like activities by the subservient relationships they had with men of their own class and with women of higher classes. The assumption that generic social differences should also apply to sport proved a powerful mechanism for reinforcing distinctions of class and gender and for the consolidation of separate spheres (McCrone, 1991, 1998). Even in the early years of the twentieth century, much of women's sport still occurred away from the male gaze and the acceptance of women's sports remained dependant on a public display of traditional feminine behaviour (Hargreaves, 1990). Perceived threats to feminine values and images meant that women were only allowed to participate within limited behavioural and spatial boundaries, thus reinforcing the separated spheres of the sexes, so only activities deemed feminine, like swimming, which avoided outward signs of physical exertion such as sweating, were considered acceptable (Phillips and Phillips, 1993).

The clothes a woman wore reflected these aesthetic rules and social constraints, and said something about her moral integrity. They also reflected social and political tensions and changing attitudes towards what had always been regarded as women's proper sphere, domesticity and subservience. Clothing designers, manufacturers and retailers produced costumes designed specifically for physical activity from the 1880s onwards but the development of specialist sports clothing generated

controversy over the competing tensions between propriety and practical requirements. Functionality remained a contentious issue with advertisements consistently emphasizing elegance, beauty, and femininity, rather than utility. In addition, while sport did much to encourage a utilitarian attitude toward female dress, middle-class sportswomen, realising they would be judged on appearance rather than on performance, adopted sportswear that safeguarded modesty (McCrone, 1998). In swimming, clothing was often deliberately shapeless in order to avoid any suggestion of eroticism while concerns with modesty and morality underpinned moves to establish and maintain a strict segregation of the sexes. That said, these strictures never went uncontested and mixed recreational sea bathing was increasingly commonplace by 1900.

Female swimming constituencies

Over the course of the nineteenth century, swimming became socially acceptable for women because it had utilitarian value as a life saving activity, it took place in an environment that masked physical effort (Phillips and Phillips, 1993; Parker, 2010), and it could provide mild, beneficial exercise in segregated surroundings. It was particularly favoured by female doctors on the basis that swimming was good for the lungs and allowed women to use their muscles in a natural, healthy manner, while also helping women to bear healthy children (Hoggan, 1879; Vertinsky, 1990). However, it needs to be understood that women participated in a number of different ways in this period and that there were different female experiences of the activity, many of which were class related. For example, recreational bathing and competitive swimming, which became increasingly popular among women of all classes, were distinctly different aquatic activities. For the purposes of this paper, those distinctions have been divided into bathing, professional natation and serious swimming, each of which was characterized not only by different forms of engagement with the aquatic environment but also by different modes of dress and conceptions of morality. These have been categorized in this order here since they represent not only something of a chronological development but also situate the professional working-class natationist as an important transitional figure between the bather and the serious swimmer, both in terms of activity in the water and with respect to their choice of clothing.

Bathing

Although leisure opportunities slowly expanded for females of all classes during the nineteenth century, the availability of time and resources to allow visits to the seaside for bathing were essentially restricted to the middle and upper classes for much of the period. As the century progressed these women were increasingly urged to move away from simple immersion to become more active and to adopt costumes that would facilitate movement. In 1873, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (July 1; August 1) provided advice on technique, in order to 'enhance the pleasure of bathing', and on suitable bathing dresses. The author recommended that, in order to free the arms and legs so that all the muscle groups could be employed, swimmers should discard the old-fashioned bathing-dresses consisting of a 'bag open at each end, with holes for the arms', which clung round the legs, preventing movement, or gathered in folds round the waist. The magazine advised a bathing-dress in which the jacket and drawers were cut in one piece, perhaps with a short peplum (overskirt) and belt. The best material was soft blue serge, trimmed with white or coloured braid, with plain long sleeves extending to the elbow to prevent the arms being burnt. The dress should be 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, since any tightness would produce 'great discomfort'. Four years later, the magazine was recommending the new 'Continental Bathing Costume', costing £1 2s. 6d, made of dark blue or black serge, with a waterproof cap large enough to roll around the costume so it could be carried home without one getting wet (*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, August 1, 1877). Subsequent writers observed that the contemporary bathing suit allowed more freedom of movement (*Standard*, July 22, 1878) and described a 'Princess bathing costume', which consisted of knickerbockers, tied round the waist with braid, and a high tunic with sash, both garments being knitted using navy blue and red wool and elastic enough to fit the figure (*Northampton Mercury*, July 31, 1886). In 1898, another commentator suggested that the crudeness of the uncomfortable, ugly and indelicate sack-like bathing gowns had finally been abandoned and that a wide variety of costumes could now be seen at Marshall and Snelgrove's, a department store in Oxford Street, London, that is now part of Debenhams. Costume materials ranged from the finest quality cream and navy blue serge to the flannelette, trimmed with contrasting colours of woollen braid (*Le Follet*, September 1, 1898).

It was still being argued in 1893, however, that Englishwomen took a 'sad delight in casing themselves in a garment that resembles a sack' that was totally unsuited to swimming (*Hearth & Home*, September 21, 1893, 616). According to an earlier article in the same magazine, these outfits scarcely ever went beyond blue serge with white braid or pink-and-white-striped Galatea, which often clung to the figure when wet. At the French seaside, where men and women bathed together, 'toilettes' were much more sophisticated but in England, 'where we take our morning plunge in the strict seclusion of a crowded beach', the attractiveness of bathing dresses was not of major concern. The author argued that it would be far more sensible, and indeed far safer, if the English copied the French by bathing in mixed company and in 'becoming costume'. It was always worthwhile to buy good woollen material for a bathing gown, since cheap material was apt to split suddenly, while cotton suits were 'deplorably indecent' (*Hearth & Home*, August 17, 1893, 474). For ordinary bathing the effect was 'far prettier' if a short, full skirt was worn, although this could be a hindrance when swimming long distances. While readymade swimming outfits were available at Shoolbred's, a department store in Tottenham Court Road, London, there were full directions in the July issue of *Myra's Journal* (July, 1893) on how to fabricate a dress. One costume suggested, which required about four yards of 48-inch serge for a medium figure, was of blue serge, with a turned-back reverse to show a vest of red-and-white striped silk or cotton, accompanied by a similar coloured sash with long ends knotted round the waist, and a red waterproofed cap. A bathing outfit did not require 'extreme nicety of fit' but it should be cut so that it did not drag and impede movement. Apparently, black satin was currently being favoured by 'fashion's votaries' at Dieppe and Trouville and the author recalled being impressed by seeing a girl performing at the Brighton aquarium clad in this material (*Hearth & Home*, August 17, 1893, 474). Although not named, this artiste would have been one of a number of working-class female natationists who had been making a living by appearing in aquatic shows in pools and aquaria, or in glass tanks on the stages of theatres and music halls, since the middle of the nineteenth century (Day, 2012).

Professional natationists

While Koditschek (1997) suggests that a modified form of the Victorian ideal of separate spheres domesticity had become a reality for most working people by the twentieth century, Best (1971, 100)

points out that, '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 normal for most of the working classes. Although wage labour was expected to be a transitional stage for young women between school and marriage (Parratt, 1998), paid employment remained commonplace among married women (August, 1994) and most working-class families relied on this supplementary income (Koditschek, 1997). The late Victorian workplace was a demanding one for these women. Fifteen hour days were common for shop assistants and a working week of over 100 hours was not unusual for waitresses. Most domestic servants had little free time and a working day in the sweated industries could be up to sixteen hours for around three shillings a week (Parratt, 1998; Holloway, 2005). Rather than eliminating women's paid employment, state regulation, the poor law and factory reform forced women into even lower paid, more exploitative, 'sweated' homework, thereby imposing on them a 'double load' above and beyond their family responsibilities. Their domestic lives were dominated by the physical realities of childbearing and child care and the typical working-class wife experienced motherhood 'as a bone-wearying burden of unremitting physical labour' (Koditschek, 1997, 347). As a result, working-class women had few resources or time for leisure (Kingsley-Kent, 1999; Parratt, 1998), although some recognition needs to be given to the diversity of female experience across social and economic categories, as well during the course of an individual's lifetime (Gordon and Nair, 2002). For a very small number of working-class women, numbered in the hundreds rather than in the thousands, sport, or sports-like activities packaged as entertainment, provided an alternative working environment and female professionals emerged in a number of different Victorian sports (Day, 2012). The most prominent were the natationists, professional swimmers who received much more public approval than other female athletes, partly because of their age, marital status, bodily appearance and gracefulness (Parker, 2010).

By the end of the nineteenth 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. Natationists performed tricks in crystal glass tanks, displayed their diving skills, indoors and outdoors, and held their breath underwater, as well as swimming in endurance events, racing for money, producing and performing in aquatic entertainments, and teaching swimming and lifesaving. The socially preferred practice of swimming teachers generally teaching their own sex became even more entrenched during the late nineteenth century, and men who taught women could find themselves in difficulty, not least over the vagaries of the female swimming costume. In 1854, when professional instructor Paulin Pearce was summonsed for being stripped to the waist and teaching ladies to swim, the primary issue for some witnesses was his proximity to the female body and its dress. Police constable James Bloomfield reported that he saw Pearce 'turn one of the young ladies on her back, and in doing so the ripple of the sea turned up her bathing gown'. It was only after Pearce produced these outfits to demonstrate that they could not wash up, that the case was dismissed (*Daily News*, October 11, 1854). In 1878, it was observed that it was not possible for a girl's father or brothers to teach her swimming since the English had not yet adopted the French approach, which was far less prescriptive in terms of segregating the sexes, and, the author noted, 'it is to be hoped we never shall'. Fortunately, the supply of competent female professional swimmers was steadily increasing (*Standard*, July 22, 1878), not least because swimming teaching was becoming more widely accepted as an appropriate way for a woman to earn a livelihood and opportunities were expanding for those with the necessary expertise, especially in London. In 1879, Miss Whyte, swimming mistress at the Chelsea and South Kensington

Baths, was afforded a financially successful benefit (*Bell's Life*, October 11, 1879) at which she went through some 'clever feats of natation', assisted by the Humphrey sisters, Charlotte and Jane, who spent all their working lives as swimming teachers. Other prominent teachers included Fanny Easton, who was working as a swimming mistress between 1881 and 1901, as well as organizing and appearing in swimming entertainments, and Eleanor Classey, a professional swimming teacher in Marylebone. As Table 1 shows, many of these individuals had emerged from the skilled working classes or the lower middle-classes (as assessed by their father's occupations).

Insert Table 1 here.

While some female swimming professionals like Fanny Easton focused on teaching and participated in displays only as a sideline, others concentrated primarily on display and became part of the entertainment industry. The commercial demands of public aquatic events meant that they were required to combine fashion and function in the way they dressed and presented themselves. When fifteen-year-old Agnes Beckwith, daughter of a London swimming teacher, swam five miles in the Thames in 1875 contemporary reports described her as slim and diminutive, dressed in a tight bathing costume of rose-pink lama, trimmed with white and rose-pink lace, a description that proffered an acceptable and reassuring vision of femininity (*Manchester Guardian*, September 2, 1875). In 1879, Agnes raced against Laura Saigeman, a Brighton-based swimming teacher and natationist, in front of over 1,200 spectators, including many women. The competitors emerged from their cubicles enveloped in Ulsters (overcoats with a cape and sleeves often made of hard-wearing fabrics such as herringbones or tweeds), which they removed to reveal, as one reporter wrote, the 'female human form divine stood out in bold relief in the semi-darkness' (*Bell's Life*, September 27, 1879). Both women wore a functional, and morally acceptable, 'University costume', a term used to describe a standardized form of dress that was being introduced across a range of sports under the influence of the amateur sportsmen emerging from Oxford and Cambridge. Agnes' décolleté attire was pink, while Laura's was dark blue. Functionality for racing was important and when Laura raced Theresa Johnson in 1883, the swimmers appeared in 'tight-fitting swimming costumes' (*York Herald*, November 1, 1883, 8). As Figure 1 shows, these individually-designed costumes, which allowed the freedom of movement necessary as well as providing the flamboyancy necessary for public display, inevitably accentuated the female form, especially as they also often acted as corsets, and they stretched the limits of decency, although the tights did at least restrict the amount of observable flesh.

Insert Figure 1 here.

While public racing between women always had its critics, ornamental, or scientific swimming,¹ was universally regarded as entirely appropriate for female natationists with *Hearth & Home* (August 6, 1891) observing that 'the true poetry of motion is exemplified in the movements of the ornamental swimmer'. In one aquatic show in 1883, Agnes displayed 'such a graceful manner as to call forth repeated applause from the large company...and near the finish a bouquet was thrown to her, which, after inhaling, she

¹ A form of swimming that displayed a range of aquatic skills often in an artistic manner resembling modern-day synchronised swimming.

placed in the sanctity of her somewhat *décolleté* costume' (*Penny Illustrated*, November 3, 1883). Constant references to appearance and dress suggest that the appeal of female natationists to many spectators, male admirers in particular, may have had as much to do with their physical features as their skill. When Agnes travelled to America to perform with P.T. Barnum's 'Greatest Show on Earth' at Madison Square Garden in 1887, the 'picturesque aquatic expert' was described as a comely, blue-eyed, twenty-four-year old with soft hair hung in small curls upon her shoulders. A flowing robe of old gold was wrapped about her from her throat to her feet as she stepped onto the platform before kicking off her rubber overshoes and flinging aside her robe to reveal her body encased in flesh-coloured tights with a dark-hued jersey drawn snugly about her waist (*New York Clipper*, April 23, 1887). The group of female natationists that she went on to lead towards the end of the century was invariably described as a graceful troupe that 'pleased everyone who saw them by their charming appearance in their pretty costumes' (*Era*, January 1, 1898; January 29, 1898; January 21, 1899).

Even though the appearance of the natational dress was important, it was also the case that the costume needed to balance form with function. When aquatic performers Maud and Gladys Finney were interviewed during their 1910 season in America they made a particular point of criticizing the American swimsuits, which had retained the short overskirt. These were 'a nuisance' that 'made it difficult for us in the water...We English girls don't swim in the funny skirts girls over here wear. Most of us swim in these "sheaths"', the costumes they were wearing in their shows (*Salt Lake Telegram*, August 8, 1910; August 11, 1910). In the long term, this natational focus on functional, rational, swimming outfits was transferred to all classes of swimmers because the contribution that the public exhibitions of these working-class women made to the development of female swimming was significant, not least in encouraging women of all classes to make the transition from recreational bathing to serious swimming. Despite wearing costumes that stretched the boundaries of what was morally acceptable, their aquatic displays were received positively, not least because female spectators would become familiar with women moving gracefully in the water and would want to acquire the knowledge and skills that would allow them to do the same thing. In addition, they regularly passed on their expertise by teaching classes and advising female swimming clubs. These natationists were thus influential in paving the way for the thousands of women who were using municipal swimming pools in the UK by 1914 (Campbell, 1918) and in demonstrating that serious swimming required specifically designed costumes. It was within this constituency that significant moves were made to rationalise the swimming dress into a functional form that replicated the freedom of movement displayed by the natational dress but did so in a morally acceptable format that was appropriate for all participants.

Serious swimming

Aquatic enthusiasts could be found throughout the social hierarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century, 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 women (*Women's Union Journal*, July 1, 1881; *Penny Illustrated*, December 19, 1863; August 11, 1866). Women at all levels of society also clearly enjoyed racing. The 1876 London Schools swimming club competition between female teachers or pupil-teachers of elementary schools took place at the Chelsea Baths while a competition for elementary schoolgirls was organized in Camden Town. The Ladies' (Amateur) Cadogan Swimming Club (LACSC) annual meeting in July 1878 included a wide variety

of races; in September 1879, Miss Whyte gave an entertainment for ladies only at the Chelsea and Kensington Baths, which included competitions for girls; and events at Portsmouth in 1883 included a Lady Members' race (*Penny Illustrated*, May 27, 1876; July 27, 1878; August 11, 1883; *Sporting Times*, September 27, 1879). When the eighteenth annual festival of the Ravensbourne Swimming Club was held in 1900 female competitors came from as far afield as Portsmouth, Leeds, Glasgow and Jersey, and Swansea beat Jersey by 4 goals to 2 in the final of the ladies' water polo challenge shield. An observer noted that year that one London ladies' swimming bath had recorded 564,483 visits during the previous eight years and credited this level of engagement specifically to the example of the aristocratic Bath Club in Dover Street, which had a membership of about 300 women (*Hearth & Home*, November 1, 1900; August 23, 1900).

Upper-class swimming

Founded in 1894, the Bath Club, so-called after its large indoor swimming pool, which featured several diving boards and a water-chute, was open to both men and women. The venue became one of the 'smartest rendezvous' in London and at the first Ladies' night in 1895, when there was some 'capital' swimming, diving, plunging, water-polo and lifesaving, there were four Duchesses present, along with Countesses and innumerable Ladies, while three Marchionesses 'looked in' during the evening (*Hearth & Home*, June 6, 1895, 130). The aristocracy was out in force again four years later to witness Lady Constance Mackenzie win the gold medal and the Challenge Shield, a success she repeated in 1900 through her 'remarkably graceful and bold swimming'. Swimming costumes were black with badges of different colours, Constance wearing a badge of the Mackenzie clan, and the only male spectators permitted were fathers or guardians of the competitors (*Hearth & Home*, July 20, 1899; August 2, 1900), an arrangement that ensured the semi-private nature of the event and allowed the competitors to wear their more functional racing costumes. Constance made it three wins in a row the following year by beating seven others in a competition that involved swimming two lengths breaststroke, diving from two spring boards, motionless floating and two displays of ordinary or fancy swimming. Everyone wore 'University' swimming costumes of dark blue serge, each competitor being distinguished by girdles of different colours and braid and frills on their costumes. Constance had the two gold medals she had won previously pinned to her costume, plus a 'dainty tartan girdle', and her nationality was further emphasized when the orchestra played Scottish tunes as she dived in (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, July 11, 1901).

The Bath Club may have been the most aristocratic ladies' swimming club in London but it was certainly not the first since the LACSC had been formed in 1877 (*Penny Illustrated*, October 27, 1877). At the 1878 annual club meeting at the Kings Road Baths competitors in the 120 yards race were not particularly fast but it was hoped that swimming would improve and become as popular with women as 'croquet, lawn tennis, riding, driving, rowing, skating, billiards and scientifically-conducted gymnastics' (*Standard*, July 22, 1878). The third annual meeting arranged fixtures for the ensuing season and elected four titled 'Ladies' onto its executive for 1879. The committee included eight married women, suggesting that not all married women gave up their pastimes to look after the home, their designated 'sphere', plus five unmarried women, including the honorary secretary, Miss Edith Nisbet. The class of woman involved is reinforced by the fact that members had sufficient leisure time to meet for practice on Tuesdays and Friday mornings from 11 to 1 o'clock. In July, the third annual competition featured 25

competitors with Miss Barres again winning the captaincy race over 160 yards (*Bell's Life*, May 31, 1879; *Englishwoman's Review*, August 15, 1879). A year later, a 'large and fashionable assemblage of Ladies' attended the baths to witness the annual races of 'this aristocratic club', which normally took place at the end of the 'London season'. The proficiency shown by the majority of club members clearly indicated to one reporter that swimming was becoming popular with the upper classes, although it was regrettable that similar institutions had not been started for the benefit of the middle and working classes (*Bell's Life*, July 24, 1880).

In actual fact these activities had been gradually extending their reach into all social classes. Although lacking the same aristocratic membership as the LACSC, the South Norwood Ladies' Swimming Club (SNLSC) held its fourteenth annual competition, consisting of eleven events, in the seventy yard long open air baths at South Norwood in July 1896. The membership of 221 contained no 'deadheads' (nominal members who never participated), and the club was considered by now to be one of the premier Ladies' swimming clubs. There were twenty-five more entries than the previous year with twelve more members competing (*Hearth & Home*, August 6, 1896; August 13, 1896). At its eighteenth annual entertainment in 1900, the captaincy competition, which included races of 44 and 176 yards, motionless floating, spring dive, surface dive, and best breast, side, and overhand strokes, was won for the second time by Miss Lilian Feast, who then swam across the bath and presented a Mrs Ritchie with a basket of red carnations tied with the club colours of red and black (*Hearth & Home*, August 30, 1900).

The magazine *Hearth & Home* was particularly fond of the Ladies' Tadpole Swimming Club (LTSC), based at the Ladies' bath in Kensington. Visitors to their races in September 1893 were entertained to tea by Mrs Middleweek, the matron, who was 'courtesy itself', and the swimming teacher, Mrs Crocker (who had been teaching as Miss Whyte before her marriage), started the races for prizes that included mother-of-pearl opera-glasses, a Swiss clock and 'an exquisite Dresden china lamp'. The club costumes were blue and scarlet, the annual subscription was 5s and there were about fifty members. Plants and red curtains relieved the 'pure whiteness of the tiles and the brown woodwork' (*Hearth & Home*, September 7, 1893, 564; October 12, 1893, 740). In 1894, Miss Lilian Wallace was elected captain for the second time, competitive fixtures were being organized, and Mrs Crocker, whose 'able system of training' had turned many novices into accomplished swimmers, remained as instructress (*Hearth & Home*, April 19, 1894, 792). In August, early arrivals to the annual races witnessed her teaching in a costume of heliotrope flannel, with silk-scalloped edging to the tunic and décolletage (*Hearth & Home*, August 2, 1894). She was a 'clever and painstaking teacher and very popular in the club' (*Hearth & Home*, August 1, 1895, 423) and five of her pupils passed the examination of the Life Saving Society in 1895, when nineteen-year-old Lilian Wallace won the captaincy again (*Hearth & Home*, June 13, 1895; July 18, 1895; December 12, 1895; December 19, 1895). In 1896, the secretary, Miss Maud Hewitt, was presented with a handsome case containing large brass candlesticks, inkstand, pen, tray, and paper-knife by the club members on the occasion of her marriage. Reflecting the widespread assumption that women would give up leisure pursuits such as swimming on marrying and retire to their domestic sphere, the reporter felt it important to note that Miss Hewitt, or 'I should say Mrs Archibald Sykes Morris', was not planning to resign until the AGM in April. At the same time the club were making special arrangements to accommodate bicycles for their more progressive members in the corridor of their headquarters at Kensington Baths (*Hearth & Home*, January 23, 1896, 406; March 19, 1896).

Clubs and schools

Serious swimming was not restricted to women from the aristocracy and upper-middle classes. Evidence indicates that many middle-class women enjoyed a wide range of hobbies and that suffrage activists, for example, took part in the same physical activities that were attracting less politically involved women. The *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* (SAWWW), published in 1913 contained self-penned biographies of more than 650 women active in suffrage societies, almost half of whom included an item on recreation, with nineteen mentioning swimming (Kay, 2008). The Women's Union Swimming Club was formed by the Women's Trade Union League, initially founded as the Women's Protective and Provident League in 1874. In contrast to the morning swims of their more leisured contemporaries, members of this club used the Ladies' swimming bath in Marylebone on Friday evenings, between 7 and 9 o'clock, at half price (threepence). The club's fourth annual competition took place in September 1882, when Miss Nisbet and Mrs Milnes from the LACSC acted as judges for contests for prizes ranging in value from 12s 6d for swimming the longest distance in the shortest time down to 4s for swimming one length. Winners could choose their own prizes, which were to be presented at an end of season social event (*Women's Union Journal*, July 1, 1881; October 1, 1882). Serious swimming was not restricted to the capital. In Leicester, cross-class support for swimming was widespread (Williams, 2012) while a 'Y' Branch of the British Women's Temperance Association, started in Burslem, Staffordshire, in January 1896, subsequently formed an amateur swimming club, which had forty members by October. The club was credited as having been the first in the area to host an amateur swimming entertainment organized and carried out entirely by women, who made up the audience and donated all the prizes (*Woman's Signal*, October 22, 1896).

In 1878, one reporter had hoped that the London School Board, which was then taking an interest in swimming, would not 'confine the benefit of their influence to boys' (*Standard*, July 22, 1878), a wish that had been fulfilled by 1893. In September, a successful swimming competition (an annual event of the Girls' Division of the London Pupil Teachers' Association) took place at the Hornsey Road Baths. Nine of the twelve School Board Pupil Teacher Centres competed and seventy-five pupil teachers, young women training to be teachers by helping out in the classroom, entered with six centres competing for the Challenge Shield. Fanny Easton, then instructress at the Hornsey Road Baths, acted as starter (*Woman's Herald*, September 28, 1893). A year later, Mrs Crocker showcased her School Board pupils in an entertainment before a crowded audience and the London Schools Swimming Association, which taught about 40,000 children, organized its annual competition at the Shoreditch Baths in 1899 featuring displays of ornamental swimming by the Perseverance Ladies' Swimming Club. At its eighth gala at Lambeth Baths in 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 diving championship and the 100 yards junior amateur girls' championship of London as well as team championships (*Hearth & Home*, October 18, 1894; October 26, 1899; November 1, 1900).

Loading, please wait.



Formalizing the swimming costume - function and decency

This widespread engagement with racing and the examples set by professional natationists inevitably led to debate as to the appropriateness of swimwear. As Warner (2006) has pointed out, the development

of swimming costumes was intimately connected to modesty standards for women and to gender expectations. If women swam in a private, single-sex environment their clothing could allow greater freedom from restraint, in terms of modesty and movement, but once they moved into the public domain then tensions could arise. One commentator in 1896 emphasized that the 'fashionable dip at the seaside' was normally 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' but that a serious 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' (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, September 11, 1896, 2). Others suggested that the racing times recorded by some women were being restricted by the 'handicapping nature of the lady's swimming costume' (*Hearth & Home*, August 6, 1896, 479; August 13, 1896, 514) and it was obvious that something needed to be done to make the serious swimming costume more functional than traditional bathing costumes (*London Standard*, September 28, 1898), which had 'evolved in obedience to a demand for something pretty and dainty in which to face the criticism and comment of a crowded beach' (*Hull Daily Mail*, September 21, 1898, 3). Given that swimming had become so popular amongst women and girls, and was now being taught in so many schools, it was time to decide on a suitable dress (*Girl's Own Paper*, November 26, 1898).

As in all athletic activities in this period, women were heavily dependent upon the men who controlled sport (Hargreaves, 1994), in this case the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA). In view of the increasing number of ladies' swimming clubs affiliated with the ASA, and the growing popularity of female competitions, the Association arranged a conference of lady swimmers in order to frame regulations for a standardized costume. The main requirements were that the dress should be suitable for appearing in and out of the water in mixed company and that it would not impede freedom of movement (*Hull Daily Mail*, September 21, 1898). The annual swimming entertainment of the Ravensbourne Club generally attracted a large number of female swimmers from all around the country so the ASA took the opportunity to arrange a conference at the Westminster Palace Hotel in 1898 to see if agreement could be reached on a rational swimming costume. The honorary secretary, George Pragnell, sent out invitations along with details of the existing regulations for men's costumes:

- (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 two inches wide.
- (e) All costumes shall be buttoned on the shoulder, and the armholes 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 (*Morning Post*, September 26, 1898, 6; *Hearth & Home*, August 25, 1898, 592).

Pragnell told the meeting that a decision on the issue of a standardized swimsuit was needed because female swimmers in the North of England and Ireland had often been deterred from competing

for prizes by the lack of agreement between judges and onlookers as to what constituted a 'perfectly decorous costume'. Under the presidency of Miss Cashmore of Birmingham, the delegates then considered the subject in private and finally reached an agreement, using a model costume, provided by the Birmingham Ladies Club, as a guide. It had flat facings of turkey-red twill, buttoned on the shoulders, and gussets under the arms to enable a short sleeve. Its best feature was its cheapness, since it could be produced in all the various sizes required, in quantities of not less than a dozen, at a fraction over 2s each. Reflecting the recent rapid expansion of swimming activities among all social classes, one reporter observed that 'where there are so many working women's clubs, this question of cost is a grave consideration' (*Morning Post*, September 26, 1898, 6; *Girl's Own Paper*, November 26, 1898, 136).

The approved costume took the form of a close-fitting navy blue, black, or red dress stockingette, considered superior to serge, flannel, silk or merino, and trimmed according to personal choice. The upper part of the dress was to be cut straight, buttoned at the shoulder, and shaped to the arm so as to form a short sleeve. The knickers, or 'continuations', must not be more than three inches above the knee and any added frills were not to be counted in the length of the dress. As was noted at the time, this meant the adoption of a costume closely resembling that worn by men but with the addition of a short sleeve and certain restrictions as to the height of the neck and the length of the lower section. Although some dissenters had been unhappy with the idea of a basqueless costume, and there had been a degree of friction between women's clubs as to the details, it was hoped that, by adopting this standard dress, disagreements would now cease. The design was submitted to the ASA for approval, leading one reporter to comment 'Fancy men being the final court of appeal on women's bathing dress! And yet, perhaps, they will be the safest judges' (*Girl's Own Paper*, November 26, 1898, 136; *London Standard*, September 28, 1898, 3; *Morning Post*, September 26, 1898, 6; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, September 27, 1898, 6). Subsequent ASA regulations record their adoption of the suggested standard but also highlight continuing concerns about the vulnerability of the new costumes to the male gaze with female competitors over 14 years of age being required to wear a 'long coat or bath gown before entering and also immediately after leaving the water' (*ASA Handbook*, 1902, Regulations for Competition, i).

Conclusion

Despite the central role played by the exclusively male ASA in deciding on a suitable female swimming costume, women's involvement in sport was not inevitably restricted by ideological constraints and, while notions of separate spheres certainly influenced the nature and extent of their engagement with sport, the tenets of Victorian patriarchy never extended completely into the lives of all women (Parratt, 1989). The way in which professional natationists transcended traditional notions of separate spheres, for example, provides a useful exemplar of how notions of gender roles were not always constrained by stereotypical and artificially created boundaries and their experiences were almost certainly mirrored by other entertainers such as music hall and circus performers. More work needs to be done to uncover the 'layers of truth' (Bale, 2011) surrounding these female natatorial careers but, even at this early stage, the evidence suggests that the life courses of Victorian female professional swimmers did not necessarily conform to the norm as far as working-class women were concerned. For Agnes Beckwith, for example, the delay of motherhood until she was into her forties meant that she was able to avoid some of the issues faced by working-class wives in coping with work and domesticity simultaneously.

With respect to the broader swimming landscape, the application of moral principles associated with notions of separate spheres became increasingly diluted as the 'long' Victorian period came to an end. When a correspondent to the *Hull Daily Mail* in June, 1912, objected to the sight of men and women bathing together it was perhaps a sign of the changing times that the letter drew a flood of replies from aquatic enthusiasts who expressed surprise that any 'sane person' could take offence and deriding the author, who proposed skirted costumes, for not understanding the difference between swimming and bathing. 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. For another commentator, 'bathing frocks' had not become more elaborate with the advent of mixed bathing since, while some lady bathers took great pains to make their costumes more attractive, serious swimmers were opting for simplicity. The 'brevity and contour of the modern girl's costume emulates her brother's' and this trend was growing with the at one time 'indispensable skirt' not only being discarded in practice but often not being bought in the first place because it was both impracticable and inconvenient. As a result, the 'plainer bathing costume is conquering the dressy rival so far as most women are concerned' (*Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, July 15, 1914, 11).

One reporter who attended a gala to watch the ladies swimming events in 1917 noted that a significant change had taken place in the separation of athletic spheres during the previous twelve years. He remembered the surprise there had been when he had once tried to get admission to some female swimming sports. They could 'not hear of such a thing as a gentleman being present!', whereas now ladies could frequently be seen giving displays in public. He recognized that there were still a few women who objected to their daughters 'standing about a bath half clad with young fellows around' but they need not worry since spectators were far too interested in the sport to notice how competitors were attired. In any case, everyone was properly dressed and he made the point that swimmers 'get so accustomed to seeing others in swimming costume that the whole atmosphere is one of normality' so swimmers were 'the last people in the world to harbour thoughts such as young fellows who have never been out of their mothers' drawing-rooms might possibly harbour'. Serious swimming made for 'real, unaffected modesty', and no one need be concerned about allowing their daughter to participate. No girl had ever 'lost an atom of her modesty through swimming and I am struck by the absolute decorum, a decorum the more perfect in that no one ever gave the question of decorum a thought' (*Sports Argus*, September 15, 1917, 1).

Nevertheless, despite the advances made in developing suitable swimming costumes, the widespread acceptance that serious swimming needed functional rather than fashionable outfits, and the 'fissures' that had become obvious in the notion of separate spheres, the traditional restrictions on women's participation rumbled on into the post-War period.

Even in the 1920s, indoor pools in Britain remained male orientated and female British Olympic representatives in 1928 all had difficulty finding enough time to train because regulations did not allow mixed bathing very often and 'Ladies' day was usually restricted to one day a week (Daniels, 1999). As for costumes, it was not until 1930 that the ASA decided to remove its restrictions on the colour of swimsuit that could be worn on the proviso that coloured costumes were made of wool or some non-transparent

material. While some women swimmers were not whole-heartedly in support because they were concerned about the possibility of coloured cotton swimsuits eventually being allowed, one ASA delegate, reflecting the male attitudes of the period, declared that coloured costumes would 'add charm to competitions' (*Hartlepool Mail*, March 10, 1930, 7). This ongoing impact of male patriarchy on women's participation in swimming, and the appropriateness of their costumes, well into the inter-War period reinforces the legacy left by the Victorians regarding the notion of 'separate spheres'. However, it in no way diminishes the influence of the late nineteenth-century natationists in breaking down some of those barriers and the impact made by the married and unmarried women of all classes who followed their example and took up the activity with such enthusiasm. In doing so, they challenged the traditional socially-created boundaries that had supposedly consigned them to their domestic sphere.

References

- ASA Handbook*, 1902. Gainsborough: J. Littlewood.
- August, Andrew. 1994. 'How separate a sphere? Poor women and paid work in late-Victorian London.' *Journal of Family History* 19 (3): 285-309.
- Bale, John. 2011. 'Ernst Jokl and Layers of Truth', in *Sporting Lives*, ed. Dave Day 1-15, Manchester: MMU IPR Publication.
- Bell's Life*, May 31, 1879; September 27, 1879; October 11, 1879; July 24, 1880.
- Best, Geoffrey. 1971. *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Campbell, Agnes. 1918. *Report on Public Baths and Wash-Houses in the United Kingdom*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Constanzo, Marilyn. 2002. '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 (1): 31-56.
- Daily News*, October 11, 1854.
- Daniels, Stephanie. 1999. 'British Swimming Memories of 1928, Amsterdam.' *Journal of Olympic History*, Spring: 20-25.
- Day, Dave. 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.
- Dundee Evening Telegraph*, July 11, 1901.
- Englishwoman's Review*, August 15, 1879.
- Era*, January 1, 1898; January 29, 1898; January 21, 1899.
- Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, September 27, 1898.
- Girl's Own Paper*, November 26, 1898.
- Gordon, Eleanor and Nair, Gweneth. 2002. 'The Myth of the Victorian Patriarchal Family.' *History of the Family* 7 (1):125-138.
- Hargreaves, Jennifer. 1990. 'Changing Images of the Sporting Female. 1: Before the First World War.' *Sport & Leisure*, July/August.
- Hargreaves, Jennifer. 1994. *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*. London: Routledge.
- Hartlepool Mail*, March 10, 1930.
- Hearth & Home*, August 6, 1891; August 17, 1893; September 7, 1893; September 21, 1893; October 12, 1893; April 19, 1894; August 2, 1894; October 18, 1894; June 6, 1895; June 13, 1895; July 18, 1895;

August 1, 1895; December 12, 1895; January 23, 1896; March 19, 1896; August 6, 1896, 479; August 13, 1896; July 20, 1899; October 26, 1899; August 2, 1900; August 23, 1900; August 30, 1900; November 1, 1900.

Hoggan, Frances. 1879. *Swimming and its Relation to the Health of Women*. London: Women's Printing Society Ltd.

Holloway, Gerry. 2005. *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*. London: Routledge.

Hull Daily Mail, September 21, 1898; June, 1912.

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

Kingsley Kent, Susan. 1999. *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1900*. London: Routledge.

Koditschek, Theodore. 1997. 'The Gendering of the British Working Class.' *Gender & History* 92: 333-363.
Le Follet, September 1, 1898.

London Standard, September 28, 1898.

Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, July 15, 1914.

Manchester Guardian, September 2, 1875.

McCrone, Kathleen. 1991. 'Class, Gender, and English Women's Sport, c. 1890-1914.' *Journal of Sport History* 18 (1): 158-182.

McCrone, Kathleen. 1998. *Feminism and Women's Sport in Late-Victorian England*. Leicester: The Centre for Research into Sport and Society, University of Leicester.

Moran, Maureen. 2006. *Victorian Literature and Culture*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Morning Post, September 26, 1898.

New York Clipper, April 23, 1887.

Northampton Mercury, July 31, 1886.

Parker, Claire. 2010. 'Swimming: The "Ideal" Sport for Nineteenth-century British Women.' *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27 (4): 675-689.

Parratt, Catriona M. 1989. 'Athletic "Womanhood": Exploring Sources for Female Sport in Victorian and Edwardian England.' *Journal of Sport History* 16 (2): 140-157.

Parratt, Catriona. 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): 22-53.

Penny Illustrated, December 19, 1863; August 11, 1866; May 27, 1876; October 27, 1877; July 27, 1878; August 11, 1883; November 3, 1883.

Phillips, Janet and Phillips, Peter. 1993. 'History from Below: Women's Underwear and the Rise of Women's Sport.' *Journal of Popular Culture* 27 (2): 129-148.

Poovey, Mary. 1995. *Making A Social Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rosenberg, Anat. 2012. 'Separate Spheres Revisited: On the Frameworks of Interdisciplinarity and Constructions of the Market.' *Law & Literature* 24 (3): 393.

Standard, July 22, 1878.

Salt Lake Telegram, August 8, 1910; August 11, 1910.

Sporting Times, September 27, 1879.

Sports Argus, September 15, 1917.

Steinbach, Susie L. 2012. *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Oxon: Routledge.

The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, July 1; August 1, 1873; August 1, 1877.

Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. 1986. *The Critical Legal Studies Movement*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Vertinsky, Patricia. 1990. *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Warner, Patricia Campbell. 2006. *When the Girls Came out to Play*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.

Williams, Jean. 2012. 'Aquadynamics and the Athletocracy: Jennie Fletcher and the British Women's 4 x 100 metre Freestyle Relay Team at the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games.' *Costume* 46 (2): 145-164.

Woman's Herald, September 28, 1893.

Woman's Signal, October 22, 1896.

Women's Union Journal, July 1, 1881; October 1, 1882.

York Herald, November 1, 1883.

Yorkshire Evening Post, September 11, 1896.

Figure 1. 'Professor' Peter Johnson and Two of his Natational Daughters (Private Papers of the Johnson family descendants. Reproduced with permission)

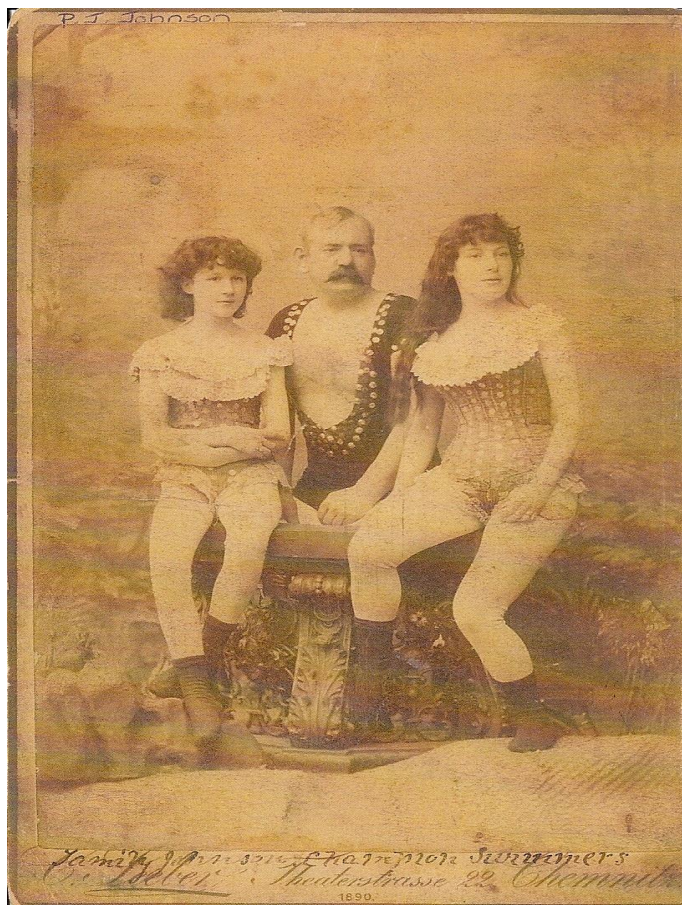


Table 1. Class Origins of Some Victorian Female Professional Swimming Teachers (Source: Census Returns 1861-1911).

| Surname | First Name | Job Title | Father's Occupation |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Andrews | Edith | Swimming Teacher | Foreman tailor |
| Austin | Muriel | Swimming Instructress | Watchmaker |
| Barrett | Elizabeth | Teacher of Swimming | Cabinet maker |
| Bright | Louisa | Teacher of Swimming | Foreman at brickworks |
| Buckingham | Charlotte | Swimming Teacher | Coachbuilder |
| Burridge | Elsie | Swimming Teacher | Collector, Singer sewing machines |
| Child | Annie | Swimming Teacher | Shopkeeper |
| Clarke | Charlotte | Swimming Instructress | Plumber |
| Classey | Eleanor | Swimming Mistress | Boat maker |
| Cornish | Edith | Swimming Instructress | Joiner |
| Cuthbertson | Lilian | Swimming Instructress | Porter on railway |
| Easton | Fanny | Swimming Mistress | Bootmaker/cordwainer |
| Foulkes | Agnes | Swimming Teacher | Sugar boiler |
| Galey | Mary | Swimming Instructress | Insurance agent |
| Goofing | Mary | Teacher of Swimming | Boatman |
| Greenwood | Annie | Swimming Instructor | Factory worker |
| Hardy | Ada | Swimming Mistress | Tailor |
| Harris | Ann W | Teacher of Swimming | Mariner |
| Hine | Agnes | Swimming Teacher | Snuff miller |
| Hodge | Edith | Swimming Instructress | Fitter engineer |
| Hoskins | Rebecca | Swimming Mistress | Cattle dealer |
| Humphrey | Charlotte | Teacher of Swimming | Shoemaker/Boat builder |
| Humphrey | Jane | Teacher of Swimming | Shoemaker/Boat builder |
| Irwin | Ethel | Teacher of Swimming | Butcher |
| Jones | Bessie | Teacher of Swimming | Cab driver |
| Lawrenson | Edith | Swimming Mistress | Drapers clerk |
| Moore | Rose | Swimming Instructor | Beer retailer |
| North | Lizzie | Swimming Instructress | School caretaker |
| Oliver | Mary | Swimming Instructor | Retired house painter |
| Parker | Emily | Swimming Mistress | Boxmaker/Odd job and warehouseman |
| Parkes | Lillian | Swimming Mistress | Plasterer |
| Pullen | Lillie | Swimming Instructress | Solicitors managing clerk |
| Purcell | Mary | Swimming Mistress | Leather shoe maker |
| Regan | Annie | Swimming Mistress | Professional caterer |
| Rhodes | Hilda | Swimming Instructress | Labourer |
| Saigeman | Laura | Swimming Instructor | Cooper |
| Smith | Maria | Swimming Teacher | Fitters labourer |
| Wishart | Catherine | Swimming Teacher | Cabinet(wood) maker |

| | | | |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|--------|
| Wood | Millicent | Swimming Instructress | Oilman |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|--------|