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LIVERPOOL AND THE ORIGINS OF THE SEASIDE RESORT

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'And any Man alive wou'd guess,
By the Town's sudden Rise, no less;
From a small Fishery of Late,
Become the Darling Child of Fate;
So Wealthy grown, so full of Hurry;
That she eclipses Bristol's Glory:
Her Trade, as well as Sumptuous Houses,
Where the Chief Publican Carouses,
The Port's infallible Director,
In modern English call'd Collector.'¹

In 1706 a 'Gentleman of Lincoln's Inn' waxed lyrical about Liverpool's recent growth from a 'small fishery' to a place eclipsing 'Bristol's Glory' as England's second port. In the late 17th century Celia Fiennes described Liverpool as 'London in miniature' and Daniel Defoe said that 'Liverpoole is one of the wonders of Britain'.² They were impressed by the fine houses and the elegant streets they witnessed, born of the new-found wealth resulting from the port's commercial success. In the early eighteenth century a new wonder, the Old Dock, enthralled visitors, and by the end of the century the river front of Liverpool was dominated by commercial docks, the basis for the town's rapid physical and economic growth. However, on the shoreline in a 1765 map a small bathhouse was depicted, a structure swept away in the early 19th century. (Fig. 1) This modest building was the last vestige of another early strand of Liverpool's history, one that has not been widely recognised or celebrated; Liverpool can claim to be among the earliest locations for organised sea bathing in England.

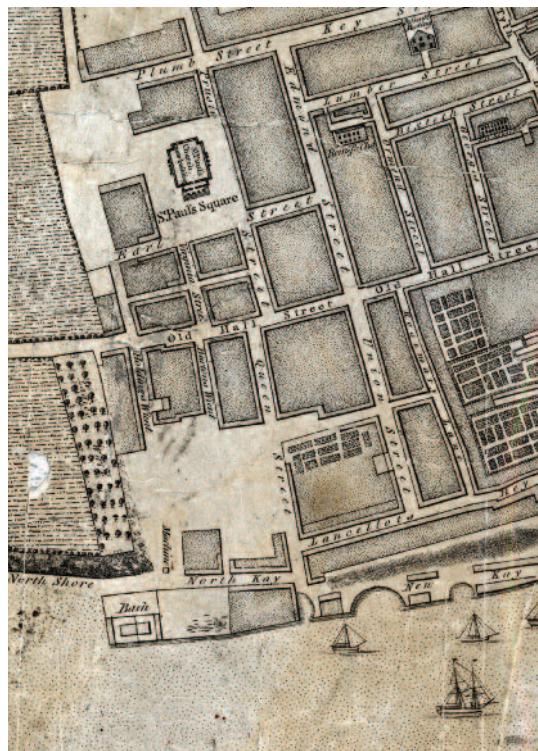


Fig. 1. Map of Liverpool in 1765 by John Eyes.
Courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.

By the 1730s sea bathing was beginning to transform a number of small coastal towns. Scarborough had welcomed visitors to its spa since the second quarter of the 17th century and an engraving of 1735 provides the earliest depiction of sea bathing. In 1736 people were bathing in the sea at Brighton, and Margate boasted a bathhouse and had already been attracting visitors seeking to improve

their health for ‘several Years’.³ In contrast to Liverpool, the role of small ports as early resorts has not been obscured by later development; in these towns it was the resort, rather than the port, that came to dominate. However, through a series of maps, guidebooks, an early engraving and the testimony of the diary of the local landowner Nicholas Blundell it is possible to construct a history of bathing and sea bathing through the 18th century in Liverpool. This paper draws together this fragmentary evidence and assesses Liverpool’s place in the early development of sea bathing and the seaside holiday.

THE ORIGINS OF SEA BATHING IN ENGLAND

In the Middle Ages holy wells were visited for spiritual motives as well as medicinal cures, and after the Reformation people increasingly travelled to spa towns to undertake a variety of treatments using their waters. Popular inland spas promoted the growth of settlements as varied as Tunbridge Wells, Epsom, Harrogate and Bath, but in the evolution of the seaside resort the key town was Scarborough. At first, attention focused on the health benefits of its spa waters. A mineral-water spring was first identified to the south of the port in about 1626, and by 1660, the year of Charles II’s restoration, the first scientific analysis and formal promotion of the powers of the water was published by a local doctor, Dr Robert Wittie.⁴ The first edition of his book advocated the use of the spa’s waters for a bewildering range of complaints, but in the 1667 edition he recorded using sea water to cure his gout.⁵

The earliest writers to advocate sea water as a medical treatment date from the sixteenth century.⁶ Thomas Vicary, the Sergeant Chirurgeon, who died in 1561, recommended standing in a cold sea-water bath for ‘three or fower howers or more, and he shall be perfectly holpe’, while in 1581 swimming in the sea was advocated for health reasons: ‘The swimming in

salt water is very good to remove the headache, to open the suffed nosethrilles, and thereby to helpe the smelling. It is a good remedie for dropsies, scabbes and surfes, small pockes, leprosies, falling awaye of either legge, or any other parte’.⁷ A treatise of 1610 recommended sea water, or water combined with salt, as a treatment for impotence in horses, while the 1613 edition of Vicary’s book, augmented by ‘G.E.’ a ‘Practitioner in Physicke and Chyrurgerie’, advocated sea bathing as a remedy for ‘the Itche’, probably scabies: ‘Take of Salte water a gallon, and soethe it with three handfulls of Wheaten bread crummes that is leavened, and wash the bodie with the water twise or thrise: Or else wash the Bodie in the Sea two or three times’.⁸

The political upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century seem to have interrupted the development of the scientific appreciation of cold water and sea-water bathing, but by the end of the century a number of medical writers were recommending sea water as a medical treatment. In 1696 Sir John Colbatch employed saline water and steam bathing in a bathhouse that he built near the salt deposits in Cheshire and by the early eighteenth century Sir John Floyer had become the leading advocate of cold-water bathing: ‘Since we live in an Island, and have the Sea about us, we cannot want an excellent Cold Bath, which will both preserve our Healths, and cure many Diseases, as our Fountains do’.⁹

By the early eighteenth century there is evidence that the use of sea bathing for medicinal purposes was spreading beyond doctors and was being taken up by ordinary people. An alternative explanation suggested first by Floyer is that sea bathing had begun as a popular activity, possibly related in some places to customary times of the year and that it was subsequently identified by doctors for its medical benefits.¹⁰ In the eighteenth century the practice of drinking sea water and bathing was common on the Lancashire coast at the August spring tide, when it was believed that the waters had special powers of purification and regeneration.¹¹ This may have been

part of an established local tradition, but would not necessarily have left any mark in early published sources. However, in 1718 Samuel Jones, a customs officer at Whitby, praised the waters of its spa and the sea for curing jaundice in a poem:

‘Here such as bathing love may surely find
The most compleat reception of that kinde;
And what the drinking cannot purge away
Is cured with ease by dipping in the Sea.’¹²

In Lincolnshire the earliest reference to sea bathing appears in a letter dated 2 May 1725; Mrs Massingberd of Gunby described how ‘Sr Hardolf Wastnage & his lady come in Whitsun week to a farmhouse in this neighbourhood to spend three months in order to bath in ye sea’.¹³

By the 1730s sea bathing was being practised at a number of small coastal towns, and early references suggest that this had been taking place for a number of years. Scarborough’s first guidebook was published in 1734; a year later an engraving depicting people bathing in the sea had been produced, while annual miscellanies of poems were being published describing the resort’s giddy social life.¹⁴ The guidebook provides the first description of sea bathing at Scarborough: ‘It is the custom for not only gentlemen, but the ladies also, to bathe in the seas; the gentlemen go out a little way to sea in boats (called here ‘cobbles’) and jump in naked directly: ... The ladies have the conveniency of gowns and guides. There are two little houses on the shore, to retire for dressing in.’¹⁵ In 1736 a visitor to Brighton described how his family were ‘sunning ourselves on the beach’ after their ‘morning business’ of ‘bathing in the sea’.¹⁶ Margate was sufficiently busy in 1730 to attract a theatre company to perform during the summer, and in 1736 a seaside bathhouse was advertised:

‘Whereas Bathing in Sea-Water has for several Years, and by great numbers of People, been found to be of great Service in many Chronical Cases, but for want of a convenient and private Bathing Place, many of both Sexes have not cared to expose themselves to the open

Air; This is to inform all Persons, that Thomas Barber, Carpenter, at Margate in the Isle of Thanett, hath lately made a very convenient Bath, into which the Sea Water runs through a Canal about 15 Foot long. You descend into the Bath from a private Room adjoining to it.’¹⁷

A distinctive sea-bathing culture was developing by the 1730s. Led by Scarborough, with its pre-existing spa, a number of settlements were beginning to offer formal bathing facilities, a range of entertainment venues – albeit initially sometimes fairly haphazard in character – and accommodation in inns and lodgings. However, this well-established account of the early origins of seaside resorts contains no mention of Liverpool. This may seem unsurprising, since the city is known primarily as a great trading port dominated by commercial buildings and infrastructure of the nineteenth century. The association of the muddy Mersey with the story of sea bathing seems unlikely to modern observers, but Liverpool was a venue for formal sea bathing in the early eighteenth century, an aspect of its history that has not been fully recognised. The construction of the docks, the Pier Head and the dual carriageway that runs behind them has destroyed the physical evidence of the city’s contribution to sea bathing, but nevertheless its story can still be pieced together from a range of documentary sources and maps.

LIVERPOOL IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Liverpool in the mid seventeenth century consisted of only seven main streets arranged in a double cruciform shape, covering only 300 yards from north to south and a similar distance inland from the waterfront.¹⁸ Though it would seem small to modern eyes, Daniel Defoe who visited Liverpool at the end of the seventeenth century was impressed with the town. In 1680 he found ‘a large, handsome, well built and increasing or thriving town’; ten years later ‘it was much bigger than at my first seeing it, and,

by the report of the Inhabitants, more than twice as big as it was twenty Years before that'.¹⁹ On his third, undated visit he was surprised that 'it was more than double what it was at the second; and, I am told, that it still visibly encreases both in Wealth, People, Business and Buildings: What it may grow to in time, I know not.'

Celia Fiennes, visiting in 1698, was similarly complimentary about Liverpool:

'LEVERPOOL is built just on the river Mersy, mostly new built houses of brick and stone after the London fashion; ... its a very rich trading town the houses of brick and stone built high and even, that a streete quite through lookes very handsome, the streetes well pitched; there are abundance of persons you see very well dress'd and of good fashion; the streetes are faire and long, its London in miniature as much as ever I saw any thing.'²⁰

Fiennes was impressed by the town and the quality of the people she saw. They were making their wealth from the growing maritime commerce, and among their number would have been some wealthy people from the surrounding countryside, drawn to Liverpool by business and increasingly in search of pleasure in the town.

In 1673 Liverpool had around 1,500 inhabitants, but by 1700 its population was 5,145; twenty years later it had more than doubled to 11,833 and by the beginning of the nineteenth century it had grown to more than 80,000.²¹ It had moved from being a small provincial town in 1700 to being the second largest town in England a century later.²² Its rapid growth was also reflected in the shipping tonnages that passed through the docks. In 1709 374 ships brought in 14,574 tons of cargo and 334 exported 12,636 tons, but in 1771 this had risen to 891 ships importing 66,656 tons and 1,024 exporting 83,798 tons.²³ The Old Dock, the first enclosed, commercial maritime dock in the world, was begun in 1709, partly opened in 1715 and completed in 1719, and by the end of the eighteenth century the riverfront was dominated by a mile of docks.²⁴ The diarist Nicholas Blundell

witnessed the arrival of the first ships into the Old Dock on 31 August 1715.²⁵

Liverpool's rapid growth was in large measure due to its location; like Bristol, it was convenient for the Atlantic trade in slaves, sugar, textiles and tobacco, but it also had a substantial hinterland that expanded rapidly during the 18th century.²⁶ This included the industrial areas of northern England, but due to the orientation of inland waterways Liverpool also served as an outlet and inlet for the canal system of the Midlands.²⁷

With a growing population and increasing commercial activity, Liverpool also began to expand its civic facilities. In 1721–2 a new Custom House was built, and in 1749–54 an ambitious new Exchange complete with lavish ballroom was erected to designs by John Wood the Elder.²⁸ Dr Richard Pococke, Bishop of Meath and Ossory, who visited in 1750, also recorded the recent church building activity:

'That town I saw on the second [July], which has greatly increased of late years; insomuch that there was but one church in it, St Nicholas, near the river at the lower end of the town. Then they built St Peter's at the other end of the town, about thirty yeare ago; after that they built St George's, a fine church and steeple, with beautiful Corinthian pillars supporting the roof. And they are building a fourth church, St Thomas, all of the hewn free stone they have in this neighbourhood.'²⁹

New entertainment facilities were also being established, including walks and pleasure gardens: 'At the corner of the town next the sea is a very fine situation, commanding a view of the sea; it is called the Ladies Walk, and is divided into three parts by two narrow slips of grass and two rows of trees'.³⁰ This walk extended inland from behind the riverfront bathhouse and on the 1765 map the strip is shown with the lines of trees described by Pococke.³¹ (Fig. 1) Another Ladies Walk was created beside Duke Street and was in existence by 1769.³² A purpose-built theatre opened in 1772 to replace a smaller one that had opened more than 20 years earlier and by the end of the 18th century there was a Public

Concert Room and assemblies were held in the Exchange until it burnt down.³³

The 1766 *Liverpool Directory* listed all the professions that would be expected in a major port, and there were also a small number of people providing the types of service associated with leisure.³⁴ There were booksellers and stationers providing services similar to the circulating libraries at seaside resorts. Innkeepers and coffee-house proprietors were common, as befits both a port and a resort, and a number of tradesmen such as peruke makers, hatters, hosiers and milliners, as well as Deville Desaubrys, a dancing master in George Street, provided luxury services for people of wealth and leisure. An infrastructure of leisure had evolved to cater for the prosperous port, much as Scarborough's entertainments developed to meet the tastes of its spa visitors. These were the type of facilities that would underpin the development of seaside resorts in the eighteenth century.

The rise of Liverpool to being the second largest town in England was accompanied by a similarly rapid growth in its leisure and cultural facilities and an increased sophistication in the behaviour of its people.³⁵ Far from simply providing mariner-merchants with 'less refined, outdoor activities', a range of increasingly large and sophisticated indoor facilities was also being established for its citizens and visitors.³⁶ Liverpool was undoubtedly economically dependent on its commerce and industrial manufacturing facilities, but it nevertheless also shared many of the attributes and facilities that visitors were beginning to expect in the larger, rapidly-expanding seaside resorts.³⁷

NICHOLAS BLUNDELL AND LIVERPOOL

By the early eighteenth century, Liverpool was becoming a significant regional centre, drawing in people from the surrounding countryside, to work, trade and to enjoy its fashionable facilities. One

regular visitor was Nicholas Blundell, who faithfully kept a diary that provides insights into the everyday life of a landowner in the north-west.³⁸ Born on 1 September 1669 at his ancestral home Little Crosby Hall, Lancashire, after being home-schooled he was sent to the Jesuit college at St Omer in Flanders.³⁹ Blundell started his diary on 27 July 1702, with an entry recording that his father had suddenly been taken ill, and he recorded his normally mundane but nevertheless intriguing activities each day until 4 April 1728.⁴⁰ During the 1715 Jacobite rising, Blundell, as a Catholic, was suspected of sheltering wanted individuals, presumably priests or refugees, and the house was searched on several occasions.⁴¹ Therefore on 24 November 1715, accompanied by his wife and two daughters, he went to London and subsequently to Flanders where he remained until returning to Little Crosby in September 1717.⁴² Blundell's diary ends abruptly in 1728, perhaps due to his increasingly poor eyesight, and he died on 21 April 1737, aged sixty-seven,

Blundell's *Diurnal* reveals that he was a regular visitor to Liverpool. Sometimes he was drawn there to conduct financial business, but other references reveal that he visited to buy luxury items that were unavailable locally. However, more often he was in Liverpool for entertainment and to socialise with friends, normally in public houses; he often attended plays, puppet shows and magic performances, as well as the races and the annual fair.

The *Diurnal* also contains useful information about how his family looked after their health. Their principal doctor, a family friend, was Dr Worthington at Wigan, and there are references to pills, purges and vomits designed to treat various conditions. The family also made visits to spas at Wigan, Harrogate and Knaresborough and during their extended continental stay they bathed at 'Chaudre Fontaine' for a week. In addition to these forays in search of curative spa waters, the Blundell family as practising Catholics made pilgrimages to St Winefride's Well at Holywell in North Wales.

SEA BATHING AND BATHHOUSES IN LIVERPOOL

As well as these well-established means of improving physical and spiritual health, Blundell was also a pioneer in using sea bathing for treating his family's ailments, as well as for pleasure. The first reference to sea bathing occurs on 5 August 1708, six years after his diary begins, suggesting that it was still only an occasional and novel activity: 'Mr Aldred & I Rode to the Sea & baithed ourselves ... it was extreamly hot as were also the two preceding days, the lick hardly ever known at this time in these parts'.⁴³ Blundell seems to have bathed because it was hot, but a year later it was used for medical reasons: 'I went part of the way towards the Sea with my Children but turned back, my Wife & Dorothy Blundell went with them, they were put into the Sea for some out breacks'.⁴⁴ The Blundells appear to have visited the stretch of coast nearest their house, possibly Crosby Beach.

The first reference to more organised sea bathing occurs in the early 1720s. On 1 August 1721 Blundell wrote that: 'Pat: Acton lodged here, he came with an Intention to stay some time to Baith in the Sea, I went with him to the Sea side to shew him what Conveniency there was for him.' The entry for the following day reads: 'I went with Pat: Acton to Leverpoole & Procured him a Place to Lodg at & a Conveniency for baithing in the Sea ...'.⁴⁵ A 'Conveniency' is being used for something that hasn't yet acquired a name; here it refers to something to aid bathing and a similar use of the word appears in 1735 referring to sea bathing at Scarborough:

'Bathing in the Sea, is, of late Years, at Scarborough, with the Spaw, grown into great Credit, frequented by both Sexes, and those of the best distinction, as a pleasant, and a medicinal Exercise; there being few Cases, wherein a moderate use of it, cold or warm, that is, Morning, or After-noon, when the want of the Sun has chill'd, or his lucid beams beat for hours on the Surface. They have a fine long Sand from the Town to the Cape, commodious for Gentlemen to retire and undress at any Distance from Company,

or to push a little off the Beach in Boats; and the Ladies have Guides, Rooms, and Conveniences for it, under the Cliff'.⁴⁶

On this occasion there is a visual clue to the word 'Conveniences', in the form of John Setterington's view of Scarborough, published in 1735. (Fig. 2) He depicts a naked man emerging from what appears to be a primitive bathing machine and this seems to be the only feature of the scene to which Shaw can be referring. The first illustration of a fully-developed, Margate-type bathing machine with a rear modesty hood appears in the 1750s in a drawing by James Theobald inserted into an edition of John Lewis' *History of the Isle of Thanet* (1736) donated to the Society of Antiquaries. In the accompanying description the name 'bathing machine' was used alongside 'bathing waggon', implying a well-established form with its own identity, now meritng its own name.⁴⁷

Blundell's companion appears to have been using some form of primitive bathing machine, which was probably available to the north of the docks where there was a bathhouse by the 1720s. The earliest reference to a bathhouse in Liverpool occurs in December 1701 when the site of a proposed bathhouse to be erected by Samuel Dene was inspected by members of the council.⁴⁸ It seems to have been on the south side of the Pool, near William Pluckington's Bowling Green in Park Lane, a road lying to the south of where the Old Dock would be built.⁴⁹ A reference to a different bathhouse occurs in a rate book of 1708:

'Aldm Tho Clayton, p. ye	1	5	0
Tower & Tents. belonging			
Mr James Gibbons, ye bagniall	0	10	
Sylvester Moorcroft, Esq,	1	2	4 ⁵⁰
p. ye Custom house			

The position of the reference implies that 'ye bagniall' was in the heart of the rapidly-expanding town, probably at the bottom of Water Street, on the riverside beside the Custom House. Liverpool had



Fig. 2. John Setterington's view of Scarborough in 1735, detail of bathing.
© British Library Board (*Maps K. Top. 44.47.b*).

broken away from the customs authority of nearby Chester in the late seventeenth century and built its own custom house as a symbol of its independence.⁵¹ This was replaced by a building that came to be called the 'Old Custom House'. It was built in 1721–2 and was necessary because of the creation of the Old Dock during the previous decade.⁵² If the first custom house had to be replaced, then presumably the nearby bathhouse in a similarly-difficult location would have also had to be relocated.

The next definite indication of a bathhouse occurs on a map by John Eyes in 1765, where another building, labelled 'Bath', is shown at the left (north) side of the map.⁵³ (Fig. 1) It is depicted as a small rectangular building, divided into two sections,

presumably for male and female bathers. The same arrangement appears in 1785 and 1796/7 editions of maps, but the building disappeared with the construction of the Prince's Dock, which opened in 1821.⁵⁴ Frustratingly, Chadwick's map of 1725 does not cover this area, as if it was still largely or wholly undeveloped, and the southern viewpoint of a 1725 painting of the town means that a distant bathhouse could not be seen.⁵⁵ However, there is a well-known, almost contemporary source for Liverpool's history that fills a gap in the story. In 1728 Samuel and Nathaniel Buck published the *South-West Prospect of Liverpoole* showing the river frontage of the rapidly expanding town.⁵⁶ (Figs. 3 & 4) In the bottom left corner there is a small, undistinguished rectangular

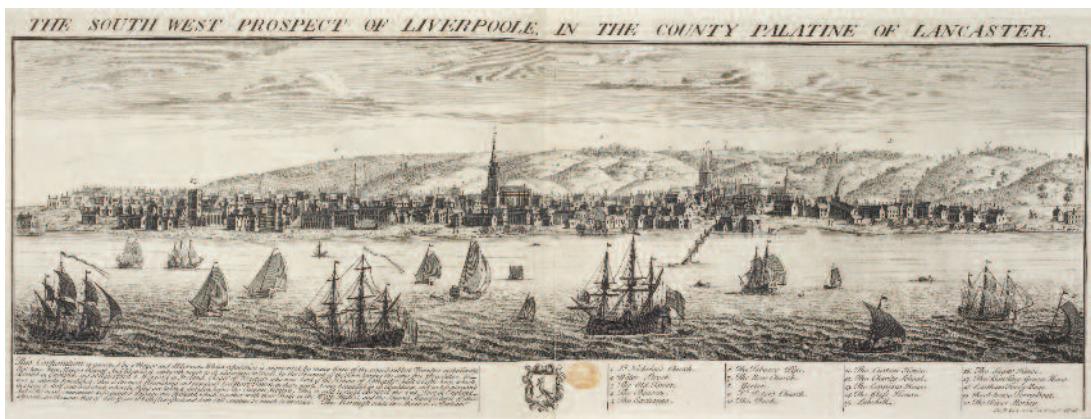


Fig. 3. S. & N. Buck's view of Liverpool. © British Library Board (*Maps K. Top. 18.76.a*).

building, standing on its own beside the river. By comparing this building's location with the position of the bathhouse on the 1765 and subsequent maps, it strongly suggests that this was the bathhouse, perhaps a recently-built one as Chadwick's map had not included this area. To arrive at this conclusion, it is necessary to match the form of the coastline and the layout of the town in both sources, but even allowing for a time difference of over three decades,

there seems to be considerable agreement to confirm the location of the bathhouse in the panoramic view.

Further evidence for this bathhouse comes from a view of the building as it was at the end of the eighteenth century. (Fig. 5) A wooden compound surrounded what seems to be a pool and on the land behind there was a modest Georgian building with extensions at either end. This ostensibly domestic building at the heart of the scene matches in broad terms the structure depicted by the Bucks six decades earlier, including the number and position of the chimneys and the tall proportions of the building. In the modern era specialised building forms have been developed for distinctive activities, but in the early eighteenth century a modified version of the house seems to have been a solution to many new functional problems. For instance, Quebec House, beside the docks at Portsmouth, appears to be a broadly domestic structure in general form and scale, but it is a bathhouse dating from 1754, the earliest surviving seaside bathhouse anywhere in England. (Fig. 6)

James Wallace writing in 1797 provided a lengthy account of the bathhouse in Liverpool.⁵⁷ It was located on the river bank at the north end of the quay and had recently been bought by the Corporation of Liverpool, who had spent £1,000 on improving it.⁵⁸



Fig. 4. Buck's view of Liverpool, detail.
© British Library Board (*Maps K. Top. 18.76.a*).



Fig. 5. Late-18th century view of the Bathhouse at Liverpool. *Courtesy of Liverpool Record Office.*



Fig. 6. Portsmouth, Quebec House. *Author.*

In fact the treasurer's accounts suggest that between June 1793 and March 1795 £1,777 3s 11d was expended, with a further £1,361 14s 7d being spent in the following three years.⁵⁹ This substantial investment may explain the increase in the size of the building since the Buck engraving. Wallace recorded that: 'the entrance to these baths is by a neat façade, or screen, exhibiting five rusticated doors, that on the left wing leads to the Gentlemen's Bath, that on the right to the Ladies'.⁶⁰ Inside each half there were: 'six partitioned baths, or closets, with handsome doors, which may be fastened on the inside, whereby a person may be concealed from any of the company in the common bath'.⁶¹ There was a single, large, 'common' bath outside in the river measuring 33ft by 30ft, enclosed by what resembled a wooden stockade but was apparently grander:

Those who are immediately disposed for the public bath, will find, contiguous to the before-mentioned, a large square reservoir, enclosed by high walls, which render it at once private and secure; these walls imitating stone, give a cool, neat appearance to the whole; the entrance to this common bath is by stone steps, which go to the bottom, whereby you may descend to what depth you please'.⁶²

As well as being the location for baths, the site also offered bathing machines: 'for the convenience of those who are disposed to bathe at all times, carts are provided on the construction and manner of those used at Brighthelmstone, and other places'.⁶³ This association with England's foremost seaside resort may have been a conscious attempt to imply a high-status facility. A mid-nineteenth-century report into the state of Liverpool's public baths and washhouses recorded that: 'people then availed themselves of the caravans on the north shore, and such as could not afford the luxury of the caravan undressed on the sands'.⁶⁴

The bathhouse was apparently demolished in 1817 to make way for the Prince's Dock and the riverfront became increasingly dominated by docks

and other commercial structures during the 19th century.⁶⁵ Commerce triumphed over the early bathing function, but the name of the bathhouse lived on.⁶⁶ It was located approximately on the site of the small triangular piece of grass in the angle between Bath Street and New Quay. A short distance to the south-east there was a narrow road called Bath Lane, perpendicular to the quayside, but this disappeared with the creation of a large office block.

In the nineteenth century bathing was not entirely relegated to the suburbs and beyond: a bathhouse was open by the 1820s at No. 1 Neptune Street, which was further to the north, lying inland from East Waterloo Dock.⁶⁷ More centrally, new baths opened on the river in front of George's Dock in 1828 in a monumental classical structure, but this was demolished in 1906 during the redevelopment of the Pier Head.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

By the early eighteenth century a number of small coastal towns were beginning the process of transformation into seaside resorts, a consequence of the arrival of visitors seeking to bathe in the sea for the benefit of their health. Scarborough, as a spa town since the 1620s, had all the facilities that spa and later seaside visitors would require, but local entrepreneurs, often innkeepers, at other coastal towns such as Whitby, Margate, Brighton and Weymouth were also making available bathhouses, circulating libraries, theatres and assembly rooms for a growing number of aristocrats and gentry seeking to be part of the Company as well as attempting to improve their health.

Unsurprisingly, historians exploring the origins of the seaside resort have concentrated their efforts in existing resorts, but at the beginning of the eighteenth century many early resort facilities were available at Liverpool. An urban bathhouse existed during the first decade of the century and a riverfront

bathhouse was depicted in the Buck engraving in 1728. There were probably primitive bathing machines and updated versions of these facilities were still in use almost a century later. As well as opportunities for sea bathing, Liverpool offered the range of facilities required by the clientele of a rapidly-growing port and these would have catered for any visitors seeking to bathe in the sea, a function obscured by its success as a port.

The identification of an early resort function at Liverpool raises the question of whether other large ports might share similar forgotten or obscured histories. In a letter dated ‘Saturday 9 August 1755’ ‘Mr H’ recorded that: ‘In this reign of saltwater, great numbers of people of distinction prefer Southampton for bathing; but you agree with me, that the bathing-house is not comparable to that of Portsmouth: not only as being smaller, and uncovered, but here is no water, except at certain times of the tide; whereas at Portsmouth one may always bathe.’⁶⁹ Southampton had mineral springs and three bathhouses developed beside its two quays as the town had a muddy foreshore rather than a beach.⁷⁰ A 1771 map shows bathing houses by the water’s edge, beside the West Quay with the ‘Long Room’ behind, while an 1802 map shows a similar arrangement and Goodman’s Baths further to the south.⁷¹ Although the dockside may not seem a salubrious or glamorous location, in 1750 George II’s son Frederick, Prince of Wales, bathed in the town while staying nearby.⁷² Dr Pococke, who visited in 1757, noted that ‘if it had not of late been much frequented for bathing and drinking the salt waters they would have had very little commerce, except among themselves.’⁷³ Count Friedrich von Kielmansegg, who visited England in 1761–2, recorded that ‘Many people come here every year, partly for sea-bathing, partly by order of their physicians, who consider the air of Southampton to be the healthiest in all England.’⁷⁴ Baths survived on the quayside until the 1830s when the main bathing establishment was converted into the ‘Dock-house’.⁷⁵

‘Mr H’ also wrote that ‘Portsmouth has been now, for many months, the rendezvous of the fashionable world; every gay young man of fortune, and woman also, in their circle of joyous amusements, took a transient view of it’.⁷⁶ The reason for this seems to have been a nascent sea bathing culture in the town, in contrast to nearby Southsea, where resort functions developed in the nineteenth-century. Portsmouth still retains a bathhouse near the docks; Quebec House was built in 1754 and was mentioned in the same year by Dr Richard Pococke: ‘The town of late has been resorted to for batheing and drinking the sea-water, and they have made a very handsome bathing-house of wood, at a great expence, with separate baths and apartments for men and women.’⁷⁷ In 1755 Archibald Maxwell wrote of this new facility:

‘But shall my Mind alone expiate,
On what with Terror fills reflecting Minds?
Nor view yon modern * Dome? This lately built,
Ease to restore, and brace the weakned Nerve:
To every gen’rous patriotic Voice,
Applause is due, for this extensive Scheme:
In future Years, when Crowds of languid Men,
Shall haste, to press the health-producing Wave;’⁷⁸

The asterisk referenced a footnote that reads: ‘The open and close Baths begun and finish’d by the worthy Corporation and principal Inhabitants, at their own private Expence; which for Elegance of Structure, and Salubrity of the Water, are no where exceeded.’ The incoming tide was used to fill four baths, two of which were apparently large enough for swimming.⁷⁹ Again the bathhouse was near the docks and while this location may seem strange, a quayside position was also used for Weymouth’s first bathhouse in the eighteenth century, despite having a long beach and seafront.⁸⁰

By the early nineteenth century Dover, although primarily a port of transit, had many features of a seaside resort. It hosted a considerable, but fairly recent, influx of visitors who used its hot baths and bathing machines, as well as its circulating libraries and its new assembly rooms and theatre.⁸¹ Edward

Hasted noted in 1800 that 'The air is exceeding healthy, on which account, and for the benefit of sea-bathing, there being a fine open bold beach all along this shore, numbers of families resort hither during the summer season.'⁸² Harwich, a smaller port, also had private baths filled by the tide and by 1810 was offering bathing machines.⁸³ Since 1766 a 'mixture of county, naval and Plymouth families' in search of a colourful social life could use the Long Room and the accompanying tepid bath on the shore of Mill Bay.⁸⁴ The Long Room has survived within the Royal Marines' barracks at Plymouth, but the bathhouse has succumbed to later development. By the early nineteenth century Swansea was attracting sea bathers despite the pall of copper smoke that apparently hung over the periphery of the town.⁸⁵ It had hot and cold sea water baths, libraries and an assembly room and theatre, the key pieces of infrastructure for a successful resort. However, the construction of commercial docks in the mid-nineteenth century on the foreshore traditionally used for sea bathing meant that this activity shifted out of the town to the western end of Swansea.

These isolated examples of the development of sea bathing in larger urban settlements may suggest that the desire to bathe in the sea not only produced dedicated seaside resorts, but may have allowed the creation of substantial leisure facilities wherever a large resident population existed. Further research will be required to establish how widely sea bathing was practised in larger settlements, but the evidence of Liverpool suggests that there may be a new strand to consider when assessing the origins and early development of sea bathing and seaside resorts in England.

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NOTES

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