

Day, D. (2015). *The Female Swimming Teacher in Victorian England: A Preliminary Analysis*. British Society of Sports History Annual Conference, Swansea University, 2/4 September.

The 'long' Victorian period has been interpreted through the lens of 'separate spheres', a concept characterized by a compartmentalized view of social markers, such as 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 hypothesize a sharp dichotomy between the feminine home and the male workplace.¹ This concept has, however, been criticized by scholars who argue that sphere boundaries were full of fissures and that the socially-defined margins established for appropriate class and gender behaviour were much more permeable than is assumed.² While wage labour was expected to be a transitional stage for young women,³ paid employment remained commonplace among married women for much of the century⁴ and most working-class families relied on this income.⁵ In 1860, the *English Woman's Journal* estimated that 3,107,791 females over fifteen were being employed out of a population of 7,043,701, the vast majority belonging to the working class, while 780,000 out of 3,460,000 married females were similarly engaged.⁶ Although the Victorian workplace was certainly demanding⁷ and the physical realities of childbearing and child care left most working-class women with few resources or time for leisure,⁸ recognition needs to be given to the diversity of female experience in this period.⁹ For example, an emerging sport and leisure culture provided an alternative working environment for a number of working-class female professional swimmers,¹⁰ who were influential in paving the way for the thousands of women swimming regularly by 1914,¹¹ not least through their teaching of aquatic skills in the burgeoning number of public baths.

This preliminary investigation into the lives of these women is based on a still-evolving database of swimming mistresses compiled from England and Wales census data collected between 1841 and 1911 by my SpLeisH research team colleague Margaret Roberts. Only individuals who actually used the term swimming 'mistress', 'teacher' or 'instructor' are considered here and those who taught swimming but preferred to call themselves something else, such as aquatic entertainer, bath attendant or professional swimmer, have been excluded for now. In terms of method this represents a tentative prosopographical approach as suggested by SpLeisH colleague Sam Oldfield, in which details of individuals are collated to identify trends in the data.¹² Christina De Bellaigue, for example, has drawn on correspondence, memoirs, and biographies, to compare the careers of eighty-three schoolmistresses born between 1780 and 1860 making it possible for her to identify commonalities, such as the 57% who were the daughters of professional men.¹³

Baths and Washhouses Act

Concerns over the 'condition' of the people physically, socially and morally, was a catalyst for the 1846 Baths and Wash-Houses Act, which encouraged local authorities to build baths and wash-houses. These provided cold and warm baths for a penny or tuppence, while a swim in a general tepid bath, with a clean towel, could be had for the 'almost ridiculously low charge of one halfpenny' and would 'at least teach as much of that useful exercise as will save life under the ordinary accidents that occur on our rivers.'¹⁴ The subsequent Public Baths and Washhouses Act of 1878 stimulated an interest in building new baths.¹⁵ By 1915 there were 343 public baths and 69 wash-houses in Britain, maintained by public authorities who encouraged schools swimming, charged low prices, enabling working-class access,¹⁶ employed swimming teachers and made at least some provision for women swimmers.

Women's swimming

The separate spheres argument and the class and gender context of late-Victorian and Edwardian England shaped the concept of what were suitable physical activities for women who were only allowed to participate within limited behavioural and spatial boundaries. Swimming became socially acceptable for women because it had utilitarian value as a lifesaving activity, it took place in an

environment that masked physical effort,¹⁷ and it provided mild, beneficial exercise in segregated surroundings. The female swimming clubs established in the last quarter of the century ran completely separately from male clubs, enabling women to swim 'seriously', unhampered by the need to behave in a 'ladylike' manner.¹⁸ By 1898 there were many 'working women's clubs'¹⁹ and swimming was increasingly encouraged among schoolgirls.²⁰ Despite its popularity though, patriarchal baths' committees initially only set aside one or two days per week, perhaps just for a few hours at a time, when women were permitted to use the 'plunge pool', generally at the least popular opening times.²¹ Even when dedicated facilities were provided, female swimmers found their swimming spaces restricted. At the Lambeth Baths, opened in 1897, the first-class men's pool was 132 feet by 40 feet while the women's pool was only 56 feet by 25 feet. In the winter season, only the women's pool was opened and used as a first- and second-class men's pool and a women's pool, in rotation. This had repercussions for what was by now a large body of professional swimming teachers.²²

Female swimming teachers

The opportunity for a female to earn a living as a professional swimming teacher was a direct result of the increasing popularity of the activity among women, the expansion in the number of indoor facilities and ongoing concerns about maintaining the segregation of the sexes. In 1859, the *Leeds Times* appealed for female swimmers to pass on their expertise to the next generation and suggested that swimming mistresses could be brought over from France while fathers should be allowed to teach their own children in infancy.²³ Another author that year suggested that if a swimming mistress was attached to each bath females might 'readily learn an art which would assist in prolonging and saving many a life.'²⁴ In April 1866, The Royal Pump Room Swimming Bath in Leamington announced that they had secured the services of 'a duly qualified Swimming Mistress for the Ladies' Bath'.²⁵ This socially preferred practice of swimming teachers teaching only their own sex became even more entrenched. 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, and, the author noted, 'it is to be hoped we never shall'.

Some scholars have seized on an article in the *Bicycle Journal, Swimming and General Athletic Pedestrian Recorder* in 1878 to argue that the number of female professional swimmers was small,²⁶ but the evidence suggests otherwise. The supply of competent female professional swimming teachers steadily increased,²⁷ not least because swimming teaching was becoming more widely accepted as an appropriate way for a woman to earn a livelihood,²⁸ 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 benefit²⁹ 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. In 1889, the Excelsoir Ladies Swimming Club, which met once a week at the Battersea Baths and had many Board School mistresses among its members, engaged a swimming mistress for instruction during the summer.³⁰ Mrs Crocker (previously Miss Whyte) was still the swimming teacher at the Kensington baths in 1893 and her 'able system of training' had turned many novices into accomplished swimmers. In August 1894 she could be seen teaching in a costume of heliotrope flannel, with silk-scalloped edging to the tunic and décolletage.³¹ She was a 'clever and painstaking teacher and very popular in the club' and five of her pupils passed the Life Saving Society examination in 1895.³² Other practitioners included Eleanor Classey, who was a professional swimming teacher in Marylebone between 1881 and 1901, and Fanny (Nellie) Easton, who worked as a swimming mistress in the same period as well as organizing and appearing in swimming entertainments. At the annual gala of the Girls' Division of the London Pupil Teachers' Association in 1893 at the Hornsey Road Baths, Easton, instructress at the Baths, acted as starter.³³ Outside London, the ladies swimming club in Rochester, Kent, reported in 1884 that one of the club's employees taught any members who needed assistance with improved swimming techniques.³⁴ When the Portsmouth Club advertised that same year for a

female attendant who was able to swim and instruct they were offering fifteen shillings a week for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day, 2 p.m. on Saturdays with Sundays free.³⁵ In 1885 this club employed Helga Lassen of Copenhagen to act as its 'lady instructress' and she also gave displays of ornamental swimming at the club's gala.³⁶

In all there are 233 swimming teachers have been identified from the census data so far and the initial analysis suggest a number of themes for further consideration.

Firstly, there are an increasing number of females giving swimming teaching as their occupation. This is accompanied by a decline in the number of 'bathers' (Table 1).

Secondly, there is strong evidence of family influence, particularly paternal, in deciding these career choices (Table 2). In sports like swimming, where finesse and skill are paramount, family involvement tended to be sustained over generations. John Howarth was superintendent of baths at the Victoria Baths in Ormskirk in 1871 and he was still the baths manager in 1881 when wife Agnes was the matron and daughter Frances was a swimming teacher. The 1891 census lists John as the baths manager, Agnes as superintendent at the baths and both Frances, now aged twenty-six, and nineteen-year-old Edith as teachers of swimming.³⁷

Thirdly, the evidence suggests that other women adopted this career path independent of familial influences. What is consistent with the family data, however, is that the class of women involved remained fairly constant. As Table 3 shows, many of these individuals had emerged from the skilled working classes (as assessed by their father's occupations).

The Professional Certificate and NGB recognition

By the time of the 1911 census these women had achieved a significant degree of official recognition, although they continued to be excluded from participation in competition by the ASA, whose Law 49 specifically excluded anyone who had 'taught, pursued or assisted in the practice of swimming, or any other athletic exercise, as a means of pecuniary gain'.³⁸ However, the ASA understood that the contribution of professionally qualified teachers was essential for increasing the numbers of people who could be taught to swim and the organisation instituted a Professional Certificate in 1899 (Table 4). By 1900 the ASA had awarded 26 Professional Certificates to male and female candidates, the first woman recipient being Miss Muriel Austin of Richmond, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of a watchmaker/jeweller.³⁹

Further recognition came in 1912 when two female swimming events and a diving contest were included in the Olympic programme and the British team were accompanied to Stockholm by two women, a Mrs Holmes and Clara Jarvis. Twenty-seven-year-old Clara Jarvis, sister of leading swimmer Jack Jarvis, was a swimming teacher in 1911, by which time she was instructress to the Leicester, Loughborough, Burton, Coventry and Hinckley Ladies' swimming clubs. Clara held the RLSS Diploma and the ASA professional certificate, making her as qualified as any male professional, and the ASA report following Stockholm commended both Clara and Walter Brickett, 'who accompanied the team as professional trainers and attendants' for discharging their duties 'in the most capable manner'.

Conclusion

The overall picture given by this initial trawl of the census data, then, is of an increasing number of Victorian and Edwardian working-class women making a decision to become a professional swimming teacher, either as a result of family influence or by choosing to utilize their swimming skills. As in all athletic activities in this period, their opportunities were dependent upon the men who controlled sport,⁴⁰ but women's involvement was not inevitably restricted by ideological constraints and, while notions of separate spheres may have influenced the nature and extent of their careers, the tenets of Victorian patriarchy never extended completely into the lives of all

women.⁴¹ The way in which female professional swimming teachers transcended traditional notions of separate spheres provides a useful exemplar of how notions of gender roles were not always constrained by stereotypical and artificially created boundaries. Clearly, much more work needs to be done to uncover the 'layers of truth'⁴² surrounding these female careers but, even at this early stage, there are signs that exploring the life courses of these working-class women has the potential to tell us something interesting about females, sport and 'separate spheres'.

Tables

Table 1. From Sea to Baths

Census	Bathers	Mistresses
1841	21	0
1851	56	2
1861	37	7
1871	N/A	9
1881	10	21
1891	4	37
1901	1	49
1911	2	110

Table 2. Family connections and female swimming teachers.

Surname	First	Job Title	Father's Occupation	188	189	190	191
Howarth	Frances	Swimming Teacher	Baths Manager	√	√		
Howarth	Edith	Teacher of Swimming	Baths Manager		√		
Leahy	Honora	Swimming Teacher	Swimming Teacher		√		
Leahy	Amy	Swimming Teacher	Swimming Teacher		√	√	
McGarrick	Annie	Swimming Instructor	Baths Superintendent		√	√	
Leadbetter	Margaret	Teacher of Swimming	Baths Manager			√	
Leadbetter	Edna	Swimming Instructress	Baths Manager				√
Leadbetter	Elsie	Swimming Instructress	Baths Manager				√
Bates	Mary	Swimming Teacher	Swimming Teacher			√	
Davey	Jessie	Swimming Mistress	Baths Superintendent			√	√
Hall	Gertrude	Swimming Instructress	Baths Superintendent		√	√	√
Ravenhill	Ethel	Swimming Mistress	Baths Manager			√	
Gardner	Hilda	Instructress of Swimming	Baths Superintendent				√
Jones	Winnie	Swimming Instructress	Baths Superintendent				√
Ruddock	Lily	Swimming Instructress	Baths Manager				√
Wilkinson	Louisa	Swimming Instructress	Baths Superintendent				√
Boon	Kate	Teacher of Swimming	H - Instructor of Swimming				√
Boon	Lizzie	Teacher of Swimming	Instructor of Swimming				√

Table 3. Class Origins of Some Victorian Female Professional Swimming Teachers (Source: Census Returns 1861-1911).

Surname	First	Job Title	Father's Occupation	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911
Bright	Louisa	Teacher of	Foreman at brickworks				√	
Buckingham	Charlotte	Swimming Teacher	Coachbuilder			√	√	
Clarke	Charlotte	Swimming	Plumber					√
Classey	Eleanor	Swimming Mistress	Boat maker		√	√	√	
Cornish	Edith	Swimming	Joiner					√
Cuthbertson	Lilian	Swimming	Porter on railway					√
Daly	Agnes	Swimming	Shoemaker			√	√	√
Easton	Fanny	Swimming Mistress	Bootmaker/cordwainer		√	√	√	√
Harris	Ann W	Teacher of	Mariner	√	√			
Hine	Agnes	Swimming Teacher	Snuff miller					√
Hodge	Edith	Swimming	Fitter engineer					√
Humphrey	Charlotte	Teacher of	Shoemaker/Boat	√	√	√	√	√
Humphrey	Jane	Teacher of	Shoemaker/Boat		√	√	√	√
Lawrenson	Edith	Swimming Mistress	Drapers clerk					√
Parkes	Lillian	Swimming Mistress	Plasterer				√	

Purcell	Mary	Swimming Mistress	Leather shoe maker				√	√
Smith	Maria	Swimming Teacher	Fitters labourer				√	√
Watt	Mary	Teacher	of Pilot				√	√

Table 4.

No	Surname	Christian	Town	Age	Yrs Wed	Kids	1911 Census Occupation	1901 Census Occupation	Fathers Occupation
15	Austin	Muriel	Richmond, Surrey	32	2	1	None. Husband a Commercial Traveller	Swimming Instructress	Watchmaker and Jeweller
18	Foulkes	Louisa	Burslem, Staffs	31	8	1	None. Husband a Brewery Inspector	None.	Painter
21	Daly	Amy	Chelsea, S.W.	37	Single	0	Swimming Instructress	Swimming Instructress	Boot Manufacturer
34	Yates	Lilian	Bristol	35	14	4	None. Husband Patent Shuttle Guard Maker	None.	Water Works Store Keeper
39	Wilson	Edna	Leeds	49	28	2	Turkish Bath Attendant	Swimming Instructor	
40	Johnson	Charlotte	Leeds	48	22	0	None.	None.	
41	Craven	Elizabeth	Bradford	N/A				Swimming Instructress	
43	Proctor	Clara	Bradford	31	5	0	Stitcher in Cotton Dyehouse	Mill Worker	Stoker in Dyehouse
44	Cunliffe	Jane	Leeds	30	Single	0	Teacher of Music	None.	Miner
50	Howard	Lily	Bradford	34	Single	0	Swimming Instructress	None.	Stoker in Mill
54	Sanderson	Ethel	Huddersfield	31	<1	0	None. Husband Wire/Staple Manufacturer	None.	Bank Caretaker
55	Beaumont	Adelaide	Huddersfield	45	20	8	None. Husband Coal Miner Hewer	Fancy Draper Shop Keeper	Draper
61	Purcell	Mary	Eastbourne	31	Single	0	Swimming Mistress	Swimming Mistress	Shoe Maker
62	Ireland	Olive	Richmond, S.W.	32	6	0	Assisting in the business (Pub)	None.	Licensed Victualler
64	Perkin	Gertrude	Leeds	47	6	3	None. Husband Commercial Traveller	None. Lodging at Baths	Millwright
65	Steele	Nellie	Newcastle	N/A				Swimming Mistress in Papers	

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⁵ Koditschek, 1997, 345

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⁸ Kingsley Kent, Susan. 1999. *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1900*. London: Routledge, 180.

⁹ Gordon and Nair, 2002, 135

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