

Class, Gender and Employment in England's Victorian Public Baths.

Introduction

The 'long' Victorian period has been interpreted from a number of perspectives, including through the lens of 'separate spheres', a notion that suggests a compartmentalization of markers like gender and class into discrete areas exemplifying typical relationship patterns.¹ However, class and gender boundaries were never clearly defined and, although Koditschek suggests that a form of separate spheres domesticity had become a reality for most working people by the twentieth century,² the theorizing of separate spheres has been criticised. Poovey argued that the negotiation of sphere boundaries is always full of fissures³ and so it cannot be assumed that all women were necessarily restricted to the home. The margins surrounding socially defined behaviours remained permeable and, although wage labour was supposedly a transitional stage for young women between school and marriage,⁴ paid employment remained commonplace among married women⁵ with most working-class families relying on this supplementary income.⁶

Given this blurring of class and gender boundaries, scholars have argued for a more nuanced approach involving specific case studies to illustrate how gender and class intersected at a micro level in order to uncover the diversity of female experiences. The building of public baths and washhouses, for example, provided a novel nineteenth-century working environment for single and married women and this paper highlights the stretching of prescribed boundaries through the intersection of class and gender in female swimming communities. This investigation is based on a still-evolving catalogue of female bathing employees compiled by my SpLeisH colleague Margaret Roberts from census data collected between 1841 and 1911. The study employs a prosopographical approach, whereby details of a group of historical actors are collated to identify and analyse trends in the data in order to contextualise historical processes, especially within previously hidden strata of society,⁷ to provide the starting point for a long-term project investigating the social impact of an increase in swimming facilities in Victorian Britain.

¹ Unger, Roberto Mangabeira.: *The Critical Legal Studies Movement*. Harvard 1986; Poovey, Mary.: *Making a Social Body*. Chicago 1995, chapter 1.

² Koditschek, Theodore: "The Gendering of the British Working Class", in: *Gender & History* 9(2) (1997), 333-363, p.353.

³ Poovey: *Making a Social Body*.

⁴ Catriona Parratt (1998) Little means or time: Working-class women and leisure in late Victorian and Edwardian England, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 15(2), pp. 22-53.p.33.

⁵ August, Andrew: "How Separate a Sphere? Poor Women and Paid Work in Late-Victorian London", *Journal of Family History* 19(3) (1994), 285-309, p.285.

⁶ Theodore Koditschek (1997) The gendering of the British working class, *Gender & History*, 9(2), pp. 341, 345, 347; Eleanor Gordon & Gweneth Nair (2002) The myth of the Victorian patriarchal family, *History of the Family*, 7, p. 126.

⁷ Oldfield, Samantha-Jayne.: *Narratives of Manchester Pedestrianism: Using Biographical Methods to Explore the Development of Athletics during the Nineteenth Century*. Unpublished PhD thesis, November 2014.

Women's sport and leisure

Social inequalities have always been influential in determining leisure activities and during the late nineteenth century, sport became a useful means of reinforcing distinctions of class and gender. While upper- and middle-class women, who had the requisite free time and financial means, increasingly engaged in sport, they participated within limited behavioural boundaries and female sports clubs deliberately restricted social and spatial zones. Working-class women lacked the necessary schooling, money, and time for leisure activities and they suffered from subservient relationships with men of their own class and with women of higher classes.⁸ Work was central to these women's lives and they were ghettoised into unskilled, insecure, low-paid occupations while their domestic labour was never considered 'real' work. **1** Nevertheless, all social classes can be found swimming in some form or other, especially after an increase in baths provision after the 1878 Baths and Washhouses Act. Swimming was considered suitable for women since it had utilitarian value as a lifesaving activity, it took place in an environment that masked physical effort,⁹ and it could provide mild, beneficial exercise in segregated surroundings.¹⁰ This is not to say that everyone participated in the same way and recognition needs to be given to the diversity of female experience.¹¹ **2** For the purposes of this paper, these experiences have been divided into professional natation, serious swimming, teaching, and employment at the Baths.

Professional natationists¹²

3 For a very small number of working-class women, swimming, often packaged as entertainment, provided an attractive working environment¹³ and by the end of the century, female natationists were performing in front of all classes of society. These working-class women performed in tanks, diving, and holding their breath underwater, swam in endurance events, raced for money, produced and performed aquatic entertainments, promoted swimming competitions, and coached or instructed swimming

⁸ McCrone, K. (1991). Class, Gender, and English Women's Sport, c. 1890-1914 *Journal of Sport History*, 18(1) pp. 158-182.

⁹ Janet Phillips & Peter Phillips (1993) History from below: Women's underwear and the rise of women's sport, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27(2), p. 130; Claire Parker (2010) Swimming: The 'Ideal' sport for nineteenth-century British women, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27(4), pp. 675-689.

¹⁰ *The Times* (12 November 1870), p. 6; Frances Hoggan (1879) *Swimming and its relation to the health of women* (London: Women's Printing Society Ltd.), pp. 1-8; *Otago Witness* (30 December 1876), p. 19; Patricia Vertinsky (1990) *The eternally wounded woman: Women, doctors and exercise in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 153-5.

¹¹ Eleanor Gordon & Gweneth Nair (2002) The myth of the Victorian patriarchal family, *History of the Family*, 7, p. 135.

¹² For more reading see Day, D. (2012). "What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?" Agnes Beckwith, Aquatic Entertainer and Victorian Role Model, *Women's History Review* 21(3), 419-446; Day, D. (2015). From Lambeth to Niagara: Imitation and Innovation amongst Female Natationists. *Sport in History* (forthcoming); Day, D. (2010). London Swimming Professors: Victorian Craftsmen and Aquatic Entrepreneurs. *Sport in History* 30(1), 32-54; *Dave Day From Oldham Baths to American Vaudeville and Beyond: The Finney Family Working Papers on Professional Natationists Paper 1* (April 2014). *Manchester Metropolitan University*

¹³ Day, D. (2012). "What Girl Will Now Remain Ignorant of Swimming?" Agnes Beckwith, Aquatic Entertainer and Victorian Role Model, *Women's History Review* 21(3), 419-446.

and lifesaving. In terms of remuneration, Violet Mitchell was being paid £2 per week in 1893,¹⁴ and four years later, a swimmer's remuneration at the Westminster Aquarium remained between £1 and £2 per week, although high divers like Annie Luker were paid substantially more.¹⁵ While the physical appearance of these female natationists may have had much to do with their appeal to many male admirers, it is clear that their skill was widely appreciated, primarily because lady spectators would be familiarised to females swimming easily and would want to 'acquire the knowledge and skill which would enable them to do the same'.¹⁶

Swimming Clubs and Racing

4 The profile of female swimming was significantly enhanced by the cultural penetration by these working-class professional natationists who stimulated a change in the way women approached swimming as an activity. In 1873, when *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, attempted to persuade women of the utility of swimming there was no real consideration of racing or display.¹⁷ Twenty years later, however, Lady Greville was observing that this had changed 'since the gentlewoman took to sport'.¹⁸ By this stage, aquatic enthusiasts could be found in all levels of the social hierarchy ranging from members of the Ladies National Association for the Diffusion of Sanitary Knowledge, to the clientele of the Brighton Baths, whose members included many aristocratic women.¹⁹ **5** Another aristocratic club, the Bath Club in London, had a membership of about 300 by 1900.²⁰

The 1913 *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* suggests that many middle-class women enjoyed swimming²¹ in clubs such as the Ladies (Amateur) Cadogan Swimming Club, which met at the South Kensington and Chelsea Baths,²² and the Ladies' Tadpole Swimming

¹⁴ Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, *The Lady Swimmer and the Water Show*, Sunday, October 15, 1893; Reynolds's Newspaper, *The Water Show and the Lady Swimmer*, Sunday, October 15, 1893.

¹⁵ *London Standard*, January 19 1897, 2; *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 6 1897, 1.

¹⁶ *Bell's Life* (17 August 1872), p. 6; (26 September 1874), p. 8; (14 November 1874), p. 8; *Era* (18 August 1872), p. 5; (4 May 1873), p. 7; (18 May 1873), p. 3; (1 June 1873), p. 3; (10 August 1873), p. 3; (17 August 1873), p. 3; (9 November 1873), p. 3; (30 August 1874), p. 3; (11 October 1874), p. 3; (23 May 1875), p. 5; (4 July 1875), p. 5; (22 August 1875), p. 3; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (21 June 1874), p. 5; *Penny Illustrated* (5 June 1875), p. 14.

¹⁷ *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Tuesday July 1, 1873, 29. Friday August 1, 1873, 80. Swimming for Ladies.

¹⁸ Lady Violet Beatrice Greville, *The Gentlewomen's Book of Sport*, In the series 'Victorian Library for Gentlewomen', London, Henry, 1892.

¹⁹ *The Women's Union Journal: The Organ of the Women's Protective and Provident League* (1 July 1881), p. 77; *Penny Illustrated* (19 December 1863), p. 3; (11 August 1866), p. 12.

²⁰ *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, Thursday August 23 1900, 605; Thursday June 6, 1895, 130.

²¹ Kay, Joyce (2008) 'It Wasn't Just Emily Davison! Sport, Suffrage and Society in Edwardian Britain', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25:10, 1338 — 1354, 1350

²² *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, Saturday, May 31, 1879; pg. 4; *The Englishwoman's Review*, Friday, August 15, 1879, 359.

Club, based at Kensington Baths, formed in July 1892.²³ The South Norwood Ladies' Swimming Club had a membership of 221 in 1896²⁴ and the eighteenth annual festival of the Ravensbourne Swimming Club was held in 1900 in front of a large crowd and involving competitors from as far apart as Portsmouth, Leeds, Glasgow and Jersey.²⁵ When the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) presented a perpetual silver vase to the club in 1901, this marked a direct response to 'the increasing number of lady swimmers and the great interest in the art generally.'²⁶

6 In 1898, one observer noted the number of 'working women's clubs' in existence.²⁷ The Women's Trade Union League club members swam at Marylebone Road²⁸ and the importance of swimming as a part of the girls physical education of girls was recognised by the annual swimming competitions of the Girls' Division of the London Pupil Teachers' Association.²⁹ The London Schools Swimming Association had taught about 40,000 children by 1899³⁰ and its annual competition in 1900 involved competitors from 500 schools.³¹

Female swimming teachers

The art of swimming required instruction and the opportunity for a female to earn a living as a professional swimming teacher was a direct result of the increasing popularity of the activity among women, the expansion in the number of indoor facilities and ongoing concerns about maintaining the segregation of the sexes. **7** In 1860, the *English Woman's Journal* argued that strong-bodied steady-minded young women should be trained as swimming mistresses, thus providing a new occupation for women,³² and, by the late 1870s, there were an increasing number of opportunities for those with the necessary expertise. **7** Some of this demand was met by the natationists. This process accelerated as the socially preferred practice of swimming teachers teaching only their own sex became even more entrenched and the supply of female professional swimming teachers increased as teaching became widely accepted as an appropriate way for a woman to earn a livelihood. Professional teachers at the London public baths included Miss Whyte, swimming mistress at the Chelsea and South Kensington Baths, was afforded a financially successful benefit in 1879, at which she went through some 'clever feats of natation'. Other practitioners included Eleanor Classey, a professional swimming teacher in Marylebone between 1881

²³ The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times, *The World of Women, Learning to Swim*, Saturday, July 23, 1892.

²⁴ *Hearth and Home*, Thursday August 6, 1896, 479; *Hearth and Home*, Thursday August 13, 1896, 514.

²⁵ *Hearth and Home*, Thursday, November 1, 1900, 985.

²⁶ *The Englishwoman's Year Book and Directory*, 1906, p, 173; *Womanhood* 3 (April 1900): 360; 5 (February 1901): 202; 6 (November 1901): 444.

²⁷ *The Girl's Own Paper*, Saturday, November 26, 1898, 136. Frocks for Tomorrow by 'The Lady Dressmaker'.

²⁸ *The Women's Union Journal: The Organ of the Women's Protective and Provident League*, Friday July 1, 1881, 77; Sunday October 1, 1882, 81.

²⁹ *The Woman's Herald*, Thursday September 28, 1893, 502. Girls' Swimming Competition.

³⁰ *Hearth and Home*, Thursday, October 26, 1899, 968.

³¹ *Hearth and Home*, Thursday, November 1, 1900, 985.

³² *The English Woman's Journal* (1 March 1860), V(25) p. 68. Letters to the Editor.

and 1901, Fanny (Nellie) Easton, who worked as a swimming mistress in the same period, as well as organizing and appearing in swimming entertainments, and the Humphrey sisters, Charlotte and Jane, who spent all their working lives as swimming teachers.³³ Mrs Crocker (previously Miss Whyte), the swimming instructress for the Tadpole Club, was still the swimming teacher at Kensington in 1893 where her 'able system of training' had turned many novices into accomplished swimmers. In August 1894, she could be seen teaching in a costume of heliotrope flannel, with silk-scalloped edging to the tunic and décolletage³⁴ and she gave a most successful display and entertainment with her pupils from the School Board before a crowded audience that same year. She was a 'clever and painstaking teacher and very popular in the club' and five of her pupils passed the Life Saving Society examination in 1895.³⁵ Outside London, when the Portsmouth Club advertised in 1884 for a female attendant who was able to swim and instruct they were offering fifteen shillings a week for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day, 2 p.m. on Saturdays with Sundays free.

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

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

9 Secondly, there is strong evidence of family influence, particularly paternal, in deciding these career choices (Table 2). In sports like swimming, where finesse and skill are paramount, family involvement tended to be sustained over generations.

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

11 The importance and status of the female swimming teacher is reinforced by Table 4 which shows that by 1903 the ASA had awarded 16 Professional Certificates to female candidates.

12 Baths Employees

³³ *Licensed Victuallers' Mirror* (15 April 1890), p. 174; Census Returns. Easton 1881 (337/61/1818), 1891 (141/84/67), 1901 (1253/76/40); Classey (Clarrey) 1881 (1009/5/4), 1891 (96/68/26), 1901 (110/61/10); Charlotte Humphrey 1871 (165/19/30); Charlotte and Jane Humphrey 1881 (31/10/13), 1891 (22/91/11), 1901 (23/123/12), 1911 (RG14PN162RG78PN5RD2SD2ED21SN99).

³⁴ *Hearth and Home*, Thursday September 7, 1893, 564; Thursday October 12, 1893, 740; Thursday April 19, 1894, 792; Thursday August 2, 1894, 423; Thursday December 27, 1894, 261.

³⁵ *Hearth and Home*, Thursday October 18, 1894, 813.

An 1852 report highlighted the staff required by Baths 13 and in 1873, the 'servants' listed at the Hastings baths included a ticket clerk, a carpenter, an engineer, a laundress and male and female bath attendants who were paid 10 shillings a week.³⁶ The permanent members of staff at Salford in 1880 were the Superintendent and Matron, Engineer, Attendant, Laundress, and a Ticket Clerk.³⁷ Adverts from Liverpool and Leeds in the 1890s specified that applicants for posts as female attendants and clerks had to be able to swim³⁸ 14 and in 1906, the rates of pay for ticket clerks at Salford were dependent upon their swimming ability. When Miss Gregory passed her swimming test, she was awarded a 2-shillings a-week pay rise while the wages of ticket clerk, Miss Curtis were raised from 17 to 18-shillings per week after she gained the Royal Life Saving Society's Award.³⁹

The role of bath attendant, which often included teaching swimming, was fluid with individuals working around the facility according to demand. In 1887, Butters observed there were a number of competent teachers on the staff at the Edinburgh Baths but from 'excess of work' they were unable to devote any attention to teaching.⁴⁰ As with swimming teachers, male and female attendants normally attended bathers of their own sex, although women employed as attendants were generally paid less than men. At Dulwich Baths in 1892, Mrs Mary Anderson was hired for twenty shillings a week, while William Sanderson received twenty-five shillings.⁴¹

14 In all, 1,242 female bathing attendants have been identified from the census data so far and the initial analysis suggests a number of themes for further consideration. Firstly, there are an increasing number of females giving 'bath attendant' as their occupation, especially after the 1878 Baths and Washhouses Act (Table 6).

The proportion of single women remains constant while those with family connections appear to reduce steadily suggesting that the occupational area was opening up. In addition, the class of women involved (as assessed by their father's occupations) was essentially similar across censuses. As Table 7 shows, many individuals had emerged from the skilled working classes and this will be explored in much more detail as the project progresses.

Matrons and Supervisors

A married couple were often employed as superintendent and matron and they lived above the baths (Table 8). Richard Whitehead and his wife, Anne, were appointed as

³⁶ *Hampshire & Portsmouth Telegraph*, December 24, 1873, p.4.

³⁷ County Borough of Salford, *Report of the Public Baths Department*, 30 October, 1880, 432.

³⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, April 20, 1899, p.1.

³⁹ County Borough of Salford, *Report of the General Baths Committee*, 29 August, 1906, 554.

⁴⁰ "Where are the teachers of swimming?" *The Scotsman*, September 7, 1887, p.9.

⁴¹ Bird, Polly: "The Origins of Victorian Public Baths, with Special Reference to Dulwich Baths", in: 25 *Local Historian*, (1995), pp.149-150.

Superintendent and Matron of Blackfriars-street Public Baths, Salford, in 1880.⁴² Richard received 35-shillings a week (£91 per annum) and Anne 10-shillings (£26 per annum), plus accommodation on-site in the purpose-built staff apartment, with free coal, gas, and water.⁴³ The husband would generally hire the staff and run the baths while his wife acted as money-taker⁴⁴ and the size of the establishment influenced remuneration levels. In the 1870s, Stalybridge was paying its Superintendent £78 per annum⁴⁵ while Manchester always paid its Superintendent much more, raising it to £225 per annum in 1900.⁴⁶

Part of the attraction of the post of superintendent and matron was that other family members could be employed. John Howarth was superintendent of the Victoria baths in Ormskirk in 1871 and by 1881, his wife Agnes was the matron and daughter Frances was a swimming teacher. In 1891, John was baths manager, Agnes the superintendent and both Frances, now aged twenty-six, and nineteen-year-old Edith were teachers of swimming.⁴⁷

Within the data collected so far, there is considerable evidence of this family influence in determining women's engagement within the baths, especially at supervisory level (Table 9). Both married and single women were involved, although the larger proportion of single women among clerks suggests that the lower one goes down the social scale among baths employees the more likely they were to be single. This 'single' category needs much more analysis in the subsequent stages of this project since there may be some important conclusions to be drawn about the number and types of 'widows' involved.

Conclusion

A report on public baths and washhouses in London in 1899 calculated that females represented only 18% of the users of the private baths and 10% in the swimming baths⁴⁸ but it is clear that an increasing number of working-class women, both married and single, were being employed within the new public baths. The way in which these female natationists, swimming teachers and bath employees transcended traditional notions of separate spheres provides a useful exemplar of how gender roles were not always constrained by stereotypical and artificially created boundaries. Clearly, much more work needs to be done to uncover the 'layers of truth'⁴⁹ surrounding these careers but, even at this early stage, there are signs that exploring the life courses of these women has the potential to tell us something interesting about females, sport and 'separate spheres'.

⁴² 1911 England Census, 'Class: RG14; Piece 25405; Schedule Number: 87. For the information on the Whiteheads I am much indebted to the research conducted by my SpLeisH colleague Keith Myerscough.

⁴³ County Borough of Salford, *Report of the General Baths Committee*, 5 May, 1880, 209.

⁴⁴ Bird: "The Origins of Victorian Public Baths", pp.149-150.

⁴⁵ Stalybridge Baths Committee Minutes, April 1870 – November 1879, Minutes for 23 June, 1870.

⁴⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 22 March, 1900, 4; 7 October, 1920, 14; 21 March, 1907, 4.

⁴⁷ Census Returns 1861–1891: John Howarth 1861 (4440/252/18), 1871 (3874/119/37). John, Agnes, Frances and Edith A. Howarth 1881 (3750/55/40), 1891 (3036/133/37).

⁴⁸ Public baths and washhouses and public libraries. London County Council 1899

⁴⁹ Bale, John: "Ernst Jokl and Layers of Truth", in: Dave Day (ed.): *Sporting Lives*, Manchester 2011, 1-15.

As the project develops over the next five years, the research tools employed will expand. Prosopography has value in uncovering common characteristics of a previously anonymous population and helping to identify their social networks but, by depriving the study of narrative, the individual cannot be fully understood.⁵⁰ Higgs concluded that, without knowledge of local economic and social conditions and a grasp of how census data collection changed, the historian could end up building 'elaborate quantitative mansions on shifting archival sands'. He also stressed that quantitative data is not necessarily 'raw material' for unbiased scientific analysis, it is also a human construct and if census collection and recording was itself part of the process by which gender divisions were defined, it cannot be used uncritically to study these divisions in Victorian society.⁵¹ It is essential, therefore, that census statistics are supplemented with all the historical and literary evidence available to be able to draw any realistic conclusions⁵² and future work will involve combining prosopography with more traditional approaches to historical research to produce what Jockers calls, a 'blended approach'.⁵³ Once the data trawl has been completed, the data will be used to build individual and collective biographies and to select two or more bathhouses to be developed further as in-depth long-term case studies of communities of female workers based at these facilities. That process will add essential 'colour' to the data and enable stories to be constructed around individual lives.

⁵⁰ Fleming, Robin.: "Writing Biography at the Edge of History", in: 114 *American Historical Association Review*, 3 (2009), 606-614.

⁵¹ Higgs: "Women, Occupations and Work", pp.76-77.

⁵² Hill: "Women, Work and the Census", pp.91-92.

⁵³ Jockers, Matthew L.: *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary Theory*. Urbana 2013, p.26.