

Female Employees and the Victorian Public Baths: Post-1878 - Pecha Kucha Script

Slide 1. Female Employees and the Victorian Public Baths: Post-1878

This paper reports on a long-term project exploring female employment in nineteenth-century swimming. It collates my work on attendants, teachers and natationists and questions the notion that gendered 'separate spheres' were a universal phenomenon.

Slide 2. Separate Spheres in Victorian Period

'Separate spheres' refers to a compartmentalized view of gender. While it postulates a dichotomy between the feminine home and the male workplace, it has come under critical scrutiny from those who argue that sphere boundaries were full of fissures.

Slide 3. August, Andrew. How separate a sphere? Poor women and paid work in late-Victorian London. *Journal of Family History*, 1994, 19(3), 285-310

It was never the case, for example, that women gave up work when they married, as can be seen from 1887 work patterns, although some believed that this lowered men's wages and degraded women. What was applied to the workplace was also applied to women's leisure.

Slide 4. Early/Mid Victorian Bathing

Sea bathing, a popular Victorian activity, was dominated by a spatial separation of the sexes and an insistence on female instructors or bathers. This became even more entrenched when women's swimming moved indoors into the new Corporation Baths.

Slide 5. 1878 Baths and Wash-Houses Act Empowered Local Authorities to Provide Covered Swimming Baths

While an earlier Act stimulated the creation of baths, it was the 1878 Baths and Washhouses Act that encouraged local authorities to build covered swimming facilities, leading to a shift in location for many female instructors.

Slide 6. From Sea to Baths

This is reflected in census returns which show a decline in the number of female 'bathers' and a parallel increase in swimming mistresses. Teachers were not the only women, however, who were employed at the baths, which normally had ancillary washing facilities.

Slide 7. Newington Ladies Bath and Laundry Room 1898

Baths like those at Newington, for example, had a designated area or time for women's swimming and a laundry room, which provided for a local population that had little access to suitable facilities for washing clothes or personal hygiene.

Slide 8. Arthur Ashpitel. Observations on baths and wash-houses, with an account of their history: an abstract of the acts of parliament relating thereto, etc. *LSE Selected Pamphlets (1852)*, 15, 19.

Even before 1878, this range of facilities meant that different categories of staff were required, ranging from the superintendent and matron, to stokers and engineers, bath attendants and support staff such as ticket clerks and laundry women.

Slide 9. Female Baths Employees (1871-1911) (N) = 1,793

The following data has been collated from census returns on nearly 1800 women gathered by my colleague Margaret Roberts. The headline figures in Table 2 illustrate the increasing numbers finding employment in all categories at the baths after 1878.

Slide 10. Table 3. Marital Status

Some significant differences between employment categories are revealed, such as the marital status of ticket clerks, invariably single or widowed (a category that needs much more analysis), and of matrons, most of whom were married.

Slide 11. Table 4. Matrons' Family Connections

This is emphasized in this sample which shows that matrons were invariably engaged as part of a couple with their husbands acting as baths superintendents or managers. The data also suggests they had some longevity in their roles when compared to clerks.

Slide 12. Newspaper adverts

Adverts for staff indicate that bath attendants were essential. The highlighted areas on these examples require the ability to swim and give some idea of wages as well as the type of individual who might be engaged, given the need to be able to write.

Slide 13. Table 5. Bath Attendants

Following 1878, there was a steady increase in the numbers of bath attendants, three-quarters of whom were single. Increasingly, there was less reliance on family connections to obtain positions suggesting these became accessible to a wider female constituency.

Slide 14. Table 6. Class Origins

These women were generally recruited from the more skilled or 'reliable' sections of the working class such as carpenters or engineers. They also tended to remain in post for at least two censuses suggesting a certain level of job security.

Slide 15. Widening participation

As facilities expanded, more women took up swimming, ranging from aristocratic women at the Bath Club to the working-class members of the Women's Union. This increased the demand for female professional swimming teachers such as 'Miss Young'.

Slide 16. Nellie Easton

Some individuals, like Nellie Easton, became prominent within the swimming community and she featured in a number of reports of the period, not only with respect to the quality of her teaching but also in her giving of swimming entertainments.

Slide 17. Natationists and Teaching

The leading figures in aquatic entertainment, of course, were professional natationists, such as Laura Saigeman, Agnes Beckwith and Alice Sinclair, who also used their reputations to attract women to their popular and lucrative teaching classes at the baths.

Slide 18. Table 7. Family Connections

Most natationists had family connections with swimming and this was true of many swimming teachers, as table 7 shows. By keeping swim teaching in the family, the head of the household ensured that the income from classes was retained.

Slide 19. Table 8. Class Origins

For those who entered teaching from outside of the swimming community, their generally artisan class backgrounds suggest they were slightly further up the social hierarchy than bath attendants. Like many natationists, they often remained in this role for many years.

Slide 20. Future directions

These lives reflect fissures in the boundaries surrounding 'separate spheres' with many women, for example, continuing to work after marriage. The data is constantly expanding and future research will examine specific baths communities to explore female employment in more detail.