

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BATHING
AT THETFORD, NORFOLK.

FROM SMALL RURAL TO EXPANDED TOWN.



B.A. COMBINED HONOURS,
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Bathing at Thetford

Dr Sarah Batstone, who died recently, aged 50, was brought up in Thetford from age 2 and knew the river pool.

She chose bathing at Thetford for an academic presentation for her Honours degree in Sport at Birmingham university. She was a keen competitive swimmer with Thetford Dolphins and was an ASA coach tutor for many years.

It is essentially an academic piece of work, fully referenced and based largely on interview and contact with older people who knew Thetford in 1880's and on. There is a lot of archive research, once again all documented.

I imagine it would be of great interest to anyone seriously researching the river pool but it is not meant for a casual read. The dissertation is illustrated but illustration is very much secondary to text.

Dr Batstone subsequently went on to research the development of bathing at Thetford and Birmingham whilst preparing a doctorate thesis in the History Department of Birmingham University

The copy I have available is only spirally bound in soft cover and therefore a little fragile for any display.

A.E.Batstone



01/05/2022

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ABSTRACT

River bathing at Thetford was popular for pleasure, and to a much lesser extent hygiene, from Charles II's reign until the provision of a school indoor pool in 1967 and the Local Authority one in 1972. In fact the Little Ouse, below town, was heavily polluted by industry and poor sanitary conditions until circa 1950. After the opening of the indoor pools its decline was slow, until the threat of Weil's disease in the late 1980's and is now virtually non-existent. The first bathing facility, provided for safety reasons, was the 1890 fore-runner of the derelict river pool. In spite of major reconstruction in 1922 by the unemployed, it remained a strip of river with the bank dug out and concreted, and the fourth side open. It was in demand for teaching purposes until 1967 and for leisure until its closure in 1972, following the opening of the new public swimming pool. The Secondary Modern provision was made possible in 1967 when pool finance was restricted, as the Headmaster requested it instead of a gymnasium. Its use for teaching and evening classes continues. The deck level Sports Centre Pool was partially financed by publicly raised funds-after their project failed to materialise. Started in 1961, early in town expansion, the council were increasingly involved. Delays were caused by site problems, increasing standards and legislation, together with limited availability of loan sanction for leisure facilities. The expanding town's needs and the money raised advanced provision by about two years. It remains a good teaching facility but fails to meet modern leisure expectations, so the council is currently considering reconstruction. Thetford's Chalybeate Spa claimed to promote health and hygiene, with baths available for the poor, but it was a commercial enterprise and at best these were very limited. Despite sub-standard housing persisting into the 1950's, the council did not provide much needed baths, in accordance with the Baths and Wash-houses Acts, until 1921. There was demand for these until 1961 when town expansion was underway.

S.A.K. BATSTONE, 1994.

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CONTENTS

Introduction.	1
Aim.	1
Literary Review.	2
Methodology.	3
Chapter 1: Bathing Prior To 1922.	7
Chapter 2: The Original Bathing Station, 1890-1921.	10
Chapter 3: The Baths At Thetford Spa, 1818-38.	13
Chapter 4: Provision Of Public Baths, 1921-61.	16
Chapter 5: The Corporation Swimming Bath, Nun's Bridges Pool, 1922-73.	17
Chapter 6: River Bathing, 1922-94.	31
Chapter 7: Thetford's First Indoor Pool - 1967.	40
Chapter 8: Thetford Swimming Pool Fund, 1961-71.	42
Chapter 9: Sports Centre Pool.	49
Conclusion	55
Bibliography.	57
Appendix.	

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BATHING AT THETFORD, NORFOLK.

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INTRODUCTION.

Thetford's Population fluctuated around 4000 from Domesday until 1958. Originally the administrative and ecclesiastical centre of East Anglia, by the late 18th Century it had become an agricultural, market town, with associated industries: farm machinery, chemical fertilisers, tanning, malting and brewing. Apart from the early 19th Century with its short-lived Spa and Theatre, Thetford remained poor and primitive. Severely depressed during the inter-war period, conditions improved during the Second World War. In 1958 the planned expansion to the current, light industrial town, with purpose built estates, began. The population rose rapidly for two decades, stabilising in 1980 around 21,000.

As an inland town on flat land at the confluence of the Little Ouse, formerly navigable with a series of staunches (locks), and The Thet, it is hardly surprising there is a tradition of bathing. The derelict river pool on the Little Ouse and nearby Spring House, originally the Pump Room for the Chalybeate Spa, are visible evidence. The Charles Burrell High School's indoor pool, 1967, and the Sport Centre's deck level pool, 1972, were comparatively early for school and small town provision.

The river pool closed in 1972, but many children including the author bathed there during the 1970's and early 1980's (see title-page). Age eight, she swam her first mile in the school pool, and later trained with Thetford Dolphins at the Sports Centre, at one stage with Olympian Helen Slatter.

AIM.

The study originated from interest in the disused Nuns Bridges Pool, and the overall aim was investigation of the development of provision for, and

participation in, bathing at Thetford, for the purposes of leisure, hygiene and structured sport.

LITERARY REVIEW.

Published literature specific to bathing at Thetford is scant. Accum (1819) wrote, "Nothing can be more beautiful than the rivers in the immediate vicinity of the chalybeate spring.....the water is as clear as rock crystal." He regarded taking baths as a co-agent to the spa's powers, extolling the advantages to health and hygiene. Hunt (1870) describes the rivers as, "narrow, crystalline and shallow.....with sandy or gravel beds," baths for, "free and unrestrained use of poor," and mentions a bath house built in 1834. Seymour (1985) refers to river bathing in 1663, and Clarke, W.G., (1925) to the staunch pools being good. Breckland District Official Guide (circa 1985) states, "swimming can be enjoyed on certain stretches of local rivers especially the Little Ouse at Thetford." Crosby (1986) refers to unemployed improving the river pool in 1921, which Blaydon (1935) said was popular and proved a valuable amenity. Clarke, W.E., (1985) briefly describes fund-raising to replace this spartan affair. The money was instrumental in government approval and donated towards the Sports Centre Pool. A series of maps showing pool provision 1870-1977, records the latter - Gratton and Taylor (1991).

Orme (1983) refers to Percey (1658) praising swimming for pleasure, exercise, health and life saving, recommending it for both sexes. Steedman (1873) considered most accidental deaths due to inability to swim and that the Royal Humane Society should be concerned with teaching as well as rescuing. Henry and Sinclair (1893) lament declining river bathing since provision of public baths in almost every town and parish following the 1846 Baths and Washhouses Act. Most rivers have good bathing spots but are dangerous near locks. Public schools including Eton swim in the river, and Cambridge University had Bathing Sheds in 1885. Women rarely bathed for lack of privacy. The Amateur Swimming

Association (1962) states the 1846 Act was the greatest step in swimming development reinforced by the 1891 Board of Education Act recognising it as a school subject. Cunningham refers to nudity of male bathers until the 1870's.

METHODOLOGY.

1) Researching recorded information.

a) Published material - Books, journals, town guides, Kelly's and White's

Directories, law statutes and old maps.

Computer searches were made at The University Of Birmingham Library, including CD ROM - Sports Discus, and at Norwich and Thetford Libraries.

Card indices in Norfolk and Suffolk Record Offices, and local study sections of Norwich and Thetford libraries were searched. The latter's was incomplete, for without public access to resources, comprehensive research was impossible.

Although the librarian produced some useful uncatalogued material, information was limited.

b) Newspaper articles.

It was obvious time would prevent searching all issues of even one local newspaper so it was decided to concentrate on key periods. A local historian offered a limited but invaluable list of bathing articles. Papers in Suffolk Record Office are on micro-film but there is no copier necessitating laborious hand copying. Early papers in the Eastern Daily Press Archives are too fragile for photocopying. The format of larger, later papers made them more difficult to search. Norwich library has The Times Index in volume form but only made available on quoting exact years, and Chelmsford has only recent years on CD ROM. Newspaper articles, especially of council meetings, contained much vital information, however bias of selective reporting and contemporary attitudes distort facts - reports often differ from council minutes. The Thetford Women's Institute Scrapbook of the early 1960's had interesting cuttings, unfortunately

mainly undated.

c) Unpublished material in Thetford Council archives.

A written request was made to the Town Clerk. Inspecting the material was difficult with only the council chamber, undergoing restoration, available for work. Resources are stored in two widely separated buildings from which his secretary has to collect selected items - a situation requiring tact and empathy. In spite of appointments sometimes she was unable to co-operate. The reference file lacked details making it difficult to select material. Until 1945 minutes of council, committee and sub-committees were bound separately, and vital Bathing Committee Minutes, 1922-45, were missing. A large parcel labelled, "Pool Acc.," relating to 1960's pool fund was uncatalogued. Pre-twentieth century handwriting, especially on disintegrating paper was hard to decipher. Despite problems the council archives produced a wealth of directly relevant, unpublished material.

d) Thetford Ancient House Museum.

The curator gave help^{to} inspect limited and mainly unlisted archives, including town guides.

e) School archives.

The history master readily gave access to resources at the long established, possibly pre-conquest Grammar School. The archives contain very old books and articles. Almost complete sets of school magazines from 1920-72 were searched, as were the Heads' reports. Nothing relevant to Reed's proposal for the first bathing facility was found.

The log books of Norwich Road School, formerly three council schools, were searched for health and bathing references. The earliest was 1870 but the set was incomplete.

2) Using visual evidence.

The disused Nuns Bridges Pool was inspected, and the popular bathing spots on The Thet and Little Ouse, and proposed sites for the 1960's lido were located. Landscape changes made some difficult to identify from descriptions - the second staunch site is no longer 'gloomy overhung with trees.' Access to Spring House, the old pump room, was not gained. St Mary's Churchyard was searched for epitaphs. Photographs were taken where possible.

Newspaper and individual appeals for illustrations were made, including a photographer with lantern slides of Victorian Thetford. Sets and boxes of photographs in the Library and Grammar School archives respectively were searched. The author's family album had some pictures from the 1970's, but in spite of an extensive search comparatively few illustrations were found. A UEA Film Archive video, sequences of Thetford 1936-1960 was viewed.

3) First hand information from local people.

Letters were sent to the editors of three local papers requesting photographs, information and opinions within broad outlines. (Appendix 1 & 2). Individuals were approached by letter (enclosing S.A.E.) giving a brief outline of the project and asking if they were able and willing to help. Their replies were followed up, were those replying to newspaper appeals. Most interviews were recorded with permission, using a dictaphone. Some requested certain information should not be recorded and this has been respected. Unfortunately memories fade and there is bias according to individual's perceptions so cross checks were made. Some suggested others who might assist - E. Clarke suggested M. Blain, secretary of Thetford Swimming Pool Fund Committee, but time prevented all leads being followed up. Examples of interviews and letters have been included in the appendix.

A full scale statistical investigation using a close coded questionnaire was deliberately avoided in order to apply only the broadest of parameters - neither ^M Such an investigation would now be supplementary. However attempts were made to take a representative sample from the community including Londoners. Age was a prime consideration and socio-economic status another. Some with known expertise were approached including W.Ellis Clarke MBE, Town Clerk 1950-74, and impetus behind the overspill development, and local historians - J. Deacon and D. Osborne. The research needed flexibility and it was impossible ^{as} information took up to a month, and interviews had to be mutually arranged. Library and record office research was directed by opening hours, and visual evidence by weather, but these could be slotted around other work. The intermittent timetable and variable amounts and types of information gleaned, made filing difficult. The research period was prolonged as the material available was far more extensive than anticipated.

CHAPTER 1

BATHING PRIOR TO 1922.

Bathing in Thetford's rivers has a long history. Roger North, music theorist in Charles II reign, attended Thetford Grammar School in 1663 and the popularity of bathing is evident from his autobiography. "There was a navigable river.....This made us all expert boatmen, swimmers and fishers. We used to pass whole days naked. Once when going down to a Sandy place to swim a frolic carried us to Brandon.....and in return must swim again."¹

Inevitably river bathing caused some deaths. A tombstone in St Mary's Churchyard records James Arbon, aged nine, died whilst bathing on June 6th 1842:



The Jury at the inquest on a youth drowned at the First Stauch in 1889 requested the Council be alerted to the need for precautions at this dangerous bathing place, and subsequently a lifebuoy was installed.² In August 1911, a pupil at the Boys

Council School was drowned two days after the headmaster warned of bathing at dangerous places.³

Site of First Staunch: Appendix 3)



As a result of the 1889 drowning the Council established a "safe" bathing place near Nun's Bridge, just upstream from town on the Little Ouse.⁴ The First Staunch was more convenient for those in the west of the town and it is likely many could not afford to pay, so river bathing continued elsewhere. In 1892 there were complaints of male bathers monopolising the river by the staunch, causing distress to ladies boating, but being over 100 yards from a public road existing bye-laws did not prohibit this. Some complained the new bathing station too shallow so provision of a fenced, bathing pond by the staunch was suggested. The Mayor hoped bathers would behave decently, confining swimming to early morning or late evening.⁵ (Appendix 3) In July 1906 the many nude bathers denied others enjoying walks at Abbey Meadows, a favourite summer promenade.⁶ In 1907 a public notice drew attention to additional bye-laws, including one concerning bathing.

(Appendix 4) However, nude bathing continued and in 1909 a new bathing bye-law was issued - No person over ten, could bathe within 200 yards of a public place unless screened from view or, "clothed with sufficient dress or covering to prevent indecent exposure." (Appendix 5)

The situation in Thetford, where river bathing continued to flourish, was very different from that described by Henry and Sinclair,⁷ and although there was no provision until 1921 the Baths and Wash-houses Acts may have promoted the practice by drawing attention to the need to cleanse the body. The 19th Century and earlier, nation-wide practice of nude bathing continued at Thetford at least until 1909 far longer than suggested by Cunningham.⁸

¹ Jessopp, Ed., 1887, p.11.

² Bury And Norwich Post, 9/7/1889, "Bathing At First Staunch."
Town Clerk's Correspondence Files, 6/6/1889.

³ Thetford Boys' Council School Log Book.

⁴ Thetford And Watton Times, 7/7/1890, "Town Council To Erect Bathing Shed Near Nuns Bridge."

⁵ Bury And Norwich Post, 16/8/1892, "Town Council - Bathing In The Rivers."

⁶ Bury Free Press, 21/6/06, "Thetford Town Council - Nude Bathing At 1st Staunch."

⁷ Henry and Sinclair, 1893, p.329, 334, 381.

⁸ Cunningham, p.260.

CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGINAL BATHING STATION, 1890-1921.

The Public Baths and Washhouses Act, 1846 and subsequent amendments, were primarily concerned with sanitation of, "the great unwashed," rather than leisure and fitness, but constituted the Government's first positive action in the field of sport and recreation. Local Authorities were conferred with permissive powers for provision of public baths and swimming pools.¹ Whilst Birmingham had a heated, indoor pool as early as 1851,² Thetford Council did not respond until pressed for safety reasons. It regarded outside legislation as interference and was very frugal.³ Furthermore river bathing was freely available in the small, poor town.

In late May 1889, Mayor R. Burrell quickly reacted to a letter from Headmaster Reed of Thetford Boys' Grammar School expressing concern regarding the recent First Staunch drowning. He wrote, "I have a number of young gentlemen in my care whom I should like to see all good swimmers." A good, safe, bathing place for boys and adults was needed. He stressed it was a council matter affecting health and safety of constituents, and, as legal custodians of the river, nothing could be done without their consent. He suggested levelling 20 yard lengths of river bed, each with steps and the 3', 4' and 5' depths clearly shown. A dressing shed 30' by 10' should be controlled by police or a curator. He obtained plans of Cambridge Baths for Council inspection. (Appendix 6 & 7) Early July, the Mayor informed the Town Clerk plans were prepared. (Appendix 8) In August the Lord of the Manor expressed regret at the death and, "pleasure in assenting to the proposition in the interests of order and decency." He stipulated fencing the area to avoid non-swimmers getting out of their depth - people were becoming safety conscious.⁴

On 27th May 1890, a public meeting was held to decide whether the council should provide and maintain a bathing station near Nun's Bridge.⁵ (Appendix 9) Agreement was unanimous and in July, following acceptance of a

£36 estimate, work started.⁶ Abingdon Borough was consulted concerning administration, and their segregated bathing with less water time for women reflected traditional conceptions of sport as a male preserve. Bathing cost 2d, but was free at certain times. (Appendix 10)

Thetford's sparse facilities were by no means unusual, even the 1900 Olympic events were held in The Seine.⁷ The Station was used seriously and in 1913 when The Shed was rebuilt during the season, the bathing fraternity were justifiably indignant!⁸ In 1922, the opening ceremony following major improvements included boys' 50 yards, and men's 120 and 440 yards. Boarders from the Boys Grammar won the relay, suggesting the school used the facility instigated by their 1890 Headmaster.⁹ In 1961, an old boy (1892-94) presented a novice cup for water confidence, presumably motivated by his opportunities.¹⁰ The Girls School may also have swam as in 1925 a former teacher wrote saying it seemed a long time since she left, and wondering whether the girls still enjoyed the open air bath.¹¹

Contemporary papers suggested the bathing station was a haunt for the town's rougher boys, with vandalism, as in modern Thetford, a problem. In 1893, two boys were charged and cautioned concerning malicious damage estimated at 6d, and told The Shed was for their benefit so they must behave correctly. Future offenders would be severely punished as there were earlier complaints that some boys made it, "quite unfit for decent boys,"¹² and in 1897, a bill on The Shed warned anyone committing a nuisance or damage would be prosecuted. (Appendix 11) In May 1909 when repairs were needed, a committee for dealing with complaints and regulating hours was suggested.¹³ In 1921 when discussing proposed improvements it was commented The Shed was used mainly as a playground and that, "boys play the very devil with it."¹⁴

The changing accommodation was enlarged more than four fold, from 30' by 10' to 120' by 15', in either 1909 or 1913. During the First World War, troops

encamped on nearby Barnham Common used the Bathing Station for ablutions and are believed to have dug out the river bed.

- ¹ The Statutes Of Great Britain And Ireland, Volume 9-10 ,Victoria, 1846, p.473-488, and amendments in later volumes.
- ² Moth, 1951, p.6.
- ³ Crosby, 1986, p.104.
- ⁴ Town Clerk's Correspondence Files, 10/8/1889.
- ⁵ Bury And Norwich Post, 27/5/1890, "Bathing Accommodation."
Thetford And Watton Times, 7/7/1890, "Council To Erect Bathing Shed Near Nuns Bridge."
- ⁶ ibid.
- ⁷ Oppenheim, 1970, p.5.
- ⁸ Bury And Norwich Post, 4/7/13, "Bathing Sheds Thetford."
- ⁹ ibid, 21/6/22, "Thetford Swimming Bath - Official Opening - Work For Unemployed."
- ¹⁰ The Fulmerstonion, 1962.
- ¹¹ The Thetfordian, December 1925.
- ¹² The Bury Free Press, 29/7/1893, "Damage To Bathing Shed."
- ¹³ Council minutes.
- ¹⁴ Bury Free Press, 29/7/1893, "Damage To Bathing Shed, Nuns Bridge Common."