

## A Social History of Swimming in England, 1800-1918

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Over the past 40 years sport has gained credibility as a field of academic study. This is evident in the expansion of participant and spectator sport worldwide, supported by an ever-increasing range of sport related programmes offered at colleges and universities and ever-increasing research opportunities. Through these developments, an increase in the historical and sociological study of sport, its place in society and specific sports and their history, has taken place. The history of sport in the true sense of academic investigation of the subject - within its context at the time rather than merely detail of contests and contestants - is definitely a development of the past 30-40 years which is steadily increasing our understanding of the evolution of the phenomenon that sport has become. In spite of this vast increase in the academic study of sport and the increasing volume of sports history texts and journals, not all sports are covered equally. As highlighted by Tony Mason (1989) in *Sport in Britain: A Social History*, when explaining why he omitted swimming from the text due to there being insufficient work done on it, the sport of swimming is very under-represented within this volume of work. Richard Holt (1989) in *Sport and the British: A Modern Future* explains the omission of swimming from his text as being in order to make it more manageable, implying the vast area of swimming related activity and the volume of research work involved in covering it.

*A Social History of Swimming in England, 1800-1918: Splashing in the Serpentine* by Christopher Love is one of a small number of recent studies on the history of swimming in the UK that are beginning to make some inroads into the serious shortage of academic study in the area. Love's study sets out to investigate the competitive and recreational forms of swimming, diving, water polo, synchronised swimming and lifesaving. The development of these activities is set within the context of the social and technological changes of the period and Love highlights the links between the activity and many key aspects of English life such as class, gender and education.

The book is divided into 10 chapters, each of which deals with a specific topic, plus a chronology of swimming during the period. The introduction sets the text within the context of the shortage of previous work in the area and outlines the themes covered while also highlighting the range of archives across the country that were used. These include the much used British Newspaper Library, Colindale, other regularly-used sources and also many other smaller, and much less familiar archive sources, particularly within the

education area.

The first chapter provides an overview of the development of swimming in England, c.1750-1918 and a summary of much of the content of the following chapters, including: descriptions of the facility building activity; the development of clubs, societies, the national governing body and amateur and professional status; the achievements of Captain Matthew Webb; swimming in the schools and armed forces; the start of international swimming; and, the effects of the First World War on swimming. These are just some of the wide range of other topics that are touched upon.

The second chapter addresses the area of gender and swimming in the Victorian era. Love provides extensive detail on the expectations of society and forms of dress used, together with the problems that the issue presented. Examples of the legislation put in place by the municipalities and by the national governing body, which controlled this at different points and in different contexts throughout the 19th century up until 1918, provide some background to the social conditions and expectations of the time for women. The 30-year gap between the start of official national championships for men and women, the limited number of events available for women and the demands of the events, with women only competing over the short 100 metres distance, are used to highlight the inferior status of women's swimming. The link between 'scientific swimming' and synchronised swimming and the adoption of it by women by 1900 is highlighted as leading to its marginalisation by the male orientated sport and its organisers. The section of the chapter on the provision of swimming for women describing the poorer facilities generally available to them, and the arguments from the period - mainly from female doctors - justifying the importance of swimming for women, highlights the difficulties that Victorian and Edwardian women had in getting involved in sport. The lack of provision for mixed bathing and the evolution of less strict conditions at some seaside resorts (the rigidly enforced segregation at indoor baths continued well into the 20th century), also provide a clear insight into the fundamental gender divisions and the expectations of society throughout the period.

The next chapter, through its investigation into amateurism and professionalism, which was such a major issue in much of British sport during the period, opens up the topic of swimming and class. Clearly, linking the class divisions in Victorian and Edwardian society with the way swimming was provided and governed highlights the divisions that were evident throughout the sport. There is also a large amount of interesting detail about the 'professors', the entertainments, the competitions and the betting on the matches. The long and uneasy evolution of amateurism through the complex and changing laws of the national governing body, which certainly in the early years were little understood or identified within the world of the participating swimmers, is well-documented and clearly in pursuit of a middle-class ideal.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal with municipal swimming provision. Chapter four takes an overview of the municipal development of swimming facilities in England during the last three quarters of the 19th and the early 20th century. This chapter, entitled 'Local aquatic empires', goes a long way towards clarifying the minefield of legislation around the middle of the 19th century relating to the provision of swimming baths, either through private enterprise or through the municipalities. Issues surrounding the creation of baths or swimming pools and the compromise of plunge pools, the diversity of the uptake of the permissive legislation by municipalities across the country, the condition of facilities, class of baths and costs of use are covered, and each contains a significant amount of informative and interesting detail. An analysis of the key research work from the end of the period, *Report on Public Baths and Wash-houses in the UK* (1918) by Agnes Campbell, explores the increasing scale of municipal provision for bathing and swimming through the century. The following chapter provides three case studies of those developments. The case studies cover two areas of London, Lambeth and Holborn, and also the rapidly expanding industrial city of Manchester. These draw heavily on an extensive range of municipal archives plus the key texts recording the facilities of the period: Dudgeon 1870, Sinclair and Henry 1893 and Campbell 1918. The lack of uniformity in the responses of the municipal authorities and the seriously slow reactions of some of the authorities in the face of the permissive, as opposed to mandatory, legislation are highlighted. This section again contains a lot of interesting examples and detail, not only on the municipalities' building of facilities, as outlined in the previous chapter, but also on the effect of private facilities on municipal provision and the changing profile

of provision over time. Early price concession schemes, strategies to ensure that the classes could bathe separately, swimming entertainments, women's swimming, mixed bathing and the promotion of swimming are all covered and provide interesting insights into the introduction and operation of the baths, while highlighting key social issues in Victorian and Edwardian society.

The next two chapters cover swimming provision within education. Chapter six, entitled 'Swimming at the Clarendon schools', deals with the public schools while chapter seven completes the coverage of the school system by considering the early state school system. The chapter on public schools focuses only on the limited group that were part of the investigation by the Clarendon Commission, provides extensive and interesting detail on their swimming provision during the 19th and early 20th century. The Commission, which was set up by Parliament to examine the finances, management, teaching and curriculum of the public schools, included some investigation into the sport and recreation in the schools. The areas covered in the chapter include details about the facilities used, the position of swimming in relation to other sports, clubs, competition, swimming tests and the rules about swimming ability and boating activity plus some information about the 'bathing masters' of the period. This section is supported by extensive archive sources relating to the individual schools and which adds greatly to both its interest and validity. Other sources such as the *Scientific Treatise on the Art of Swimming* (1861) by Etonian Aquatic, *Swimming in the Eton Style* (1875) by Sergeant Leahy, who taught swimming at Eton and *The Complete Swimmer* (1912) by Frank Sachs, which provides fairly detailed coverage of the swimming provision at a wide range of public schools at the turn of the century, are not used and could have provided still more detail.

Chapter seven, after outlining the development of mass education in the last quarter of the 19th century, provides an excellent and detailed account of the somewhat slow and confusing evolution of swimming within the state education curriculum. This includes coverage of the different stances of the Board of Education and local education boards such as the London School Board. The latter was very forward-thinking and keen to promote swimming, although it was not officially approved as a curricular subject, and it eventually became the first school board to get an agreement to fund swimming provision. There are also some interesting reflections on the belief in bathing and swimming and their place within education by the civil servants, members of parliament, the Amateur Swimming Association, the newly established school boards and the state schools themselves. Interesting variations in the financing of provision by the local Baths and Wash-houses Committee, the local Education Committee and the students themselves are also highlighted. This area is again supported by extensive references, in this instance to public records, which provide considerable detail about the very confused position during the early evolution of mass education and in the development of the forerunner to what we recognise today as physical education.

The next two chapters deal with the concept of service, humanitarian values and lifesaving. Chapter eight highlights the links between swimming and humanitarianism, from the founding of the Royal Humane Society in the 18th century and the work of the National Swimming Society in the middle of the 19th, to the start of the Life Saving Society in 1891. It covers the development of the activity of lifesaving which, following the establishment of the Life Saving Society, spread widely. This spread was prompted by its humanitarian appeal and aided by its uptake by other organisations, such as the Scouts, who were interested in the concept of service to others.

The following chapter continues with the humanitarian ideal specifically linked to service to others and traces the development of this within the context of Baden-Powell's youth movements, such as the Boy Scouts. Love relates this humanitarianism and service ethic to Britain's imperialism and desire to export the civilising values of Christianity to the empire, which was at its peak during the Edwardian period. He outlines the principles of the Boy Scout movement and the amount of swimming and lifesaving that featured within the Scout's activities and badges, and subsequently within those of the Girl Guides.

Chapter ten entitled 'Health, cleanliness and empire', looks at the links between swimming facilities and their activity, and the health and cleanliness of the population during a period of increasing concern about the filth and misery of urban life and developing understanding of the links between such filth, degradation,

immorality and ill health. The chapter provides a lot of information on the development of views about cleanliness and health, the increasing number of facilities, the improvement of the cleanliness of the water in the baths themselves and the various campaigns and publications on the subject during this period. However, it is very light on the topic of empire, which the chapter's title might not lead the reader to expect. Apart from brief reference to the public schoolboys going to the borders of the empire to fight and the problems of the health of the prospective recruits to the army in relation to its failures in the Boer War, there is little in relation to empire in what is otherwise an interesting and informative chapter. Finally, the text concludes with a chronology of the main events related to swimming during the period 1747-1918.

Overall this book covers a wide range of topics related to swimming and provides a comprehensive overview of the developments of the period. This reviewer finds the text, considering the wide range of topics covered and hence the limited depth possible for each, to be a valuable contribution to the detailed knowledge about the development of the facilities, participation and the sport in general. The social context of the country at the time is embedded in the text and although at first I thought it to be limited amid the extensive factual swimming specific information, it is in fact there in considerable depth and well-related to the swimming events. The book provides a welcome and worthwhile insight into the development of swimming during the period and the relationship between the activity, its development and the evolving society of the time. The notes and references are evidence of the very extensive range of sources, and in particular, the wide range of primary sources drawn upon. It is particularly strong in the areas of municipal provision, education and swimming, and class. It provides a lot of interesting information for others pursuing research in the area and certainly points the direction to a lot of useful sources of information in this previously neglected area within the wider field of sports history research. If there is a weakness it lies in the limited coverage of diving, water polo and synchronised swimming which the introduction leads us to expect. These activities, although existing in differing amounts (especially in view of the limits on swimming itself during much of the period) were even more limited in relation to participation.

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