Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

EDWARDIAN LADY'S BATHING COSTUME — H229A



The girl's costume in this box is based on an illustration in *The Lady* for July 1905 (see picture, right). The Tam O' Shanter hat was a favoured style for bathing; the original would probably have been lined with oilskin. It would, as the illustration shows, have been worn with a pair of bloomers.

Sea bathing began in Britain. It first became fashionable in the eighteenth century. The first locations where it took place were Whitby and Scarborough, in North Yorkshire, shortly before 1720, but other places soon followed the fashion. It began because many doctors recommended bathing in the sea for health reasons. The coldness of the salty water was believed to invigorate the body. New towns like Brighton and Bognor Regis began to replace inland spas such as Bath and Harrogate as the places where rich people travelled in order to sort out their health problems. Between 1821 and 1831 the fastest-growing towns in Britain were Bradford (because of its factories) and Brighton (because of its beach).

From the beginning men and women were compelled to follow very different dress codes.

To begin with women were expected to bathe completely out of sight. They bathed using gypsy-caravan-like bathing wagons in which they would undress. The wagon was then hauled into the water and an awning lowered to create a small area of sea which was screened from view. The bather would then be carried into the water by a couple of bathing women - called dippers - who would then plunge her (generally head first) two or three times into the cold water. Swimming in the sea was not part of the treatment.

Many women viewed the prospect of being treated in this way with terror. Sometimes doctors forbade the dipping of young girls for fear of inducing convulsions. Of course, after a while women got used to the process. In 1782 Fanny Burney visited Brighton and wrote: 'I have bathed so often as to lose my dread of the operation, which now gives me nothing but animation and vigour.'

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As the nineteenth century progressed bathing wagons with their tents were gradually abandoned. However, for women the privacy of the wagon was replaced by having to wear very voluminous and heavy bathing costumes. As one English fashion writer put it 'care should be taken lest they reveal the figure when wet'.

Women and men were also expected to swim in segregated areas. For example, a late nineteenth century byelaw at Lowestoft ordered that 'a person of the female sex shall not, while bathing, approach within one hundred yards of any place at which any person of the male sex, above the age of twelve years, may be set down for the purpose of bathing.'

The girls bathing costume in this box is from around 1900. This was a period when many women were actively (often very violently) agitating for political equality with men - votes for women! - and there was similar pressure to have access to public (male) swimming areas so as to be able to benefit from the exercise of swimming without being burdened by a cumbersome swimming costume.



Anonymous watercolour of Eastbourne c.1900, from Museum of Reading collection.

This costume is considerably more revealing than anything which could have been worn only twenty years earlier. It would have revealed a shocking amount of skin! In 1913 the *Daily Mail* ran a story headlined 'Bathing Women: A Revolt from Skirts' which trumpeted the arrival of figure-hugging bathing suits. One of the hits of the 1916 music hall was the song 'When Maud Put Her New Bathing Costume On', which made saucy fun of the revealing new style. Elaborate skirted costumes were still being sold, but comparatively skimpy costumes like this one were increasingly the norm.

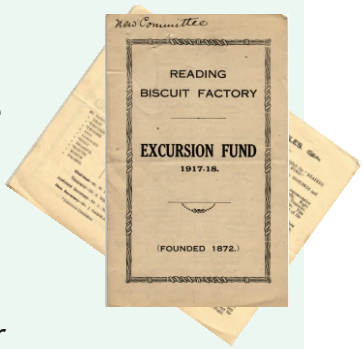
In the earliest days of sea bathing men, like women, were dunked in the sea by dippers. Less modesty was required than for women, though. A comic print of George III having his first bathe at Weymouth in 1789 shows him naked in the open air being manhandled by two hefty female dippers.

Swimming, rather than being dipped, came to be thought of as the most healthy option, particularly for men. For much of the nineteenth century this was done naked. In 1873 the Reverend Frances Kilvert recorded his annoyance at being asked to wear bathing drawers at Seaton in Devon.

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Swimming naked was acceptable as long as most beaches were segregated and given over to the needs of male bathers. However, the increasing popularity of the seaside as a holiday destination meant naked bathing by men came under pressure. By the end of the century bathing suits such as this became the norm for men on most beaches.



Reading is far from the coast, but in the early years of the twentieth century many Reading people would have made a trip to the coast at least once a year.

The illustration to the right shows the rule book prepared by the Huntley & Palmers Excursion Fund Committee in 1917-18. The Excursion Fund was founded in 1872. Members could pay for the excursion through regular contributions, usually 1d a week. The destination, usually a seaside town, was decided by ballot - in this case they intended to visit Hastings and Weymouth.

Of course, swimming was possible in the Reading area, either in the River Thames or in one of the local pools. A map of 1860 show a men's bathing area at King's Meadow. In 1879 a tin wall was put up around the men's bathing pool. In 1903 a fine brick-built open air facility was built, with separate pools for men and women. Before the opening an advertisement was placed in the paper for an attendant. It was specified that the post would be for May, June, July, August and September and was open to a female of between 25 and 35 years, preferences given to one that could swim. The pay was to be 30 shillings per week. The pool was busy in its first year. In Autumn 1903 Reading Girls were taught to swim in spite of the chilly windy weather. Kendrick boys were taught to swim during the month of June, 1911. Younger children too, from the Reading and District Elementary Schools Swimming Association, used both the men's and the women's pools.



In January 1902 the Reading Winter Bathers were photographed at the Corporation Baths after having had their ritual swim. Afterwards they were presented to the Mayor at their annual banquet. The photograph on the right shows this club (mainly men!) about to set off for a swim in 1911. Winter bathing was not as bizarre as it sounds. A cold bath first thing in the morning was a regular practice for many Victorian men, particularly those who went to public schools, where such a practice was often compulsory.