

The Cleveland ‘Pleasure Baths’: Secluded Pleasures in a Spa City

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This article focuses on the Cleveland Pleasure Baths — a unique feature of Bath’s Georgian heritage. The Baths (now known as the Cleveland Pools) are the oldest UK outdoor public swimming pool or lido, the subscriptions having been launched in 1815, and they are thus an important part of the British history of organised swimming. The article discusses the development of the Baths in the context of the middle-class interest in outdoor bathing in the Regency period and the continuing development of subscription clubs and societies. It draws upon historical records of the original subscribers to the Baths where accessible, to place individuals in their social context, arguing that they were men from the ‘middle middle class’, who were established in trade and influential in the governance of the city.

Open Air Bathing

The Cleveland Baths are notable in the relatively early history of organised bathing. The late eighteenth century saw medical opinion tending to focus on sea bathing and on the benefits of cold-water bathing, including open-air cold-water baths. Physicians considered that cold-water bathing was particularly helpful for chronic medical conditions. The eighteenth-century taste for sea-bathing in Brighton, Bognor and Scarborough quite literally brought swimming into the open. Weymouth and Lyme Regis were the closest sea-bathing resorts to Bath. The nascent seaside industry, with its fashion and passion for bathing, caused the period to be known as ‘the dipping age’.¹ For Bath ‘the dawn of the nineteenth century and the new fashion for sea bathing spelled the end of the city’s period of greatness’.²

Most local spas in England were rural, perhaps attached to an inn with a physician or apothecary available to advise clients.³ Baths and wells were often landscaped, fenced and laid out with walks.⁴ Still more people may have plunged into rivers, as nude river bathing was popular for men in the eighteenth century, but regular newspaper stories of accidental drowning associated with bathing in rivers and lakes, made safety a consideration.

Middle-Class Interests and Concerns

By the late eighteenth century, Bath was gradually becoming more sedate and respectable. Transient fashionable society was increasingly moving on to Cheltenham, Leamington and Brighton. Population growth in the city in the Regency period was in line with national trends, but the growth of the middle classes in the city is demonstrated by census returns. By 1830, eighty per cent of men over the age of twenty were artisans, or employed in business or the retail trades.⁵ Bath had ten times more tradespeople than the Somerset average and was a sprawling residential town, an increasingly popular retirement haven for

1 Phyllis Hembry, *British Spas from 1815 to the Present: A Social History*, edited and completed by Leonard W. Cowie and Evelyn E. Cowie (Associated University Presses, NJ, 1997), p.6.

2 Cynthia Hammond, *Architects, Angels, Activists and the City of Bath 1765–1965* (London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2012), p.6.

3 Hembry, *British Spas*, p.1.

4 Hembry, *British Spas*, p.3.

5 Ronald Stanley Neale, *Bath, 1680–1850: A Social History, Or, A Valley of Pleasure, Yet a Sink of Iniquity*, (London: Routledge, 1981), p.267.

senior military officers and civil servants returning from India.⁶

In the nineteenth century, mixed bathing at Bath was associated with perceptions of rowdy and scandalous behaviour at the spa.⁷ Not only was the Season noted for the appearance of itinerant rogues, vagabonds and petty criminals, but also among some middle-class social groups there was a reaction to what was described in a contemporary publication as ‘all the wanton dalliances imaginable’.⁸ This mattered for, as Peter Borsay has argued, image was of central importance in a city where the city itself was the predominant local economic product.⁹ Moreover, Methodism was growing in influence and the increasing elevation of respectability as a national social ethos was to develop into the Victorian preoccupation with decency and decorum.¹⁰ Chris Ayriss has discussed the development of the British culture of prudery in relation to nude bathing in rivers and lakes.¹¹ In Bath this was present as early as 1801, when the Bathwick Water Act prohibited nude bathing in the river. This would have affected local people more than visitors to the city, as local bathers resorted to the marl pits in the Bathwick area just off the river Avon. Marl pits are the sizable mud- and water-filled holes left behind after marl (a mix of earth and lime used to improve soil productivity) has been excavated. It was in this context that the idea of a more private, attractive bathing facility took shape. The first subscribers to the Baths desired relatively private and sedate bathing facilities, and wanted it to be known publicly that they were using those facilities.

Economic Crisis and the Building of the Pleasure Baths

War with France broke out in 1793 with consequent severe economic uncertainty in England. Two of Bath’s banks ‘went broke’ and buildings stood unfinished. There was some revival of the local economy around 1805–9. For instance, the Bath builder and surveyor of the Bathwick Estate,

6 John Wroughton, *Bath in the Age of Reform 1830–1841* (Bath, Morgan Books, 1972), p.48.

7 For Asa Briggs, the spa was an illustration of the coexistence of elegance and squalor in eighteenth-century social life: Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.212.

8 Neale, *Bath*, p.17.

9 Peter Borsay, ‘Image and Counter-Image in Georgian Bath’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* Vol. 17, No. 2 (1994), pp.165–80.

10 Ben Wilson, *Decency and Disorder: the Age of Cant 1789–1837* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

11 Chris Ayriss, *Hung Out to Dry: Swimming and British Culture* (Raleigh NC: Lulu.com, 2009)



Fig. 1: **William Henry Vane (1766-1842)**
3rd Earl of Darlington and 1st Duke of
Cleveland - With kind permission of the
Lord Barnard, Raby Castle

John Pinch (the Elder), who had been made bankrupt in 1800, was active again as an architect-developer by 1807. Then in 1808 William Vane, third Earl of Darlington, and later Duke of Cleveland, inherited the Bathwick Estate. In 1809 William Bourne, a speculative developer, was granted a lease by the Duke of Cleveland of the land in the Bathwick area by the river, adjacent to the marl pits. This was in the form of a 'gentleman's agreement', never formalised. The original intention was to build houses on the site in the context of the proposed new town to the east of the city centre. James Newport, who was later to construct the Baths, was also

party to the agreement.

The Baths were planned for the very eastern edge of the Estate and would have been adjacent to Bourne's new town; however, this development did not proceed because of the economic impact of the Napoleonic Wars. The combination of difficult economic circumstances, combined with the desire for relatively private bathing facilities, led to the subscription launch for the Baths in 1815.¹²

The Baths were completed in 1815. There are no records located to date that indicate when the construction work and site layout began, or how much the Baths cost. Construction was carried out by James Newport, a builder, to the design of John Pinch the Elder, an architect.¹³ The Baths are on the banks of the

¹² Neale, *Bath*, p.241.

¹³ John Pinch the Elder, surveyor to the Bathwick Estate, was an accomplished local architect. He was also the designer of the 'artisan' housing on Hampton Row. His name appears on

Avon and separated from the river by a low bank or bund. The site originally had one D-shaped pool, 100 feet long, 50 feet wide and 6 ft deep, filled with filtered river water. When the main pool was emptied for a technical assessment in 2010, an ingenious original sluice for incoming river water could be seen. This assessment also confirmed that two fresh-water springs not having any connection with the mineral-water springs in the centre of Bath came up from the base of the pool. The site slopes steeply from Hampton Row to the river Avon, one mile to the east of the centre of Bath. The curve of the pool was reflected in a curved crescent of changing rooms — six flanking each wall of a central cottage that accommodated a site overseer. Steps provided access to the water.

The Baths were a convenient and comfortable adaptation of swimming in the river Avon and the site would have had trees and plantings to reflect the taste of the Romantic era.¹⁴ An icehouse was located nearby, so no doubt there were refreshments. The site is still hidden away today; when it opened in 1815 it would have been very secluded, on undeveloped land, yet within a relatively short distance from the hubbub of the fashionable city. It had the added advantage of being within reasonable walking or riding distance of Sydney Gardens, where there were pleasure-garden attractions. The *Annals of Bath* listing for 1815 included this reference to the Baths:

The Pleasure Baths in the vicinity of Sydney Gardens were this year erected, and have proved in each succeeding one, a high source of gratification to those who delight in the healthful recreation of bathing and swimming.

The ground, where they now are, was contiguous to some marl pits (an unprofitable waste piece of land), and admirably designed to form a connection with the river, which sends a running stream constantly through the baths. They have been much improved of late years, are nearly shut out from public view, and will soon be entirely so, by the continued growth of trees which surround them.¹⁵

the subscription list to the Baths, but he was shown as having a free or 'gratis' subscription in return for services to the design of the Baths.

14 Ainslie Ensom, (2012) *Conservation Statement*, Cleveland Pools Trust, retrieved from <http://www.clevelandpools.org.uk/>.

15 Rowland Mainwaring, *Annals of Bath 1800-1830* (Bath: Mary Meyler and Son, 1838).

The First Subscribers

Subscription list for the Baths opened in July 1815. The *Bath Weekly Chronicle* announced:

The Public are informed, that a PIECE OF GROUND is secured near the Marl-Pits, for the purpose of forming PLEASURE BATHS, and erecting Apartments for dressing, &c. The object in view is to provide a place in connection with the River, where those who swim, and those who do not, will be alike accommodated. — As the completion of the plan will depend on the first Subscriptions, those Gentlemen who wish to encourage it are requested to insert their names, in a Book opened for the purpose, at Messrs. James Evill and Son's, and Messrs Bourne and Austin's, Market-place, and at the Kingston Pump room.¹⁶

Swimmers and non-swimmers were accommodated in the subscription arrangements. Subscribers paid either one or two guineas per year. One guinea was the fee for younger men. The modern equivalent is approximately £90 and £180 respectively, so subscribers required a certain level of disposable income. The subscription list, totalling eighty-five subscribers, was composed of men. The Baths opened on a seasonal basis, with the *Bath Weekly Chronicle* of 24th April 1817 announcing that the Baths would be open from 1st May. In June that year a further notice in the *Weekly Chronicle* stated that there were arrangements for non-subscribers to use the Baths by paying sixpence.¹⁷ Provision for separate female swimming was only created later in 1827. A taller block, still covered with its original slates, at the western end of the cubicles is probably the home of the Perpetual Shower Bath, beyond which was located the Ladies' Pool.

The subscription list shows that the original subscribers were predominantly from the 'middle middle' class — the extent of social stratification in the city would have effectively excluded them from the organised pleasures arranged by and for the upper middle class. Subscribers included medical men, engravers and musicians, as well as many significant traders with shop premises.

What follows is a selection of the original subscribers:

¹⁶ *Bath Weekly Chronicle* (20th July 1815).

¹⁷ *Bath Weekly Chronicle* (24th April 1817).

Thomas Austin. Born in Bath in 1801, the son of a military family, he entered the Navy in 1813 and in 1815 had just returned from Quebec, where his father had been involved in the American campaigns. He was to explore the Arctic in 1824–5 and would go on to settle in Canada in 1835 with his wife and children. He would play a prominent role in the formative Canadian government and rise to become an Admiral.

James and William Evill; James Evill Jnr. The Evill family were a leading firm of clock and watchmakers in Bath in the late eighteenth century. At least one example of their high-quality work is to be seen at 1 Royal Crescent.

George and Rob Goldstone. Rob Goldstone, born in 1774, was a surgeon to the Somersetshire Yeomanry; he was also listed as an apothecary and *accoucheur*. He served as apothecary/surgeon to the St James and Abbey Poor House from 1801 to 1804. George was just fifteen in 1815 and was to become a surgeon/apothecary/dentist, practising in Canada.

Henry Goodridge, born in 1775. Goodridge was a notable Bath architect. His work includes the Corridor, opposite the Bath Guildhall and the Cleveland Bridge at Bathwick. He designed the Cleveland Bridge and Beckford's Tower. Brunel used his services to sell shares for the Great Western Railway and to deal with major issues concerning the railway in Bath after it was completed.

Frederick Gye, born in Bath in 1780. Gye was a printer and bookseller, initially with the family business. He was instrumental in the relaunch of the very popular and notorious Vauxhall Gardens in London in 1822. Gye maintained links with the Bath area after moving to London; he stood as a candidate for Chippenham and was elected a Member of Parliament, unopposed, in 1826.

Joseph Hume Spry, born in 1781. Hume Spry was a physician who published *Practical Treatise on the Bath Waters* in 1822, advocating the use of Bath waters for health benefits. He was later to practise at the Bailbrook Asylum, which had been established as an asylum in Bailbrook House by his uncle. Hume Spry was elected Mayor in 1830.

George Moger. Moger was a banker whose private bank — Dore, Smith, Moger & Evans — was established in Union Street, Bath, in 1815. The bank was also known as Bath City Bank. It became Smith & Moger in 1822, then Smith, Moger & Evans in 1825 and finally Moger & Son in 1834.

John Parish, born in 1778. Captain John Parish fought with Nelson at the Battle of the Nile. He married in March 1815 and had a substantial house rebuilt in Timsbury in 1816. His wife owned the house and the family tradition is that the rebuilding was financed by his prize money from the capture of the Spanish treasure ship *Pomona* in the West Indies in 1806.

Charles Philott, born in 1746, was the son of the Archdeacon of Bath. Philott was a banker and developer, who led the fundraising campaign in Bath in support of the war against the French. He became Mayor of Bath for the third time in 1814–15.

John, William and Henry Stothert; George Stothert Jr. Sons and grandson of George Stothert Snr, who founded an ironmongery business in Bath in 1785. By the turn of the nineteenth century the family company was making ornamental ironwork, cast-iron footbridges and agricultural machinery. It even exported to New York. By 1815 there was also a separate iron foundry and, in 1836, Henry Stothert, son of the founder, set up his works in Bristol, with an eye to getting work from the GWR making locomotive engines. George Stothert Snr was a shareholder in the Sydney Gardens enterprise. The firm became Stothert and Pitt in 1844 when Robert Pitt joined the company.

What role could the Cleveland Baths have played as a social network? One answer may relate to the fact that political power in Bath was in the hands of businessmen, shopkeepers, tradesmen and commercial interests.¹⁸ The Mayor was among the first subscribers and a range of other subscribers played roles in the stressful civic life of the city during the Napoleonic Wars. We can only imagine the political and commercial discussions that took place at the Baths. Social inequality in the city was marked, with unrest a sporadic feature. Outbreaks of cholera and other serious diseases affected the most heavily populated areas of the city suffering the worst living conditions close to the river. Furthermore, in the period preceding the 1832 Reform Act, the Mayor and Corporation contended with public challenges arising from frustration about Bath's narrow franchise.¹⁹ The Cleveland Baths provide these men of the middle class with a place that could be used for relaxation and privacy, and a space to conduct business at a time when they were contending with social turbulence and challenge.

¹⁸ Davis and Bonsall, *A History of Bath*, p.107.

¹⁹ Wroughton, *Age of Reform*, p.22.

Post-Napoleonic Wars

In 1827 Newport, the builder and developer of the Baths, went bankrupt and the Baths became dilapidated. This led to the transfer of the Baths to the Reverend Race Godfrey. He bought the lease for the Baths and land on Cleveland Row for £350 and operated the Baths until the 1860s, spending £1,200 on refurbishments. Godfrey immediately instituted provision for women's bathing: a ladies' pool with a perpetual shower bath. A Methodist minister who believed that education and exercise were invaluable for young people, Godfrey ran schools in Bath and Frome, and offered regular swimming in the Baths as part of his educational package. Cynthia Hickman has suggested that non-conformists advocated cold-water bathing in the context of the baptismal associations of immersion.²⁰ In 1844 Godfrey was the Principal and Headmaster of Grosvenor House College on London Road in Bath. The school's facilities include mention of exclusive use of the Baths in the summer months. The school's four rowing boats no doubt enabled pupils to row across to enjoy them before Grosvenor Bridge was built in 1850.

Over the nineteenth century, the Baths' users changed very significantly as a social group. They changed again with wider popular use in the Victorian period and after the Baths were taken over by Bath Corporation in 1900. Swimming was available almost continuously at the Baths from 1815 to the 1980s. The whole crescent of buildings is original. The Cleveland Pools today are Grade II* listed, open to the public on Heritage Open Days and at other specified dates and times (see <http://clevelandpools.org.uk/en/left/news/>). There is increasing evidence from those with specific interests in spa development in Europe that they are the only surviving example of an outdoor public bathing facility fed from a river, not only in the UK, but also in Western Europe. The Cleveland Pools Trust has undertaken research on the Baths and has disseminated its research findings, starting with a short history produced in 2008.²¹ The Cleveland Pools Trust is currently engaged with partners and volunteers in a campaign to raise funds to restore the site to public use, including swimming.²²

20 Cynthia Hickman, 'Taking the Plunge: 18th Century Bath-houses and Plunge Pools', Cathedral Communications, 2010, <http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/bath-houses/bath-houses.htm>, [accessed on 20th July 2014].

21 Janice Dreisbach, *The Cleveland Pleasure Pools Bath, a Short History*, (Printed by the Cleveland Pools Trust, 2008).

22 Cleveland Pools website: <http://www.clevelandpools.org.uk/>

About the Author

Dr Linda Watts is an amateur local historian who has been researching the social history of the Cleveland Pools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and related topics since she retired from local government in 2010. She was a Cleveland Pools Trust trustee for three years and is currently an adviser to the trustees with particular reference to the education development programme. She gives talks to local societies and interest groups on the Pools' history. Her previous published work including an edited book, addresses psychosocial research methodologies and their application in qualitative research. In that context she was previously a Research Fellow at the University of the West of England.