

## MOTCOMBE BATHS A Brief History



Let those who bathe now  
Who never bathed before  
And those who have always bathed  
Now bathe the more

# **MOTCOMBE BATHS**

## **A Brief History**

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## **The Advent of Public Bathing & Slipper Baths**

Increased urbanisation and densely populated communities had been on the rise since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. With it came disease multiplied by living in unsanitary conditions, compounded by poor nutrition, lack of health education or freely available medical intervention or education. Victorian technology, the creation of groups such as The Society of Sanitary Engineers and philanthropy, perhaps pricked by the campaigns of *The Architectural Review*, and its predecessor *The Builder*, led to advances in public health.

The Public Baths & Washhouses Act - 1846, aimed to provide washing and bathing facilities for all, although in reality a charge of 1d would still be above the reach of the poorest. The building of the first public baths stems from the 1844 movement, The Association for Promoting Cleanliness Among the Poor, which aimed to provide washing facilities for those members of "the poorer working classes". At this time wealthier households would have had rudimentary washing facilities for the person, and would have had the means to send laundry items out, or daily help to launder in the home. Poorer households would have had a shared WC, and no specific facilities for personal hygiene.

The Public Baths and Wash Houses Act and then, in 1852, Baths and Washhouses for the Labouring Classes aimed:

"To promote the health and cleanliness of the working classes, and as a necessary consequence, improve their social condition and raise their moral tone, thereby, tendering them more accessible to and better fitted to receive religious and secular training."

This act gave local authorities the power to commission public baths in their own boroughs, although few councils chose to do this.

When built, many Baths comprised;

- Slipper baths – Segregated bathing, that is to say actual bath tubs, for individual bathing
- A pool, for diving, swimming and exercise, usually with changing cabins on the poolside
- Metropolitan baths tended to include more elaborate sports massage facilities and Turkish baths
- Facilities for the laundry of clothing, basic ceramic sinks, hot water, washboards and soap.
- A library

Not all baths had the facilities above, although excellent examples still exist. When many boroughs and councils build their baths in the 1930's, it was an opportunity to introduce a touch of the orient or the exotic to the bathing

process. For example Porchester Spa in Bayswater and the recently refurbished Ironmongers Row in Finsbury.

Both of these, despite their outward theatrical appearance, housed the basic functions of cleanliness. In Bayswater, as in Eastbourne, the external appearance reflected the scale, mass and material of the surrounding streetscape. However, the leading Bathhouse architect of the time Alfred Cross, set out his ideal model:

*'a two or three-storey brick and stone structure that would screen "the obnoxious business"'*

The washing of bodies and clothes was housed inside. When he later came to design Ironmonger Row (below – top picture), Cross concealed the 'obnoxious business' in the guise of an Italian palazzo, the building studiously avoids advertising the unseemly goings-on within'. The baths still comprise bathing and laundry.



PORCHESTER HALL, PORCHESTER ROAD, PADDINGTON.

## Bathing & Washhouses in Eastbourne



Perhaps the first Baths in Eastbourne were the Devonshire Baths (above), constructed in 1874 by The Devonshire Park and Baths Company, established and financed by the 7th Duke of Devonshire as part of his development of Eastbourne. The Devonshire baths were at the time the largest heated salt water baths in the country but now only the outer perimeter walls remain, with the Manager's house and flagstaff tower.

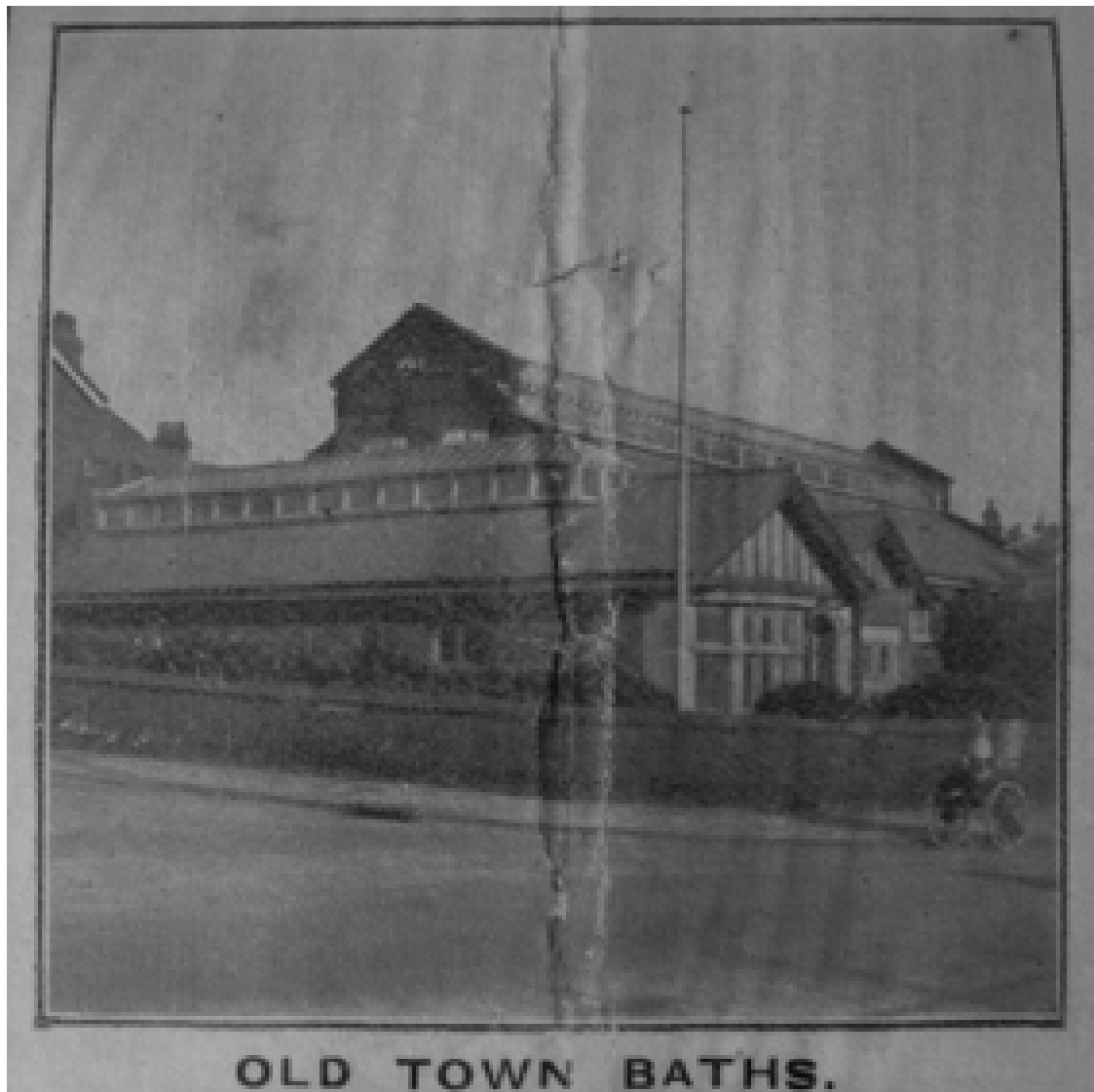
These baths were part of the Duke of Devonshire's plan to construct a resort, with fashionable theatre, walks, carriage drives, roller balding, carriage drives and entertainments to attract fashionable tourism. Now sadly demolished, the baths comprised ladies and gentlemen's pools, and were more for the tourist classes, and less for the ablutions of the poor.

In 1901, the Corporation built a Baths & Library in Seaside. This was definitely a Mind & Body undertaking, and was constructed by Messer's Miller & Selmes at a cost of £4,256, demonstrating the need to provide facilities for the growing town.

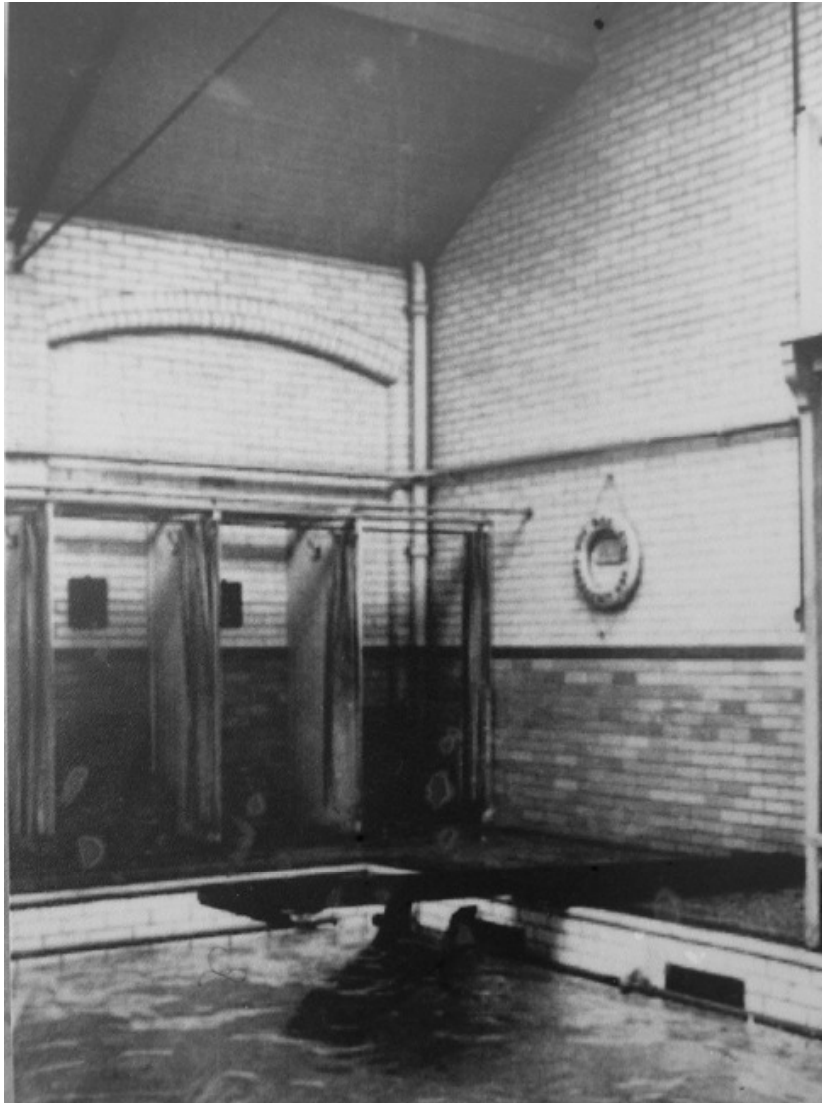
## The Motcombe Slipper Baths and Pool

The land for the pool was purchased from the Compton Estate on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1904, at a cost of £315, for the express purpose of 'providing a baths for public use'. Construction began, and once completed by Peerless Dennis & Sons, they were opened by The Mayor in January 1905. The report in the *Eastbourne Gazette* (4<sup>th</sup> January 1904), makes plain that the pool is expected to be self-financing, and to make substantial contribution to school and club exercise, the learning of swimming and lifesaving activities.

The pool comprised a Ladies and Men's slipper baths, and central pool with poolside changing in cabins with curtains. A caretaker's cottage was built adjoining the facilities.



The baths were fitted out with articles necessary for adequate bathing and swimming. Each changing cabin was fitted with a duck board, chair, mirror and towels were available.



Sanitary, Dec. 12, 1904. 261

(b) OLD TOWN BATHS—

Tender submitted by	Description of Articles.	Prices. £ s. d.
Plummer & Co. ...	Bath Towels ... .. per pair	0 2 1
S. Bindon ...	Chairs ... .. @	0 3 1
.. ..	36 Curtains ... ..	12 3 0
.. ..	36 Rails ... ..	2 14 0
.. ..	4 Curtains (Linen) ... ..	1 2 0
A. W. Alderton...	51 Looking Glasses ... ..	5 2 0

Additional tenders for Huckaback towels for the Baths were ordered to be obtained.



The slipper baths provided bathing in rooms designed for convenience of the bather and the maintenance and cleanliness of the facility. Tiled walls and terrazzo flooring throughout ensured a hygienic finish. Built with curved corner, where no germs could lurk. The two slipper baths and main pool are lit by separate glazed atrium, ventilated by mechanically operated glazed louvres, and heated by coal fired boilers in the basement.



The pool was fed by a pump which tapped into underground spring water – the source of the River Bourne which also feeds the pond in Motcombe Gardens. The well head is pictured below, and is now part of the 1950s extension which was constructed to provide mechanical (electric) pumping system and a purification plant. These are still in use today.





## Bathing & Swimming at The Baths

Once open, the baths charged between 4d and 6d for the swimming bath, however stating that;

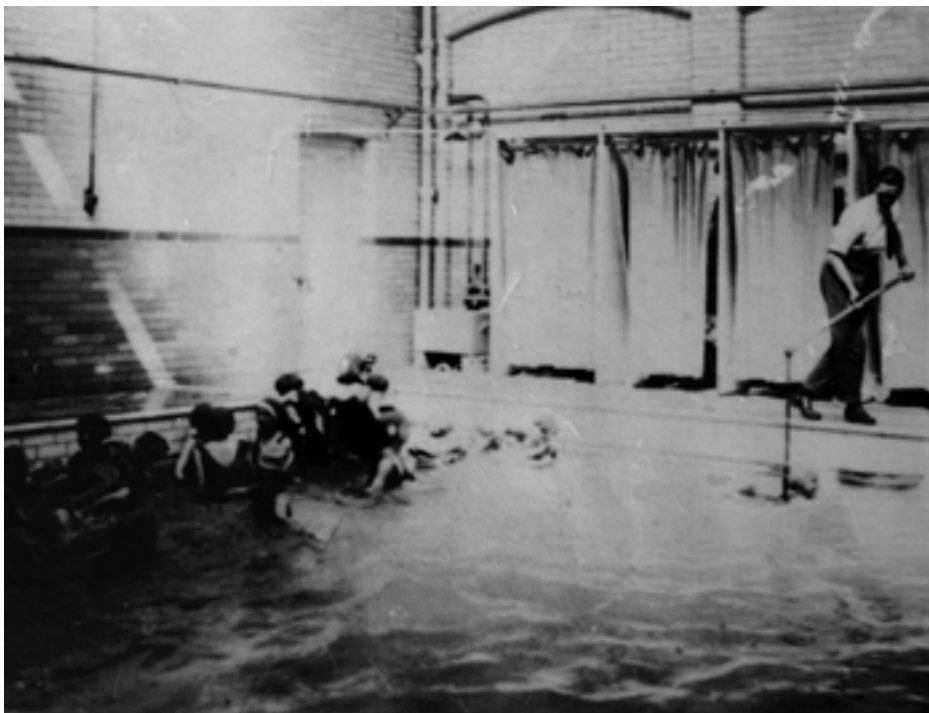
*'persons of weak intellect, or those subject to fits, or suffering from an organic disease are not allowed into the swimming bath under any circumstances, and in the Private Baths only under medical advice and accompanied by an attendant'*

The slippers baths provided half an hour per person to bathe. Even in 1905, when the streets around the baths were new, many would not have had indoor bathrooms. The terraced streets of what is popularly referred to now as Old Town would not have bathrooms until the 1970s, still reliant on a tin bath in front of the fire, the baths would have provided an economical and cheap way of keeping clean. The link between cleanliness and controlling the spread of infection was strong. Prevention was better than cure in an age before antibiotics.

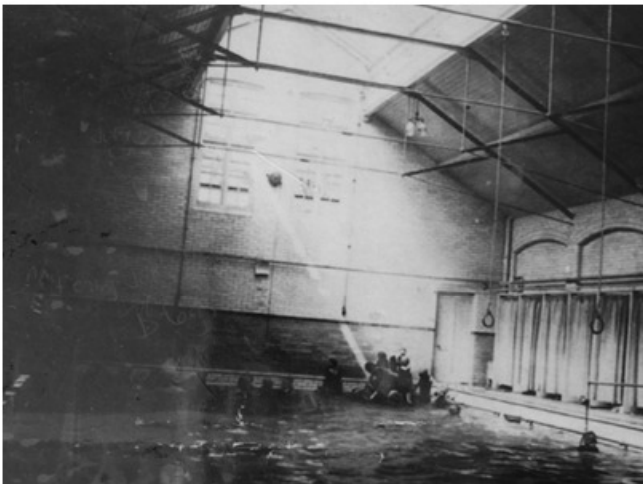
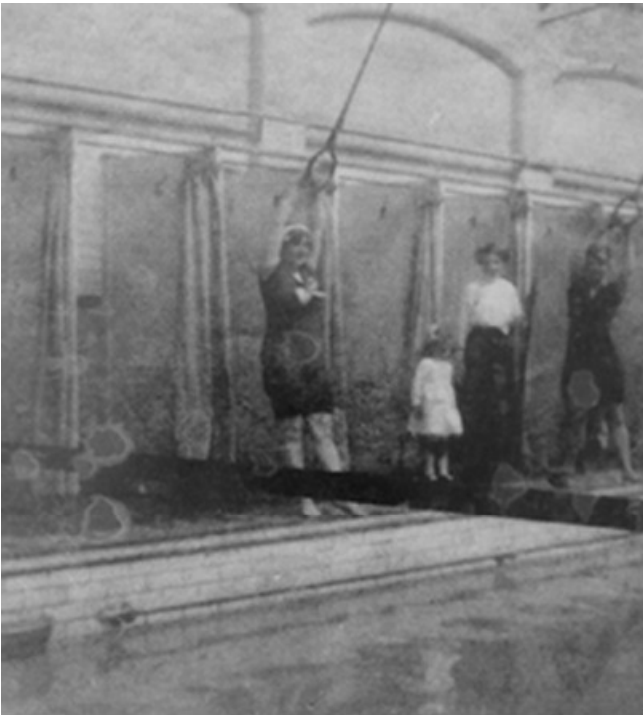


Lessons were provided by the Caretaker of the Baths. Mr Larkin was appointed to the role in 1914, and remained in the post for the rest of his working life. The baths were routinely used for schools bathing, men's and ladies clubs, lifesaving classes and water polo.

Swimming instruction, seen below, was commenced at beginner level with the aide of a strap on a wooden pole, supporting the learner around the midriff.



The main pool was equipped with a diving board and springboard. Originally the pool was all one depth, to allow bathers to launch themselves in directly from the changing cabins, using the roped attached to the roof for the purpose.



The baths continued to thrive until the 1960's when the pools were threatened with closure after the 'unhygienic and old-fashioned conditions' were found to be the source of 'foot virus' although the Council disputed this to the only case of outbreaks, the pools future continued to be under threat from closure, with high maintenance, falling membership and antiquated design being the rationale for closure.

The slipper baths were still being used until at least the late 1950's when most of the pre-Edwardian homes in Old Town had no indoor bathing.

Bathing now thrives at Motcombe Pool. The slipper baths now changing rooms and much of the original tiling, windows, fittings, rope-hooks and original spring feed still exist.

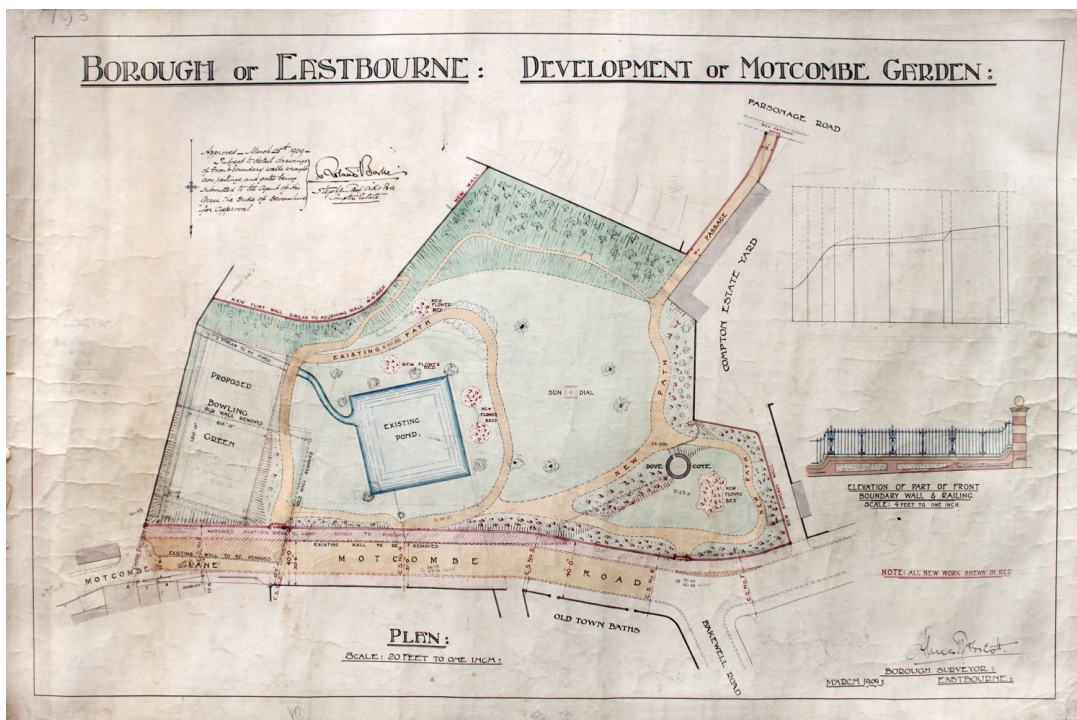




## Motcombe Gardens

In 1908, the Duke of Devonshire made a gift of gardens adjacent to the baths 'for the enjoyment of the public'. This garden, formerly part of the productive grounds of Motcombe Manor, housed a square pond, filled by the Bourne Stream, and its issue and a dovecote.

The Borough paid for iron railings to enclose the park, landscaping to provide shaded walks, a bowling green and a clubhouse, establishing Motcombe as a centre for health and enjoyment, away from the main town of Eastbourne and The Devonshire Baths or those in Seaside.



## **Acknowledgements:**

With grateful thanks to Linda Lower, Motcombe Pool for her insights and for many of the photographs reproduced here.

Also to Mrs Maureen Bennett for her recollections of the pool and bathing in the 19050s, and others who provided information, maps and anecdotal recollections.

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