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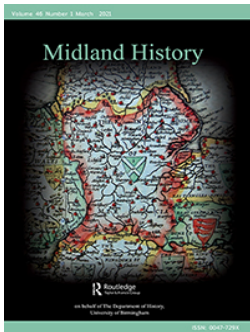
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Dave Day & Margaret Roberts

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Swimming beyond the Metropolis: The Kent Street Baths in Victorian Birmingham

Dave Day^a and Margaret Roberts^b

^aDepartment of History, Politics and Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK;

^bIndependent Researcher

ABSTRACT

Throughout the Victorian era, the availability of facilities and prevailing social attitudes were important influences on the swimming landscape. Middle-class concerns about the working classes led to the creation of municipal swimming baths following Acts of Parliament in 1846 and 1878 and these became hubs for the development of local swimming communities incorporating teachers, baths staff and users. Previously, swimming had been dependent on individual entrepreneurs, swimming professors, mostly operating in London, but amateur swimmers assumed control of the sport through their creation of clubs and the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA), which created the Midland Counties ASA. This paper draws on a range of sources, including archives, newspapers, and census records, to illustrate these transitions in the Midlands through a case study of the first 50 years of operation at the Kent Street Baths in Birmingham, which demonstrates the ways in which one local swimming community evolved, expanded and changed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

KEYWORDS

Kent Street baths; swimming; professors; Birmingham; communities

Introduction

During the early nineteenth century, local and national ‘worthies’ delivered lectures, or authored pamphlets and books, emphasizing the importance of personal cleanliness and advising the ‘labouring classes’ to adopt a daily bathing regime because cleanliness was one of the ‘greatest aids to health’.¹ These concerns underpinned the 1846 Baths and Washhouses Act, which encouraged local authorities to build baths and washhouses to provide washing and swimming facilities at prices that made them accessible to the working class. The Act also required local authorities to make bye-laws to ensure privacy and security, to ensure that there was a separation of the sexes for anyone aged over eight, to prevent inappropriate behaviour, and to determine the duties of the ‘officers, servants and others’ that they appointed.² The facilities that emerged as a result of this Act, and that of 1878, functioned as key loci in the middle-class mission to

CONTACT Dave Day  D.J.Day@mmu.ac.uk  Geoffrey Manton 0-14, Rosamund Street West, Manchester M15 6EB

¹Health of Towns Association, *Unhealthiness of Towns, Its Causes and Remedies Being a Lecture Delivered on the 10th of December 1845, In the Mechanics’ Institute at Plymouth* by Viscount Ebrington, M.P. (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1846), pp. 33, 43; H. W. Lobb, *Hygiene or the Handbook of Health* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1855).

²*Bill for promoting Voluntary Establishment in Boroughs, Cities and Towns in Ireland, of Public Baths and Washhouses 1846* (523). House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online.

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propagate their values throughout society. Since personal cleanliness was associated with sober, industrious habits, and a sense of domestic and social responsibility, baths and washhouses were regarded as the greatest boon which ‘modern civilization has yet given to the working classes’.³ With improved personal hygiene there supposedly came improvements in social and moral behaviour, aspirations articulated in 1861 by Arthur Ryland, the mayor of Birmingham, who argued that the public baths had a direct influence in promoting the happiness, comfort, and the moral and social welfare of citizens. Using the baths would stimulate a ‘greater love of order, cleanliness and cheerfulness’ and, since ‘cleanliness was next to godliness’, he anticipated a greater ‘degree of intelligence and moral improvement’ in the town.⁴

One of the side effects of facility creation was that swimming professors were presented with additional opportunities to develop careers as teachers, swimming masters, and aquatic entrepreneurs. They took full advantage and baths witnessed regular exhibitions, racing, the creation of swimming clubs, and the development of teaching classes, almost as soon as they were opened. Professors were not the only beneficiaries since the need for staffing created employment opportunities and a status hierarchy evolved within the baths community with superintendents and matrons overseeing the working lives of engineers, stokers, and carpenters, as well as other ‘servants’ such as baths attendants, ticket clerks, towel washers, and washerwomen. While an expansion in career opportunities had never been a prime concern for the middle-class promoters of the baths and washhouses, their creation of new facilities had other unintended consequences, including the wider engagement of women, as employees and participants, and the formation of a national swimming organization. As participation increased around the country the local communities based at baths facilities became part of a much larger network of clubs and associations, including the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA), which created three divisions in 1889, the Northern Counties, the Southern Counties and the Midland Counties.⁵ Midlands swimming clubs reconstructed the Midland Counties Amateur Swimming Association (MCASA) in 1890, adopted the rules of the ASA, and agreed that all Midland clubs must join the Association.⁶ The Association was in a ‘very bad way’ by 1891, attributed by commentators, including H. E. Cashmore from Birmingham, to the ‘inattention’ of its honorary secretary, Thomas Dugmore, but, despite further claims about the ‘apathy of the Birmingham swimmers’, the MCASA had recovered by 1892 when the Executive included Cashmore as a vice-president and five Birmingham club representatives.⁷

The first Birmingham club was formed at the Municipal Baths in Kent Street, which is presented as a case study of how one bathing facility generated and sustained swimming communities, and how its day-to-day activities provide a lens through which to view broader social developments. Following a template established by earlier

³T. Crook, ‘“Schools for the Moral Training of the People”: Public Baths, Liberalism and the Promotion of Cleanliness in Victorian Britain’, *European Review of History: Revue Européenne D’Histoire*, 13, 1 (2006), 21–47; L. J. Beale, *On Personal and Domestic Hygiene showing The Value of Sanitary Laws Addressed Especially to the Working Classes* (London: John Churchill, 1855), pp. 10–11.

⁴*Aris’s Birmingham Gazette (ABG)*, 1 June 1861, p. 5.

⁵A. Sinclair and W. Henry, *Swimming* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1893), pp. 349–51.

⁶*Leicester Daily Post*, 24 March 1890, p. 3; *Nottingham Journal*, 19 May 1890, p. 7.

⁷*Birmingham Mail (BM)*, 18 March 1891, p. 3; *Field*, 11 April 1891, p. 55; *Leicester Chronicle*, 19 March 1892, p. 6; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 2 April 1892, p. 2.

work on London, and thereby extending the historiography beyond its focus on the metropolis, this paper combines archival material, contemporary texts, directories, organizational records, and newspaper reports, with census and birth, marriage and death records, to explore the community that evolved at Kent Street Baths in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁸ Sports historians have been criticized for an over-reliance on newspapers reports, which are value-laden with the opinions of proprietors, editors and reporters, but local newspapers, though not free from political or class bias, always reflected local concerns. They are critical in uncovering detail about the baths and the personalities involved. Similarly, census data is not unproblematic in that the occupational status of women was assigned to them by men and reflected male preconceptions of women's social status.⁹ Nevertheless, a combination of sources has enabled biographical material to be collated for relevant swimming professors, teachers, and baths employees, who generally emerged from the artisan or lower middle classes. This has helped to illustrate the interconnectedness between wider social processes and local populations. As Beverly Lemire pointed out, 'The humble, ubiquitous practices that characterised plebeian lives are fertile ground for historical enquiry, mirroring in their collective daily acts the evolving expectations and aspirations of each generation'.¹⁰

The Space

By 1840, Birmingham had a population of 220,000 contained within an area of about two square miles. It consisted of upwards of 44,000 houses, as well as 10 privately owned baths, including a ladies' bath.¹¹ Increasingly, however, middle-class commentators argued that Birmingham would benefit from public bathing facilities that were accessible to the 'humbler classes'.¹² In 1846, the sites for the first two sets of baths were selected, one of which was in Kent Street in the most densely populated part of the town. The land was purchased and it was hoped that an appeal for subscriptions would be started quickly, although it was a 'reproach on the liberality of the wealthier portions of the inhabitants' that such an initiative was necessary.¹³ Eventually, two years after the 1846 Public Baths and Washhouses Act had received royal assent, Birmingham Council sanctioned the construction of public baths and washhouses on Kent Street, beginning a process that saw further facilities opening as the century progressed with Woodcock Street Baths in 1860, Northwood Street Baths in 1862, and Monument Road Baths in 1883.¹⁴

⁸D. Day and M. Roberts, *Swimming Communities in Victorian England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); D. Day, 'Kinship and Community in Victorian London: the "Beckwith Frogs"', *History Workshop Journal*, 71, 1 (2011), 194–218; D. Day, 'London Swimming Professors: Victorian Craftsmen and Aquatic Entrepreneurs', *Sport in History*, 30, 1, (2010), 32–54.

⁹E. Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth-century Censuses', *History Workshop Journal*, 23, 1 (1987), 59–80.

¹⁰B. Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c.1600–1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹¹L. Brierley, *A Brief Description of Birmingham with a Map of the Town* (1840); J. Moth, *The City of Birmingham Baths Department, 1851–1951* (Birmingham: James Upton Ltd, 1951), pp. 1–2.

¹²*Report of Select Committees of The House of Commons: Indexes to the Subject-Matters of The Reports, 1801–34. Evidence from Theodore Price (Magistrate), 343–347; Rev. John Corrie, 362, 363; Charles Smith Foster MP, 414.*

¹³*Birmingham Journal (BJ)*, 4 April 1846, p. 4.

¹⁴ABG, 1 September 1860, p. 5; Moth, pp. 10, 12, 13–14, 62.

Kent Street Baths, which opened on 12 May 1851, were described favourably and in detail by Birmingham newspapers. The first entrance included a pay station and led to the male baths, which were divided into two classes, the first class having better fittings and including glasses, towels, and 'other requisites'. Otherwise, there was little difference between the 13 first-class and 24 second-class rooms. Users were charged sixpence in first class and threepence in second and, thanks to gas lighting, the facilities were open into the evening 'when labour has ceased'. On the other side of the building, the completely separate 'female department' was identical, except there were fewer baths, seven first class and eight second class. The swimming bath was about 89 ft long and 34 ft wide with a gradually increasing depth from four feet to seven, furnished with seats on one side and 22 separate dressing rooms on the other. On the second floor, there were apartments for the superintendent and attendants plus a committee room.

Commentators believed that the main beneficiaries of Kent Street were the 'labouring population' and that as a facility accessible to the humblest, it would become one of the 'most powerful agencies in the promotion of health'. Reflecting these concerns about working-class hygiene, the press also detailed the attached washhouses, noting that reservations about exposing linen to public gaze had been avoided by having separate stalls, each containing a washing trough and boiling tub with cold and hot water taps plus access to wringing machines and clothes horses, while the adjacent laundry had ironing facilities. These washhouses meant that the poorer classes could wash their clothes and linen for a penny an hour, a system that was successfully operated elsewhere and which, in conjunction with the bathing department, was both a 'source of profit for the borough and a great boon to the poor'. Their optimism was justified by attendance figures for the first 12 days with 10,352 patrons, 8,374 in the swimming baths and 274 in the female department, paying a total of £125. By the end of the first month, the total number of users was 22,207, the vast majority attending as swimmers (8,370 in first class and 8,950 in second class).¹⁵

The Community

Kent Street Baths became a focal point for those interested in swimming and the interaction between users and staff, as recorded by the press, suggests ongoing local engagement in the operation of the facility. In exploring these phenomena, this paper uses the exemplar provided by previous work on other locations and separates the community that emerged at Kent Street into those who taught and entertained, those who used the Baths, either as individuals or as members of clubs, and those who staffed the Baths.¹⁶ Reflecting their status with baths committees and customers, and the prevailing social context in which they were employed, staff were consistently referred to as 'servants' and there were often complaints about the costs of their wages.

¹⁵ABG, 19 May 1851, p. 4; BJ, 12 April 1851, p. 7; 24 May 1851, p. 8; 14 June 1851, p. 8.

¹⁶Day and Roberts, *Swimming Communities in Victorian England*.

Staffing the Baths

Economy was always an issue for the authorities and their rate payers but the key factor was the quality of facility management. Typically, a married couple was employed as superintendent and matron, the husband hiring staff and running the baths while his wife acted as money-taker, and they lived above the baths. These positions were not dependent on aquatic abilities, but on their being a joint team capable of managing a small business, and their duties were extensive, including purchasing coal, the supervision of staff, and the profitable use of the facilities. What was different about the management of Kent Street between its opening and the end of the century was that, while the wife of the first superintendent acted as Matron, superintendents were appointed primarily for their engineering expertise and not as part of a management couple.

Superintendents and Engineers

In 1851, fifty-three-year-old Samuel Suffield was superintendent and his wife Elizabeth was matron, although their tenure was relatively short-lived. In May 1857, the Baths and Washhouses Committee (BWC) reported that they had examined the Kent Street accounts and found a deficiency on the sale of soap that Suffield had been unable to account for. The committee had repeatedly called his attention to the ‘incorrect and negligent manner in which his duties were performed’ and a final warning had been issued in January 1856. This had made little difference and Suffield was dismissed in 1857 after the BWC recommended to the Council that ‘a continuation of the present inefficient management of the important institution’ would be ‘detrimental alike to its interests and that of the inhabitants at large’.¹⁷ He was replaced by Benjamin Purnell, previously the engineer at Kent Street.¹⁸ In August 1857, after observing that Purnell had been performing the duties of superintendent following Suffield’s departure ‘with entire satisfaction’, the BWC recommended that the offices of engineer and superintendent be amalgamated and that Purnell be appointed at a salary of £2 5s per week with residence, coal, and gas. Three years later, his salary was raised from £117 to £150 in recognition of the efficient manner in which he had performed his duties, including his saving of £200 for fuel and labour in the supply of hot water.¹⁹ After Purnell died at the Baths in 1881, it was observed that Birmingham had lost ‘an old and valuable servant’, who had won ‘the respect and esteem of those over whom he was placed’ and the ‘confidence and high appreciation’ of the Baths and Parks Committee (BPC). Although employed as the baths superintendent, Purnell had really acted as engineer to the committee, and made several improvements for the ‘more economical and effectual carrying on of the baths’.²⁰

In March 1881, the BPC considered 178 applications for a successor to Purnell and appointed Job Cox, an engine fitter lodging off Kent Street in 1871, as ‘Superintendent Engineer of the Public Baths’ at a salary of two hundred pounds per annum with accommodation, coal, and gas.²¹ In addition to his work at the Baths, Cox designed the

¹⁷1851 Census 107/2059; *ABG*, 18 April 1853, p. 3; *BJ*, 20 May 1857, p. 3.

¹⁸1851 Census 107/1878.

¹⁹*ABG*, 17 August 1857, p. 4; *Birmingham Daily Post (BDP)*, 30 May 1860, p. 3.

²⁰1861 Census RG9/2141; 1871 Census RG10/3103; *BMD*; *BDP*, 29 January 1881, p. 7.

²¹*Wiltshire Times and Trowbridge Advertiser*, 12 March 1881, p. 5; *BDP*, 4 March 1881, p. 4; 1871 Census RG10/3090.

bandstands that adorned many Birmingham parks and, in 1889, he was appointed as office secretary to the Parks Sub-Committee, which involved consolidating the clerical work for both departments at Kent Street and resulted in a ‘considerable saving in expense’. At a concert given by the Birmingham Association of Mechanical Engineers in 1900, Job was recognized for his service as President and at a dinner given for him by the BPC on his retirement in 1914 ‘eulogistic references’ were made to his years of service both as ‘superintendent engineer and secretary of the baths department’ and in the parks department.²² The demands of these combined roles meant that Cox had been given additional help at the Baths. Engineer William Siddall was living at Northwood Baths in 1881 but, as the engineer for the City Baths, he was living in the five-roomed Engineer’s House next to Kent Street Baths by 1891, having moved in when Job Cox moved out in 1885, while engineer Joseph Neal had replaced him in the house ten years later.²³

Money Takers and Cashiers

In contrast to many other local authorities, Birmingham did not place much emphasis on the role of Matron and relied instead on their female administrative staff. Being confident in the honesty of clerical assistance was essential and early advertisements for ‘Money Takers’ at Kent Street asked specifically for a ‘respectable middle-aged Female’. While ‘respectable’ was never defined, the written applications and interviews with the superintendent weeded out anyone deemed inappropriate.²⁴ Mary Ann Hughes, a 52-year-old widow, and her nineteen-year-old daughter, were both employed as cashiers at the baths in 1861, living on the premises,²⁵ and in April 1890, when the BPC were advertising for another money-taker, they were again looking for a widow who had good references and was ‘well up in figures’. Wages were 15 shillings per week with unfurnished apartments and applications, including qualifications, recent testimonials, and the age and number of children, had to be addressed in the candidate’s own handwriting to the superintendent.²⁶ Cashier Clara Thorne, a 38-year-old widow with two children aged 17 and 11, obviously met the criteria and she was living at the Baths in 1891, while widow Mary Portlock was living and working as cashier at Kent Street in both 1901 and 1911.²⁷

Bath Attendants

Bath attendants played an essential part in the running of the baths and, as with the office staff, management was keen to ensure they recruited the right type. In 1883, Kent Street was looking for a ‘Woman (respectable young)’ as a bath attendant and a ‘Youth (respectable)’ with references as a Turkish Bath attendant, while an 1891 advert for a bath attendant was looking to recruit a ‘Man (respectable)’.²⁸ Some attendants had long careers. Tailor Joseph Burnett had become a bath attendant by 1881 and he was

²²*BDP*, 3 August 1877, p. 8; 9 May 1889, p. 5; 19 March 1900 p. 6; 4 April 1914, p. 7.

²³1871 Census RG 10/3150; 1881 Census RG11/3003; *BDP*, 18 September 1886, p. 5; 1891 Census RG12/2381; 1901 Census RG13/2835.

²⁴*ABG*, 1 October 1855, p. 3; *Birmingham Daily Gazette (BDG)*, 21 July 1863, p. 2.

²⁵1861 Census 9/2141.

²⁶*BM*, 19 April 1890, p. 4.

²⁷1891 Census RG12/2381; 1901 Census RG13/2835; 1911 Mary Portlock, 72 Belgrave Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham.

²⁸*BM*, 11 June 1883, p. 4; 26 April 1883, p. 4; 20 April 1891, p. 4.

still working in the role, aged 63, in 1901,²⁹ while his colleague Matthew Gilbert, who was living at Kent Street in 1861, was still working at the baths in 1891.³⁰ Both men undertook a range of duties, including handling corpses, a sensitive task that reinforced the Council's need for 'respectable' bath attendants. At the inquest into the death of Thomas Biddle in February 1885, Joseph, then keeper of the first-class baths, who was looking after the second-class baths because it was Matthew's dinnertime, stated that after seeing Biddle into his bath he had gone back to his own side of the baths. On being told that Biddle had died, he returned to find Matthew dealing with Biddle's body after he had apparently fainted in the bath. Not all deaths at the Baths were accidents. In 1893, Joseph discovered Thomas Page sitting upright in his bath with a gash in his throat self-inflicted with a pocketknife, which had severed several arteries and nearly divided the windpipe.³¹

Keeping discipline and order was a key part of the attendant's role. When two youths were charged with being disorderly and assaulting the second-class swimming bath attendant and Suffield, then superintendent, at Kent Street in 1856, the magistrate said the baths had been established for the 'accommodation of the public at large' and that the defendants must be taught that they should conduct themselves properly so he fined them a total of ten shillings, or 14-day imprisonment.³² Similar problems were reported in 1869, when one correspondent to the press, calling himself/herself 'Probono Publico', complained of the disgusting expressions being used by boys at the baths and suggested posting notices prohibiting obscene language.³³ There were also regular occurrences of theft. When two boys were tried for stealing a shilling in 1851, a detective observed that similar robberies were a daily occurrence and that money and watches were 'the chief plunder'. Thirty years later, this remained a problem and in 1884, magistrates considered instances of robberies at the Baths by a gang that included Alfred Plowright, a former bath attendant.³⁴ The Baths management were always aware that security was an issue. Responding to complaints from 'A season Ticket-holder' and 'A Bather' in 1881, Cox argued that these should have been raised with the attendant or the superintendent at the time and that steps had been taken to address some of the issues. After a spate of incidents at the Turkish Baths in 1887, Cox further noted that if bathers shut their dressing room doors properly then no-one could enter without the attendant's key.³⁵

Swimming Teachers and Professors

As the number of facilities expanded so did the demand for lessons, enabling several individuals to establish themselves as swimming masters and mistresses. In May 1859, it was reported that a teacher of swimming had been engaged at Kent Street and, by July, James Johnson 'professor of swimming at the baths' was teaching swimming on Monday and Friday evenings, as well as donating silver medals as prizes.³⁶ While

²⁹1881 Census RG11/2976 24; 1891 Census RG 12/2377 19; 1901 Census RG 13/2831.

³⁰1861 Census RG 9/2141; 1871 Census RG10/3099; 1881 Census RG11/2975; 1891 Census RG12/2376.

³¹*BDP*, 18 February 1885, p. 7; 29 August 1893, p. 4.

³²*BJ*, 21 June 1856, p. 6.

³³*BDG*, 6 April 1869, p. 4.

³⁴*BJ*, 7 June 1851, p. 3; *BM*, 11 April 1883, p. 2; 19 September 1884, p. 3.

³⁵*BDP*, 26 May 1881, p. 5; 28 October 1887, p. 4.

³⁶*ABG*, 16 May 1859 p. 4; *BDP*, 14 June 1859, p. 3; 13 July 1859, p. 2.

swimming may have been part of his working life, however, Johnson never acknowledged that fact in his personal documentation, which suggests that he spent his adult life as a bed and mattress manufacturer or 'brass founder', interspersed with periods of bankruptcy.³⁷ His relationship with the Baths management also seemed to ebb and flow. Citing his family and members of 'our swimming club', he complained in 1886 that the water in the first-class swimming bath was too cold, to which Job Cox replied that, 'on the first evening' that Johnson had become a swimming club member, his 'brother members' had 'expressed their satisfaction at the temperature and condition of the water'.³⁸

Thomas Tomlinson, swimming master at Kent Street in the 1870s and 1880s, was a clerk in 1871, living with wife Elizabeth at 81 Kent Street. Ten years later they were both were giving their occupations as 'Teacher of Swimming', careers that they continued after later moving to Leamington Spa.³⁹ As swimming master, Thomas managed matches at Northwood Street in 1871, and at Kent Street a year later, leading to observations that his 'untiring efforts' to develop the art of swimming, 'so necessary to all grades', were well appreciated and 'no man in the district has laboured so heartily in the good cause'.⁴⁰ When Birmingham Swimming Club's season concluded with races at Kent Street in October 1873, Tomlinson acted as starter and, as swimming master, he was still presenting medals in 1881,⁴¹ while arrangements at an aquatic entertainment in 'University costume' at Kent Street in June 1882, 'reflected great credit on Mr Tomlinson'.⁴² The reference to 'University costume' highlights the changes taking place as a result of amateur regulation. Swimmers had traditionally raced in the nude, but this was no longer acceptable by the 1880s when organizers were insisting on standardized costumes.

The opportunity for a female to earn a living as a professional swimming teacher was a result of the increasing popularity of the activity among women, an expansion in indoor facilities, and ongoing concerns about maintaining the segregation of the sexes. In 1867, Kent Street Baths advertised for a 'respectable' female, competent to teach ladies the art of swimming and one of the advantages that Tomlinson had in his appointment as swimming master was that Elizabeth was also a swimming teacher. By 1877, the first-class bath was reserved for women on Wednesday and Friday mornings and private lessons could be arranged with the swimming mistress.⁴³ In 1891, Mrs Hoskins was appointed swimming mistress for the Corporation and was advertising for pupils, informing potential clients that there was a private bath reserved for ladies at Kent Street.⁴⁴

Swimming professors were critically important in developing aquatic activities throughout the nineteenth century and as teachers, inventors, and promoters, they took responsibility for the progress of the sport before the formation of amateur

³⁷*BJ*, 26 December 1857, p. 9; 12 February 1859, p. 4; 29 September 1860, p. 3; *BM*, 24 June 1881, p. 3; 1861 Census RG 9/2145; 1871 Census RG 10/1516; 1881 Census RG11/3040; 1891 Census RG12/2433; 1901 Census RG13/2884.

³⁸*BDP*, 12 July 1886, p. 7; 14 July 1886, p. 4.

³⁹1871 Census RG10/3103; 1881 Census RG11/2981; 1891 Census RG12/2473.

⁴⁰*BDP*, 14 September 1871, p. 8; *Bell's Life*, 21 September 1872 p. 8.

⁴¹*BDP*, 31 October 1873, p. 4; 3 May 1881, p. 5.

⁴²*Sporting Life*, 14 June 1882, p. 4.

⁴³*BDG*, 7 June 1867, p. 1; 29 March 1877, p. 4.

⁴⁴*BM*, 28 March 1891, p. 1.

organizations and their value to facility providers was significant.⁴⁵ In May 1857, the *Birmingham Journal* observed that less than ten per cent of those frequenting Kent Street could do anything more than plunge or 'roll about like a porpoise bereft of fin and tail' and it applauded the decision to engage Professor Poulton, who would attend the first-class department on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays to give lessons.⁴⁶ Although George Poulton was based in Manchester, the expanding railway network enabled him to operate around the country and notices in 1860, which suggested to parents and guardians that swimming ought to be part of a youth's education, advertised that he, or his 'Assistant', were teaching swimming at Kent Street. Perhaps reflecting changes in behaviour among his potential clientele, subsequent advertisements emphasized that before going to the seaside one should learn to swim.⁴⁷

Swimming matches were attracting crowds to the Kent Street Baths by July 1857,⁴⁸ many of them organized by Poulton as personal 'benefits'.⁴⁹ In July 1860, he demonstrated diving from 40 ft and swimming a length in four strokes before races for a silver medal, and he organized many similar events throughout 1861, each featuring exhibitions of his aquatic skills alongside racing. In July, his 'friends and pupils' presented him with a 'handsome silver cup in token of their admiration of his skill and their appreciation of the pains he had taken in teaching them the art of swimming'.⁵⁰ Poulton continued his entertainments for the next 20 years at Kent Street and Northwood Street, as well as outdoor venues such as the Aston Hall, Lower Grounds, sometimes involving his son, 'Master J. Poulton'.⁵¹ Not everyone appreciated his efforts, however, and criticisms of Poulton's displays reflected the shift towards an amateur ethos in swimming. In 1857, 'Paterfamilias' expressed his outrage at 'grand displays' of 'ornamental' swimming and similar concerns were raised in the Council Chamber where objections were voiced about the way the BWC had advertised performances 'very much in the mountebank style' and including 'feats of aquatic tumbling', which were 'derogatory to the dignity of the Council'.⁵²

The example provided by Poulton stimulated the emergence of other swimming professors, such as John Bates. As with many professors and swimming teachers, he oscillated when stating his occupation, describing himself variously as 'Cabinet Maker', 'Professor of Swimming', and 'Furniture Dealer'.⁵³ Whatever his occupational preference, he was constantly involved in swimming and at Kent Street he taught 'many thousands of Birmingham people to swim' during a 'remarkable career of public usefulness as a swimming instructor'.⁵⁴ Being a swimming professor meant doing much more than teaching, however, and he spent some of his working life, taking

⁴⁵See multiple examples of swimming professors in Day and Roberts, *Swimming Communities in Victorian England*.

⁴⁶*BJ*, 30 May 1857, p. 7.

⁴⁷*BDP*, 16 July 1860, p. 4; 8 August 1860, p. 1; 25 May 1865, p. 1; *ABG*, 22 June 1861, p. 8.

⁴⁸*Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 10 July 1857, p. 7.

⁴⁹*BDP*, 13 August 1860, p. 1.

⁵⁰*BJ*, 7 July 1860, p. 5; *Sporting Life*, 8 May 1861, p. 3; *ABG*, 15 June 1861, p. 4; *BDP*, 17 June 1861, p. 1; 18 June 1861, p. 2; *BJ*, 27 July 1861, p. 5.

⁵¹*BDG*, 15 August 1862, p. 2; *Bell's Life*, 12 May 1861, p. 7; 30 September 1865, p. 7; 28 October 1865, p. 7; 18 August 1866, p. 7; 15 September 1866, p. 3; 3 August 1867, p. 6; 24 June 1871, p. 9; *BM*, 13 June 1882, p. 2.

⁵²*ABG*, 13 July 1857, p. 2; 17 August 1857, p. 4.

⁵³1861 Census RG 9/2152; 1871 Census RG10/3113; 1881 Census RG11/3011; 1891 Census. RG12/2401; Births, Marriages and Deaths; Baptism Register. Parish Church St Paul Birmingham, 1884, 1886, 1888, 1890.

⁵⁴*Evening Despatch*, 29 December 1939, p. 8; *BM*, 29 December 1939, p. 8; *Sports Argus*, 30 December 1939, p. 2; 13 January 1940, p. 2.

part in water scenes in pantomime, giving displays and exhibitions of fancy and trick swimming, acting as club instructor to Birmingham Leander S.C., and officiating. When Birchfield Gymnasium Swimming Club held their sports at Northwood Street in 1887 under the rules of the newly formed ASA, ‘Professor Bates and Pupil’ provided the entertainment and John acted as both starter and handicapper.⁵⁵ His entertainments were not always profitable, though. At Lichfield in 1895, the Professor, daughter Lizzie, and son John, ‘the smallest swimmer in the world’, demonstrated life-saving, swimming strokes, diving, and trick swimming, but less than 60 people attended, resulting in his losing £5 on the event.⁵⁶

John invariably involved his children in his aquatic endeavours and at the Birmingham YMCA Swimming Club sports in 1897, the ‘Bates’ Troupe’ exhibition included Lizzie singing ‘Daisy’ while underwater.⁵⁷ Lizzie was the only survivor of a fatal boating accident in 1898 making her way to shore despite ‘being encumbered’ by her walking dress and a tightly buttoned mackintosh. At the time she was teaching swimming to the Aston Manor District Council, the Aston School Board, the Walsall Ladies Swimming Club, and the Marston Green Homes, and the *Owl* noted that, after this display of her ‘mastery of the art, there will probably be a great increase in the number of ladies anxious to avail themselves of her services as an instructor’.⁵⁸ The 1901 census recorded that the twenty-four-year-old was a self-employed ‘Teacher of Swimming’, although when she married later that year her occupational status was left blank, an example of the way women’s work was frequently omitted from official documentation, partly because the men filling in forms assumed that women would give up work on marriage. John and his ‘troupe of lady swimmers’ also appeared at the new baths at Stourbridge, where daughter Edith had been appointed as swimming mistress, and he and his daughters continued to teach swimming until his death, aged 84, in 1939.⁵⁹

The Users

The voices of individual users of Kent Street can be heard through their correspondence to the Press and a sample from the 1850s demonstrates some of their concerns. William Fearn, a youth who was ‘rather particular about combing his hair after bathing’ complained that the dressing rooms mirrors were too high, while James Kenward, suggested introducing season tickets. He was also unhappy about the practice of allowing spectators, partly because they added to the ‘noise and excitement’ which was ‘rather too prevalent’. James Jackson argued that for young men like himself, who were ‘actively employed during the day’, the Baths should engage additional staff so they could be kept open to eleven o’clock. ‘One who Can’t Swim’ suggested that the management made swimming belts or corks available ‘on payment of a trifle’, while ‘A Sixpenny Plunger’ complained that ‘an establishment which has cost the ratepayers an

⁵⁵*Dart*, 12 August 1886, p. 14; 23 September 1887, p. 8; 19 August 1892, p. 14; 26 August 1892, p. 8.

⁵⁶*Lichfield Mercury*, 14 June 1895, p. 5.

⁵⁷*BDP*, 27 July 1894, p. 8; *Birmingham Pictorial and Dart*, 24 September 1897, pp. 8–9.

⁵⁸*Owl*, 12 August 1898, p. 14.

⁵⁹1901 Census RG13/2842; *Sports Argus*, 25 May 1901, p. 4; For a comprehensive biography of the Bates family see D. Day, ‘A “Remarkable Career of Public Usefulness”: Birmingham Swimming Professor John Bates’, *Playing Pasts*, <<http://www.playingpasts.co.uk/>> [accessed 9 November 2020].

unnecessarily large sum of money' had 'stupidly' whitewashed the first-class dressing room leaving its patrons 'as white as a miller'. He never used the combs and brushes, which were always full of hair, but the baths were clean, and the attendants were 'civil and obliging'.⁶⁰ Correspondent 'Flying Fish, jun.' suggested that the water be changed daily to avoid giving bathers a 'dirty swill', to which T. Siviter Smith, another user, replied that to empty the bath, fill it and warm it took eighteen-and-a-half hours and the labour of four men, so that changing the water every day was impractical. For clear fresh water and first-class conveniences and attention Kent Street Baths were 'second to none in the Kingdom' and he observed that he had always found Mr Purnell and the matron, Mrs Hughes, to be 'respectful, assiduous, and obliging'.⁶¹ Similarly, Samuel Harryman declared that he, like hundreds of others, would come forward at any time to testify to the 'attention and respect which we have always received from' Purnell and his attendants, while a 'Regular Bather' described Purnell as 'civil and attentive' and willing to adopt suggestions for improving the 'comfort and enjoyment' of his customers.⁶²

Schools and Swimming Clubs

In 1875, the Baths Committee and the Birmingham School Board introduced a scheme whereby books of one penny and halfpenny tickets could be purchased by school authorities for use in the swimming baths by classes of elementary school children attending with their teachers during school hours. These could also be sold for use after school up to 5.30 p.m. by scholars forming groups for swimming instruction in charge of an adult while those who could already swim could buy tickets to visit the baths on their own. In addition, free passes were made available to pupils who could demonstrate that they could swim one length of Kent Street. These arrangements, which were later extended to secondary schools, proved very successful and over 202,000 schoolchildren had been admitted, 24,000 of them free of charge, by October 1882.⁶³ Initially, school children were instructed by teachers who were able to swim but the Baths Committee subsequently engaged qualified swimming instructors, such as John Bates, whose pupils included those at Blue Coat School, the Deaf and Dumb Institution, the Royal Institution for the Blind, and King Edward's School.⁶⁴

The provision of more baths and the wider engagement of men and women from all social classes led to the creation of swimming clubs, which provided a focal point for competition, physical activity, and mixing with one's peers. Sports history is replete with 'origin myths' and controversies surrounding club formation, but there is rarely, if ever, a definitive starting point and clubs often emerge out of already existing structures. Writing in 1951, for example, Moth claimed that the Birmingham Leander Swimming Club had been formed in 1877 at Northwood Street Baths.⁶⁵ Yet correspondence published in the *Birmingham Daily Post* in April 1865 announced that a swimming club had been formed at Northwood Street, raising the possibility that

⁶⁰*BJ*, 10 July 1852, p. 8; 17 July 1852, p. 8; 24 July 1852, p. 8; 9 June 1855, p. 6.

⁶¹*BDP*, 10 August 1858, p. 4; 11 August 1858, p. 3.

⁶²*BJ*, 16 July 1859, p. 8; 23 July 1859, p. 7; *BDP*, 21 March 1860, p. 2.

⁶³*BM*, 28 February 1883, p. 2.

⁶⁴*Moth*, pp. 58, 60; *BM*, 29 December 1939, p. 8; *Sports Argus*, 13 January 1940, p. 2.

⁶⁵*Moth*, p. 54.

the club had originated twelve years earlier.⁶⁶ Another myth was perpetuated by J. Moth, General Manager and Secretary of the City of Birmingham Baths Department, when he observed in 1951, that the city's first swimming club had been formed in 1862 as the Birmingham Amateur Swimming Club (BASC).⁶⁷ Reflecting the ASA's distaste for professionalism, Moth was assuming here that only clubs whose amateurism was uncompromised really counted in terms of the sport's history. In reality, when Poulton had a benefit at Kent Street in July 1857, the programme included races between members of Birmingham Swimming Club (BSC), a 'very promising organisation'. The designation of this club variously as the BSC and the BASC reflects the nascent nature of swimming clubs in this period and references to the organization used both terms interchangeably over the next few years before settling on BASC, presumably when amateur members of the club took over control from the swimming professor. At a Poulton gala in 1861 the now BASC contested for a medal while the main event in May 1863 was a race for the captaincy and cup of the BSC.⁶⁸ In 1864, the BSC were practising at Kent Street on Wednesdays at 6.30 a.m., details available from the 'Swimming Master Mr. Tomlinson', while a club notice the following year, which stated that the club had been formed in 1860 for the 'Promotion of the Useful Art of Swimming', advertised practice nights as Tuesdays and Thursdays, with information available from 'Professor Poulton's Assistant' at Kent Street.⁶⁹

Over the course of the next 20 years, the club combined the traditional approaches to swimming taken by swimming professors with the structures and regulations imposed by the emerging ideology of amateurism. In July 1881, club members gave a display at Kent Street to a large audience of men and women, which included stroke demonstrations by club members as well as diving for tin plates, exhibitions of double floating, lifesaving and diving, handicap races, and a water polo match.⁷⁰ In August, Tomlinson started the races at the BASC sports in the Edgbaston Reservoir, which included separate handicap races for members of the host club, Ashted Amateur Swimming Club, and Birmingham Leander. There was also a race for competitors wearing a suit of ordinary clothes, a water polo match, a gander hunt, and an exhibition of fancy swimming.⁷¹ When BASC organized the first Midlands half-mile amateur championship in July 1883 under the rules of the Swimming Association of Great Britain (the forerunner of the ASA) the entries were handled by BASC Hon. Sec. Tomlinson, who also acted as starter. Apparently, the 'popular little Professor' had been 'in possession of a firearm which nearly hid him from sight' and which was found to be 'woefully wanting'.⁷²

While a combination of new facilities and changing social mores encouraged women to take up swimming, there was little evidence of this in Birmingham in the 10 years following the opening of the Kent Street when only 7,015 women paid admissions out of nearly 100,000 users. Rev. G. B. P. Latimer thought it strange, considering that 'baths

⁶⁶*BDP*, 24 April 1865, p. 7.

⁶⁷Moth, p. 54.

⁶⁸*BJ*, 15 July 1857, p. 2; *BDP*, 13 May 1861, p. 3; *Sporting Life*, 23 May 1863, p. 3.

⁶⁹*BDP*, 23 May 1864, p. 1; 25 May 1865, p. 1.

⁷⁰*BM*, 21 July 1881, p. 2.

⁷¹*BM*, 22 August 1881, p. 2. A 'gander hunt' was a popular practice of the period in which 'ducks', either in the form of live animals or individuals acting in their place, were chased and caught by swimmers.

⁷²*Sporting Life*, 16 June 1883, p. 3; *Owl*, 13 July 1883, p. 17; 20 July 1883, p. 11; 27 July 1883.

were more beneficial to females than to the other sex', that the number of females using them was only one-twentieth of the number of men, but what male commentators ignored was that provision for female swimming was extremely limited in the early years of the Birmingham baths.⁷³ By 1867, however, Kent Street was reserving the first-class swimming bath for ladies until noon on Wednesdays, and subsequent developments at Northwood Baths saw 1,400 women attending within a six month period in 1882.⁷⁴ This led to debates about the provision of a women's swimming bath and in June 1883 the BWC recommended purchasing land adjacent to Kent Street Baths, although this was rejected on the basis that the land was too costly, the baths were not an absolute necessity, and because 'another burden would be cast on the ratepayers, who were already too heavily taxed'.⁷⁵ The BWC returned to the subject in 1884 when they were supported by Robin Goodfellow in the *Birmingham Mail* who also noted that a ladies' swimming club was being mooted.

Middle-class women would not want to mix in the swimming pool with someone they would not entertain to tea, and class tensions are discernible in the furore created by a subsequent article by Goodfellow, which discussed the rules of the newly formed Birmingham Ladies Amateur Swimming Club (BLASC) and noted that Mrs Ashford was president, Miss Abbot, vice-president, Mrs R. Hoskins, honorary secretary, and Mrs Tomlinson, treasurer. The article then attracted criticism by suggesting that ladies wanting to join could be blackballed and that to 'ensure the exclusiveness' of their practices at Kent Street on Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings members were expected to wear the 'initials of the club'.⁷⁶ The *Dart* attacked the reported 'exclusiveness' of the club, especially the implication that it would have a monopoly of a 'public rate-supported swimming bath' at certain times. Neither 'such an important personage as Mrs Ashford, nor such minor goddesses as Miss Abbot and Mesdames Hoskins and Tomlinson', could dare in Birmingham to exclude from a public rate-supported facility any bather who had paid her money and wanted to splash or sprawl about. Job Cox responded that the Baths Committee would never allow any club to interfere with the 'comfort and convenience of the public' and that anyone paying admittance could 'splash or sprawl about' as they pleased.⁷⁷ Another letter, from 'A Member of the B.L.A.S. C.', argued that the club was not 'exclusive' and it had not arranged a monopoly at Kent Street. No-one had been excluded or 'blackballed', nor would they be if 'they conduct themselves as any respectable member should'. Again, the editor responded, saying that without a monopoly of the bath there could be no exclusiveness and without a certain amount of exclusiveness there could be no club.⁷⁸

These issues had been resolved by the 1890s and in October 1895 BLASC held their fourth annual sports at Kent Street in front of a large audience, comprised entirely of women. Miss Cashmore's lifesaving exhibition was followed by handicap races, Clara Thorne, 'lady champion of the Midlands' and daughter of the Kent Street Baths cashier,

⁷³ABG, 1 June 1861, p. 5.

⁷⁴BDP, 10 July 1867, p. 1; BM, 28 February 1883, p. 2.

⁷⁵BDP, 4 June 1883, p. 3.

⁷⁶BDP, 31 May 1884, p. 7; BM, 17 May 1884, p. 2; 23 August 1884, p. 2.

⁷⁷Dart, 29 August 1884, pp. 10, 12; 5 September 1884, p. 10.

⁷⁸Dart, 5 September 1884, p. 10.

giving an exhibition of styles of swimming, and then ‘cork-bobbing in fancy costumes’.⁷⁹ The Countess of Warwick was elected club president in 1897, and during 1898, BLASC, ‘one of the best-managed ladies’ clubs in England’, was planning an ambitious programme including life-saving and swimming instruction, monthly handicaps, fancy and scientific swimming, and theoretical essays on swimming, as well as water polo.⁸⁰ The club also made a contribution to the national scene. Female swimmers across the country were engaged in trying to rationalize the swimming dress and it was at a conference in 1898, under the presidency of Miss Cashmore, that agreement was reached on a standard costume, using a model costume provided by BLASC as the template.⁸¹

Conclusion

The 50 years of swimming at Kent Street Baths described briefly in this paper provide a mirror for wider developments in the activity during a period that witnessed the evolution of swimming from an ad-hoc participatory activity into a recognizably ‘modern’ sport, influenced differentially by several closely connected swimming communities. The creation of Kent Street Baths following the 1846 Act of Parliament was driven by the concerns of the Birmingham middle classes about the state of the working classes and, in many ways, the baths fulfilled bourgeois ambitions by demonstrating regular rises in usage rates and even making annual profits. While the middle-class mission was purportedly a philanthropic one designed to improve the conditions of the working classes, they always had an eye on the balance sheet.

Concerns over expenditure meant that Birmingham BWC and concerned ratepayers were careful about staffing costs, but the new facilities could not operate without the presence of those ‘servants’ who were so important to the Kent Street swimming community in their roles as superintendents, engineers, administrators and baths attendants. One important feature of this expansion nationally was that women were increasingly involved, although this case study suggests that, at first, they were not particularly numerous in Birmingham. The focus at Kent Street on having superintendents with an engineering background, perhaps reflecting the emphasis within the local economy and the interests of the men who sat on the BWC, meant economizing on certain levels of staffing, especially matrons and female bath attendants. Making sure that male and female staff at all levels were ‘respectable’ and acceptable to both their employers and those who used the baths was essential. The evidence here seems to suggest that the appointments made were satisfactory in this respect as individual users were generally complimentary about the quality and demeanour of the baths staff. It should be noted here that it is difficult for researchers to hear the voices of most individuals from the nineteenth century and this applies to those that swam at Kent Street, but the use of correspondence to the local newspapers as a source in this paper proved extremely useful in accessing opinions of and interactions with the facility and

⁷⁹*BDP*, 10 October 1895, p. 8.

⁸⁰*Leamington, Warwick, Kenilworth & District Daily Circular*, 30 October 1897, p. 2; *Walsall Advertiser*, 23 April 1898, p. 8.

⁸¹D. Day, ‘National Dress: Functionality, Fashion and the Fracturing of Separate Spheres in Victorian Britain’, *Annals of Leisure Research*, 19, 2, (2016), 145–162.

its staff. This is perhaps a source that has not been fully utilized in previous studies and points the way for future research into marginalized or 'hidden' populations.

The trajectory of the Kent Street swimming clubs, both BASC and BLASC, typified the way that swimming clubs developed in this period. The traditional narrative surrounding the creation of nineteenth-century amateur organizations implies that there was a clean break between professionals and amateurs but that was never the case in swimming. Swimming professors and professional swimming teachers mixed easily with amateurs, who appreciated their expertise, and professors Poulton, Bates, and Tomlinson, were instrumental in facilitating amateur club formation since it provided them with a group of individuals wanting to learn to swim and to do so faster and more efficiently. In addition, the funding of BASC and BLASC and their ability to attract and retain members was related to how attractive they could make their racing and entertainment programme, which obliged the clubs, and Kent Street management, to devise a programme of events that would attract paying spectators. It says something about the lack of a swimming tradition in Birmingham in the first half of the nineteenth century that Poulton had to be imported from Manchester, but both Tomlinson and Bates seemed to have learnt from the professor and gone on to generate their own careers, not least in helping to stimulate other users of the baths such as clubs and schools.

The history of Kent Street Baths, then, provides a glimpse of how swimming baths of the second half of the nineteenth century were organized and the different constituencies that they generated and sustained. They provided an important hub for social interaction at a local level and, judging by the correspondent columns, users felt both a sense of ownership and a degree of connection to the facility. Even though the baths, through BASC and BLASC and their connections to other clubs and wider amateur organizations, became part of a much wider network of swimming interests it was their importance to residents of south Birmingham as a centre of health and as a municipal edifice that they could be proud of that seems to stand out. What is much more difficult to assess of course is if Kent Street Baths achieved the mayor's expectations in 1861 for a greater 'degree of intelligence and moral improvement' in the town.

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