Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

EDWARDIAN BATHING SUIT H229/B



Despite being surrounded by the sea, people in Britain didn't start to visit the coast to bathe until the eighteenth century. In fact, bathing in the sea for fun or for health reasons was unheard of in any European country. Doctors first made bathing in the sea popular, suggesting that the salt-water and fresh air were good for the health.



1

By the Victorian Period many small fishing ports had been transformed into holiday resorts. Now there were shops, dancing halls, gardens, theatres and libraries to entertain holidaymakers when they weren't on the beach. The growth of the railway network meant that it was easier to get to the coast, but at this time it was really only the rich who could afford to spend holidays in this way. Photograph number 1 on the right shows a Victorian family on the beach.



2

Things changed at the beginning of the twentieth century as more people could afford a seaside holiday. By the 1920s doctors were recommending the health benefits of sunshine, encouraging more people to spend their free time on the beach soaking up the rays. Of course, now we know the dangers of too much sun. Photograph 2 on the right shows a group of people sunbathing in the 1920s.



But by the 1960s and 1970s the beach holiday was under threat from cheaper travel abroad. People chose to spend their time and money in France or Spain rather than stay at home. Some of the larger seaside resorts managed to continue to attract visitors, whilst others lost money and have became run down and tired looking. Brighton is one resort that has survived and is still thriving. The picture on the right shows the crowded beach at Brighton in 2002.

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In the eighteenth century 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 actually considered to be beneficial to the health! Many women viewed the prospect of being treated in this way with terror.

Men were given similar treatment, although less modesty was needed. They were usually naked when dipped into the water.

As the nineteenth century progressed bathing wagons with their tents were gradually abandoned and proper swimming began. 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 at the time put it 'care should be taken lest they reveal the figure when wet'. Men continued to swim naked.

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 the one in the box became the norm for men on most beaches.



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

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By the Edwardian Period, many women were actively (often very violently) arguing for political equality with men - votes for women! There was similar pressure to have access to public (male) swimming areas so that women could benefit from the exercise of swimming without being burdened by a heavy and uncomfortable swimming costume.

The replica costumes in this box are based on original illustrations from the Edwardian Period, like those below. The originals would have been made from wool or cotton.



A group of Edwardian ladies ready for a dip



An illustration of a bathing Costume, from The Lady, 1905

The girl's costume in this box is a lot more revealing than anything that would 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'. This signalled the arrival of figure-hugging bathing suits.

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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.

Of course, swimming was possible in the Reading area, either in the River Thames or in one of the local pools. The photograph below shows the Reading Winter Bathers Swimming Club (mainly men!) about to set off for a swim in 1911.

