

Professor George Poulton: Natationist and Entrepreneur

George Poulton was born in 1824, son of a tailor.¹ At nineteen, he was competing in the premier swimming events of the 1840s, at the National Baths in High Holborn.² George's speciality became floating, 'scientific' and 'ornamental' swimming, and Kenworthy subsequently described Poulton as one of the best swimmers in the country.³ George was engaged as swimming master at Newcastle public baths by 1847 and commentators noted that he 'considerably improved' swimming in Newcastle.⁴ George was swimming master at the Albion Baths in London by July 1854 when he took a benefit. He swam one hundred and sixty feet under water (twice the length of the bath) followed by swimming a length with his hands and legs bound. He then swam eighty feet in only four strokes and did the same distance backwards. He then gave some 'fine specimens of scientific swimming' and floating, illustrating a dead man, 'The Crucifix', 'The Dying Gladiator', turned eight summersaults in the water without touching the bottom. He drank a bottle of milk, which he did by holding the bottle in his mouth, and with arms extended immersed himself about six inches below the surface and rose after swallowing the contents. He then smoked a pipe while under the water, the bowl only remaining a little above. He was of such an amphibious nature that the water was as much his 'element as *terra firma*'.⁵

Teaching and Venues

A year later, George was organising a benefit in Manchester, and from this point, he was a firm fixture in the district as teacher, natationist, publican, and sporting entrepreneur. Advertisements over forty years informed the public that daily teaching classes, for ladies and gentlemen, were taught by Poulton at Mayfield, Greengate, and Leaf Street Baths.⁶

Swimming Baths

Greengate Baths was financed by the Manchester and Salford Baths & Laundry Corporation and opened in 1856. In 1859, Poulton, the swimming master, took a benefit at the Baths, when he went through his unrivalled swimming feats, and twenty years later, he was still giving exhibitions and offering medals for swimming.⁷

When the Company opened Mayfield Baths, the professor included the facility into his portfolio. In 1858, a large audience witnessed his aquatic feats and contests for medals given for the encouragement of swimming and diving. In April 1883, Poulton and some pupils, male and female, gave an exhibition in the ladies' swimming bath, and in July he swam twenty-one yards on his back, in one stroke, starting from the shallow end.⁸

Leaf Street Baths opened in 1860,⁹ and in July Poulton gave a 'specimen of his powers' by swimming twice the length of the bath at an 'incredible rate'. Leaf Street was subsequently the venue for races, open to the world, over 500 yards, for the Manchester Champion's Challenge Cup, and Poulton also organised races for a Lancashire Silver Cup, open to men resident within 100 miles of Manchester.¹⁰

Nineteenth-century professionals normally preferred to organise serious matches in open water. When Mather and Johnson raced one mile for £25 a side in 1864, the event took place in the Mersey. Poulton engaged a steamboat so spectators could follow the race.¹¹

Bellevue Gardens

Between 1858 and 1876, Poulton took advantage of the five acre lake created by Jennison at Bellevue to perform 'some singular and surprising feats, and to exhibit his method of saving the lives of drowning persons' as well establishing races, around a course marked out by posts, and a swimming steeplechase, in which competitors went over two and under two hurdles once around the course.¹²

Hollingworth Lake

The professor also organised outdoor galas at Hollingworth Lake, Littleborough. In 1865, a quarter of a mile race open to All England was attended by Gurr (Champion of England), Pamplin and 'their trainer',

Woodbridge. These events included a great duck hunt, with 20 'live ducks', and 'walking the greasy pole for two live pigs'.¹³

Outside Manchester

In the 1860s, Poulton had regular engagements in Burnley, Liverpool, Birmingham, Morecambe, Halifax, and Leeds.¹⁴ These trips were not without their dangers. Poulton was seriously injured by a railway collision in 1864, whilst travelling by express train to Birmingham.¹⁵ There were also organisational difficulties. In 1865, Poulton organised a gala in Lancaster which Gurr was scheduled to attend but he was nowhere to be found.¹⁶

Club Activities

When Victorian swimming clubs were formed, they turned to swimming professors for instruction and organisational advice. Manchester Swimming Club 'profited by the services of that eminent professor', Poulton, and at Mayfield Baths in 1859, the chairman presented him with a gold watch and chain in acknowledgement of his services. A year later, Poulton noted that its members had won prizes in Gibraltar, Birmingham, London, Liverpool, among other places.¹⁷

Poulton as Publican

Although the 1861 census listed George as a teacher of swimming, he was running the Griffin Inn, 20 Medlock Street, Hulme, by 1865 and gala entries from that point until 1871 could be made at his house where trophies were on view and competitors from all over the country could congregate.¹⁸ In the tradition of sporting publicans, the professor involved himself in a range of sports. In 1865, he sponsored an All England angling match by giving three cups to be fished for at Hollingworth Lake. Poulton also sponsored shooting matches for gentlemen amateurs in 1865 at the Copenhagen grounds. Competitors were required to shoot at 7 birds each and 'first-class flyers' were provided by Hayes. In 1869, George gave a cup, plus prize money, for a half-mile pedestrian handicap at the City Grounds.¹⁹

Poulton the Champion

George never forgot to emphasise his swimming skills by issuing challenges. In 1860, he offered to swim any man in England a scientific match for £25 a side, and in 1874, he offered to swim a scientific swimming match 'with any man breathing', for £50 or £100 a side, point for point, or trick for trick, over two minutes.²⁰

His expertise was clearly valued by the swimming community and he attended a meeting about a national Champion Challenge Cup, in London in 1863.²¹ When a discussion took place about the origins of the overhand stroke in 1875 Henry Gardener, claimed 'to be the first to use and bring it to perfection by winning the championship with it at Manchester'. Poulton replied that it was 'impossible' to say who had invented the stroke but he recalled seeing it at Holborn baths in 1842.²²

Like many professors, George displayed considerable longevity in his swimming activities. In 1881, George, a teacher of swimming, was living in Hulme, and, judging by a letter he sent to the newspapers in August, he was still based at Mayfield baths. He pointed out that reports of a death by drowning at the Mayfield baths were inaccurate and that the incident had taken place at the Leaf Street baths. It was also inaccurate to say that the water of the Mayfield baths was 'murky' and that the attendants could not swim. On the contrary, they were 'excellent swimmers'.²³ The 1891 census records the 67-year-old as a swimming master living in Moss Side, and he organised the annual gala at Mayfield Baths that year, which now included a ladies race, and he gave exhibitions in ornamental and scientific swimming. George died in 1898, aged 74.²⁴

¹ 1824 Baptismal Registers, Saint George, Hanover Square, Middlesex, 9. No 71. George Poulton to George, tailor, and Elizabeth.

² *Era*, July 23, 1843

³ *Era*, July 6, 1845; *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, September 14, 1845; *Era*, September 14, 1845; September 28, 1845; *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, , September 28, 1845; *Era*, May 17, 1846; July 26, 1846; *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, July 12, 1846.

⁴ *Newcastle Guardian and Tyne Mercury*, June 5, 1847, 5; *Newcastle Courant*, August 20, 1847.

⁵ 1851 Census HO 107/1504; 1852 Jan-Feb-Mar Marriage to London, 1c Page 306; *Era*, July 30, 1854, 13.

- ⁶ *Bells Life*, , September 16, 1855, 8; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, April 4, 1863, 12; April 11, 1863, 6; April 25, 1863, 6; May 2, 1863, 6; May 9, 1863, 6; May 16, 1863, 6; May 30, 1863, 1; June 6, 1863, 4; August 23, 1862, 1; August 2, 1864, 1; August 8, 1864, 1; July 6, 1865, 1; July 15, 1865, 5; July 27, 1865, 1; August 3, 1865, 1; August 5, 1865, 1; June 23, 1866, 1; June 28, 1866, 1; July 12, 1866, 1; July 14, 1866, 3; July 24, 1866, 1; August 7, 1866, 1; 29 June 1867, 1; 1 July 1867, 1; 2 July 1867, 1; 4 July 1867, 1; July 5, 1867, 1; 6 July 1867, 1; 11 July 1867, 1; 16 July 1867, 1; 27 July 1867, 1; June 19, 1877, 1; June 20 1877, 1; June 22, 1880, 1; September 17, 1881, 1; December 29, 1880, 1; August 10, 1882, 1; August 14, 1882, 1; December 22, 1883, 1; September 25, 1883, 1; December 26, 1883, 1.
- ⁷ *Bells Life*, September 25, 1859, 6; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, July 26, 1880, 8; *Bells Life*, July 31, 1880, 8.
- ⁸ *Bells Life*, September 5, 1858, 5; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, October 28, 1882, 7; April 21, 1883, 14; *Illustrated Police News*, July 21, 1883, 4.
- ⁹ These three baths were purchased by Manchester City Council on 29 September, 1877. Source: Carl Evans Baths and Washhouses Historical Archive <http://www.bathsandwashhouses.co.uk/archive>
- ¹⁰ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, July 21, 1860, 9; *Bells Life*, April 27, 1862, 7; May 18, 1862, 6; July 5, 1863, 3; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, July 26, 1865, 4; *Bells Life*, July 29, 1865, 7.
- ¹¹ *Bells Life*, May 21, 1864, 6.
- ¹² *Bells Life*, September 5, 1858, 5; *Bells Life*, August 30, 1863, 6.
- ¹³ *Bells Life*, August 19, 1865, 6; August 11, 1866, 2; August 1, 1868, 10; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, August 30, 1869, 3.
- ¹⁴ *Bells Life*, May 21, 1864, 6; May 6, 1865, 7; April 14, 1866, 7; September 5, 1868, 10; September 15, 1866, 3; *Bells Life*, August 18, 1866, 7; August 31, 1872, 10; May 5, 1869, 8.
- ¹⁵ *Bells Life*, October 29, 1864, 7.
- ¹⁶ *Bells Life*, October 21, 1865, 9.
- ¹⁷ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, November 12, 1859, 6; *Bells Life*, , November 13, 1859, 7; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, October 13, 1860, 9.
- ¹⁸ *Bells Life*, August 19, 1865, 6; August 11, 1866, 2; August 22, 1868, 7.
- ¹⁹ *Bells Life*, August 19, 1865, 7; December 9, 1865, 7; December 16, 1865, 7; December 23, 1865, 7; December 30, 1865, 8; June 5, 1869, 7; June 16, 1869, 7; June 19, 1869, 7.
- ²⁰ *Bells Life*, October 21, 1860, 7; July 18, 1874, 5.
- ²¹ *Bells Life*, August 30, 1863, 6.
- ²² *Bells Life*, December 4, 1875, 10/7; December 18, 1875, 9.
- ²³ 1881 Census RG11/3936; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, August 24, 1881, 7.
- ²⁴ 1891 Census RG12/3200; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, September 23, 1891, 4; BMD: 1898 Jan-Feb-Mar Death of George Poulton, 74, Chorlton, Lancashire. 8c Page: 545