

Swimming Natationists, Mistresses and Matrons: Patriarchal Influences on Female Careers in Victorian Britain.

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The Victorian period has been studied from several perspectives, including through the lens of 'separate spheres', a notion that suggests a compartmentalization of markers like gender and class into discrete areas exemplifying typical relationship patterns. As Poovey (1995) argued, however, the margins surrounding class and gender were full of fissures, leading scholars to argue for a more nuanced approach involving specific case studies to explore how gender and class intersected at a micro level (Vickery, 1993). Because sport was a means of reinforcing social inequalities it provides a useful vehicle for micro study and this paper uses biographical methods to try to understand the degree of self-determinism that women had in selecting swimming-related careers. Serious swimming had utilitarian value and provided feminine-appropriate activity in segregated surroundings, making it increasingly acceptable for women of all social classes, especially after facilities expanded following the Baths and Washhouses Acts of 1846 and 1878. A moral imperative, which required women to be attended to only by women, meant that gender-specific career routes emerged as the activity became more widespread. For some working-class women, swimming, packaged as entertainment, provided an attractive working environment and by the end of the century, professional female natationists were appearing in front of all classes of society on the stage, in the baths and at the seaside. Their activities stimulated interest at all levels of the social hierarchy and generated a demand for female swimming teachers, whose numbers increased significantly. Other women were employed in supervisory capacities with married couples normally being employed as superintendent and matron. They generally lived above the baths and other female family members were often employed as swimming teachers or baths employees.

This paper initially adopts a prosopographical approach to the census data collected at ten-yearly intervals in England and Wales between 1841 and 1911 to explore the class origins, familial connections, and marital status of these women and to trace their career trajectories. Collective biographies are then outlined and the life courses of some key individuals are described to place them within the contemporary social context. While more work needs to be done to uncover what Bale (2011) calls the 'layers of truth' surrounding these biographies there are indications that these could tell us something interesting about females, sport and 'separate spheres'. For example, the data highlights the ongoing patriarchal influences on the shaping of women's lives. Female natationists were almost always introduced to the activity through fathers and brothers, swimming mistresses entered their careers through male connections, and matrons were almost exclusively engaged as an adjunct to their husband's appointment. In these respects, even though their lives might apparently challenge any rigid notion of 'separate spheres' it seems that few women really exercised any significant degree of self-determinism in their career choices. The paper concludes with reflections on the usefulness of different biographical approaches. Higgs (1996) argued that census data cannot be used uncritically to study divisions in Victorian society and it is essential that prosopography is combined with more traditional approaches to biographical research to produce what Jockers (2013) calls, a 'blended approach'.

Keywords: Biography; Swimming; Separate spheres; Patriarchy; Gender

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Introduction

By the mid-nineteenth century the role of women in the workplace had been firmly established and when the

English Woman's Journal used the 1851 census returns to analyse the extent of their involvement it estimated that 3,107,791 females over fifteen were being employed out of a population of 7,043,701.¹ While most of these women came from the working class, class being assessed here with reference to occupational status,² thousands of middle-class women were also engaged in a range of occupations, although reformers were beginning to place a different emphasis on the social value and place of women. Ideas of 'refinement' prescribed a life of idleness for middle-class women unless absolute necessity ruled otherwise and, even then, they were limited to genteel trades like dressmaking or to what Charlotte Bronte described as 'governessing slavery'.³ Increasingly, the middle-class family took on a different form, as Victorian culture sentimentalized women's family lives. In *Sesame and Lilies* John Ruskin articulated the philosophy of 'separate spheres', and claimed that women were best equipped for the private or domestic realm, while men were naturally suited to the active, aggressive, and intellectual domains of public life.⁴ Davidoff and Hall have argued that this ideology emerged as an integral part of the process of middle-class formation and that middle-class women subsequently withdrew from public life to concentrate on their domesticity.⁵ This perspective remains influential and several scholars believe that this period witnessed the demarcation of family life as private, sentimental, and feminine in opposition to the masculine world of public affairs.⁶

There have been subtle and challenging analyses of this public/private dichotomy and the concept of 'separate spheres' has been critiqued by historians who have highlighted long-term continuities in the basic structure of women's work thus contradicting the argument that women's employment was constricted by capitalism and industrialization.⁷ Vickery argues that a basic separation of spheres could be applied to any culture and/or time period while Shoemaker suggests that the metaphor needs to be re-examined for its suitability in explaining gender roles, observing that the impact of ideological prescriptions on day-to-day practice was limited and that the spheres were never truly separate.⁸ This was especially pertinent further down the social scale. While Koditschek believes that a form of separate spheres domesticity gradually became a reality for most working people,⁹ Best points out that the '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.¹⁰ In contrast to their middle-class counterparts, who were often salaried and in supervisory positions, working-class women engaged in waged manual work and they were ghettoised into unskilled, insecure, low-paid occupations.¹¹ Although this wage labour was expected to be a transitional stage for young women between school and marriage,¹² 780,000 out of 3,460,000 married females were working by 1851¹³ and paid employment

¹ 'Statistics as to the Employment of the Female Population of Great Britain', *English Woman's Journal* March 1, 1860, 1-2.

² *Approximated Social Grade*, UK Office for National Statistics.

³ Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (London: Virago Press, 1981), 315.

⁴ Diana Cordea, 'Two approaches on the philosophy of separate spheres in mid-Victorian England: John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 71 (2013): 115-122.

⁵ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle-Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

⁶ Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1998), 6-7.

⁷ Beverly Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c.1600-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 4, 13.

⁸ Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383; Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society*, 9-11.

⁹ Theodore Koditschek, 'The Gendering of the British Working Class', *Gender & History* 92 (1997): 345.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 100.

¹¹ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2005), 96-126.

¹² Catriona Parratt, 'Little Means or Time: Working-class Women and Leisure in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 15, no. 2 (1998): 33.

¹³ 'Statistics as to the Employment of the Female Population of Great Britain', *English Woman's Journal* March 1, 1860, 1-2.

remained commonplace among married women for much of the century¹⁴ with most working-class families relying on this income.¹⁵

Irrespective of issues of class, Poovey argued that the negotiation of sphere boundaries was full of fissures.¹⁶ Consequently, the socially defined margins established for appropriate class and gender behaviour were always permeable and it cannot be assumed that women of any class or marital status were necessarily restricted to the home. Those women whose occupations transcended notional class boundaries deserve especial consideration since not all social classes have been treated equally by historians. Studies of gender amongst the nineteenth century lower-middle classes remain scarce,¹⁷ while Holt's observation in 1996 that the lower middle class seemed especially obscure in leisure histories¹⁸ still resonates, certainly in terms of their positioning within broader historical perspectives of gender and class. There is no obvious reason why this should be the case since new technology has enabled a reassessment of sources and access to archives, and researchers now utilize a range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative.¹⁹ For those interested in biographies, quantitative methods such as prosopography, whereby details of a group of historical actors are collated to identify and analyse trends in the data, can help contextualise historical processes and explain ideological or cultural change, especially within previously hidden strata of society, as well as identifying the interconnections that form social networks,²⁰ or the influence of family on life courses. Wray Vamplew, for example, identified that the number of golf professionals grew from 679 in 1907 to 941 in 1913 and that 64.7% of professionals shared their surname with at least one other professional, thereby uncovering the importance of kinship to this group.²¹

On the downside, a large-scale quantifiable approach can marginalize individual lives and deprive historical narrative of its richness, and smaller, more detailed, collective or individual biographies can better enable previously hidden lives and individual experiences to be illuminated instead of being subsumed within the historical context. As Abrams argued, 'history' happens at the micro-social level of individuals, so historians should strive to capture what was important to the people who lived their lives, irrespective of their social status.²² For Lemire, 'The humble, ubiquitous practices that characterized plebeian lives are fertile ground for historical enquiry, mirroring in their collective daily acts the evolving expectations and aspirations of each generation'.²³ Learning about the mundane is more difficult than investigating the extraordinary though and exposing these lives is not an easy undertaking. Kay pointed out that the lives of many ordinary suffrage activists and sportswomen went unrecorded and Hill suggested that reconstructing the experiences of ordinary people requires the interrogation of new kinds of sources, as well as the imaginative use of methods.²⁴ Since the individual life course cannot, on its own, lead to any definitive conclusions about wider experiences of class and gender it pays historians to consider combining individual, collective and prosopographical approaches, not only to uncover previously hidden lives, connections and networks but also to add significantly to wider historical debates, such as those surrounding gender and women's engagement in sport.

¹⁴ Andrew August, 'How Separate a Sphere? Poor Women and Paid Work in Late-Victorian London', *Journal of Family History* 19, no. 3 (1994): 285.

¹⁵ Koditschek, 'The Gendering of the British Working Class', 345.

¹⁶ Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Hannah Barker, 'A Grocer's Tale: Gender, Family and Class in Early Nineteenth-Century Manchester', *Gender & History* 21, no. 2 (2009): 340–357.

¹⁸ Richard Holt, 'Sport and History: The State of the Subject in Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* 7 no. 2 (1996): 231.

¹⁹ Dave Day and Wray Vamplew, 'Sports History Methodologies: Old and New', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 15 (2016): 1715–1724.

²⁰ Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, *IJHS special*. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32, no. 15 (2016)

²¹ Wray Vamplew, 'Successful workers or exploited labour? Golf professionals and professional golfers in Britain 1888–1914', *Economic History Review* 61, no. 1 (2008),

²² Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982).

²³ Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life*, 2.

²⁴ Joyce Kay, 'It Wasn't Just Emily Davison! Sport, Suffrage and Society in Edwardian Britain', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25, no. 10 (2008): 1349–1350; Jeffrey Hill, 'British Sports History: A Post-Modern Future?', *Journal of Sport History* 23, no. 1 (1996)

Contemporary scholars have argued for a more nuanced approach to studying the diversity of female experiences involving specific case studies that explore economic roles, social lives, institutional opportunities and personal preoccupations, to illustrate how gender and class intersected at a micro level.²⁵ This paper adopts that approach through an investigation of the social impact of an increase in Victorian public baths and washhouses, which provided a working environment for single and married women from different social backgrounds. This ongoing project involves engaging with all biographical methods, including a substantial and still-evolving prosopographical database of women with swimming connections compiled from census data collected in England and Wales between 1841 and 1911,²⁶ to explore their class origins, familial connections, and marital status and to trace their career trajectories. One focus here is on the influence of male family connections and the implications this has for assessing the impact of patriarchy on female life courses and the degree of self-determinism that women had in selecting swimming-related careers.

Women in Sport

Nineteenth-century women may have adopted many roles in society but they did not enjoy infinite possibilities,²⁷ especially in activities such as sport. 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 landscape²⁸ so the separate spheres argument, providing it is valid, supposedly shaped concepts of what were suitable physical activities for women and established limited behavioural and spatial boundaries,²⁹ based on both class and gender.³⁰ In her role as sportswoman, as in her role as wife and mother, a woman was expected to behave in an exemplary fashion and to display feminine traits,³¹ while remaining subservient to the male in all respects. McCrone notes that team sports were believed to develop character traits normally reserved for men and that if women played them without restriction, the sports would be feminised and women masculinised. Women had an easier time winning public approval in individual sports such as archery, lawn tennis and golf, which required membership in socially exclusive, often mixed, clubs, and involved the production of aesthetically pleasing images, thus according much more with social and cultural images of genteel womanliness.³² On a note of caution, though, it needs to be recognized that distinctive class differences always existed within this gender context and that McCrone also highlights the dangers of adopting 'illusions of sisterly solidarity' since women had no desire to associate on the playing field with people they would never have entertained in their drawing rooms.³³ Parratt has criticised the explanatory models, theories, and perspectives on class used by the mainly middle-class historians of women's sport, because of their concentration on the experiences of educated, bourgeois females to the exclusion of working-class women.³⁴ For example, the femininity question which hindered the development of generations of middle-class games players was less of

²⁵ Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', 413-414.

²⁶ Census Returns of England and Wales, 1841-1911. Kew, Surrey, England: The National Archives of the UK (TNA): Public Records Office (PRO).

²⁷ Susie Steinbach, *Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History* (Phoenix, 2013).

²⁸ Dave Day, 'Natal dress: functionality, fashion and the fracturing of separate spheres in Victorian Britain', *Annals of Leisure Research* 19, no. 2 (2016): 162-179.

²⁹ Parratt, 'Little Means or Time', 36-37.

³⁰ Kathleen McCrone, *Feminism and Women's Sport in Late-Victorian England* (Leicester: Centre for Research into Sport and Society. University of Leicester, 1991, 1998).

³¹ Jennifer Hargreaves, 'Recreative and competitive sports: expansion and containment' in Hargreaves, J. *Sporting females: critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports* (London: Routledge, 1994): 90; 'Changing Images of the Sporting Female. 1: Before the First World War', *Sport & Leisure* (July/August 1990): 14-15.

³² Kathleen McCrone, *Hockey's But A Game For Men...: The Development Of Team Sports For Women, c.1880-1914* (Leicester: Centre for Research into Sport and Society. University of Leicester, 1998): 165, 182; *Daily Mail*, 19 November 1904.

³³ Kathleen McCrone, 'Class, Gender, and English Women's Sport, c. 1890-1914', *Journal of Sport History* 18, no. 1 (1991): 160, 179.

³⁴ Catriona Parratt, 'Athletic Womanhood: Exploring Sources for Female Sport in Victorian and Edwardian England,' *Journal of Sport History* 16 (1989): 140-57.

a problem for lower order women because they were excluded ordinarily from society's definition of 'feminine,' and thus concerns about the effects on 'ladies' of physical overstrain.³⁵

Swimming

Although both sexes in Britain engaged in bathing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, often under the supervision of local 'bathers' at the seaside, swimming for exercise remained a primarily male activity. As the century progressed, 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, and it provided mild, beneficial exercise in segregated surroundings.³⁶ Female doctors were among its leading advocates on the basis that it was good for the lungs and allowed women to use their muscles in a natural and healthy manner, while also helping them to bear healthy children.³⁷ Widening female participation was facilitated by an increase in baths provision following the 1846 Baths and Washhouses Act, the catalyst for which was widespread concern over the 'condition' of the people, physically, socially and morally, and the subsequent Public Baths and Washhouses Act of 1878.³⁸ 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,³⁹ employed swimming teachers and made at least some provision for women swimmers, many of whom were now taking the activity seriously. Aquatic enthusiasts could be found in all levels of the social hierarchy and in all parts of the country. The clientele of the Brighton Baths included many aristocratic women, as did the Bath Club in London, while many middle-class women enjoyed swimming in clubs such as the Ladies (Amateur) Cadogan Swimming Club and the Ladies' Tadpole Swimming Club. Swimming was increasingly encouraged among schoolgirls⁴⁰ and by 1898 there were many 'working women's clubs',⁴¹ although the physical realities of childbearing and child care left most working-class women with little time for leisure.⁴²

Despite its popularity, patriarchal baths' committees initially only set aside one or two days per week for women, perhaps just for a few hours at a time and generally at the least popular opening times. The Dulwich Baths for example, consisted of two baths but ladies' day was scheduled only for Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 5.30 p.m.⁴³ 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 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 practice had repercussions for the professional swimmers who used these facilities and for the increasing number of women employed in various categories at the baths, from swimming teachers, cashiers and matrons to bath attendants.⁴⁴ Many of these roles had emerged following the Acts of 1846 and 1878, which had increased facilities and stimulated a limited degree of gender equality in the work-place as more women participated in segregated spaces. They reflected a status hierarchy within the female swimming community with older, married matrons overseeing the working lives of less respectable colleagues such as baths attendants and laundry women (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

³⁵ McCrone, 'Class, Gender, and English Women's Sport', 160, 179.

³⁶ Claire Parker, 'Swimming: The "Ideal" Sport for Nineteenth-century British Women', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 4 (2010): 675-689.

³⁷ Frances Hoggan, *Swimming and Its Relation to the Health of Women* (London: Women's Printing Society, 1879).

³⁸ Claire Parker, 'The Rise of Competitive Swimming 1840 to 1878', *The Sports Historian* 21, no. 2 66

³⁹ Christopher Love, 'Local aquatic empires: The municipal provision of swimming pools in England, 1828-1918', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, no. 5, 622-627.

⁴⁰ *Woman's Herald*, September 28, 1893.

⁴¹ *Morning Post*, September 26, 1898; *Girl's Own Paper*, November 26, 1898.

⁴² Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1900* (London: Routledge, 1999), 180.

⁴³ *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, July 3, 1892, 8.

⁴⁴ Christopher Love, 'Holborn, Lambeth and Manchester: Three Case Studies in Municipal Swimming Pool Provision', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, no. 5, 632-633.

Professional swimmers

An emerging sport and leisure culture in the Victorian period provided opportunities for several working-class female professional swimmers ('natationists'),⁴⁵ who were influential in paving the way for the thousands of women swimming regularly by the turn of the century, not least through their aquatic demonstrations and teaching of skills in the public baths. While it has been argued that the number of natationists was insignificant,⁴⁶ the evidence suggests otherwise and that swimming, often packaged as entertainment, provided an attractive working environment for several female professionals who were appearing before all classes of society by the end of the century. Natationists displayed their diving skills, held their breath underwater, swam in endurance events, raced for money, produced and performed in aquatic entertainments, and taught swimming and lifesaving. A popular feature of their performances was ornamental or scientific swimming, which displayed a range of aquatic skills in an artistic manner much like modern-day synchronized swimming. In terms of remuneration, Violet Mitchell was paid £2 per week in 1893, and four years later, swimmers at the Westminster Aquarium were being paid between £1 and £2 per week, although high divers like Annie Luker were paid substantially more. These women generally received much more public approval than other professional sportswomen of the period, partly because of their age, marital status and bodily appearance, and partly because swimming was regarded as an acceptable female activity. While their physical appearance had much to do with their appeal to many male admirers, their skill was widely appreciated, primarily because female spectators would become accustomed to seeing females swimming easily and would want to 'acquire the knowledge and skill which would enable them to do the same'. The contribution that their public exhibitions made to the development of female swimming was significant and, thanks partly to their example, swimming became a popular means of providing women with a 'counterpoise to their more sedentary employments and physically less active life'.⁴⁷

The research conducted to this point suggests that this was an alternative, albeit intermittent, way of earning a living for a few women in this period. Most were single and their class status is highlighted by the occupation of fathers and spouses, which suggests that many of these women emerged from the margins between the working and middle class (see Table 2 for some examples).

Insert Table 2 here

Not surprisingly, many of these women had family connections to the activity and it is here that the patriarchal influence on career choices becomes obvious. The development of swimming throughout the century relied heavily on the activities of swimming families who included summer seasons at seaside resorts as well as appearances in variety theatres and music halls. Female family members proved particularly popular and families like the Wards and the Finneys relied on their contributions to attract spectators to their shows. Alfred Ward was an 'agent, teacher of swimming and dancing' living in Hampstead in 1881, along with ten-year-old Minnie, and in 1883, Ward, now swimming master at Hammersmith Baths, gave an exhibition in Ramsgate with his 'naiad' of a daughter, 'whose grace and dexterity in the water are well worth witnessing'. By 1891, Ward, 'professional swimmer and house decorator', was living in Kensington with Alfred (eighteen), 'professional swimmer and stationary assistant', Florence (seventeen), 'professional swimmer and upholsters helper', Ernest (fifteen), 'professional swimmer and bookbinder's assistant', and Maud (thirteen) 'professional swimmer'.⁴⁸ One of the few aquatic entertainers who managed to sustain his career into the twentieth century was James Finney, only eighteen in 1881 but already a 'teacher of swimming' in Oldham. He was a regular competitor during the

⁴⁵ Dave Day, "'What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?'" Agnes Beckwith, Aquatic Entertainer and Victorian Role Model', *Women's History Review* 21, no. 3 (2012): 419-446.

⁴⁶ Parker, 'Swimming: The "Ideal" Sport', 681.

⁴⁷ Day, "'What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?'" , 419-446.

⁴⁸ *Penny Illustrated*, September 22 1883, 10; Census Returns, Alfred W. Ward, Minnie and Alfred 1881 (172/13/20); Alfred W., Alfred E., Florence, Ernest and Maud Ward 1891 (22/86/1); Minnie Ward 1891 (82/73/13).

1880s, and well known in the music halls. He was a major attraction as a tank exhibitor in Glasgow and Dundee during 1884, and his attempt on the underwater record at the Canterbury Music Hall in Lambeth in April 1886 attracted a large audience. He often performed alongside his sister Marie (Mary), who was presented with a gold medal in 1889 in recognition of her 'clever and plucky dive' from London Bridge. Finney was in Battersea in 1891, and registered as a 'teacher of swimming', as was his sister, then nineteen. Following the example set, among others, by the Beckwith family in the 1880s, Finney appeared in America with Marie in 1894 and he was back in America with daughter Elsie several times between 1906 and 1910. He also spent much of 1911 in America performing with Elsie, as did his other daughters Maud Evelyn and Ethel Gladys, both professional swimmers.⁴⁹ A similar scenario is played out wherever aquatic families appear in the records and it is reasonable to surmise that these female professionals, while transcending traditional notions of feminine behaviour and stretching the credibility of the 'separate spheres' argument, lacked any real self-determinism in terms of their career choice. As in similar activities such as the circus their personal desires were likely to be superseded by the needs of the family and the wishes of the patriarch. In this respect they were not alone since a similar trend can be identified in other swimming-related groups.

Swimming teachers

The art of swimming required instruction and 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 indoor facilities and ongoing concerns about maintaining the segregation of the sexes. The socially preferred practice of swimming teachers teaching their own sex became even more entrenched during the late nineteenth century with one author observing 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 'it is to be hoped we never shall'. 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.⁵⁰ Another writer 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'⁵¹ and in 1860, the *English Woman's Journal* argued that strong-bodied, steady-minded young women should be trained as swimming mistresses. Gradually, as swimming teaching became more widely accepted as an appropriate way for a woman to earn a livelihood, the supply of female professional teachers increased to the point where *Bell's Life* was bemoaning in 1879 the general apathy about female swimming given that there was no lack of female teachers.⁵² In 1889, the Excelsior 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ In 1885, the club employed Helga Lassen of Copenhagen to act as its 'lady instructress' and she gave displays of

⁴⁹ *Swimming Notes*, March 22 1884, 4; *The Swimmer: A Journal Devoted to Natation* 1, no. 6 (April 10 1886): 58; *Daily News*, December 20 1889, 3.89. *Manchester Guardian*, August 29 1903, 5; *New York Times*, November 11 1894; December 23 1894; *Evening Post*, November 17 1897, 5; *Grey River Argus*, November 17 1897, 2; *Wanganui Herald*, November 1897 17, 3; *Era*, December 15 1900, 91; *Hull Daily Mirror*, December 26 1905; *New York Times*, November 25 1906, 22; January 13 1907, 22; *Morning Oregonian*, August 16 1908, 2; *Duluth News Tribune*, December 24 1910, 4; January 21 1911, 9; *Morning Oregonian*, March 14 1911, 11; *Duluth News Tribune*, December 12 1911, 2; Census 1911, Maud Evelyn Finney (26) and Ethel Gladys Finney (21), 'Professional Swimmers' (RG14PN2229RG78 PN76RD26SD3ED9SN317).

⁵⁰ *Leeds Times*, October 15, 1859, 6.

⁵¹ T. Herbert Braker, 'Tracts of the Ladies' National Association for the Diffusion of Sanitary Knowledge', *The Medico-Chirurgical Review, and Journal of Medical Science* (1859): 115.

⁵² *Otago Witness*, December 30, 1876; *Standard*, July 22, 1878; *Bell's Life*, September 27 1879, 5.

⁵³ Excelsior Swimming Club. *Women's Penny Paper*, October 5, 1889, 8.

⁵⁴ Ian Keil and Don Wix, *In the Swim: The Amateur Swimming Association From 1869 To 1994* (Leicester: Swimming Times Ltd., 1996), 22.

⁵⁵ *Swimming Notes*, May 10 1884 13 8;

ornamental swimming at the club's gala.⁵⁶

Opportunities were clearly expanding for those with expertise and the census data shows an increasing number of females giving swimming teaching as their occupation with the nine swimming mistresses recorded in 1871 becoming 110 by 1911. In analysing this data, only individuals who used the term swimming 'mistress', 'teacher' or 'instructor' were considered and those who taught swimming but preferred to call themselves something else, such as aquatic entertainer, bath attendant or professional swimmer, have been excluded. In all, 233 swimming teachers have been identified and the evidence suggests that the class of women involved was consistent with that of the professional swimmers (see Table 3), which is not surprising since there was considerable crossover between these swimming constituencies with teachers performing entertainments and natationists running teaching classes. Fanny (Nellie) Easton, for example, worked as a swimming mistress at the Hornsey Road Baths between 1881 and 1911, as well as organizing and appearing in swimming entertainments, and Nellie is revisited in more detail at the end of this paper.

Insert Table 3 here.

In sports like swimming, where finesse and skill were paramount, family involvement tended to be sustained over generations and in several instances women were introduced into the occupation by male relatives. William Tuohy was giving swimming exhibitions in 1851 and fifty years later his whole family was involved in swimming. Tuohy was a 'swimming instructor' and Sarah, his wife, was a 'swimming instructress', as were daughters Sarah and Mary, both of whom later taught swimming in Nottingham.⁵⁷ Fathers like William were especially important facilitators of female teaching careers. In 1879, Miss Whyte, swimming mistress at the Chelsea and South Kensington Baths, was afforded a financially successful benefit at which she went through some 'clever feats of natation'.⁵⁸ Her father, Charles Whyte, was variously the swimming master and instructor at Harrow School, and the professor in residence at the King Street Baths, Camden Town. He sat on the first committee of the Professional Swimming Association in 1881, and as swimming master at Paddington Public Baths he organized annual swimming entertainments. Having married, and now calling herself Mrs Crocker, she was still the swimming teacher at the Kensington baths in 1893 where 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. 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 1895.⁵⁹ Other prominent practitioners included the Humphrey sisters, Charlotte and Jane, whose father had been a leading swimming teacher and organizer, and several similar examples of patriarchal influence can be observed in much of the current data (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 here

Baths employees

The new baths required staffing, ranging from the matrons who adopted managerial roles to the laundresses and washerwomen at the other end of the social scale. Reflecting their status with baths committees and customers, the 'servants' listed at the Hastings baths in 1873 included a ticket clerk, a carpenter, an engineer, a laundress and male and female bath attendants who were paid 10 shillings a week.⁶⁰ It should be noted at this

⁵⁶ Keil and Wix, *In the Swim*, 21.

⁵⁷ Census Returns, William Tuohy 1841, Scottish Census 493/7/24/18. 1851 (1589/425/3); 1861 (648/65/30); 1871 (1131/45/10); 1881 (1150/52/24); 1891 (2689/62/7); 1901 (986/77/6); GRO (1902/death/Portsmouth/2b/348); Annie and Ada Tuohy 1901 (3184/46/29).

⁵⁸ *Bell's Life*, October 11, 1879

⁵⁹ *Hearth & Home*, September 7, 1893, 564; October 12, 1893, 740; April 19, 1894; August 2, 1894; August 1, 1895; June 13, 1895; July 18, 1895; December 12, 1895; December 19, 1895; January 23, 1896; March 19, 1896.

⁶⁰ *Hampshire & Portsmouth Telegraph*, December 24, 1873, 4.

point that there are significant difficulties in identifying attendants specifically employed at public baths and washhouses rather than in other facilities such as Turkish baths or medical establishments. Census records rarely enable the researcher to distinguish between these positions and, even within the public baths, the term 'bath attendant' encompassed many different roles. The data is, therefore, being subjected to as much scrutiny as is possible through triangulation with other sources, although this is difficult since the study of previously hidden individuals is the study of those who rarely appear in the records. The further one goes down the social scale the more problematic this becomes. Newspaper reports, for example, generally ignored the lowly bath attendant although they can provide supporting evidence for those in supervisory positions such as matrons.

Attendants

Bath attendants played an essential part in the running of the baths, although their role, which often included teaching swimming, was always fluid with individuals working around the facility according to demand. In 1887, John Butters observed there were a number of competent teachers on the staff at the Edinburgh Baths but from 'excess of work' they were unable to devote any attention to teaching, their time being devoted to the safety of swimmers, cleaning, and attending to customers requiring hot baths.⁶¹ Some of these duties might take them into the front office and adverts from Leeds in 1895 and Liverpool in 1899 specified that applicants for the role of 'female attendant and clerk' at the public baths had to be able to swim.⁶² As with swimming teachers, attendants normally looked after bathers of their own sex, although women were paid less than men. The weekly wage of a male bath attendant in Liverpool in 1856 was 24 shillings, not much better than the average manual wage of the period,⁶³ but when the Portsmouth Club advertised in 1884 for a female attendant who was also able to teach they only offered fifteen shillings a week for up to six hours a day with Sundays free.⁶⁴ At Dulwich Baths in 1892, Mrs Mary Anderson was hired for twenty shillings a week, while William Sanderson received twenty-five shillings.⁶⁵

In all, 1,242 female bathing attendants have been identified so far and the census data indicates an increasing number of females giving 'bath attendant' as their occupation, especially after the 1878 Act, with the 75 bath attendants recorded in 1871 rising to 455 by 1911. Both married and single women were involved, although the 'single' category needs further investigation since there may be some important conclusions to be drawn here about the category of 'widows', many of whom would have become single again in their fifties.⁶⁶ The proportion of single women remains constant while those with family connections appear to reduce steadily suggesting that the occupational area was becoming more widely available. Unlike the natationists and teachers, a family background in the activity was not a significant factor and this probably relates to the more menial and less specialized role that the bath attendant played in which high levels of transferable knowledge were not required. In addition, the class of women involved was essentially similar across censuses with significant numbers emerging from the skilled working classes and lower middle-class (see Table 5).

Insert Table 5 here

Matrons

A married couple were often employed as baths' superintendent and matron and lived above the baths. Richard Whitehead and his wife, Anne, were appointed as Superintendent and Matron of Blackfriars-street Public Baths, Salford, in 1880. Richard received £91 per annum and Anne £26 per annum, plus accommodation on-site in the

⁶¹ Where are the teachers of swimming? *The Scotsman*, September 7, 1887, 9.

⁶² *Liverpool Mercury*, April 20, 1899, 1.

⁶³ *Annals of the Liverpool Corporate Baths Dept.*, 1952, 29, cited in Parker, 'The Rise of Competitive Swimming', 62.

⁶⁴ *Swimming Notes*, May 10 1884 13 p. 8;

⁶⁵ Polly Bird, (1995). 'The Origins of Victorian Public Baths, with Special Reference to Dulwich Baths', *Local Historian* 25 149-150.

⁶⁶ Steinbach, *Women in England*.

purpose-built staff apartment, with free coal, gas, and water.⁶⁷ When the Cardiff Corporation advertised for a general manager and wife, to attend the ladies' baths, they offered a joint salary of £70 per annum with accommodation, house coals and gas provided free of charge.⁶⁸ Typically the husband would hire the staff and run the baths while his wife acted as money-taker⁶⁹ as well as providing a public face for the couple. Visitors to the Ladies' Tadpole Swimming Club races in September 1893 were entertained to tea by Mrs Middleweek, the matron, who was 'courtesy itself'.⁷⁰ Part of the attraction of the post of superintendent and matron was that other family members could be employed. John Howarth was bath superintendent at 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 and both Frances, now aged twenty-six, and nineteen-year-old Edith as teachers of swimming.⁷¹ The prosopographical data highlights this family influence in determining women's engagement at supervisory level within the baths and shows that almost all of those involved were married, normally to the superintendent (see Table 6).

Insert Table 6 here

Conclusion

The overall picture given by the data collected so far indicates that an increasing number of Victorian and Edwardian working-class women, both married and single, were being employed within the new public baths, often because of family influence, although this depended on the level at which they were engaged. While every swimming-related life-course reflected the context in which it was lived the evidence suggests that the careers of many of these women did not always conform to the discourses surrounding the impact of the 'domesticity' ideology on gender employment patterns in this period. The way in which they transgressed traditional notions of separate spheres reinforces the argument that gender roles were not always constrained by stereotypical and artificially created boundaries, especially among those who straddled the boundaries between the working and middle classes. This highlights the need for historians to avoid writing about the middle class as one amorphous mass and making assumptions about the extent that values were shared across this class. The 'separate spheres' ideology was often stretched at the edges and women's involvement was not inevitably restricted by ideological constraints. Having said that, the data also makes it clear that for many female swimming communities the influence of patriarchy in determining career choices was significant. Female natationists were almost always introduced to the activity through fathers and brothers, swimming mistresses entered their careers through male connections, and matrons were almost exclusively engaged as an adjunct to their husband's appointment. In these respects, even though their lives might apparently challenge any rigid notion of 'separate spheres' it seems that few women really exercised any significant degree of self-determinism in their working lives.

Methodological reflections

While prosopography has been useful in uncovering some common characteristics of these different but related swimming groups and identifying their social networks,⁷² this analysis highlights the limitations of relying solely on quantitative methodology and much more work needs to be done to uncover what Bale called the 'layers of truth' surrounding these female careers.⁷³ These prosopographical catalogues, based primarily on census data, have proved useful in helping to identify future research directions and have enabled evaluation and

⁶⁷ Keith Myerscough – personal communication.

⁶⁸ Simon Graham Allen, *The Provision of Public Baths and Wash Houses in Cardiff and their Effect on Victorian Public Health and Hygiene, 1846-1901*. MA thesis, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, September 1998, 66.

⁶⁹ Bird, 'The Origins of Victorian Public Baths', 149-150.

⁷⁰ *Hearth & Home*, September 7, 1893, 564; October 12, 1893, 740

⁷¹ Census Returns 1861-1891. John Howarth 1861 (4440/252/18), 1871 (3874/119/37). John, Agnes, Frances and Edith A. Howarth 1881 (3750/55/40), 1891 (3036/133/37).

⁷² Stone, 'Prosopography'; Keats-Rohan, ed., *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: a Handbook*.

⁷³ John Bale, 'Ernst Jokl and Layers of Truth', in *Sporting Lives*, ed. Dave Day (Manchester: MMU IPR Publication, 2011), 1-15.

experimentation to occur before more detailed studies focusing on individuals and collectives are undertaken,⁷⁴ but they need to be treated with caution. Higgs stressed that quantitative data is not necessarily 'raw material' for unbiased scientific analysis, it is also a human construct and if census collection and recording was itself part of the process by which gender divisions were defined, it cannot be used uncritically to study these divisions in Victorian society. Without knowledge of local economic and social conditions and a grasp of how census data collection changed, the historian could end up building 'elaborate quantitative mansions on shifting archival sands'.⁷⁵ It is essential, therefore, that prosopography is combined with other methods of biographical research to produce what Jockers calls, a 'blended approach'.⁷⁶ Diverse interrogations and interpretations of the source material, presented through different modes of expression, will rarely, if ever, result in a consensus but they all add to the richness of the history landscape, a richness that can often come only from a more detailed reading of individual biographies, such as that of swimming teacher Nellie Easton (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

Fanny Elizabeth (Nellie) Dear nee Easton might appear as a name on a prosopographical spreadsheet but the bare facts of her life course tell the reader little about the woman. She was born in Middlesex in 1854 to cordwainer Charles Dear and wife Emma, and married to James Allford in 1873.⁷⁷ A year later she was in the divorce courts accused of co-habiting with costermonger Levi Jackson, committing adultery with an unknown man in Hyde Park, and leading the life of a common prostitute. The judge found for the husband and the divorce was made absolute in 1875.⁷⁸ Two years later, Fanny, 22, spinster and machinist, was married to David Henry Easton, 20, a shorthand clerk,⁷⁹ whose brother, T.C. Easton, later became hon. sec. of the Professional Swimming Association.⁸⁰

Despite her chequered early life, Nellie subsequently established herself as a highly respected teacher and aquatic entertainer. By the 1881 census, she was describing herself as a swimming mistress and over the next thirty years, she appeared regularly inside and outside of London, with and without her pupils.⁸¹ By 1888, she was swimming mistress at nine Metropolitan Baths and her aquatic exhibitions were proving extremely popular.⁸² At Bath in 1888, Nellie was introduced as the most accomplished lady swimmer in England and someone who had taught more women to swim than any other female teacher in Britain. During her exhibition, she went through several different styles of swimming, including revolving in the water.⁸³ Her exhibitions for the South-East London Swimming Club in September 1888 were of an 'extremely pleasing character' and her plain and ornamental swimming was considered 'fetching'. Described as a charming and beautifully proportioned

⁷⁴ Robin Fleming, 'Writing Biography at the Edge of History', *American Historical Association Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 606-614.

⁷⁵ Edward Higgs, *A Clearer Sense of the Census* (Public Record Office, 1996).

⁷⁶ Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 26.

⁷⁷ 1854. April 30 Baptism - Harrow Weald, Middlesex. Parents Charles, a cordwainer, and Emma Dear.; 1861 Census RG 9/693 Schedule 138. Colebrook Place, St Peter Colebrook/Saint Maurice, Winchester. Charles Dear, 30, Boot maker born in Harrow, Middlesex, Emma Dear, 28, born in Bodggle, Hampshire, Charles (8), Fanny (7) and James (3) plus William (6 months); 1873. May 12 Marriage. Paris Church, St Marks, Notting Hill, Middlesex. Fanny Elizabeth Dear, 19, Spinster, 235 Portobello Road, to James Allford, Tin Smith, 25 St Marks Road, son of Thomas Allford, brush maker.

⁷⁸ 1874. In Her Majesty's Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes. James Allford v Fanny Elizabeth Allford & Levi Jackson. Court Minutes: Petition Filed 18 May 1874: Decree Nisi 11 November 1874: Final Decree 25 May 1875.

⁷⁹ 1877. February 25. Married in St Mark's Church, St Marylebone, Middlesex; 1881. Census RG 11/337 Schedule 153. 26 Gloucester Street, St George Martyr, Finsbury. David H. Easton, 22, shorthand writer born in Chelsea Middlesex, and Fanny E. Easton, 26, swimming mistress born in Harrow, Middlesex.

⁸⁰ *Penny Illustrated Paper*, October 5 1889, 6

⁸¹ *Era*, September 8, 1883, 4; *Bell's Life*, April 16, 1885, 4; *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, July 22, 1885, 1; *Bell's Life*, May 4, 1886, 4; *Penny Illustrated*, April 14, 1888, 234; *Ipswich Journal*, August 10, 1888, 5; *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror*, May 7, 1889, 179; *Essex Standard*, August 2, 1890, 5.

⁸² *Western Daily Press*, August 29, 1888, 5; *Bristol Mercury*, August 29, 1888, 5; August 30, 1888, 8.

⁸³ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, November 1, 1888, 3.

woman with three children, her promotions emphasized that she did not wear corsets in the water and the public were invited to inspect her clothing to double check.⁸⁴

Nellie was extremely active during the 1890s. In Bristol in September 1890, Nellie and her pupil Ada Clare, went through a programme of eighteen items of ornamental swimming and floating,⁸⁵ and when the Islington baths in Hornsey Road, were opened in July 1892, Nellie, the swimming instructress, gave an exhibition.⁸⁶ In August 1891, 'three clever lady swimmers', Nellie, Belle White and Rose Gamble, appeared at Ilfracombe Hotel Baths,⁸⁷ and Belle White was with Nellie again in Bristol in September, giving an exhibition of ornamental swimming and floating that was loudly applauded.⁸⁸ At the opening of the Dulwich Baths in 1892, Nellie and her pupils gave an aquatic display of ornamental swimming⁸⁹ and she was at Ilfracombe again in August with Belle White, Connie Stevenson and Rose Potter.⁹⁰ When the Camberwell Public Baths and Wash houses opened in October 1892, Nellie and her pupils gave an exhibition of swimming and floating.⁹¹ She acted as starter at the annual swimming competitions of the Girls' Division of the London Pupil Teachers' Association at the Hornsey Road Baths in 1893⁹² and gave swimming entertainments at the Baths in September 1894, assisted by many of her lady pupils, ranging from babies upwards, who made a 'grand show, none having the slightest fear of the water, plunging and swimming about like so many ducks'. Nellie, 'besides being a perfect swimmer herself, certainly has the power to impart her skill to that of her pupils'.⁹³ At the Victoria Swimming Club in July 1894, the programme concluded with an aquatic performance by Nellie and pupils⁹⁴ and when the third of Islington's public baths was opened in April 1895, Nellie entertained spectators with a variety of swimming feats.⁹⁵

In the 1901 census Nellie was describing herself as a 'swimming mistress (Own account)' and ten years later she was a 'swimming instructress', again working on her 'Own account', at the County Council Public Baths. Contradicting reports of her having had children, the census enumerator recorded that she had had no children during her 34 years of marriage.⁹⁶ Nellie died on 19 June 1919, leaving effects worth £2,723 10s. 9d (£280,636.45 in today's money).⁹⁷

This type of research makes connections between historian and subject in a way that is not possible with prosopography and reflects the dynamic relationship that always exists between the historian and the past. E.H. Carr, for example, emphasized the historian's need of imaginative understanding for the people being considered and argued that history cannot be written unless the historian can connect with the mind of those being studied.⁹⁸ Generating an emotional engagement with individual and collective biographies brings with it

⁸⁴ *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror*, September 11, 1888, 390.

⁸⁵ *Bristol Mercury*, September 11, 1890, 3.

⁸⁶ *Morning Post*, July 27, 1892, 3.

⁸⁷ *North Devon Journal*, August 13, 1891, 2.

⁸⁸ *Western Daily Press*, September 10, 1891, 7.

⁸⁹ *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, July 3, 1892, 8.

⁹⁰ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, August 2, 1892, 5.

⁹¹ *Standard*, October 3, 1892, 6.

⁹² *Woman's Herald*, September 28, 1893, 502.

⁹³ *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, September 29, 1894, 198.

⁹⁴ *Chelmsford Chronicle*, July 27, 1894, 7; *Essex Newsman*, July 28, 1894, 1.

⁹⁵ *Morning Post*, April 29, 1895, 6.

⁹⁶ 1891 Census RG 12/141 Schedule 450. 8 Girdlestone Road, St Peters, North Islington. David H. Easton, 33, shorthand writer, and Fanny E. Easton, 35, swimming mistress; 1901 Census RG 13/1253 Schedule 253. 2 Elm Villas, Black Boy Lane, St Anns, West Green, Tottenham, Middlesex. David H. Easton, 42, shorthand writer (worker) and Fanny E. Easton, 44, swimming mistress (Own account); 1911 Census Schedule 146. The Elms, 43 Black Boy Lane, West Green (six rooms). David H. Easton, 54, law clerk working for solicitor, and Nellie Easton, 55, swimming Instructress working on her 'Own account' at the County Council Public Baths. No children during 34 years of marriage. Also in household, Nellie's mother, Emma Dear, 78, niece Daisy Brion, 24, and niece May Brion, 18, an assistant swimming instructress at County Council Public Baths.

⁹⁷ 1919. Died 19 June. Probate London 25 July to Charles Dear, retired bootmaker, Williams Phillips, school keeper, and Louisa Phillips, his wife. Effects £2,723 10s. 9d.

⁹⁸ E. H. Carr, (1990) *What is History?*

of course some inherent dangers and there is always a need for vigilance since historians sometimes veer too far towards the production of hagiographies and there have been examples of poor research leading to the reproduction of errors and the creation of myths. Given that many sources are biased, or distort and filter the 'truth', all of them need interpretation and as this exploration into female swimming careers progresses, through an ongoing combination of methodologies and the careful triangulation of sources, confidence in those interpretations will mature to the point at which they satisfy Johnes' ambition for a history where 'assertions are qualified and the nuances of the past are clear'.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Martin Johnes, 'Archives, Truths and the Historian at Work: A Reply to Douglas Booth's "Refiguring the Archive"', *Sport in History* (2007)