**Swimming into modernity: Innovation and invention amongst aquatic craft communities in Victorian England.**

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**Abstract**

While it was mainly limited to bathing in the natural environment in the early nineteenth century, swimming subsequently developed into a competitive activity, stimulated by the expansion of facilities created by the 1846 and 1878 Baths and Washhouses Acts. In the absence of national structures, progress in all aspects of aquatics relied upon the innovative approaches taken by swimming 'professors', working individually and collectively through informal craft communities, who used their expertise to improve techniques and introduce new technologies. These artisans also penetrated the entertainment industry by creating aquatic shows in music halls and theatres, swimming baths, in sea and rivers, and in aquaria and circus rings. Through their innovative use of technology, their creativity in both sporting and entertainment environments, and their promotion of the female swimmer, these communities demonstrated a willingness to embrace modernity that fundamentally altered attitudes to swimming and created the basis for the contemporary sport.

**Keywords:** Swimming; Craft; Professors; Technology; Modernity.

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## Introduction

Everard Digby's *De Arte Natandi*, published in Latin in 1587 and translated into English eight years later, is considered the first English treatise on the practice of swimming. At the time it was written, swimming was viewed as a utilitarian and participatory activity and, in a contemporary society concerned with increasing levels of obesity and physical inactivity, these aspects remain important, with Sport England (2017) reporting that 2,516,700 individuals (5.67% of the population) had participated in swimming between October 2015 and September 2016. However, swimming has also become an archetypal 'modern' sport, characterized by a high degree of regulatory control, disciplined body practices, and globalization. The 209 National Member Federations that form the Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA) compete in standardized pools and over specified distances on different strokes, the rules for which are enshrined in 'laws'. In England, thousands of swimming competitions take place annually, controlled by a National Governing Body (NGB), the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA), that is supported financially by government quangos to develop an elite programme for national prestige alongside its participation agenda.

This transitioning of older activities like swimming into their modern sport versions has been the subject of debate. While Bourg and Gouguet (2005, p. 4) and Cronin (2014, p. 30) argue that modern sport emerged in Britain because of the industrial revolution, these sports did not develop spontaneously and processes such as emergent capitalism, boundary-making, standardization, codification, and specialization, were already in evidence (Struna 2000). In rejecting the industrialization hypothesis, McClelland (2007) and Kruger (2008) argued that athletic activities were already displaying characteristics of modern sport by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries while Tomlinson and Young (2011, p. 10) suggest that modern sports

were becoming increasingly institutionalized from 1450 onwards. With respect to swimming, for example, von Mallinckrodt (2016, 234) has noted how entrepreneurial providers were founding swimming schools and offering swimming lessons in late eighteenth-century France. In reviewing these different perspectives, Vamplew (2016, p. 343) observed that, although its precursors originated before widespread industrialization, the institutionalization of sport required further stimuli and there is less disagreement among scholars about the importance of the nineteenth century as a period in which the modernization of sport accelerated. Alongside rule development and the growth of sports architecture, there was an expansion in the production of sporting goods and equipment, the numbers of specialized teachers, trainers, coaches and sporting entrepreneurs, and the volume of sports reporting and advertisements (Huggins 2017, pp. 119-120).

The standard narrative surrounding the evolution of physical activities into global 'modernized' sports during this period, credits English public-school and university elites with combining to form national associations and then exporting their values and organizations worldwide. The argument presented here, however, is that this discourse marginalises the often-significant contributions made by sporting professionals. In swimming, for example, a group of entrepreneurial experts were critical in initiating the modernization of the sport and in stimulating participation. Although Carlile (2004) suggested that circumstance, climate, the availability of facilities, and prevailing social attitudes, were important modernizing influences, individual practitioners, whether driven by altruism or by economic motives, were key to changes that occurred in the swimming landscape. Their interventions drove the transition of 'bathing' into 'aquatics' well before the formation of the ASA and provided the foundations for a sport that was subsequently appropriated by the amateur NGB. Central to their practice was the employment of technology, interpreted here not in terms of material artefacts but as 'crystallizations of socially organized action' (Sterne, 2003, pp. 369-370), the

establishment of organizational structures, pedagogical practices, stroke developments and changes to the social order, such as the increasing visibility of women within the swimming world.

Reflecting the argument that individuals were critical to the development of modern swimming, this paper explores this process through the life courses of two nineteenth-century practitioners. Day (2010, 2012, 2014), who has used biography to explore 'history from below' in sporting and swimming contexts, suggests that this research format can help uncover the working practices of those who were active agents in shaping their world (Thompson, 1963). Exposing these lives is not easy, however, since many nineteenth-century lives went almost completely unrecorded, so little trace remains of most swimming professors. This paper draws on a range of sources, combining the traditional use of newspapers, texts, directories and organizational records, with census data, probates, divorce records, and other genealogical material, to provide an interpretation of what professors' lives involved and to assess their impact.

**Craft practices and swimming communities**

The opportunities afforded by nineteenth-century urbanization and commercialization, technological advances, and global expansion, enabled many sporting professionals to make entrepreneurial use of their expertise. Professional swimmers, having established their swimming prowess by attaining a 'championship', opportunities for which proliferated as an increasing number of pool proprietors organized races for prizes and titles to attract spectators and competitors, used the associated symbolic capital to establish themselves as 'Professors'. This term, which had long been associated with activities such as dancing, sword play, music and equestrianism, became further entrenched in the eighteenth century through its adoption by leading pugilists, and it was widely understood to mean an expert practitioner who was available for teaching engagements. These individuals, who generally emerged from within the swimming community, employed the knowledge and practical skills they had developed. Frost

(1816), for example, emphasized that his swimming text was not the product of a 'speculative theory' but the result of many years of long and successful practice. Professors also experimented in applying emerging knowledge, particularly as commercial opportunities became more widespread, leading to the creation of new ideas, concepts, and methods (Day, 2014). As teachers, inventors, promoters, and entrepreneurs, they assumed responsibility not only for their athletes but also for the progress of the sport, since their financial success depended on both for economic gain and social status.

The working lives of swimming professors replicated that of the artisans and craftsmen that surrounded them. In conventional craft processes, the artisan was the master of a body of traditional knowledge and the tacit nature of craft transmission involved the master modelling and the apprentice observing, a process described as 'stealing with the eyes' (Gamble, 2001). It has been argued that an emphasis on copying inevitably inhibited innovation, but craftsmen were constantly stimulated to experiment by competitors, commercialisation, and emerging technologies (Clegg, 1977). In swimming, craft knowledge was embedded within informal communities of practice, the close-knit groups surrounding professors that developed shared methodologies and a common repertoire of resources (Wenger, 2004). While these were often family centred they also included other practitioners whose served a form of apprenticeship with the professor before going on to establish their own careers. Skills and knowledge were reproduced across generations through the granting of access to shared understandings, and the communities they generated and sustained were central to professors' working lives. The operational nature of these self-contained communities could lead to the perpetuation of 'fads' but they also gave considerable scope for innovation (Day, 2011).

***Professors***

While the trajectory of each professor's career was dictated by his abilities as swimmer, teacher, and publicist, it was also affected by the availability of spaces and facilities so

ambitious professors moved to where they could find the crowds, the swimming baths and the competition, to support them financially. Nineteenth-century attitudes to cleanliness have been well-documented (Kelley, 2010) and the public baths and wash-houses created following the 1846 Baths and Wash-Houses Act were considered to be of 'inestimable benefit' in transmitting middle-class values to the working classes (Beale, 1855). A subsequent Act in 1878 accelerated this building process, providing professors with further venues for their entrepreneurial activities, which focused on teaching, competing and the performance of swimming feats and displays.

Many professors only committed themselves fully to the role when they were assured of sufficient financial returns or stability of employment. Charles Whyte, swimming master to the Elephant Club in the 1860s, was a champion five-mile swimmer and his reputation was such that he was able to call himself a professor in his adverts for work as a swimming entertainer and teacher by 1870. He was variously the swimming master at Harrow School, the professor attached to King Street Baths, Camden Town, and swimming master at Paddington Public Baths, where he organized swimming entertainments for many years. Despite his extensive swimming involvement, Whyte always referred to himself as a fret cutter between 1871 and 1901 and it was only in the 1911 census that he described himself as a swimming instructor and son Charles as a swimming tutor. Passing on knowledge was a feature of swimming communities and children like Charles were central to aquatic displays. During 1883, Alfred Ward, swimming master at Hammersmith Baths, staged swimming fetes with daughter Minnie and demonstrated his invention of waterproof covering for Channel swimmers by using nine-year-old son Alfred to paddle in one of the suits from Dover to Folkestone (*Penny Illustrated*, September 22, 1883, p. 10). In 1891, Ward was living with sons Alfred and Ernest, and daughters Florence and Maud, all of whom called themselves professional swimmers. William Tuohy exhibited with his children in 1851 (*The Times*, August 6, 1851, p. 6) and forty years

later the swimming instructor was living with wife Sarah and daughters Sarah and Mary, all of whom were swimming instructresses.

Opportunities to supplement the returns from public performances by teaching increased as the number of swimming facilities expanded and the demand for lessons grew. Professional teacher 'Sergeant' Leahy, swimming master at Eton from 1868 to 1889, commented on the craft nature of swimming teaching:

> If parents wish their children to learn any trade or profession, they generally look out for the best teachers of it. Why not in swimming as well as other things? If possible, get a teacher of the best style of swimming, who is master of the art in all its different stages, who has studied it…he ought to be as well acquainted with everything that pertains to swimming as other trade masters are with their respective trades (Leahy, 1875, p. 21).

These 'tradesmen' ranged from bath attendants to specialist swimming teachers and professors like Harry Parker (*Swimming, Rowing and Athletic Record*, May 10, 1873, p. 2). Parker, who incorporated sister Emily into his aquatic entertainments, taught at the Crown Baths, Kennington Oval, and at Brixton Baths, where Emily taught a ladies' class during the 1870s. One writer observed that Emily could be described as a swimming professor because she had been teaching women alongside her mother Louisa for some time, as well as giving nationwide exhibitions (*Northern Echo*, September 6, 1875, p. 3), but this was a minority view. Females were rarely, if ever, referred to as professors and the 1881 census records Harry as a professor of swimming and Emily as a teacher of swimming.

**Professor George Poulton (1824-1898)**

Swimming professors were never confined to London and the first of the two exemplar biographies presented here explores the life course of a professor who spent most of his career in Manchester. George Poulton, born in London in 1824, competed in the premier swimming events of the 1840s at the National Baths in High Holborn, alongside other elite swimmers of

the day, including Harold Kenworthy. In 1845, George joined Kenworthy in demonstrating 'astonishing evolutions in swimming, diving and floating' (*Era*, July 13, 1845; *Lloyds Weekly,* August 3, 1845) and Kenworthy subsequently described him as one of the best swimmers in the country (*Era*, May 17, 1846). A year later, having been engaged as swimming master for two years, he was giving lessons and promoting exhibitions at the public baths in Newcastle, while continuing to compete, winning a three-mile race in the Tyne for a £5 stake (*Newcastle Journal*, June 12, 1847, p. 2l; *Bells Life*, July 4, 1847, p. 8). Commentators noted that swimming in Newcastle had been considerably improved, both in terms of speed and science, because of his work (*Newcastle Courant*, July 23, 1847; August 20, 1847).

After his contract ended, George taught swimming at the Albion Baths in Leicester (*Leicester Journal*, May 19, 1848, p. 2) and then returned to London to work as a stationer and librarian before becoming swimming master at the Albion Baths in Kingsland where he took a benefit in July 1854. Benefits were opportunities for professors to stage aquatic exhibitions for their own profit, rather than being paid a fee for appearing in promotions organized by others, and Poulton began his show by swimming 160 feet underwater (four lengths) followed by swimming a length with his hands and legs bound. He then swam eighty feet in only four strokes and did the same distance backwards. This was followed by some 'scientific swimming', floating, and turning eight somersaults without touching the bottom. He then drank a bottle of milk and smoked a pipe underwater (*Era*, July 30, 1854, p. 13). A year later, George had migrated to Manchester (*Bells Life*, September 16, 1855, p. 8), where he became a firm fixture as an exhibiting swimmer, a publican and sporting entrepreneur, and a teacher. Advertisements over a forty-year period exhorted the public to learn to swim with the 'Champion Scientific Swimmer of England' and Poulton increasingly began to advertise daily classes for both men and women as well as running lessons for local schools (*Manchester Courier,* April 4, 1863, p. 12; December 20, 1865, p. 3; December 26, 1883, p. 1).

***Venues, competitions and entertainments***

Greengate Baths, one of the first 'modern' swimming baths, which opened in 1856, was financed by the Manchester and Salford Baths & Laundry Corporation, who later operated Mayfield and Leaf Street Baths. Poulton, as swimming master, took benefits at Greengate, giving displays, organizing competitions and donating prizes (*Bells Life*, September 25, 1859, p. 6; October 21, 1860, p. 7; July 31, 1880, p. 8) and when Mayfield Baths was opened the professor quickly included the facility into his portfolio. In September 1858, a large audience witnessed his displays and contests for his silver medals given to encourage swimming and diving. In October 1866, the Manchester Society for the Promotion of the Art of Swimming arranged races at the Baths and Poulton exhibited his skills (*Bells Life*, September 5, 1858, p. 5; October 20, 1866, p. 9). In 1882, Poulton organized further swimming galas and benefits and in 1883 he exhibited in the ladies' bath, alongside his male and female pupils (*Manchester Courier,* October 28, 1882, p. 7; April 21, 1883, p. 14).

When Leaf Street Baths opened in 1860, Poulton displayed his skills and presented a silver medal to one of his pupils for winning the main race. He also thanked the audience for their patronage and promised to do all he could to promote swimming in the city (*Manchester Courier,* July 21, 1860, p. 9). In September 1861, he donated further prizes for his benefit, including a £20 challenge cup, distance 500 yards, open to the world, and Leaf Street subsequently hosted races for the Manchester Champion's Challenge Cup in 1862 and 1863. Poulton organized the events, gave demonstrations, and presented a 'first-class Victoria and Albert medal', for an all-England 200 yards race for boys under 20 years old (*Bells Life*, September 15, 1861, p. 7; April 27, 1862, p. 7; May 18, 1862, p. 6; July 5, 1863, p. 3). In June 1864, Poulton organized a series of races at Leaf Street, including a 400 yards event, open to all England, and in October 1864, E.B. Mather challenged 'Professor Poulton's prodigy (Meakin)' over 500 yards in Leaf Street Baths for £25 to £100 a side (*Bells Life*, June 25, 1864,

p. 7; October 8, 1864, p. 2). A year later Poulton staged a race for his Lancashire Silver Cup, open to men resident within 100 miles of Manchester. *Bell's Life* praised him for the arrangements and the cup was swum for again in 1865, when Mather's third consecutive victory made it his personal property (*Bells Life*, July 29, 1865, p. 7; November 4, 1865, p. 7). Although the provision of swimming baths increased throughout the nineteenth century, open water spaces continued to provide useful venues for professors. In 1858, Poulton took advantage of the large lake created by John Jennison at Bellevue Gardens to exhibit his skills and lifesaving methods (*Bells Life*, September 5, 1858, p. 5) and the following year he repeated these performances in front of about 2,000 spectators, resulting in receipts of £22 (*Manchester Courier,* August 20, 1859, p. 7). In 1864, Poulton introduced a 'handsome' cup at Belle Vue for a swimming race for youths under eighteen (*Manchester Courier,* August 17, 1864, p. 2), and in August 1865 the event attracted many of the best swimmers from around the country (*Bells Life*, August 26, 1865, p. 7), after which these competitions continued until at least 1876 (*Manchester Courier,* July 29, 1876, p. 1). Poulton also organized swimming galas at Hollingworth Lake, Littleborough. At his 'Great Swimming Gala and Aristocratic Fete' in 1868, prizes were donated by the Hollingworth Lake Company, and the proprietor of the Lake Hotel, and the professor demonstrated his skills. Other attractions included a duck hunt with 20 live ducks, walking the pole for two live pigs, along with bands and dancing. Cheap trips to the event were provided by the Lancashire and Yorkshire railway (*Bells Life*, August 1, 1868, p. 10). The professor's benefit at the lake in August 1868 drew 6,000 spectators (*Bells Life*, September 5, 1868, p. 10) and he presented further races and duck hunts in 1869. One reporter noted that these events figured prominently among the many annual galas and festivals around Manchester, both in the large number of competitors and in the talent displayed (*Manchester Courier,* July 15, 1869, pp. 1, 8; August 30, 1869, p. 3).

Outside of Manchester, Poulton performed regularly in the 1860s at the New Royal Albert Baths, Burnley, and he donated several prizes including the £10 Burnley Champion Challenge Cup, open to residents living within 25 miles (*Bells Life*, May 21, 1864, p. 6; May 6, 1865, p. 7; April 14, 1866, p. 7; September 5, 1868, p. 10). He appeared in Liverpool throughout the 1860s and the Margaret Street Baths, Everton, included a race open to All England for a cup given by the professor in September 1866 when he was joined by champion swimmer Harry Gurr, who was with him again in 1868 (*Bells Life*, October 8, 1864, p. 2; September 15, 1866, p. 3; June 8, 1867, p. 7; September 5, 1868, p. 10). The same decade saw Poulton in Birmingham and Nottingham, exhibiting with Gurr on occasions as well as J. Wilkinson from Australia. Poulton was joined by 'Master J. Poulton' and Harry Keel to display feats of ornamental swimming, diving, eating, smoking etc. in Birmingham in 1871 and a year later, he gave an entertainment at Morecambe (*Bells Life*, May 12, 1861, p. 7; September 30, 1865, p. 7; October 28, 1865, p. 7; August 18, 1866, p. 7; September 15, 1866, p. 3; August 4, 1866, p. 7; August 3, 1867, p. 6; June 24, 1871, p. 9; August 31, 1872, p. 10). Poulton, Gurr, and professor Woodbridge, were at Park Baths, Halifax, Yorkshire, in August 1865, and Poulton, with his associates, displayed their skills when Wellington Street Baths, Leeds, managed by professor Johnson, opened in 1869 (*Bells Life*, August 19, 1865, p. 6; May 5, 1869, p. 8). These trips were not without their dangers and Poulton was seriously injured by a railway collision on September 14, 1864, at Bushery, whilst travelling by express train to Birmingham to fulfil an aquatic engagement. They were also not without organizational difficulties. In 1865, Poulton arranged a gala in Lancaster in which Gurr was scheduled to attend but, unfortunately, he was nowhere to be found (*Bells Life*, October 29, 1864, p. 7; October 21, 1865, p. 9).

***Club activities and officiating***

The creation of swimming clubs accelerated after an 1878 Public Baths and Washhouses Act encouraged the development of indoor facilities, which often accommodated several clubs,

most of them engaging a professor to instruct and provide organizational support (Dudgeon, 1870). Poulton was involved with Manchester Swimming Club (MSC) who presented him with a gold watch and chain in 1859 in acknowledgement of his services. In returning thanks, Poulton said he believed MSC members would soon be able to compete with swimmers nationwide. After this 'skilful' teacher exhibited his skills at Hulme Baths in October 1860, matches took place for club medals and in awarding the prizes, Poulton noted that its members had been successful in Gibraltar, Birmingham, London, and Liverpool (*Manchester Courier,* November 12, 1859, p. 6; October 13, 1860, p. 9).

A professor's responsibilities included officiating. In 1859, Poulton refereed Aspinall's match against Mathers over twelve lengths of Mayfield Baths for £10 a side and in 1866, he officiated as starter and handicapper at a Manchester and Salford Association handicap at the baths. In September, when Mather undertook a challenge to swim 500 yards in eight minutes for £20 at Leaf Street Baths, Poulton acted as stakeholder, timekeeper and referee. At a match at Greengate Baths in March 1871 Poulton officiated as referee and later that month he acted as starter at Leaf Street Baths, when he discharged his duties 'most efficiently' (*Bells Life*, November 13, 1859, p. 7; July 7, 1866, p. 9; September 15, 1866, p. 9; April 1, 1871, p. 9; April 29, 1871, p. 9). It is a measure of Poulton's national reputation that he attended a meeting in August 1863 about a national Champion Challenge Cup when delegates agreed on the minimum amount of any wager, that the distance should be two miles in the Thames, and that the management should be entrusted to the London Swimming Club (*Bells Life*, Sunday, August 30, 1863, p. 6). Poulton's expertise was clearly valued within the swimming community. When a public debate took place over the origins of the overhand stroke in 1875, Henry Gardner, who claimed 'to be the first to use and bring it to perfection by winning the championship with it at Manchester', suggested that Poulton might know who originated the stroke. Poulton replied that it was impossible to identify the inventor, but he recalled that

Robinson had won a race with it at Holborn Baths in 1842 (*Bells Life*, December 4, 1875, pp. 7, 10; December 18, 1875, p. 9).

***Sporting entrepreneur***

Professors needed to keep themselves in the public eye and George never forgot to emphasize his swimming skills by issuing challenges. He clearly specialized as an ornamental or scientific swimmer as his challenges over some twenty-five years indicate. In 1870, he challenged Marquis Bibbero for a scientific swimming match, for £25 or £50 a side, and in 1874, he offered to swim 'any man breathing, bar neither country nor colour', a two-minute match of scientific swimming, for £50 or £100 a side, point for point, or trick for trick (*Bells Life*, July 16, 1870, p. 7; July 18, 1874, p. 5).

Competitions, and the financial opportunities they provided, were always few and far between so many swimming professors drew on their reputations to try and build successful commercial concerns. By 1865, Poulton was running the *Griffin Inn* in Manchester, where gala entries could be made, trophies could be seen behind the bar, and competitors from all over the country would meet. In the tradition of sporting publicans, the professor involved himself in sports other than swimming. He gave cups for a 'Great Angling Match (Open to All England)' in Hollingworth Lake and sponsored shooting matches at the Copenhagen grounds in Manchester, including presenting a cup for gentlemen amateurs. George also gave a cup, plus prize money, for a half-mile pedestrian handicap at the City Grounds in Manchester (*Bells Life*, August 19, 1865, pp. 6, 7; December 30, 1865, p. 8; June 16, 1869, p. 7).

Like many professors, George displayed considerable longevity in his swimming activities. In 1881, he was still based at the Mayfield Baths as a swimming teacher and he wrote to the local paper refuting a suggestion that the bath attendants there could not swim. He was also involved in planning for a private swimming bath for Manchester in 1884 (*Manchester Courier,* August 24, 1881, p. 7; July 22, 1884, p. 4). The 1891 census records the 67-year-old as a swimming

master and when he arranged the annual swimming gala at Mayfield Baths that year he included a women's race as well as giving an exhibition of scientific swimming (*Manchester Courier,* September 23, 1891, p. 4). George eventually died in 1898, aged 74.

**Frederick Beckwith (1821-1898)**

The commercial imperative that drove many of Poulton's initiatives is reflected in the activities of Frederick Edward Beckwith, whose aquatic promotions were constant features in the sporting and entertainment landscape during the nineteenth century. His swimming knowledge, social networks and entrepreneurial flair, established him at the centre of a South London sporting and entertainment community and his career exemplifies the critical role played by the swimming entrepreneur in stimulating and sustaining interest in the sport. His core community contained his children, Jessie and Frederick, then Willie, Charles, Agnes, Lizzie and Robert, along with other family members such as second wife Elizabeth, daughters-in-law Emma and Emily, and grandchildren Frederick and Agnes.

Having beaten all the 'cracks' in Southern England by 1840, Beckwith relocated from Ramsgate to Lambeth in London, an astute decision for someone intent on selling his skills to the public. The parish had numerous theatres and music halls as well as the privately owned National Tepid and Cold Swimming Baths, which regularly hosted swimming races, and, in 1853, Lambeth Baths, financed by Lambeth Baths and Washhouses Company Ltd, were opened behind 156 Westminster Bridge Road. Described as the most extensive baths in England (*The Times*, July 4, 1853, p. 3) they became the core site for Frederick's activities in the 1850s and 1860s. Like its predecessors, the main pool could be boarded over to make an indoor arena and the Beckwith family later managed a gymnasium there during the winter.

Frederick held the post of swimming master at Lambeth for over twenty years, and taught at several elite schools, through which he established connections to members of the nobility (*Era*, June 4, 1898, p. 18). Although he referred to himself as a fancy willow seat maker in

1851 he increasingly advertised himself as a professor as the decade progressed. After winning the 'Championship of England' he regularly issued challenges over distances from one hundred yards to four miles, before announcing his retirement in 1858, because teaching commitments meant that he could no longer sustain 'that condition fit to hold his title of champion, which he has maintained for six years against all comers' (*Era*, July 18, 1858, p. 14). Frederick wrote *The Whole Art of Swimming* (1857), established the National Philanthropic Swimming Society in 1859 to diffuse among the working classes 'a knowledge of the art of swimming' and promote proficiency in a healthy exercise and lifesaving, and reportedly originated the first amateur club, the Leander Swimming Club, in the early 1850s (*Morning Chronicle*, May 29, 1857, p. 7; *Era*, June 19, 1859, p. 14; Dudgeon, 1870, p. 23).

Beckwith used the symbolic capital accruing from his status as champion to expand his commercial concerns and between 1859 and 1860 he ran an alehouse, *The Leander*, as well as developing his swimming business (*Bell's Life*, December 4, 1859, p. 7; April 29, 1860, p. 7). In 1861, Frederick took over *The Good Intent*, situated within one hundred yards of Lambeth Baths (*Bell's Life*, September 22, 1861, p. 6) and this became one of the most celebrated sporting inns in South London (*Bell's Life*, February 9, 1862, p. 6). By 1863, he was managing a post office and during the late 1870s, he was host of the *King's Head* hotel. Beckwith was also a cigar shop proprietor in the 1880s (*Bell's Life*, August 9, 1863, p. 6; June 30, 1877, p. 9; *Swimming Notes and Record*, May 10, 1884, p. 2) and 1884 business directories listed him as a swimming teacher, an agent for aquatic galas, and a tobacconist (*The Business Directory of London*, 1884, 47; *Walter's Theatrical and Sporting Directory*, 1884). Unfortunately, his financial acumen failed to match his ambition and, in 1861, Frederick appeared in the Court for Relief of Insolvent Debtors. In 1879, he was in the London Bankruptcy Court (*The Times*, June 27, 1861, p. 4; *London Gazette*, May 6, 1879, p. 216). There were also complaints in 1872

that swimmers were having problems in getting prizes from the professor (Metropolitan Swimming Association Minutes, February 8, 1872; September 9, 1872).

Frederick's position at Lambeth enabled him to organize, and profit from, galas and benefits, and his renown for aquatic exhibitions spread to the extent that he was increasingly engaged outside of London from the 1860s onwards. He utilized every facility at his disposal, including crystal tanks on stages in theatres and music halls, and in 1869, the 'Beckwith Frogs', dressed in fleshings and drawers, demonstrated their 'fishlike facility' in a large tank in Cremorne Gardens in Chelsea (*Penny Illustrated*, June 19, 1869, p. 7). At Lambeth in November 1873 Willie and Agnes performed their tank feats, 'a mode of entertainment that has of late years been highly appreciated by the public', at one end of the gymnasium and tank displays became a staple feature of the work of both male and female professionals (*Liverpool Mercury*, November 9, 1873, p. 3). Fredrick later claimed credit for the introduction of tank performances, pointing out that he had been the first to travel with a tank during a visit to Paris in 1872, when Willie and Agnes appeared at the Porcherons Music Hall (*Era*, April 11, 1891, p. 17).

Other venues important to Frederick included the Royal Aquarium and Summer and Winter Garden in Westminster, opened in 1876 opposite Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament. It was intended initially to be a cultural institution but, after mounting losses, the directors hired ex-trapeze artist, 'The Great Farini', to make 'The Aq' a place of popular entertainment. The aquarium tanks subsequently staged Beckwith's swimming school and his 'amphibious family' in their swimming, diving and boating entertainments throughout the 1880s. Always aware of the value of the female performer in attracting an audience, Frederick introduced Alice Sinclair, 'the Lady Godiva, and champion ornamental swimmer of the world' in 1885 (British library poster, December 18, 1885). Throughout the 1890s, the Beckwiths gave tank performances and aquatic entertainments in music halls, circus rings, aquaria, swimming

baths, and in the sea, rivers and lakes (*Northern Echo*, November 15, 1893; *Sporting Times*, August 4, 1894, p. 6; *Reynolds's Newspaper*, December 16, 1894, p. 6). The difficulties encountered by swimming entrepreneurs were illustrated on one occasion when Beckwith went to Southampton only to find that a travelling circus drew everyone away from his show, apart from those wanting to compete for prizes (*London Journal*, October 16, 1875, pp. 251-2).

Beckwith's aquatic community broadened to encompass most of the prominent swimming professors and female professionals (natationists) of the period, including Thomas Attwood, who was Frederick's assistant swimming teacher by 1869 and continued to teach swimming into the 1890s, and Richard Giles, who swam with the Beckwiths in the 1870s and later became a professor. David Pamplin, who exhibited with Frederick, became swimming master at the Camberwell and Dulwich Baths in 1863 and listed swimming teacher, master, or instructor, as his occupation between 1871 and 1911 (Day, 2011). Frederick was shrewd enough to develop his activities across a broad cultural range and he established strong connections to aristocrats, writers, journalists and sportsmen of all persuasions. In 1861, the elite swimmers attending a Beckwith benefit were joined by professional oarsmen, physical culturists, and Pudney, the ten-mile runner, who exhibited his champion's belt. The Lambeth Baths gymnasium winter season in 1873 included wrestlers, strongmen, and boxers, and in 1879, the Beckwiths promoted a pedestrian event for music-hall artistes, emphasising the close relationships established between sportsmen and entertainers in this period (*Era,* July 7, 1861; November 9, 1873; November 16, 1879).

Beckwith's career highlights both his sense of community and his swimming expertise. Craft and innovation were constantly engaged, for example, through the continuous refinement of traditional swimming techniques and his reputation was consolidated by his coaching of Harry Gardner, 500 yards champion of England (*Manchester Guardian*, August 17, 1864, p. 1), and training of Matthew Webb for his successful Channel swim in 1875 (Watson, 1899, p. 21). For

swimming professors, technique was always more important than physical training so the major innovations they made were in stoke development. The foundations of the crawl stroke, for example, were laid by London-born professor Frederick Cavill who emigrated to Australia in 1879, where he trained competitive swimmers, including his sons, Sydney, Arthur, Dick, and Percy, who later broke several records in England using their crawl stroke (*Manchester Guardian*, September 27, 1897, p. 3). In the tradition of the sharing and developing of craft knowledge, the stroke had emerged from Cavill's observation of local practices and a willingness to experiment and innovate (Sullivan, 1927, pp. 37-38).

Beckwith remained prominent in the sporting psyche of the late nineteenth century and no other professor was as well regarded, as a teacher, a performer, and an advocate for swimming. As early as 1859, he was described as one who had 'striven hard, both by precept and example, to cultivate and uphold this noble and useful art' by 'his unwearied exertions to promote and extend among all classes a practical acquaintance with the art of swimming' (*Bell's Life*, December 4, 1859, p. 7*)*. Another journalist wrote in 1882 that Beckwith had been 'untiring in his zeal and energy' for forty years in showing the importance of teaching swimming to children and noted that the family displays at the Aquarium had provided a major stimulus to propagation of swimming (*Era*, May 20, 1882, p. 4). William Wilson in *The Swimming Instructor* (1883) described Beckwith as 'the father of present-day swimming', a view later reiterated by Ralph Thomas (1904, p. 295).

***Agnes Beckwith (1861-1951)***

The influence of the Beckwiths in stimulating swimming among women at home and abroad was significant. Fred's daughter Agnes, the most recognized and acclaimed natationist of the period, exhibited in America and Canada in 1883 and swam with P.T. Barnum's 'Greatest Show on Earth' at Madison Square Garden in 1887 (*Penny Illustrated,* August 18, 1883, p. 10; *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*, April 2, 1887, p. 4). This visit stimulated several imitators who

then disseminated swimming knowledge across the continent. Clara 'Beckwith' and Cora 'Beckwith' performed regularly on stage and in travelling fairs in America over the decades following Agnes' visits, falsely claiming British roots and connections to the Beckwith dynasty. They not only appropriated the Beckwith name, but they also annexed Beckwith aquatic routines and practices. Agnes spent her winters in England touring indoor facilities with a troupe of female swimmers and Cora replicated this in America for many years with her 'Neptune's Daughters', considered one of the 'best aquatic entertainments in vaudeville' (*Manitoba Free Press*, January 6, 1917, p. 14). Just as Agnes spent her summers at English seaside resorts, Cora established her own summer season touring fairs, carnivals and festivals. One feature of these women's working lives was their innovate use of technology. Clara used a ten-foot-long tank, four feet wide and eight feet deep containing salted water and heated to 92 degrees (*Lewiston Evening Journal*, July 31, 1893, p. 2). Because her summer was spent in rural fairs, Cora took a substantial paraphernalia with her, including a canvas and a ten-foot by fifty-foot tank holding 40,000 gallons of water, heated by the boiler that powered the merry-go-round. She also performed in a circus ring, covered with a 'tremendous rubber' and filled with four feet of water, and a fifty-foot-long and twenty-foot-wide trench, while her night exhibitions were lit by electricity (*Kansas City Journal*, July 2, 1899, p. 16; *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 19, 1899, p. 5; *Ohio Democrat*, April 23, 1903; *Police Gazette*, June 25, 1904, p. 2; *New York Clipper,* April 2, 1906, p. 270; April 27, 1907, p. 278; *Austin Daily Herald*, September 24, 1907; *Iowa City Citizen*, August 19, 1908, p. 8; *New York Clipper*, September 21, 1912).

Agnes also travelled extensively in Europe, promoting the Beckwith name and demonstrating what female swimmers could achieve. In 1882, she appeared at the Royal Baths in Brussels, in a programme distinguished by her 'calm harmoniousness' and the absence of obvious effort. Observers recorded that they had never seen swimming with 'such elegance, vigor, and safety'

(*Independence Belge*, July 17, 1882, p. 2; *Meuse*, July 19, 1882, p. 2; *Secho Du Parlement*, July 20, 1882, p. 2). In Paris, in 1886, Agnes performed at the New Circus and five years later she was at the Sophienbad in Vienna (*Le Temps*, February 20, 1886, p. 5; *Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung*, May 14, 1891, p. 479). When she appeared again in Paris in 1894, she offered 500 francs to anyone able to remain at the bottom of her aquarium for as long as she did (*Le Gaulois*, March 11, p. 1894, 4; *La Lanterne*, March 4, 1894, pp. 3-4). At home, Agnes was leading her own troupe of lady swimmers by the late 1880s and, during the 1890s, she appeared as 'Queen of the Waves' at Boyton's Water Show at Earls Court, London, and performed with Boswell's Grand Circus, Transfield's Circus, and Hengler's Cirque.

Although Agnes was never able to convert her social capital into personal financial capital, her appearances at home and abroad had a significant impact on attitudes towards women's swimming. Natationists like Agnes were among the first women to demonstrate the capabilities of the female body, and their skill was widely applauded, not least because female spectators would want to 'acquire the knowledge and skill which would enable them to do the same'. Through teaching, demonstrations and exhibitions, natationists like Agnes made a major contribution to swimming becoming a popular means of providing women with a 'counterpoise to their more sedentary employments and physically less active life' (*Manchester Times*, September 21, 1900, p. 8; Day, 2012). Natationists were also important transitional figures in terms of swimming dress. The commercial demands of aquatic events meant that natationists were required to combine fashion and function and their individually-designed costumes allowed freedom of movement as well as providing the flamboyance necessary for public display. In the long term, this natational focus on functional, rational, swimming outfits was replicated by those adopted by later female competitors who found their racing times restricted by the unsuitability of their swimwear (*Girl's Own Paper*, November 26, 1898, 136).

**Conclusion**

The life courses of Poulton and Beckwith illustrate many commonalities in their working practices and emphasize their importance to the development of swimming from its roots in the bathing culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to the recognizably modern sport that existed at the turn of the twentieth century. Their first task was to establish their credibility as a 'professor'. For Poulton this came through his expertise as a champion 'scientific swimmer', while Beckwith used his skills as a speed swimmer to become champion of England. These successes enabled both men to pursue careers as swimming teachers, during which they extended awareness of the activity by using different technologies and exhibiting in a range of venues, outdoors and indoors, in the new baths and aquaria, and in the music halls and theatres. The need for novelty in these displays encouraged experimentation with skills and ways of moving in the water, while coaching commitments and the search for speed led to stroke innovations that underpinned and informed twentieth-century swimming techniques. The trialling of different swimwear through these displays, particularly among female members of their swimming communities, also influenced later swimsuit design.

These physical efforts were enhanced by the networks that professors created with other practitioners within the sport and in the wider social, sporting and entertainment communities that they interacted with. The taking on of commercial concerns away from the pool, such as pubs, provided a focal point for some of these extended networks and a base for their swimming and sporting communities where trophies could be viewed, entries and wagers made, news of the day could be shared, and ideas discussed and developed. Allied to this of course was the creation of clubs, the assuming of administrative and officiating roles, the regular staging of competitions, and the employment of related publicity strategies such as the donating of prizes to attract entries to their benefits and galas. While adopting these roles was clearly in each professor's own interests, without their entrepreneurial activities, swimming as a serious activity would have struggled to have achieved any public profile. Although their motivation

was commercially driven, the outcome of the efforts of these entrepreneurs was the expansion of the participation base for the sport among all classes, for women as well as men, thereby generating the widespread involvement necessary for the sport to develop. In the case of the Beckwith community, and Agnes in particular, this impacted abroad as well as at home and the raising of awareness in Europe and America as to the validity of swimming as an acceptable female activity can be linked to their efforts.

***Centralisation and organisation***

Poulton and Beckwith were not unique in the nineteenth century swimming world (Day, 2010, 2014) but the type of swimming professor that they represented disappeared quickly after the ASA established control of the sport during the 1890s, resulting in the 'purification' of swimming into an amateur activity. It has become something of a cliché that 'winners write history' but it does seem that the critical role played by professors in creating the foundations for modern swimming has been, at best, marginalized or forgotten, and, at worst, been the subject of derision from those not prepared to look beyond their entrepreneurial activities. To a certain extent, professionals brought this on themselves by failing to establish their own robust central organization. Swimming professors tried to combine by forming a Professional Swimming Association (PSA) on 6 July 1881 to organize professional competitions and promote professional activity and it 'prospered until it became the wealthiest swimming institution in England'. It might 'have gone on prospering if its financial stability had not been wrecked' but 'ultimately the members killed it' and the PSA slid into oblivion in late 1891 (Thomas, 1904, 357). This was not really a surprise. Contemporary authors refer to 'regimes of appropriation', which recognize that financial incentives prevent those who have competitive knowledge from sharing it with outsiders. Many groups may simply not want to share, or they may want to hide what they know (Teece, 1986; Duguid, 2005) and in sports like swimming, where finesse and skill are paramount, swimming professors often jealously

guarded a body of sport-specific technical knowledge that was a valuable commodity for their dependants.

The invisibility of swimming professors and natationists in the history of swimming can be attributed to the ASA and its proponents who were quick to write them out of the records and to expunge their contributions from the collective memory. Commenting on professional swimmers in 1892, one writer, probably reflecting the hardening of attitudes among the amateur fraternity, observed that, 'With the notable exception of the Beckwiths who, father and sons, are a credit to themselves and their sport... professional swimmers are, as a rule, the dirtiest dogs in the world' (*Sporting Times*, 21 May 1892, p. 2). A year later, Sinclair argued that many swimmers who called themselves 'Professor' on the assumption that they were born teachers because they were successful champions, rarely, if ever, applied scientific principles. Attempts to institute certification had been 'rendered futile' by these men because they had wanted certificates to be awarded without examination since 'the ordeal would have been too much for some of their number'. Amateurs should take responsibility for developing an examination system to encourage those deterred from teaching for a living because of the poor reputation of professionals (Sinclair and Henry, 1893, pp. 27-31). Billington later criticized nineteenth-century professors for having:

> …had a number of recipes by heart, to which he most religiously adhered, right or wrong, advancing as an unanswerable argument, that the man whom he had trained last had faithfully followed his instructions and won his race through this much-vaunted lasting power when the chances were, that had the learned empiric not been his attendant, the athlete would have won his race more easily (Billington 1926, p. 55).

Part of the problem for these commentators was the tension between their vision of swimming as an amateur sport, adhering to values of volunteerism and participation, and the commercial approach adopted by swimming professors and entrepreneurs. The close relationship established by professors between entertainment and sport was not unique to the age of course.

Professional athletes, aware of the transitory nature of their earning potential from sport, tend to explore every potential avenue to capitalize on their reputation and this imperative had encouraged nineteenth-century professors to initiate and sustain the teaching of swimming and life-saving and the expansion of the swimming art in all its forms. As a result, through their innovative use of technologies, their creativity in the way they accessed the sporting and entertainment environments, and their specific encouragement of the female swimmer, these professors and their aquatic craft communities demonstrated a willingness to embrace modernity that fundamentally altered attitudes to swimming and created the basis for the contemporary sport.

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