



***The Cleveland ‘Pleasure Baths’ - secluded pleasures in a spa city***

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*This paper 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 history of organised swimming. The Baths are discussed in the context of the development of the middle classes. The middle class interest in outdoor bathing in the Regency period and the continuing development of subscription clubs and societies are also examined. Importantly, the reasons for such a facility being constructed in a prominent spa city are explored. Where historical records are accessible on the original Baths subscribers, the records are used to place those individuals in their social context as it is argued that these 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18th-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’<sup>i</sup>. 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’<sup>ii</sup>. An influence on the upper middle and upper classes would have been the Grand Tour that tended to include the Venetian island of Lido (the origin of our use of the term ‘lido’). Bathing activities were of course limited to those with sufficient resources and leisure time.

Local spas in England were more easily accessed - most local spas were rural, perhaps attached to an inn with a physician or apothecary available to advise.<sup>iii</sup> The sites of baths

and wells were often landscaped with bushes, trees and walks and fenced around.<sup>iv</sup> Still larger numbers of people would have plunged into rivers – nude river bathing was popular for men in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but safety became an important consideration - there were regular newspaper stories of accidental drowning associated with bathing in rivers and lakes.

### ***Middle class interests and concerns***

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Bath had become far less fashionable and glamorous than during the heyday of the spa and the city gradually became more sedate and respectable. It was becoming a popular retirement haven for senior military officers and civil servants returning from India. The relatively transient fashionable society had moved 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 that show that by 1830 80% of males over 20 were artisans, or running or working in businesses or retail trades.<sup>v</sup> There were ten times the numbers of tradespeople in the city compared with the average across the county of Somerset. My use of the term ‘middle middle’ class in this article applies to local bankers, people owning substantial shops and businesses, people having a commission in the services and professionally qualified people such as medics. By 1830, we need to envisage Bath as a sprawling town, no longer with a large transitory population, but being a permanent residence.<sup>vi</sup>

Discourses of respectability and social regulation were becoming more dominant; ‘...the city was transforming to one that was at least superficially decorous, where social life was governed by rigid conventions.’<sup>vii</sup> Clubs and cliques became more numerous, reflecting the increased social segregation. ‘Clubs created identity and partisanship’<sup>viii</sup> The growth of the middle class in the city had particular impacts: ‘The more established growth of the city and its popularity had increased social segregation and altered the forms of social life’<sup>ix</sup>

Importantly, the concept of the seasonal subscription developed in this period in the context of the spas. Subscription was a sure way to commercialise leisure<sup>x</sup>. Clubs and societies provided a setting for sharing ideas, debating and learning. In some respects, they replaced the role of the coffee houses as sites for social networking.

Mixed bathing in the Bath spa was associated with perceptions of rowdy and scandalous behaviour. The spa was an illustration of Briggs’ observation of the coexistence of elegance and squalor in 18<sup>th</sup> century social life.<sup>xi</sup> There was thus a counter – image that was negative in the perception of respectable society, as an image of high quality leisure - and image was key in a city where the city itself was the predominant local economic product.<sup>xii</sup> 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.<sup>xiii</sup> Ayriss discusses the development of the British culture of prudery in relation to nude bathing in rivers and lakes.<sup>xiv</sup> So the first subscribers desired not only to use the Baths facilities but also for it to be known publicly that they were using those relatively private and sedate facilities.

The spa baths had been very crowded and hectic and. the ‘season’ was noted for the appearance of itinerant rogues, vagabonds and petty criminals. In some middle class social

groups there was a reaction to what was described in a contemporary publication as ‘all the wanton dalliances imaginable’.<sup>xv</sup> In 1801, the Bathwick Water Act prohibited nude bathing in the river. This would have affected local people more than visitors to the city and local bathers resorted to the marl pits in the Bathwick area just off the river. 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) had been excavated. In this context, the idea of a more private, attractive bathing facility would have taken shape.

### ***Economic crisis and the building of the pleasure baths***

War with France broke out in 1793 with consequent severe economic uncertainty in England. Bath’s boom of the 1760s and early 1790s was over. Two of Bath’s banks ‘went broke;’ and buildings stood unfinished. There was some revival of the local economy around 1805 - 9. The Bath builder John Pinch (the Elder) had been made bankrupt in 1800 but was active again as an architect-developer by 1807.

In 1809 William Bourne, a speculative developer, was granted a lease by the Duke of Cleveland that was a form of ‘gentleman’s agreement’, never formalised, of the land in the Bathwick area by the river, adjacent to the marl pits. The original intention was speculative – to build houses on the site in the context of the proposed new town to the east of the city centre. Newport was also party to the agreement – he was the builder who was later to construct the Baths. William Vane, third Earl of Darlington, and later the Duke of Cleveland, had inherited the Bathwick Estate in 1808.



William Vane, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Cleveland

English School, Copyright Torre Abbey Gallery collection (image supplied by Bridgeman Art Library)

The Baths were on the very eastern edge of the Estate and would have been adjacent to the significant planned development – a ‘new town’ - that in the event did not proceed due to the economic impacts of the Napoleonic Wars. So the major difficulty arising from the economic situation combined with the desire for relatively private bathing facilities led to the subscription launch for the Baths in 1815: ‘What exists today in Bathwick, to be often admired as the result of the intentions of men in the past, is in fact the unintended result of the workings of the marketplace...’<sup>xvi</sup> The site would have had trees and planting to reflect taste in the Romantic era. It is on the banks of the river and separated from the river by a low bank or bund. An icehouse was located nearby so no doubt there were refreshments. It is hidden away now and when it was opened 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 advantage of being within a reasonable walking distance of Sydney Gardens where there were pleasure garden attractions.

John Pinch the Elder, surveyor to the Bathwick Estate, an 'accomplished' local architect, also designer of the 'artisan' housing on Hampton Row, was on the subscription list to the Baths but he was shown as having a free or 'gratis' subscription in return for services and therefore is very likely to have contributed to the design of the Baths. John Pinch the Elder didn't build the great showpieces of Bath architecture, but he did succeed in building on difficult terrain, in terms of slope and flooding risk. The Baths as constructed were a convenient and comfortable adaptation of swimming in the river Avon; river water was diverted to flow through the original single pool, with steps for access, and changing rooms were provided. <sup>xvii</sup>

The main pool was emptied for a technical assessment in 2010 and an ingenious original sluice for the incoming river water could be seen, also it was confirmed that two springs came up from the base of the pool.

### ***The first subscribers in 1815***

In July 1815 the subscription list for the Baths opened, to gauge interest and to raise funds. The Bath Weekly Chronicle announced in July 1815:

*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. ...<sup>xviii</sup>*

Non swimmers were accommodated in the subscription arrangements. The subscription list totalling eighty five subscribers was composed of males – provision for separate female swimming was created later in 1827. A taller block at the western end of the cubicles still with its original slates is probably the home of the Perpetual Shower Bath, with the Ladies Pool being housed beyond .

The original funding, by private subscriptions from those able to afford it, enabled the subscription list to be closed in 1815, the same year that the list had been opened. Subscriptions of either one guinea or two guineas per year were paid with one guinea being the fee for younger men (modern equivalent is approximately £90 and £180 respectively) so the fees required a certain level of disposable income. The Baths opened on a seasonal basis – the Bath Weekly Chronicle published on 24 April 1817 announced that the Baths would be opened from 1<sup>st</sup> 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.

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.”<sup>xix</sup>*

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. Professions ranging from medicine to engraving and music are represented plus many significant traders having shop premises. This is a selection of the original subscribers:

Thomas Austin. Born in Bath in 1801, the son of a military family, entered the Navy in 1813 and in 1815 had just returned from Quebec where his father had been in the campaign against the US. He was to explore the Arctic in 1824-5. He settled in Canada in 1835 with his wife and children and had a prominent role in the formative Canadian government. Austin was to become an Admiral.



Horatio Thomas Austin 1880 NPG archive

James and William Evill, Jas Evill jun.. The Evill family were a leading firm of clock and watchmakers in Bath in the late 18<sup>th</sup> 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, 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 15 in 1815 and was to become a surgeon apothecary dentist, practising in Canada.

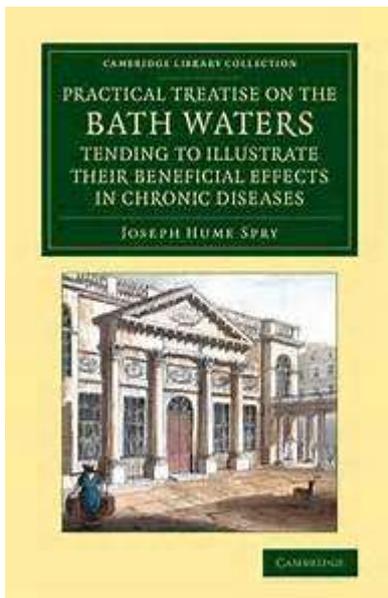
Henry Goodridge, born in 1775. Goodridge was a notable Bath architect. His work includes the Cleveland Bridge at Bathwick, then the Corridor opposite the Guildhall. He designed the Cleveland Bridge and Beckford’s Tower. Brunel used his services to sell shares for the Great Western Railway and to deal 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 this area after moving to London after standing as a general election candidate for Chippenham, elected unopposed in 1826.



Frederick Gye Copyright Bath In Time

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 located in Bailbrook House, originally established as an asylum by his uncle. Hume Spry was elected Mayor in 1830.



Modern cover of Hume Spry's published treatise

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

Parish John. 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. The house was owned by his wife and the family tradition is that rebuilding was financed by his

using prize money from the capture of the Spanish treasure ship Pomona in the West Indies in 1806.



John Parish Esq. Copyright Bath In Time

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

John, William and Henry Stothert and George Stothert junior. George Stothert had founded an ironmongery business in Bath in 1785. By the turn of the century the family company was making ornamental ironwork, cast iron footbridges, agricultural machinery, and even exporting to New York. By 1815 there was 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.<sup>xx</sup> The Mayor was among the first Baths subscribers and a range of other subscribers played roles in the stressful civic life of the city during the Napoleonic Wars. These influential roles included those concerned with maintaining social order and meting out punishment during a period characterised by dissent and demands for social justice, in a climate of concern for social stability and protection of property.

We can only imagine the political and commercial discussions that took place at the Baths. Social inequality in the city was marked, with unrest being a sporadic feature. Outbreaks of cholera and other serious diseases affected the populated areas of the city suffering the worst conditions, close to the river. In the period preceding the 1832 Reform Act, the Mayor and corporation contended with public challenge arising from frustration about lack of electoral rights that led the Mayor to respond to an agitated crowd who were damaging the Guildhall by 'reading the riot act.'<sup>xxi</sup> Porter<sup>xxii</sup> and then Mee<sup>xxiii</sup> have pointed to the way in which polite society withdrew into more segregated enclaves in this period. The Cleveland Baths provide an example of a space that could be used by men of the middle middle class (at a time when patronage, or the influence of social relationships, was a primary route into positions in local government, the military or the church.<sup>xxiv</sup> The baths afforded both relaxation and privacy to an identifiable group to conduct their business at a time when they were contending with social turbulence and challenge.

## ***Post Napoleonic Wars***

In 1827 Newport, the builder and developer, 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 Bath and land on Cleveland Row for £350, operated the baths until the 1860s and spent £1200 on refurbishments. An immediate change instituted by the Reverend was provision for women's bathing – a ladies pool with a perpetual shower bath. The Reverend was a Methodist minister whose vision was that education and exercise were invaluable for young people. He ran schools in Bath and Frome and offered regular swimming in the Baths as part of the educational package. It has been suggested that cold water bathing was promoted by the advocates of non – conformist religion in the context of the baptismal associations of immersion.<sup>xxv</sup>

In 1844 the Rev Race Godfrey was the Principal and Head Master of the Grosvenor House College on London Rd in Bath. The schools facilities include mention of exclusive use of the Pools in the summer months and four rowing boats so no doubt pupils rowed across at first to enjoy the Pools. The Grosvenor Bridge was built in 1850 so the pupils from Grosvenor College would have used this to access the Pools and canal as well.



Grosvenor College Bath 1845. Copyright Bath In Time

So the Baths' users changed very significantly as a social group and were to change again with wider popular use in the Victorian period, followed by the Bath Corporation taking over in 1900.

The Cleveland Pools today are Grade II\* listed, open to the public to drop in on days and times set out on the website and Heritage Open Days. The whole crescent of buildings is original. A central two storey cottage is flanked symmetrically on either side by wings of six changing cubicles. Swimming was available almost continuously from 1815 to the 1980s. 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 and disseminated research findings starting with a short history produced in 2008.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Cleveland Pools Trust is engaged with partners and volunteers in a campaign to raise funds to restore the site to public use including swimming.<sup>xxvii</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Phylis Hembry, *British Spas: from 1815 to the present: A Social History*, ed. Leonard Cowie and Evelyn Cowie (Associated University Presses, NJ, 1997) p.6.
- <sup>ii</sup> Cynthia Hammond, *Architects, Angels, Activists and the City of Bath 1765-1965* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, London , 2012) p.6.
- <sup>iii</sup> Phylis Hembry, p.1.
- <sup>iv</sup> Phylis Hembry, p.3.
- <sup>v</sup> Ronald Stanley Neale, *Bath, 1680-1850: A Social History, Or, A Valley of Pleasure, Yet a Sink of Iniquity*, (Routledge, London, 1981) p.267.
- <sup>vi</sup> John Wroughton, *Bath in the Age of Reform 1830-1841* (Morgan Books, Bath, Somerset, 1972) p.48.
- <sup>vii</sup> Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall , *A History of Bath: Image and Reality* (Carnegie Publishing, Lancaster, 2006) p.117.
- <sup>viii</sup> Roy Porter, *English Society in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Allen Lane, London, 1982) p.157.
- <sup>ix</sup> Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall, p.125.
- <sup>x</sup> Phylis Hembry, p.4.
- <sup>xi</sup> Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (Penguin, London, 1987) p.212.
- <sup>xii</sup> Peter Borsay, 'Image and Counter – Image in Georgian Bath', *Journal for 18<sup>th</sup> Century Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell 1994) vol 17:2, pp.165-180.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ben Wilson ,*Decency and Disorder: the Age of Cant 1789-1837* (Faber and Faber, London, 2007).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Chris Ayriss , *Hung Out to Dry: Swimming and British Culture* (Lulu.com, Raleigh NC.,2009)
- <sup>xv</sup> Ronald Stanley Neale, p.17.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Ronald Stanley Neale, p.241.

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

<sup>xviii</sup> *Bath Weekly Chronicle*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1815.

<sup>xix</sup> Rowland Mainwaring, *Annals of Bath 1800-1830*, (Mary Meyer and Son, Bath, 1838).

<sup>xx</sup> Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall, p.107.

<sup>xxi</sup> John Wroughton, p.22.

<sup>xxii</sup> Roy Porter, p.249.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford University Press, Oxford,2011).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Jennifer Hall-Witt *Opera and Elite Culture in London 1780 – 1880*, (University Press of New England, Hanover, US, 2007) p.69.

<sup>xxv</sup> Cynthia Hickman (2010). *Taking the Plunge: 18<sup>th</sup> century Bath-houses and Plunge Pools*, [www.buildingconservation.com/articles/bath-houses/bath-houses.htm](http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/bath-houses/bath-houses.htm), (Cathedral Communications,2010) Accessed on 20 July 2014.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Janice Dreisbach, *The Cleveland Pleasure Pools Bath, a Short History*, (Printed by the Cleveland Pools Trust, 2008).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Cleveland Pools website [www.clevelandpools.org.uk](http://www.clevelandpools.org.uk)