

Walthamstow High Street Baths

Sanitary Conditions In Towns In The 19th Century

In 1844, a Royal Commission into the *Sanitary State of Large Towns and Populous Districts* highlighted growing dangers in urban areas. Only six of fifty large towns were considered to have 'good' water supply and many were classed as 'impure'. It identified the absence of cheap baths and a lack of public laundry facilities as an impediment to better health. This situation left the poor to clean themselves and their clothes as best they could within their own crowded houses

As a result of growing public concern, The *Public Baths and Wash Houses Act of 1846* received assent on 26th August of that year. This allowed local parishes in the UK to raise money to provide public baths and laundries. In view of the rapidly expanding urban population who were often living in most insanitary conditions, bath-houses were then seen as essential public services. Cholera epidemics had been a frequent in many towns in the 1830s.

This situation became a major problem for Walthamstow, where the population had grown from 4,959 in 1851 to 96,720 in 1901. Amongst other issues, this had created massive problems of the drainage of waste effluents from the many thousands of new properties that had been erected on roads that lacked proper sewer facilities. This situation was to remain a problem for many years until it was resolved in 1928 when Walthamstow sewerage system was linked to London.

Personal Hygiene

In 1900, only a few rich people had bathrooms. When the Finsbury Borough Council in London carried out a survey of local households in 1928, it was discovered that only 4% had baths of their own. It wasn't until after World War II that houses began to be routinely built with their own bathrooms and laundry sinks.



In 1900, the bathtub was a new status symbol of the upwardly mobile, and its proper use was still an object of speculation. Books advised no more than one hot bath per week, since no one was sure if they were bad for health. In many homes, bath water was heated on the kitchen's coal-fired range and ferried upstairs jug by jug.

Bathing in general was a very important Victorian value given their obsession with personal hygiene, and they used soaps made of animal fat and vegetable oils.



Right: A tin bath two feet long and 18 inches wide. In my nan's home, this hung (Beside the 'fly' safe) on a hook on the wall outside the scullery

Generally adults didn't have baths, instead they had a good wash down at the scullery sink. Bath time happened once a week, when mothers would heat enough water in pots and kettles on the range or fill

the copper boiler in the scullery with water, then light the copper fire. Once the water was hot, they had to ladle it into a bucket and carry it to the bath. The full buckets were heavy and it was all too easy to spill the hot water and scald oneself .

The family would bathe in it one by one in front of the fire, using the same water. It was warm but not very private. The tin bath would have been bought from the ironmongers and had two handles to make it convenient to carry. It would often be hung from a hook on an outside wall by the scullery beside the mangle.

The Walthamstow Swimming Pool & Slipper Baths

In what was a gradual process, between 1845 and 1915, 345 public baths and 69 washhouses were built in Britain. These were all maintained by a public authority, with most towns over 50,000 having some form of bathing facility . One of these was in Walthamstow.



In 1900, the magnificent swimming pool and slipper bath building designed by architect William Dunfield in 1896 was opened at the top of the High Street. It was located close to the newly built George Monoux school that was opened in 1889 (In 1909, the Walthamstow Central Library was created beside it after philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie donated money for a large house to be converted into an

important public library by adding a new frontage to the building)

From its opening, the swimming pool and baths were hugely popular and was used extensively by local people. Previously, apart from the River Lea and Epping Forest ponds, the only public place to swim had been at Low Hall in the summers of 1889 and 1890 where a large sewerage tank had been cleaned and filled so that it could be used for public swimming.

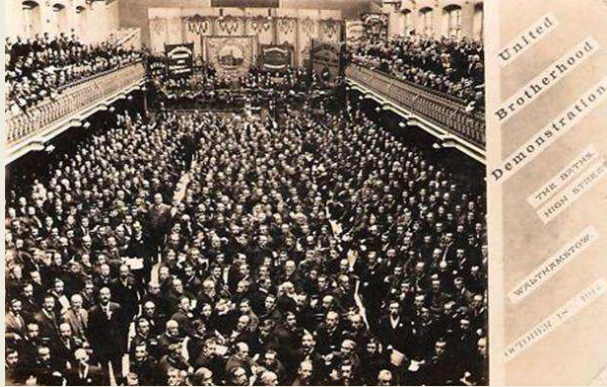
In addition to its use as a swimming pool, it was also used as an entertainment centre and a public meeting place.. From 1900 until around 1912, films were shown at the Walthamstow Baths Hall. For seven years of this period they were shown by Edward Turner, the founder of Britain's first film rental company.

There were also Saturday night shows at the Baths with Pierrot troops under the management of Eric Lane.



Above: A Pierrot troupe in traditional costume

Winston Churchill's Car Stoned (But not drug related)



Politics were taken seriously and candidates held public meetings at the Baths and the speakers were often heckled. The Baths were the scene of much excitement and sometimes those who could not get in forced the side doors. It was at one such meeting, when Winston Churchill (then a Liberal) and speaking on behalf of Major Crawford, was besieged and his car was stoned at the baths.

Left: A United Brotherhood meeting with people packing the balcony.

The Slipper Baths



The term 'slipper' bath refers to the shape of the bath. This was a bath that was shaped like a slipper, with a high rising back, designed to keep the water hot for longer and to protect the modesty of the bather – even though they were alone in a cubicle.

Left a modern copy of a traditional 'slipper' bath

Many people remember Walthamstow's 'slipper' baths. Barbara Hemmings tells on:

<http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/html/postbag04.html>

.....We had no bath so once a week on a Saturday we went to the swimming baths for our bath!..

Terry Brown writes in <http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/pdfs/Val%20Terry%20Brown.pdf>

'The Slipper Baths had individual cubicles housing full-size baths, the water operated from the outside by an attendant. They also hired out towels and soap and with your clean clothes under your arm, your ablutions were completed in luxury....'

Len Hall tells us : <http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/pdfs/Len%20Hall.pdf>

'...We did not have a bath at home, so in later years when I discovered what girls were (much later) I used to go to the slipper baths once a week (whether I needed a bath or not) what an experience that was. Later I decided that the baths at Leyton were much better and if you tipped the attendant you could get extra soap etc.'....

The Swimming Pool

There are many thousands of Walthamstow children who learnt to swim at Walthamstow Baths. They were taken once a week from their schools for lessons and many took place in swimming galas. Richard Dunn in his excellent website: <http://www.walthamstowhistory.com/memoirs.htm> tells us:



We were given swimming lessons at Walthamstow baths. They were situated next to the Central Library in the High Street where the 'square' is now by Selborne Walk. We were taken by either one of two old motor coaches. One had a flat front and more comfortable ride. I used to watch hard wooden seats. The other had a bonnet, and padded leather seats and gave a far in anticipation to see which one would turn the corner. Flat front, or bonnet!

Walthamstow baths were not very big, and the changing rooms were cubicles all around the pool. If you left any clothing on the floor, then they would be

soaked by the time you got back.

There was an attendant who used to roll his own cigarettes, and it was that smell mixed with the smell of chlorine that always sticks in my mind. That smell was Walthamstow baths.

For the cost of one (old) penny you could get some Brylcreem from a vending machine to put on your hair.....

Ron Parker writing on the same site says: Coming out of swimming at the Walthamstow Baths and crossing the road to Holdstocks the Bakers to buy 2d. (2 pennyworth) of yesterday's cakes and rolls to eat on the way back to school.

It wasn't only the baker's that benefited from the swimming bath's trade. In the early 60's, with my wife, I ran a Fish & Chip restaurant nearly opposite the baths. There were often swimming galas in the evenings and afterwards we were inundated with hungry customers from the baths wanting bags of chips.

Laura Forrester: <http://www.walthamstowmemories.net/html/Laura%20Forrester.html> gives us a fascinating insight into the swimming baths:Do you remember the old Walthamstow Baths at the top of the High Street? They really were the old fashioned baths, as they had separate baths in cubicles and people could hire towels and have a bath.....We were lucky to have school swimming lessons and were taken to the Old Walthamstow Swimming Baths at the top of the High Street next to the Central Library on a rickety old bus not dissimilar to the St Trinian's bus. Not like the plush coaches of today. The bench seats were hard stretched leather on steel legs with brown linoleum floors – very uncomfortable. The old Swimming baths had wooden changing cubicles along each side of the pool and it was prudent to close the double doors on the changing rooms because swimmers jumping in from the side of the pool obviously splashed people's dry clothes.

I remember the horrible tyrant Mr Smith with his broom and when you were taking your 25 yards or one length certificate used to push you away from the edge with his broom whether you were in danger of drowning or not. Age the age of 10 there were four of us wanting to swim for our one mile certificate – I can't remember how many lengths it amounted to now but just swimming up and down interminably became pretty boring. So under the watchful eye of Mr Smith I decided to alternate my lengths with a different stroke ie two lengths breast stroke, two lengths back stroke etc. At the end of the mile as I climbed out of the pool quite

exhausted Mr Smith told me I had failed. When I asked why he told me I had not kept to the same stroke. What an absolute ----- Why couldn't he have shouted out to keep to the same stroke! Much later in life I met someone from a different Walthamstow school with equally bad experiences and memories of Mr Smith!.....

Mick Gilbey remembers: <http://micksuses.com/category/memories/walthamstow/>

A set of large permanently closed wooden doors separated a narrow walkway around one end of the swimming pool from the pavement of the High Street. The pavement was always wet at this location as dripping water from the wet feet and bodies of swimmers leaked under the door. Upper galleries with stepped seating ran along both sides of the pool but I never recall seeing the galleries in use. There were no real changing rooms just wooden cubicles with half height doors lining both sides of the pool. The cubicles allowed a view of changing bathers heads and feet. Females and males used the cubicles on different sides of the pool. I think one got about 45 minutes – 1 hour of swimming time for one's money and although no tickets were used, our clothes were left in the small changing cubicles so attendants knew if anyone overstayed their time.

The New Walthamstow Swimming Pool

The Walthamstow High Street Baths were demolished in 1968 after Waltham Forest Council built a



running track and 'state of the art' new swimming pool on land adjacent to the Chestnuts at the rear of the Town Hall. The new pool was intended to be Olympic sized but owing to a miscalculation was a few inches too short! It had a high diving area that could be separated the main swimming area, an under water viewing area where viewers could watch swimmers through a large glass window and a cafeteria.

Unfortunately, in recent years, due to financial constriction, there has not been sufficient money allocated to maintaining the pool and its equipment and it has become run-down and is not fit for purpose. However, £21million has been secured to demolish and rebuild the Track and Pool facilities. Works are scheduled to begin in 2014 and could take up to two years to complete.

The running track will be replaced this year but the swimming section will have new pools, a new 400-seater spectator area and new diving boards, along with other facilities yet to be decided.

The London Borough of Waltham Forest places a high value on educating all children in the Borough to swim and presently is one of a few Local Authorities that provides free swimming to all of its school aged children.

Bill Bayliss

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