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# Coming Out in the Wash: Investigating Manchester's Public Baths and Wash-houses

Ian Miller  and Oliver Cook 

## ABSTRACT

Manchester experienced an astonishing rate of growth from the late 18th century to become the first industrial town in the world by the 1830s. Its industrial prowess was fuelled by remarkable engineering talent that was drawn from across the country, coupled with the migration of workers on a scale that was unprecedented and unforeseen. The living conditions, sanitation and health of the burgeoning ranks of urban poor had become a pressing issue for social concern in many towns by the mid-19th century, and the introduction of public baths and wash-houses was an early attempt at redress. These important facilities represented the first civil-engineering projects that were implemented explicitly for the poor, and some of the earliest in the country were established in Manchester and Salford by private enterprise and combined innovative technology with impressive architectural detailing that exuded civic pride, setting a high standard for later swimming baths. Several of these pioneering public baths have been subject to archaeological excavation since 2014, making an important contribution to understanding this significant but dwindling monument type.

## KEYWORDS

Thomas Worthington; public baths; wash-houses; Turkish baths; swimming baths; sanitary reform

## The Origin and Progress of Public Baths

Public bathing in England in the late 18th century was seen as a cultural activity for the affluent and an inappropriate pursuit for the working classes, not least as it was considered a possible route of infection for diseases such as syphilis.<sup>1</sup> These views began to be challenged in the early 19th century with a growing realisation that the promotion of cleanliness would 'render the body less susceptible of disease'.<sup>2</sup> A fresh appreciation of the health benefits of public bathing drew the attention of sanitary reformers, who argued that public baths offered an effective means of cleansing that would be particularly advantageous to the health of economically active working-class males, referred to disparagingly in 1830 as the 'Great Unwashed'.<sup>3</sup> Alongside bathing was a growing recognition that washing clothing and bedding helped to prevent the spread of infectious disease, and acknowledgement that for many this would be best performed at a public wash-house, as the absence of piped water directly into poor-quality housing meant that the water used for washing clothes was normally recycled, and thus dirty. It was also recognised that a lack of drying facilities in houses that were permanently damp could promote and agitate illness.<sup>4</sup> This was combined with an emerging ethos that it was the duty of the municipal authorities and paternalistic middle classes to control the lives of the labouring classes as a matter of civic pride, although it has been argued that this reveals more about middle-class anxieties than genuine concern for the social and physical conditions of the urban poor.<sup>5</sup>

These pervading views on personal hygiene and disease led to the emergence of public baths and wash-houses, which were seen as an affordable and immediate way of improving the public's cleanliness and health. The first public baths in Britain to be built and operated (at least initially) by a municipal authority was St George's Baths in Liverpool, which opened in June 1829.<sup>6</sup> The building had an E-shaped plan with an imposing colonnaded façade, and functioned primarily as a cold salt-water swimming pool, with the water being pumped from the River Mersey via a steam engine (Figure 1). It was essentially a subscription baths, with a charge of 1s being levied for a cold bath, and was consequently 'not frequented by the lower orders on account of the price of admission'.<sup>7</sup> However, Liverpool also boasted one of the country's first public wash-houses, which was opened in a cellar

in 1832 to allow the poor to wash their clothes and bedding in response to the cholera epidemic of that year. It was run by Kitty Wilkinson for five years, earning her the popular accolade of 'Saint of the Slums', but closed in 1837 despite an appeal for funding being launched.<sup>8</sup>

In 1833, Dr James Kay presented one of the first papers set before the influential Manchester Statistical Society, entitled 'Plans and Estimates for Public Swimming Baths for the Use of the Operative Population', in which he argued the pressing need to provide large-scale baths and laundries for the urban population, not least as a means of reducing the threat of mass epidemic. An attempt was made two years later to establish a public baths on Peru Street in Salford and, whilst this was not progressed, it reinforced an emerging awareness locally of the potential benefits.<sup>9</sup> The issue of public cleanliness appeared in various official reports subsequently, including a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1840 that advocated further investigation of baths in the interests of public health. Action thereafter was relatively swift, with Liverpool Corporation opening the first combined public baths and wash-house on Upper Frederick Street in 1842.<sup>10</sup>

Several urban pressure groups that petitioned for public baths and wash-houses as part of a wider movement of sanitary reform emerged in the wake of Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Working Classes* of 1842, coupled with further outbreaks of cholera.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately this led to the passing of the Public Baths and Wash-houses Act of 1846, spearheaded by Sir Henry Dukinfield and Sir George Gray, which afforded local authorities ample powers to provide public baths and wash-houses. Whilst by-laws allowed a charge to be levied for the use of the facilities, the Act stipulated that at least two-thirds of new baths were to be of the cheapest class to ensure that the poor were not excluded. A schedule appended to the Act decreed that each adult bather should be supplied with clean water and a towel, and fixed the maximum charge for a warm bath of the lowest class at 2d; special dispensation was granted to children, and the charge for open-air baths was fixed at 1d. Each woman using the wash-house was to be provided with a tub, a boiler and drying convenience for 1d. A revised Public Baths and Wash-houses Act of 1847 allowed increased charges to be levied for the provision of upgraded bathing facilities (excluding swimming pools) for those who wanted them, acknowledging that baths should be

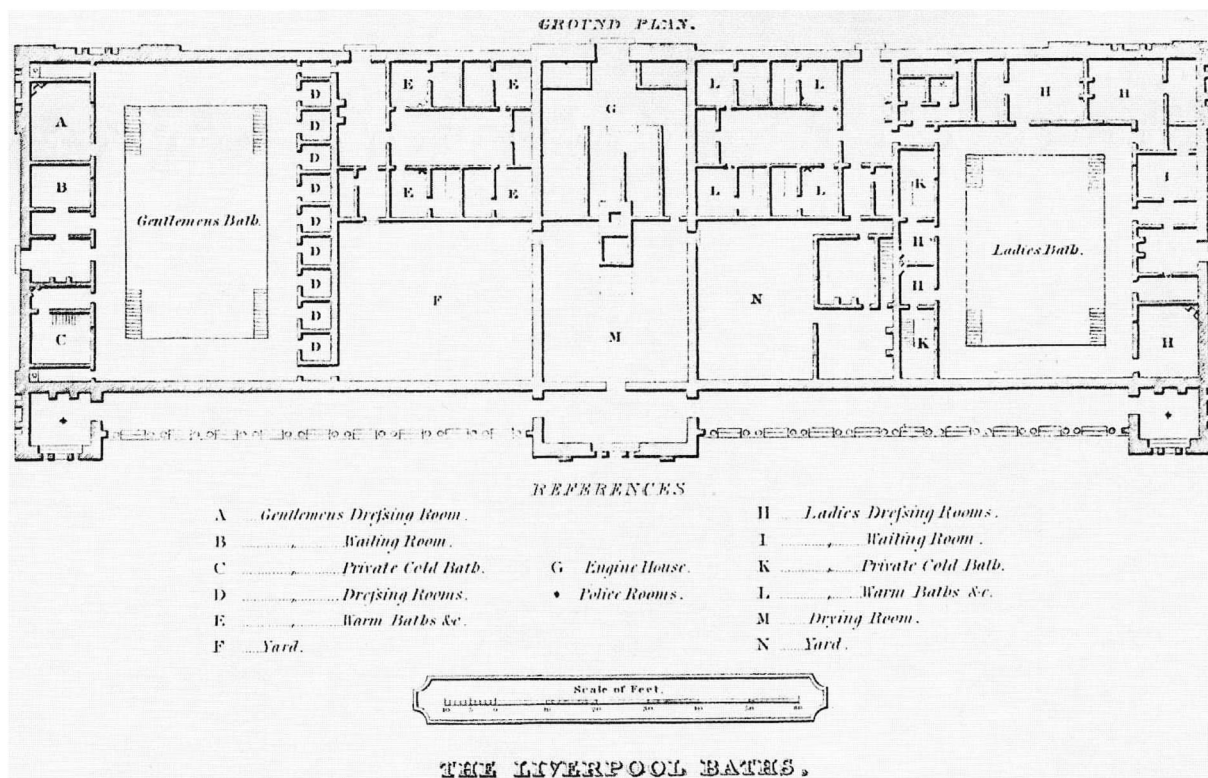


Figure 1. Floor plan of St George's Baths that opened on Liverpool's waterfront in 1829 (© Liverpool Record Office, Liverpool Libraries).

self-supporting and not draw on municipal finances, and were thus not to be used exclusively by the poor.<sup>12</sup> Public baths and wash-houses were established in the several of the country's large urban centres in consequence of these Acts, although some cities and many of the poorer London vestries continued to have very little or no provision at all.

A report published in 1852 for the Bath Committee of the London Association highlighted the benefits accrued from those new public baths and wash-houses that had opened, but also noted the failure to make many of the facilities self-supporting, which led to very few being established during the 1860s.<sup>13</sup> Renewed vigour was stimulated in the 1870s by the launch of a government loan scheme that assisted local authorities to purchase baths and wash-houses, together with the 1878 Baths and Wash-houses Act, which allowed public baths to be drained and boarded over 'for other means of healthful recreation' for up to five months each year, offering considerable savings in fuel and staffing costs.<sup>14</sup> The Act also allowed increased charges to be levied for the use of first-class swimming baths, enabling greater revenue to be generated and affording more affluent local authorities an opportunity to plan for broader levels of provision. An amendment in 1899 allowed public baths to be used for dancing and music events in addition to 'healthy recreation' during winter months permitted by the terms of the 1878 Act. The use of public baths for sports such as competition swimming and water polo also blossomed during the late 19th century, especially in Manchester; swimming's first recognised world record was achieved at New Islington Baths in 1889 when E.T. Jones won the Amateur Swimming Association's 200-yard (182m) 'freestyle' event, whilst the water polo team from Osborne Street Baths represented Great Britain at the 1900 Olympics in Paris and won the gold medal.

The remit of public baths over half a century thus evolved from purely health and welfare provision to multi-purpose event venues that offered recreation, sport and, after 1899, entertainment. Public baths gained maturity during the Edwardian era and were built in increasing numbers, displaying 'unprecedented exuberance and technological advancement', exemplified by the 1906

Victoria Baths in Manchester.<sup>15</sup> It was also during this period that Manchester emerged as the leading centre in the country for swimming facilities, with six new pools being built between 1904 and 1913. There were 343 public baths and 69 wash-houses maintained by public authorities across the country by 1915, of which Manchester boasted 19 public baths with 12 incorporating wash-houses (Figure 2).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Manchester endorsed the largest provision of baths and wash-houses outside London, and more than any other provincial city.

### The Research Context

The popularity of public baths waned during second half of the 20th century, with eight baths in Manchester closing during the 1970s–80s alone. The net result is that the majority of the 19th-century public baths in Manchester and Salford have been demolished, although the sites of several early examples have been the focus of archaeological investigations in recent years. These investigations, all undertaken through the planning system as a requirement in advance of redevelopment, have been amongst the first in Britain to target the sites of 19th-century public baths for full excavation as a strategy for development management, and have successfully highlighted the research value of investigating such sites archaeologically.

Data gathered from the excavation of public baths in Manchester, particularly Leaf Street Baths and Mayfield Baths, have made an important contribution to an understanding and appreciation of this important urban monument type, and complement previous research that has examined public baths as a means of analysing social change in the historic built environment of industrialised towns.<sup>17</sup> Studying public baths and wash-houses also makes a valuable contribution to a wider understanding of improvements in workers' housing and associated sanitation during the second half of the 19th century, a topic that has attracted a considerable amount of research in Manchester and Salford since the early 21st century.<sup>18</sup> The excavations have also informed wider archaeological research priorities for the industrial period that are set out in the current North West Regional Research

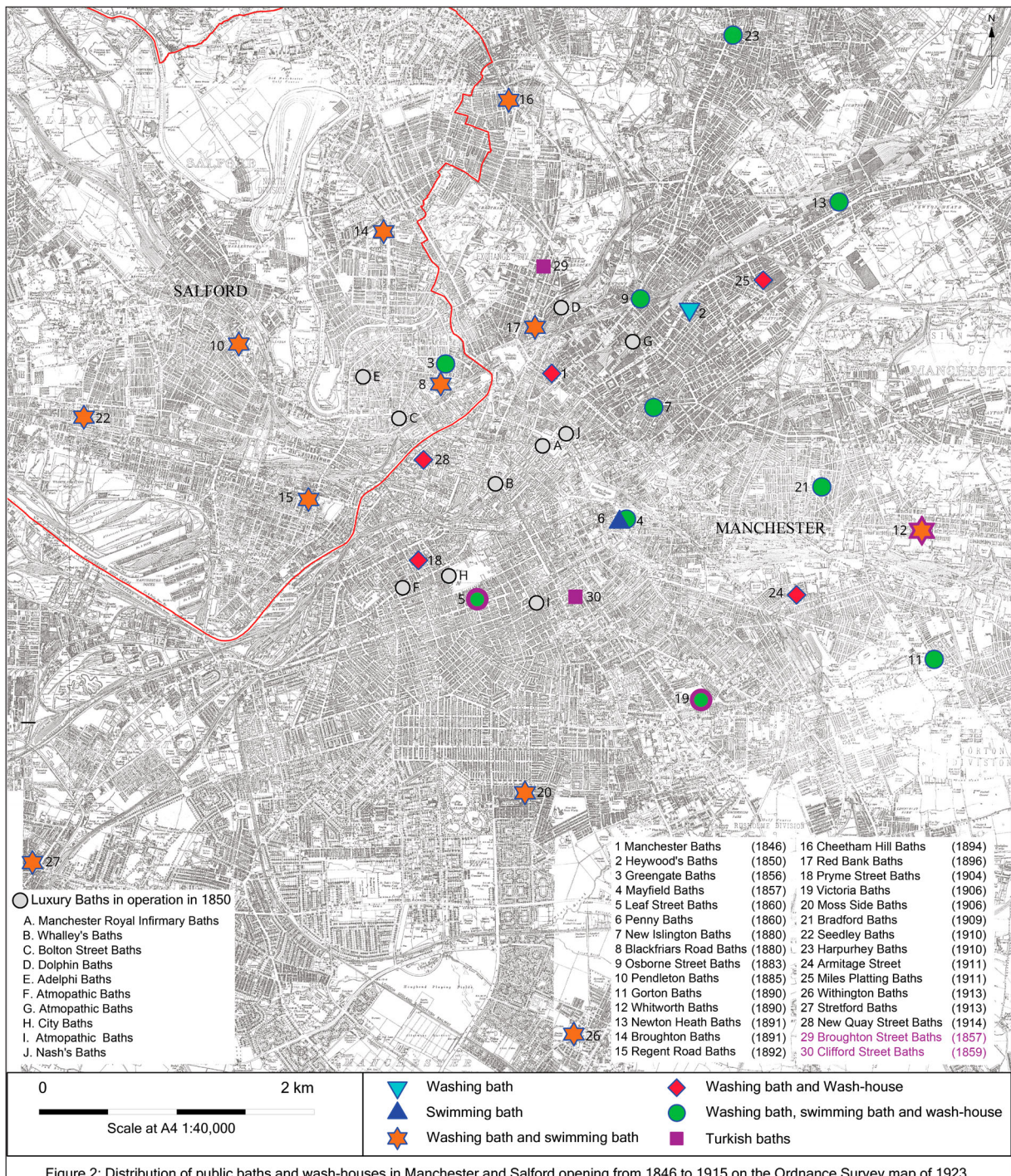


Figure 2: Distribution of public baths and wash-houses in Manchester and Salford opening from 1846 to 1915 on the Ordnance Survey map of 1923

Figure 2. Distribution of the public baths and wash-houses established in Manchester and Salford up to 1915 (© University of Salford).

Framework, which include gaining a better understanding of the impact of industrialisation on the urban working class and their living conditions, the improvement of urban public health during this period and the influence of civic and public buildings on settlement growth.<sup>19</sup>

### Public Baths and Wash-houses in Manchester

There were several baths in Manchester and Salford that were available to affluent residents by the end of the 18th century, with at least ten separate premises offering hot and cold 'slipper' baths or 'vapour' baths by 1850 (Figure 2). Some had very limited capacity, although a notable exception was the bath house attached to the Manchester Royal Infirmary and Lunatic Hospital that was established in a high-class residential quarter in 1781. These baths were refurbished in June 1845 with 'extensive enlargements and improvements for the exclusive use of the

public upon greatly reduced terms'.<sup>20</sup> A cold or shower bath at the reduced rate cost 9d, a warm bath 1s and a first-class warm bath was 2s, and were thus still beyond the financial reach of many.<sup>21</sup> In the same year, however, work began on the first public baths and wash-house in Manchester that was accessible to the working classes. This opened on Miller Street immediately prior to the passing of the 1846 Act, and was one of the earliest combined warm-water public baths and wash-houses in the country, alongside Frederick Street Baths in Liverpool (1842), the Glasshouse Street Public Baths next to London Docks (1844) and the George Street Baths in London (1846).<sup>22</sup> In contrast to these other pioneering examples, the Manchester Public Baths and Wash-house was established by private enterprise rather than the local authority, with much of the initial capital required deriving from a fund-raising ball at the Free Trade Hall in 1845, organised by the Public Baths and Wash-houses in Manchester Committee.<sup>23</sup> This Committee was formed in February 1845 by

an influential group with a shared interest in improving the living conditions of the poor, and the members included Alexander Kay, Josiah Peel and Edward Taylor Bellhouse, the eldest son of the eminent engineer David Bellhouse.

### The Manchester Public Baths and Wash-house

The Manchester Public Baths and Wash-house was established on the north-eastern fringe of central Manchester, and was intended to serve the densely populated area of Angel Meadow. It was designed by Frank Taylor Bellhouse, a younger brother of Edward Taylor Bellhouse, who proposed to convert a three-storey, 12-roomed dwelling at 24 Miller Street.<sup>24</sup> The cellars were devoted to the washing department and provided accommodation for 26 washers at any one time, containing two large boilers for boiling the clothes and a drying stove. The first floor comprised a waiting room for males, apartments for the superintendent and matron, and a room containing six slipper baths for females with a separate entrance and waiting room. The second floor housed the male baths, with two rooms each containing six slipper baths. A fee of 2d was levied for a bath, included the use of a clean towel. The water was supplied by the Manchester & Salford Waterworks Company, a private enterprise that was the sole source of piped water in Manchester until 1851, with a reputation for providing a poor service in terms of regularity and quality of the water.<sup>25</sup> The Company main fed two cisterns on the top floor of the bath house, one containing hot water heated by steam, and the other cold water.

Construction work began in September 1845 and the premises opened 12 months later. The facilities proved to be well received, with 2,111 men and 189 women availing themselves of a bath and 396 'washers' and 247 'manglers' using the wash-house during the first month.<sup>26</sup> The Public Baths and Wash-houses Committee reported some 19 months later that 'this important sanitary institution' had returned a favourable balance sheet, providing satisfactory confirmation that such establishments could be self-supporting, and petitioned Manchester Corporation to purchase the baths and place it under their management.<sup>27</sup> This

recommendation failed to attract any symptoms of enthusiasm, leading the Committee to host another charity ball in May 1849 to fund 'extensive alterations and additions' that were needed to cater for the demand.<sup>28</sup> There is no record of this extension coming to fruition and, having provided half a million private baths and serving 132,250 washes during its lifespan, the premises closed in September 1875 after receiving notice to quit from the owners of the property who were looking to redevelop the land.<sup>29</sup> The building was used subsequently as a machinery warehouse, and the site was cleared in the wake of the devastation caused by the 'Manchester Blitz' in December 1940. The northern half of the building's footprint was subsumed by the widening of Miller Street in the late 20th century, but the southern part was available for archaeological excavation by Oxford Archaeology North in 2014 prior to a major redevelopment.

The excavation uncovered some structural elements of the basement, including the foundations of the second-class washing room and, in the eastern part of the excavated area, the remnants of the drying room and a stairwell that had afforded external access to the basement from the rear of the building. A small boiler room in the western part of the basement had entrances on both sides and a 1.3m-wide recess set in the western wall, with a flagstone sill and three putlog holes to receive timber beams immediately below. The recess was capped at pavement level with flagstones, but may originally have been a coal chute. Further foundations exposed to the north, and beyond the footprint of the building shown on the Ordnance Survey Town Plan of 1850 (Figure 3), may have formed the extension to the wash-house that was funded by the charity ball in 1849.

All of the excavated walls were of hand-made bricks set in lime-based mortar, but no internal surfaces survived except for the remnants of a timber floor in the south-western part of the basement. The northern and western walls contained closely set, deep, cellar-light apertures with flagstone sills that permitted daylight into the basement. A cast-iron pipe set into the rear wall of one of the cellar lights to the second-class washing room probably represented the vestiges of the original water-supply system. A deeper aperture in

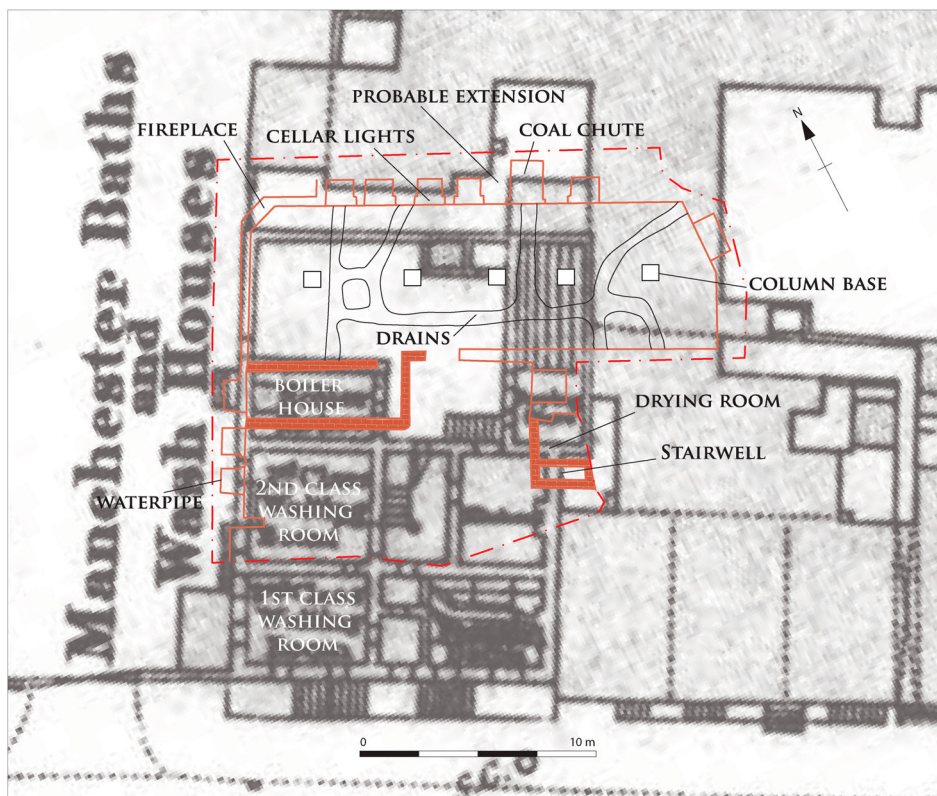


Figure 3. The excavated remains of the Manchester Baths and Wash-house superimposed on the Ordnance Survey 1:1056 Town Plan of 1850 (© University of Salford).



**Figure 4.** The remains of the closely spaced cellar lights in the washing room, the adjacent boiler room and the probable extension with stone column bases and drains exposed during excavation in 2014 (© The Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service).

the north wall of the extension may have been used as a coal chute, whilst a fireplace occupied the north-western corner of this large room and a series of five stone column bases traversed the centre (Figure 4). The column bases were cut into the natural drift geology, together with a series of drains. The excavation thus provided some details of the internal layout of this important building, but yielded little evidence for its use as a public baths and laundry.<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of the success of the Miller Street Baths, a small establishment was opened on Sycamore Street in Miles Platting in July 1850. It was cheaply designed by a joiner, Marmaduke Bunnell, and cost £2,000 that was funded entirely by a private benefactor, Sir Benjamin Heywood.<sup>31</sup> It offered washing tubs for 45 persons, 23 wash baths (15 for men and eight for women, all of timber construction) and a plunge bath that was just 27ft long by 18ft wide (8.23m × 5.48m) but nevertheless represented Manchester's first public swimming pool intended for working men, although an earlier example had been built in the neighbouring town of Bolton in August 1846.<sup>32</sup> Heywood's establishment proved very popular initially, attracting a total of 25,272 bathers in 1853 that covered its running expenses, although it was reported in 1858 that 'were it not for the interest taken by the superintendent, and tact in management, the place could hardly be kept open' due to the poor quality of the fittings and fixtures.<sup>33</sup> The baths closed in 1869 as it had ceased to be self-supporting and, in contrast to the baths on Miller Street, 'commensurate advantage did not seem to accrue to the neighbourhood'.<sup>34</sup>

#### ***The Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company (1854–77)***

In 1854, in reaction to the inertia of Manchester Corporation to proactively address the issue of adequate bathing and washing facilities for the urban poor, a public meeting was held at the town hall with the intention of eliciting support for the formation of a joint-stock company to construct public baths and laundries in Manchester and Salford in the spirit of the 1846 Act. The success of the Miller Street Baths was cited as proof that baths and laundries could be provided 'within the means and reach of the poorest classes and at the same time yield a return of five pounds per cent upon the capital invested in the undertaking'.<sup>35</sup> Amongst the leading proponents of the venture was William Neild, owner of the highly successful Mayfield Print Works in Ardwick, and

one of the first aldermen to be elected when Manchester was incorporated in 1838.

The prospectus of the new venture was advertised three days after the public meeting with the offer of 7,000 £5 shares for general purchase to secure the capital of £35,000 required to fund five new establishments within the following five years. An amount of £20,000 was subscribed almost immediately, not least from local industrialists keen to play a role in civic life. This enabled the new company to purchase suitable sites in the poorer districts of the two towns, which included land that had been occupied until the early 1850s by workhouses on Collier Street in Salford and Leaf Street in Hulme. Land in Ardwick had been purchased by William Neild and his business partners several years previously with the express purpose of establishing a public baths, but this had not been progressed and the land was still available.<sup>36</sup>

The Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company was incorporated by Royal Charter in June 1855, and in the same year appointed Thomas Worthington as their architect following a limited competition that invited the submission of preliminary design plans. Worthington had previously spent eight months touring Europe, particularly Italy, where he made numerous sketches of Italian Renaissance and Gothic buildings, which clearly influenced the design of his public baths and wash-houses. The first of these, Greengate Baths in Salford, was hailed as one of the finest pools in the country when it opened on 27 August 1856, and set a very high standard for public baths that were built subsequently. It featured an impressive Italianate façade along Collier Street, which was considered at the time to be 'the most useful and beautiful style for street architecture that we possess'.<sup>37</sup> Situated to the rear were two large plunge or swimming baths for first- and second-class bathers, together with waiting and reading rooms and a superintendent's office. The upper floor was devoted to private slipper baths, with an outer gallery overlooking the plunge bath. The slipper baths were 'of the newest construction, namely, Messrs Rufford and Finch's "Patent Porcelain Baths", the peculiarity of which is that they are made in one piece, like an enormous oblong basin'.<sup>38</sup> The roof and galleries were supported by complex iron framing that also served as drainpipes for the slipper baths, with most of the roof glazed to provide natural lighting. A central five-bay attic storey provided living accommodation for the baths superintendent and his family. The wash-house boasted 38 washing tubs for boiling, washing and rinsing clothes, with machinery to assist in

drying. The hot water for the baths and wash-house was heated by steam that was raised in a bank of three boilers. The ornate chimney that served the boiler house also provided a vent for surplus steam from the baths and wash-house (Figure 5).

Greengate Baths was shortly followed by the opening of the Mayfield Baths in Ardwick in June 1857 and the associated Penny Bath in 1860, and the Leaf Street Baths in Hulme in 1860. This latter also contained a Turkish baths, and was the first public baths in Manchester to boast such a facility; the first Victorian Turkish baths in England had been built just three years earlier for the Manchester Foreign Affairs Committee at the house of William Potter on Broughton Street in Manchester and, by 1860, there were as many as eight Turkish baths in Manchester, although none were accessible to the urban poor on account of the entrance fees.

The purpose-built public baths and wash-houses at Greengate, Mayfield and Leaf Street differed to the early premises on Miller Street at in Miles Platting (which were both acquired by the Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company in 1862 and 1864 respectively to fulfil the commitment to shareholders of providing five establishments) in that they were much larger in scale and employed advanced constructional techniques and complex mechanical services, setting the precedent for the later design of this particular type of public building across the region and beyond. Indeed, the French government bought copies of the plans for Leaf Street Baths, intending to provide similar facilities in Paris, and Worthington was consulted from places as far afield as Gothenburg and Gibraltar.<sup>39</sup>

### Mayfield Baths

The second public baths and wash-house Thomas Worthington designed for the Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company opened in July 1857. It occupied land obtained from William Neild, owner of the revered Mayfield Print Works and a founding partner of the Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company. The new baths lay on the south bank of the River Medlock, opposite Mayfield Print Works and amongst a concentration of dye works, textile-printing works and tanneries that lined the narrow and meandering river corridor. This belt of industry was flanked by 'a densely populated district occupied almost wholly by the working classes', many of whom worked at Mayfield Print Works.<sup>40</sup>

Worthington had started the design for Mayfield Baths several months before Greengate Baths was completed, and again employed Italianate architecture with a scale and massing similar to Greengate. The pools were slightly larger with curved corners, and were fitted with steps rather than ladders. Worthington also introduced design improvements to the services and, crucially, the ventilation system that incorporated four prominent vents in the roof and an improved type of chimney that was designed to expel warm vapour from the baths (Figure 6). This addressed the problems of condensation that had become readily apparent at Greengate Baths, and was ultimately a factor in its premature closure in c. 1880.<sup>41</sup>

The striking Italianate façade of Mayfield Baths was composed of brick with stone dressings, and was 120ft long (36.57m), with separate entrances to the first- and second-class male swimming baths. The first-class baths were served by 32 enclosed dressing stalls that lay beneath a gallery supported on ornamental iron columns, supplied by Edward Taylor Bellhouse. The gallery housed 17 private slipper baths, with a further five facing the front of the building and separated from the gallery by an open corridor. The second-class baths had fewer enclosed dressing stalls, but had a similar number of private slipper baths in the gallery. The ceiling of both baths was open to the rafters, with ample light admitted through a glazed clerestory above the galley in lieu of the glazed roof that had been employed at Greengate Baths (Figure 7). There was no swimming pool for women, but there were four first- and seven second-class slipper baths that were accessed via two separate doors from the streets. The laundry department occupied the northern end of the building, and housed six first-class and 30 second-class departments. The former were provided with three tubs for washing, boiling and rinsing, whilst the latter had only two for washing and boiling. Each compartment was provided with an iron 'maiden' that was placed over a hot-air stove and could dry clothes in about 20 minutes. The hot water and steam was supplied from a bank of three boilers, drawing water from a rooftop tank that held approximately 3,000 gallons.<sup>42</sup> Smoke from the boilers and drying furnaces, together with surplus steam and vapour from the baths, were vented via a slender 'Florentine' chimney that rose from a base 2.5m square to a height of 27.43m. The smoke passed up a circular flue of rivetted boiler plate that was fixed into the centre of the chimney, whilst vapour from the baths was vented between the flue and the shaft (Figure 6).

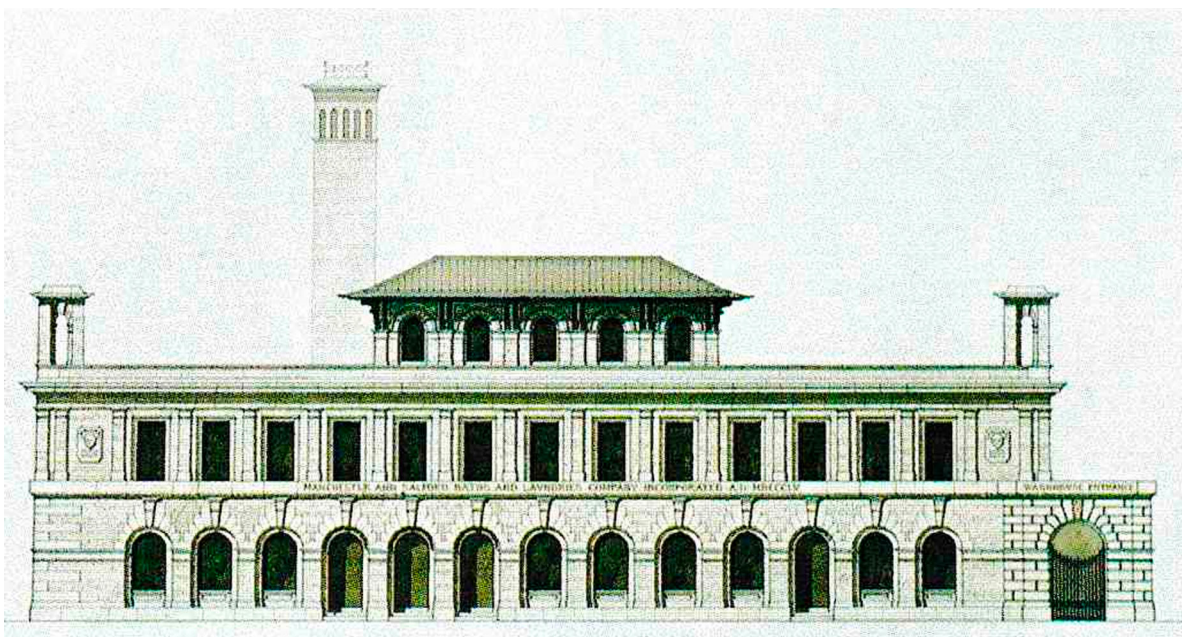
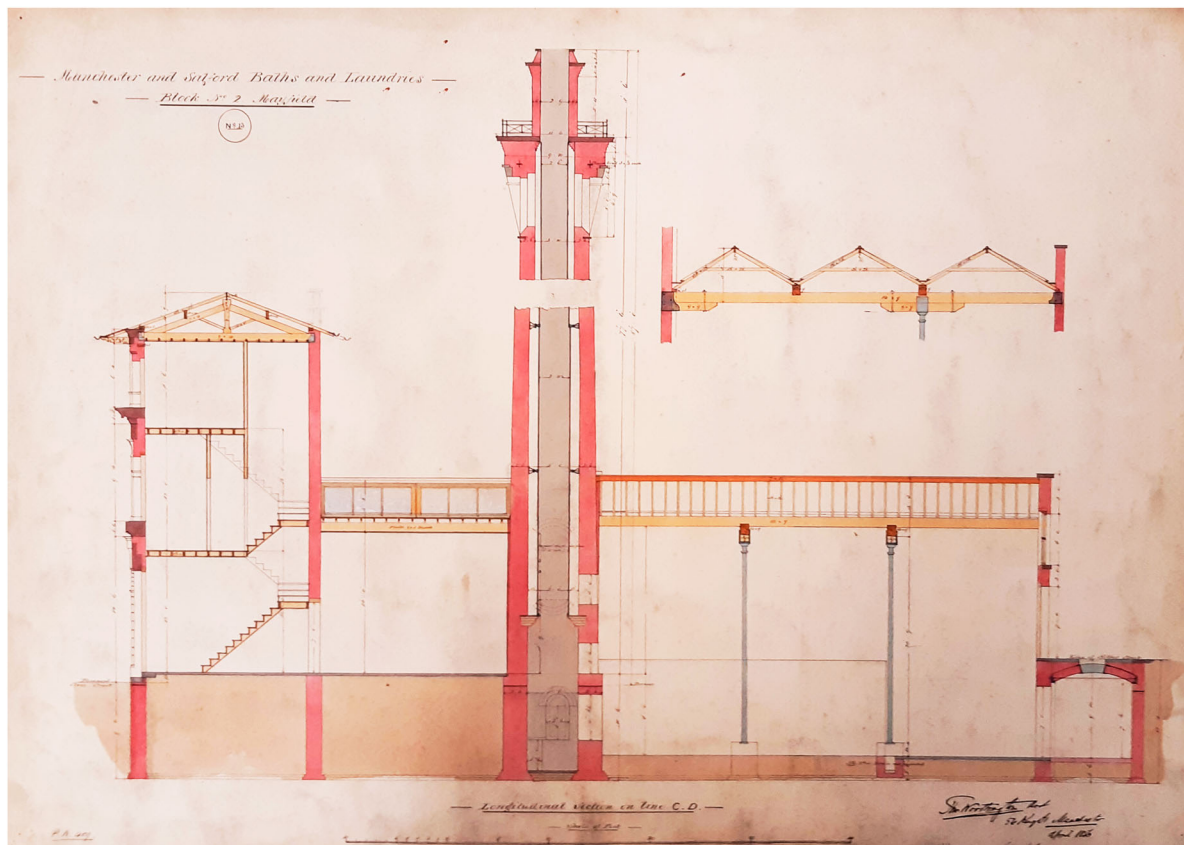


Figure 5. Worthington's design for Greengate Baths, featuring the Italianate façade along Collier Street and the impressive chimney to the rear (private collection).



**Figure 6.** One of the surviving design plans of Mayfield Baths drawn on canvas by Thomas Worthington in April 1856, showing the arrangement of the gallery and chimney (© The Thomas Worthington and Sons archive at Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections Museum).

It was reported at the annual shareholders' meeting in March 1860 that the previous year had seen an increase of 36,432 bathers and 547 washers, with the net profit for the Greengate and Mayfield baths being £233 9s 9d and £432 19s 11.5d respectively.<sup>43</sup> It was also in 1860 that the 'Penny Baths' were added to the Mayfield site (Figure 8). These were again designed by Thomas Worthington and were intended specially for boys, the depth of the water being nowhere more than 4ft (1.22m).<sup>44</sup> These were the first public baths of their kind but were short-lived following complaints that boys persistently lingered in the street begging for entrance money, and the building was converted into a gentlemen's subscription swimming bath in 1866.<sup>45</sup> The Mayfield Baths were purchased by Manchester Corporation on 29 September 1877, and was administered thereafter by the Baths and Wash-houses Committee.

### The Archaeological Excavation

The Mayfield Baths sustained damage during an air-raid in 1941, which led to their closure and subsequent clearance. The footprint of the baths was subject to an excavation by Salford Archaeology in 2020, which uncovered the largely intact foundations of the first- and second-class swimming pools and the associated boiler house (Figure 9). The pools were designed to hold up to 40,000 gallons of water, measured 19.2m by 7.32m, and had a rectangular footprint with rounded corners. The outer walls of the pools ranged in thickness from 0.65m to 0.85m, and comprised hand-made red brick bonded with hard, grey cementitious mortar. The bases of the pools were constructed in concrete, brick and stone and sloped from east to west to create the shallow and deep ends of each structure.

Excavation beneath the pools revealed a deep layer of alluvial silt, which had accrued in the previous centuries with the migration of the River Medlock. The foundations had evidently required a significant outlay on materials to form a solid base

capable of distributing the load of the baths evenly. Through investigation of the sub-floor structure of the second-class pool, it became clear this was largely achieved through a bedding layer of crushed and chipped limestone fragments (300mm thick), above which was a concrete raft containing frequent rounded stone aggregate inclusions (250mm thick). Sealing the raft was a single layer of hand-made bricks bonded with a light bluish-grey cement (75mm thick). The original surface of the pool was finished with a series of light yellowish-grey flagstones.

After nearly a century of use, few original materials, fixtures or fittings were immediately apparent, reflecting decades of alteration and repair. The bullnose stone coping which survived around the southern and eastern edges of the first-class pool was potentially one of the few original design choices that were retained throughout the lifespan of the baths. The coping was formed from sandstone slabs measuring 1.12m × 0.33m and was laid with a slight overhang over the pool edge. Circular openings cut into the slabs were spaced regularly at 2.35m intervals along the pool side, providing foundation pads for the cast-iron columns that had supported the walkways and first-floor arrangement above. Several hollow iron collars with a diameter of 0.18m, into which the columns were affixed, survived *in situ*. Elsewhere, the upper courses of the pool walls had been truncated through demolition and landscaping, although historic photographs show identical poolside arrangements for the adjacent second-class pool.

Although the basic fabric remained consistent between the structures, the level of adornment provided the distinction between the first- and second-class pools. In the first-class pool, the walls were mainly covered with plain white earthenware tiles affixed with a hard grey waterproof cement, although a repeating pattern of motif tiles — three forms of two-tone, blue radial design — with a solid blue border were used above the waterline (Figure 10). A different style of patterned tile had been used following





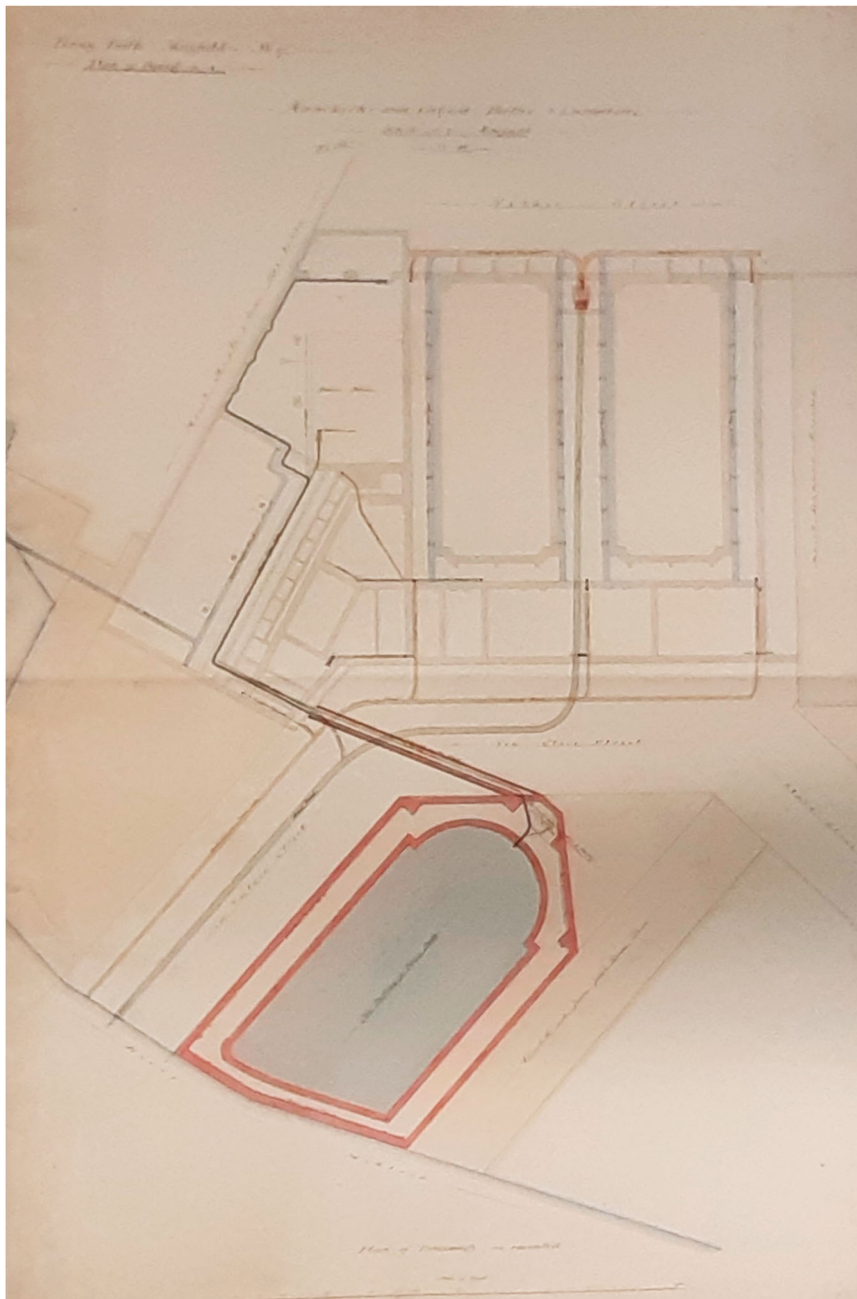
**Figure 7.** Wood engraving of Mayfield Baths by W.E. Hodgkin, published in *The Builder*, 14 August 1858.

subsequent alterations; these plainer tiles were arranged primarily in a grid-iron pattern on the base of the pool but had also been used to repair the tiling with the insertion of later steps. Both variations of tile were the product of Minton Hollins & Co. of Stoke-on-Trent; these dust-pressed and printed tiles were mass-produced in the latter half of the 19th century, presumably following the break-away of the tile producers from Minton in 1869. Prior to this, the plunge pool had been adorned with Italianate geometric designs visible in an engraving from 1858 (Figure 7). It is perhaps no coincidence that both variations of blue-and-white patterned tiles were revealed during the excavation of Leaf Street Baths in 2016, suggesting a complete overhaul to the original interiors of both baths after they came into municipal ownership in 1877.

The walls and base of the second-class pool were finished more simply. In stark contrast to the ornate tiling in the adjacent pool, the walls were lined entirely in plain 6in. (152mm) white earthenware tiles. This was also reflected in the application of more utilitarian materials on the base of the pool, which was relined in

the late 19th century with black and white enamelled bricks. Produced by Gilmour & Co. of Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, the frogged, fire-clay bricks bearing their maker's mark likely date to the period c. 1880–90. These were arranged with two parallel lines of black bricks running the length of the pool, intersected by similar lines running widthways. The enamelled bricks had been laid above an original sandstone surface; the decision to reline the pool may have been driven by the desire to improve standards of hygiene, as the ceramic surfaces were far easier to clean than the porous stone.

An insalubrious feature by modern standards was a series of cast-iron spittoons arranged around the edges of the first-class pool. Five of the original seven spittoons survived *in situ*. These took the form of a half-bowl with a flat back fixed to the wall just above with the waterline (Figure 10). With no associated drainage or apparent means to empty the spittoons, this early design may have resulted in the washing back of the contents and would have been a cause of concern for public health. Indeed, their inclusion was considered by some to be unnecessary and 'their



**Figure 8.** Thomas Worthington's plan for the Penny Baths at Mayfield, showing the swimming pools in Mayfield Baths on the opposite side of Boardman Street (© The Thomas Worthington and Sons archive at Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections Museum).

use will always be a source of annoyance and disgust to anyone of cleanly habits or inclination'.<sup>46</sup>

A relatively late addition were the steps situated in the four corners of each pool, which had been constructed after the retiling of the pool. These steps replaced an earlier form shown on Worthington's design plans. The replacement tiles used to repair the inward face of the wall adjacent to the steps in the first-class pool matched those used on the floor, bearing a slightly different design and colour to the earlier two-tone examples (Figure 11). Near-identical steps were uncovered in the second-class pool, albeit lined with plain white tiles. All of the steps were of solid brick construction with large blocks of sandstone used as treads.

A range of fixtures and fittings survived within the first-class pool alluding to its use and modernisation in the late 19th and early 20th century. These included a cylindrical, hollow, iron hand-rail fixed to the wall at the shallow end of the pool. The presence of four cupped iron supports would have held a rail at the opposing end, although this had since been removed. Brass fixings just above the waterline were recorded at the same level along the

northern and southern walls and may have supported a similar rail, whilst a series of L-shaped brackets found only at the deep end of the first-class pool probably supported a wooden walkway. These were not depicted in Hodgkin's 1858 engraving, but are visible in photographs from 1902, suggesting that the walkway was added in the late 19th century. The same photographs also provide evidence for the pools' direct steam-injection pipework for heating the water. This comprised a wide, vertical cast-iron pipe that fed into a narrower T-shaped pipe fitted with spouts. Although long since removed, the original position was indicated by several brass fittings and an impression left by the hot pipework on the surface of the tiles, which were cracked and discoloured. This rather basic and somewhat hazardous heating system was probably an original fixture and was seemingly employed until the baths closed in 1941.

As with the majority of 19th-century baths, maintaining the water quality originally required the pools to be emptied completely, cleaned and refilled on a regular basis, typically once a week for the second-class pool and twice weekly for the first-class pool.<sup>47</sup> Visible elements of this drainage system identified during



**Figure 9.** Mayfield Baths during excavation in December 2020, showing the foundations of the boiler house and chimney in the foreground, the second-class pool in the centre and the first-class pool to the rear (© University of Salford).

the excavation included rectangular openings covered by cast-iron grates that were placed at the lowest point of each pool, allowing the water to be emptied directly into an east/west conduit between the two pools (Figure 12). This method of maintaining the water quality was expensive in terms of water, heating and labour costs, and was superseded during the Edwardian period by mechanical filtration and aeration systems. Experimentation with this technology was pioneered at Newton Heath Baths in Manchester in 1903–4, using equipment developed by Salford-based engineer John Royle.<sup>48</sup> This plant pumped water from the deep end of the pool, aerating it via a large spray before filtering it through sand and gravel, reheating and returning it to the pool. In addition, the water was chlorinated on its return journey by forcing chlorine gas into the water at a point nearest the entry to the pool.<sup>49</sup> This allowed the same water to be circulated, filtered and cleansed over a period of between four and eight hours, and dispensed with the need to empty the pool.

The installation of a filtration system at Mayfield Baths was indicated by collared cast-iron pipes (102mm internal diameter) that

were set into the lower portions of the wall adjacent to the steps at the deep ends of both pools (Figure 12). These pipes were presumably intended for pumping water out of the pools, whilst small brass grates revealed in the walls at the foot of the shallow-end steps marked the point where purified water was returned to the pools.

Company accounts for 1913–14 record large sums of money — £401 1s 2d in 1913 and £827 5s in 1914 — were expended on filtration plant, suggesting it may have been installed at that date. A historic photograph of Mayfield Baths features a Royle's water-feed heater, or calorifier, that will have formed part of the system, heating the aerated and filtered water prior to returning it to the pool (Figure 13). The photograph is reputed to have been taken in 1902, which would make this a very early example, although it seems more likely that the date attributed to the image is incorrect. A small anteroom excavated to the south of the boiler room contained two rectangular stone beds fitted with threaded retraining bars that were set into the concrete floor, possibly representing the setting for the calorifier.



**Figure 10.** Examples of the two-tone motif tiles used in the first-class pool at Mayfield Baths, together with one of the cast-iron spittoons (© University of Salford).



**Figure 11.** The inserted steps in the first-class pool, with later monochrome radial tile (© University of Salford).

Documentary accounts imply that the hot water for the baths and wash-house was heated by steam raised in a bank of three boilers. The excavation demonstrated that the boiler house was situated in the north-eastern corner of the bath house, although only two boiler beds were present, together with the remains of associated flues, a chimney and what appeared to be the foundations of an economiser (Figure 14). The fabric of the boiler house implied that it had been heavily modified from its original construction. Parts of the chimney and early vaulted flues were constructed in hand-made brick, which had degraded considerably from use. In contrast, the boiler beds and unobstructed flues, operational during the final years of the baths, were constructed in a harder, more durable machine-made firebrick with concrete foundations, materials feasibly utilised during the renovation and improvement of the boilers that is implicit in the company accounts for 1923 and 1931–2.

Few structural remains uncovered beyond the pools and boiler house could be tangibly related to the operation of the baths and

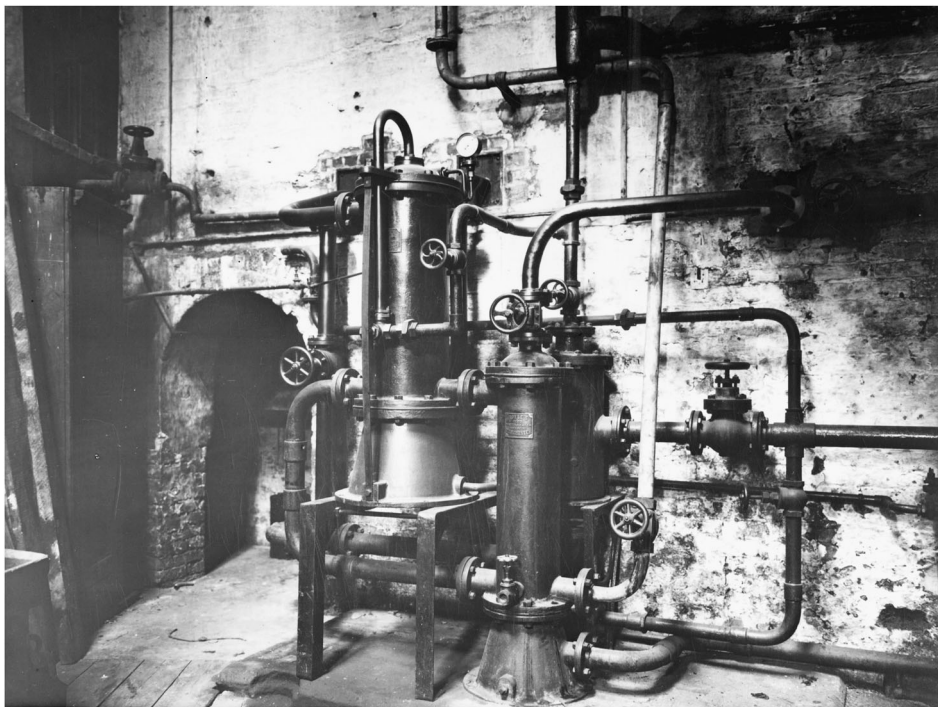
wash-house. The entrance and street frontage were not fully explored, but a cast-iron and aluminium turnstile lying amongst the demolition debris in the second-class pool gave some indication of the foyer arrangement. Another interesting find recovered from the debris filling the anteroom of the boiler house were two enamel number plates that may have once adorned the doors to the private slipper baths or dressing rooms (Figure 14).

### Leaf Street Baths

Leaf Street Baths opened to the public on 20 June 1860, and was the third to be designed by Thomas Worthington for the Manchester and Salford Public Baths and Laundries Company. It fronted onto Leaf Street in Hulme, and occupied part of the site of the Chorlton Union Workhouse that had been demolished three years previously. As with his earlier designs, Worthington employed Italianate architecture for the main façade, which was



**Figure 12.** The cast-iron grate across the drain and the collared pipe associated with the filtration system in the second-class pool (© University of Salford).



**Figure 13.** A Royle's calorifier installed at Mayfield Baths as part of the filtration system (© Manchester Archives and Local Studies).

two storeys high with a central attic floor that provided accommodation for the baths superintendent (Figure 15).

The new baths comprised two large swimming pools for first- and second-class customers, numerous private slipper baths, and two sets of rooms for Turkish baths. Worthington intended each swimming pool to measure 75ft by 25ft (22.86m × 7.62m), with the first-class bath being served by 40 dressing rooms and the second-class bath having 66 stalls, all of which were numbered. The depth of water was 0.91m at the shallow (western) end and 1.83m at the opposite end. As at Mayfield, an open iron gallery around each pool afforded access to the private slipper baths.

The public wash-house and laundry housed 20 washing compartments, and had four washing machines driven by a small steam engine, allowing washing to be performed either by hand or by machine. The steam required by the engine and for heating the water was raised in two Lancashire boilers, with spent steam exhausted via an underground flue, and thence into a space in the 113ft tall (34.44m) chimney surrounding the core for the passage of smoke from the boilers.<sup>50</sup> The cost of the new baths, exclusive of land, was approximately £12,000.<sup>51</sup> Leaf Street was larger than either Mayfield or Greengate baths, and was the first public baths to include a Turkish bath.

The baths were purchased by Manchester Corporation on 29 September 1877 and became the responsibility of the Manchester Baths & Wash-houses Committee. In 1880, the Committee closed the public wash-house and built a new swimming pool for women in its place (Figure 16); this was the first pool built in Manchester for the exclusive use of women.

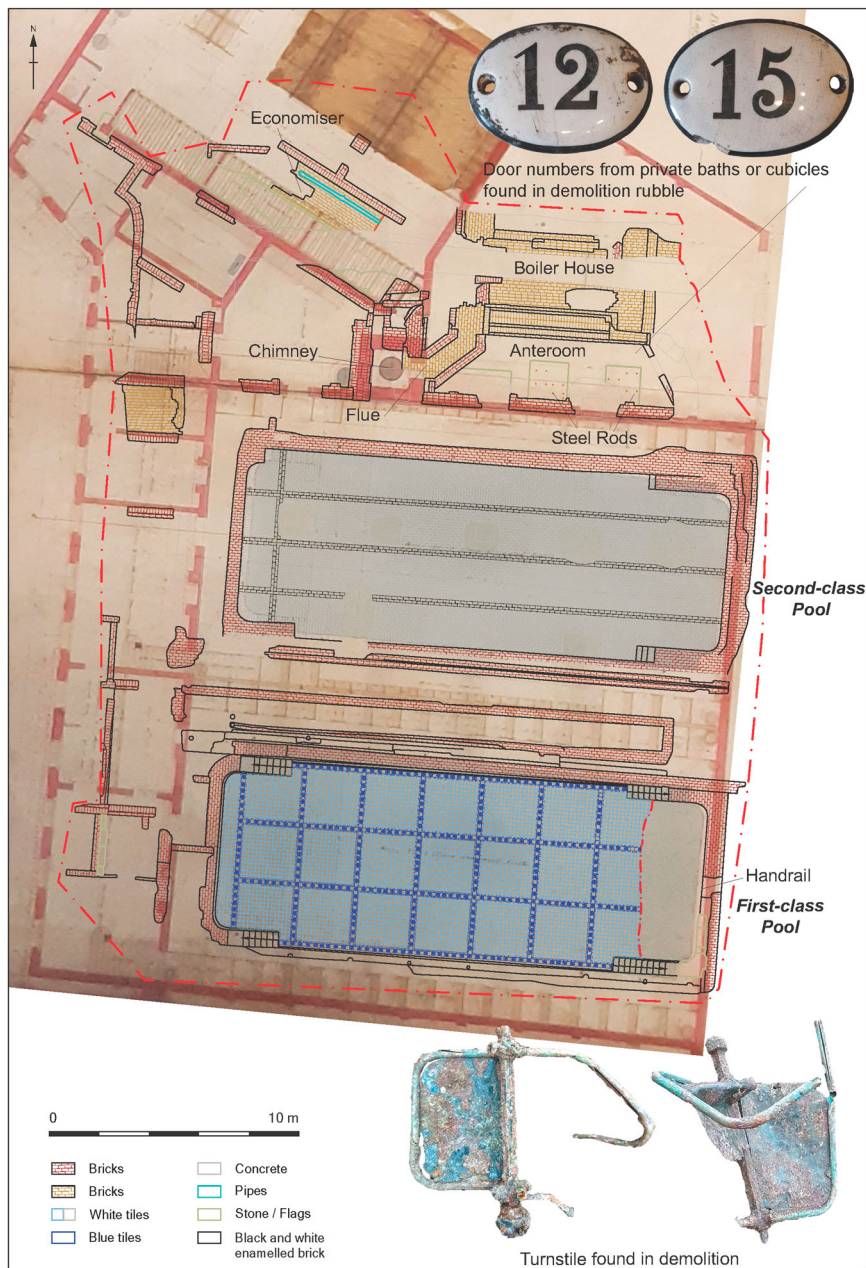
### **The Archaeological Excavation**

Leaf Street Baths was demolished in 1976 and the site was used thereafter as recreational ground, until planning permission for a residential development was granted in 2015. The construction work was preceded by an archaeological investigation by Salford Archaeology, which in the first instance required the excavation of a series of trenches across the footprint of the baths to establish whether any structural remains survived intact. The foundations of the two men's swimming pools and some ancillary structures were uncovered in these initial trenches, leading to the full excavation of the first-class pool and partial excavation of the second-class

pool (Figure 17); the female pool was not uncovered. The purpose of the excavation was to enhance the existing documentary record of the baths by examining the construction details of the pools and mapping their layout; whilst historical research enabled some contemporary descriptions of the baths to be collated, no original plans have been located.

The second-class pool was found to be 22m long, 2.8m longer than those at Mayfield Baths, but very slightly shorter than Worthington's specification. Sections of the wall at the western (shallow) end had been removed in the 20th century to enable service cables to be laid, and the upper course of brickwork elsewhere had been lost during demolition, together with the original floor around the top of the pool. The pool wall was up to 1.2m thick at the eastern (deep) end, and was constructed from hand-made bricks that were bonded with lime mortar. Plain white ceramic tiles lined the wall with a single narrow strip of greyish-blue tiles forming the only surviving decorative element, although a second strip had originally been set in the upper course of the pool wall. The tiles were all bonded to the brickwork with a white-coloured waterproof cement. A series of iron fittings that had held a handrail around the pool at water level was the only surviving fixture. The pool had evidently fallen into disuse during the 20th century, as a modern wall set on a concrete foundation had been built within the pool, and the floor had also been covered in concrete. Excavation of the demolition rubble that had been used to backfill the pool yielded fragments of the decorative cornice that had adorned the façade of the building (Figure 18).

The first-class pool was excavated completely and measured 22.0m by 8.50m, being slightly wider than Worthington's design. The pool wall was three courses wide and constructed from hand-made bricks bonded with lime mortar. An internal skin of brick was bonded to the pool wall with bitumen and faced with white ceramic tiles. A set of stone steps identical to those found at Mayfield Baths were fitted to each corner of the pool, and similarly appeared to be a later insertion. Those at the shallow (western) end comprised four stone treads, and those at the east end had seven; each step was 0.80m × 0.30m × 0.30m. The floor was tiled with plain white tiles in a grid pattern separated by slim blue border tiles in which every second tile featured a blue printed motif. The walls of the pool were similarly finished with white tiles, with a border. Every second tile above the border



**Figure 14.** Plan of the excavated remains of Mayfield Baths superimposed onto one of Thomas Worthington's original design plans (© University of Salford).

featured a blue motif, similar to those set into the floor of the pool, although these only survived intact at the western end of the pool (Figure 19).<sup>52</sup>

A flanged pipe set into the north wall at the foot of the steps at the deep end of the pool probably formed part of a filtration system similar to that identified at Mayfield Baths. An aperture with an iron grate in the same wall at the foot of the steps at the shallow end had similarly formed part of the filtration system, marking the point where purified water was returned to the pool.

### Turkish Baths

There was a rapid rise in the popularity of Victorian Turkish baths following their introduction to England in 1857 at William Potter's premises in Manchester.<sup>53</sup> Patrons passed through progressively hotter rooms heated by dry air before receiving a massage and body wash and finally relaxing in a cooling-down room. In 1859, Potter bought a Georgian villa on Clifford Street in the Chorlton-upon-Medlock area of Manchester, and converted it for use as a Turkish baths that he ran in tandem with the private baths on

Broughton Street. His design drawing for Clifford Street featured an ornate Turkish-style room with a domed ceiling and the floor and walls decorated with tiles (Figure 20).<sup>54</sup> It is uncertain to what extent this matched the finished baths, although Potter claimed to have spent £2,000 on the building, while a correspondent for a local newspaper noted that it was 'fitted up with great elegance and comfort'. The baths were short-lived, however, and the building was absorbed into an expansion of the Manchester Southern Hospital for Women and Children in 1868.

The site of the Turkish baths was subject to excavation by Oxford Archaeology North in 2013, which uncovered five basement rooms (Figure 21). The largest of these formed the eastern part of the building but was devoid of any remnants of the baths. A small brick-floored room immediately to the west had been used for storing coal or coke required for the furnace that lay to the south. The ornamental tiled floor of the adjacent room to the west had been raised to enable an underfloor heating system to be installed, the remains of which were uncovered beneath the tiled floor in the adjacent room. The tiles were laid onto stone slabs which in turn were carried by cast-iron beams fixed into the top of a series of firebrick flues. Two additional



**Figure 15.** The façade of Leaf Street Baths in 1920 (© Manchester Archives and Local Studies).

sections of flue ran through the south-eastern wall, blocked by upright stone slabs, below the concrete floor of the adjacent room.<sup>55</sup>

#### ***Manchester Corporation's Baths and Wash-houses***

Despite the achievements of the Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company, the 1860s proved to be very difficult financially in consequence of the Lancashire Cotton Famine (1861–5) that brought incredible hardship to the working population of Manchester and Salford, coupled with an unusually cold winter in 1861, and an extraordinary rise in the cost of coal in 1866. Notwithstanding mounting losses, the Company remained

in business until 1877 when all their assets were purchased by Manchester Corporation for £19,000.<sup>56</sup> The Corporation's decision was influenced by the findings of the Manchester Baths and Wash-houses Committee of 1876, which reported that Birmingham, Sheffield and Liverpool were all planning to add to their existing baths as a matter of civic pride, despite the baths in all three cities incurring an annual loss.<sup>57</sup> During this same period, Salford Corporation appointed a Baths Committee to consider the prudence of erecting public baths. This Committee recommended the purchase of the Baths and Laundries Company's premises in Greengate for the sum of £6,000, but the Corporation rejected this counsel in 1877 in favour building four new establishments, authorising an expenditure of £20,000 for that purpose.<sup>58</sup>



**Figure 16.** The women's baths at Leaf Street in 1920 (© Manchester Archives and Local Studies).



**Figure 17.** Leaf Street Baths during excavation, showing the second-class pool in the foreground and the first-class pool to the rear (© University of Salford).

The transferral of the public baths and wash-houses from the private sector into municipal ownership attests to their continued popularity and importance, as bathing came to be recognised nationally as an integral part of public health. Shortly after taking over, however, the Manchester Baths and Wash-houses Committee decided to close down the public wash-houses at Mayfield and Leaf Street 'owing to lack of patronage and the abuse made of them by the professional washers'.<sup>59</sup> The Committee also found Mayfield Baths to be 'in a most unsatisfactory state', not least due to issues with the building's foundations that were exacerbated by severe floods of the River Medlock in 1857, 1866 and 1872.<sup>60</sup> It was reported in June 1879 that the two swimming pools had been re-laid with concrete and the sides reset with tiles, which was corroborated by the archaeological excavation in 2020. It was also reported that the Penny Baths on the opposite side of Boardman Street that had latterly been used exclusively by those who paid an annual subscription was being refurbished for use by the public.<sup>61</sup>

Several new public baths were established across Manchester and Salford by their respective corporations during the 1880s and 1890s, the first of which was New Islington Baths in Ancoats. This opened on 1 May 1880 and represented the first swimming baths built by Manchester Corporation, although it had been designed by John Johnson, a London-based architect who had submitted plans in response to an architectural competition launched in 1877 (Figure 22). His design allowed for the inclusion of two public meeting halls in addition to what had become the standard components of first- and second-class pools, male and female slipper baths, and a small wash-house and laundry. In 1902, Manchester Corporation converted the laundry into a modern public wash-house with washing stalls, hydro extractors, drying horses and mangles. It was the first of its kind in Manchester and its immediate popularity provided an incentive for other wash-houses to be built. In 1914, for instance, the Baths and Wash-house Committee proposed expending £1,620 to build a new wash-house at Leaf Street Baths.<sup>62</sup> By March 1934, Manchester Corporation operated 20 public wash-houses with a combined total of 458 washing stalls, 597 drying horses, 125 rotary washing machines, 68 steam and electrically driven mangles, 108 steam and electrically driven hydro extractors, ironing stoves, irons and all other essentials for washing.<sup>63</sup>

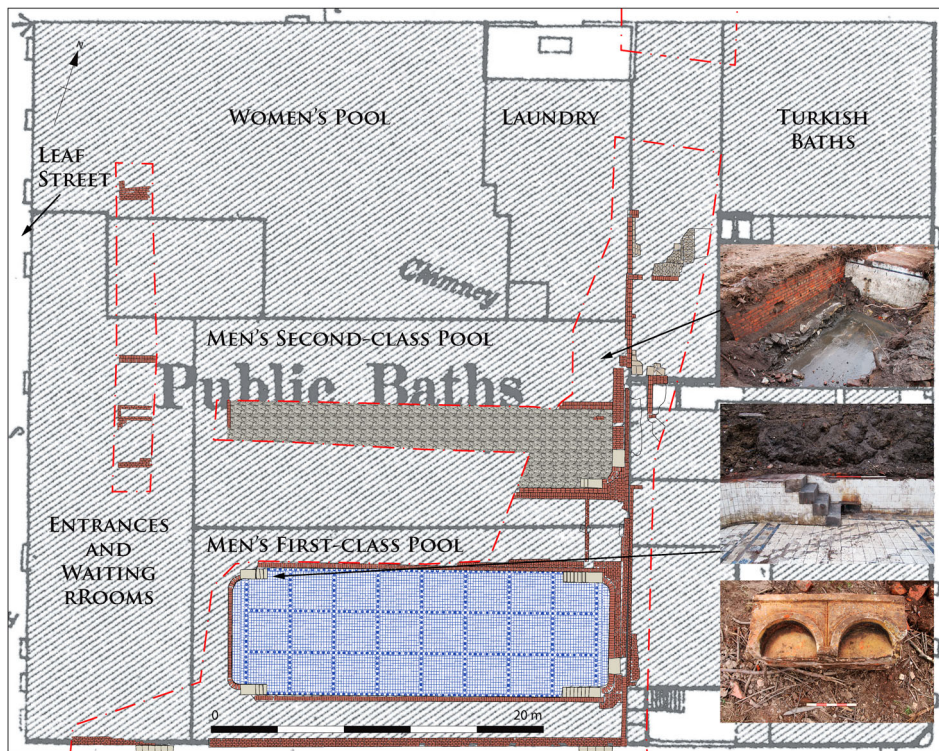
The first baths designed and delivered entirely by Manchester Corporation were opened on Osborne Street in 1883, and housed pools that were even larger than those in the city's earlier bath houses, reflecting an increased popularity and profitability of swimming pools relative to slipper baths. The first public baths to be established by Salford Corporation opened in June 1880, occupying a site at the corner of Richmond Street and Blackfriars Road, which was laid in the 1870s to replace Broughton Road as the main thoroughfare between Salford and Broughton. The baths proved popular immediately, with the first summer season attracting a total of 58,844 bathers.<sup>64</sup> Salford Corporation built another four public baths prior to the First World War but, in contrast to those in Manchester, all of these just housed swimming pools and slipper baths, and Salford's first public wash-house (excepting that at Greengate Baths, which closed in c. 1880) was not opened until 1928.<sup>65</sup>

In an attempt to improve the health of the community further, the Manchester Baths and Wash-houses Committee decided to provide space and facilities for physical exercise and, in 1891, established gymnasias in the women's swimming baths at Leaf Street and Mayfield. This pioneering attempt to introduce public gymnasias was short-lived due to a lack of patronage, but a purpose-built gymnasium that opened on Pryme Street in Hulme in January 1892 was well received by the local community.<sup>66</sup>

### Proctor's Gymnasium and Pryme Street Baths

Proctor's Gymnasium on Pryme Street was built on land occupied previously by a block of insanitary back-to-back dwellings known ironically as Paradise Court, which were cleared in 1891 and the site was passed to the Committee for Securing Open Spaces for Recreation. The construction work was funded by a £4,000 gift of the trustees of Daniel Proctor, formerly an active member of the Committee and ardent proponent of improving the conditions of life in some of the more congested quarters of Manchester. It was intended that the Committee retain control of the gymnasium for three years, after which it was to be handed over to the Parks Committee of Manchester Corporation, making it the first institution of its kind under municipal management. The accommodation consisted of a large room fitted with gymnasium





**Figure 18.** Plan of the excavated remains of Leaf Street Baths showing the key features, superimposed on the Ordnance Survey Town Plan of 1891 (© University of Salford).

apparatus, with a public gallery across one end that led to rooms for fencing and other exercises and a committee room. There were also slipper and shower baths, a reading room, dressing rooms and lavatories, with hot water supplied throughout.<sup>67</sup>

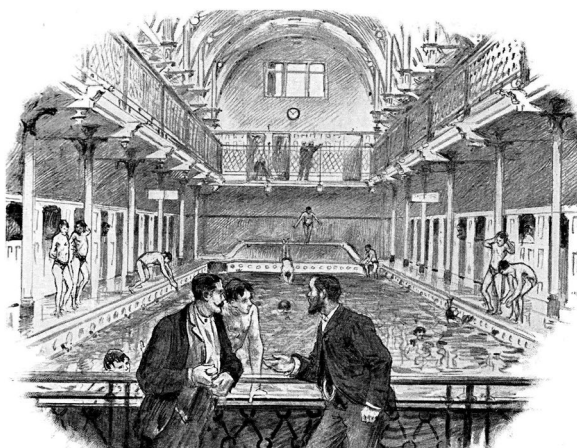
The gymnasium was essentially expanded in 1904, when Pryme Street Baths was built immediately to the south. Designed by W. and G. Higginbottom, this was the first 20th-century public baths and wash-house to be erected in Manchester and contained 12 men's slipper baths on the ground floor, together with a large wash-house with drying and ironing rooms. The first floor housed 12 women's baths and accommodation for the baths' superintendent and his family. A small single-storey wing at the north-eastern end of the building contained an engine house and a room for a single boiler. The baths and wash-house were fitted with the latest facilities and equipment, and proved to be one of the best patronised establishments under municipal control.<sup>68</sup> In contrast to the earlier baths, however, it did not have a swimming pool.

The site of Pryme Street Baths and Proctor's Gymnasium was subject to archaeological investigation in 2020. Initial trenching

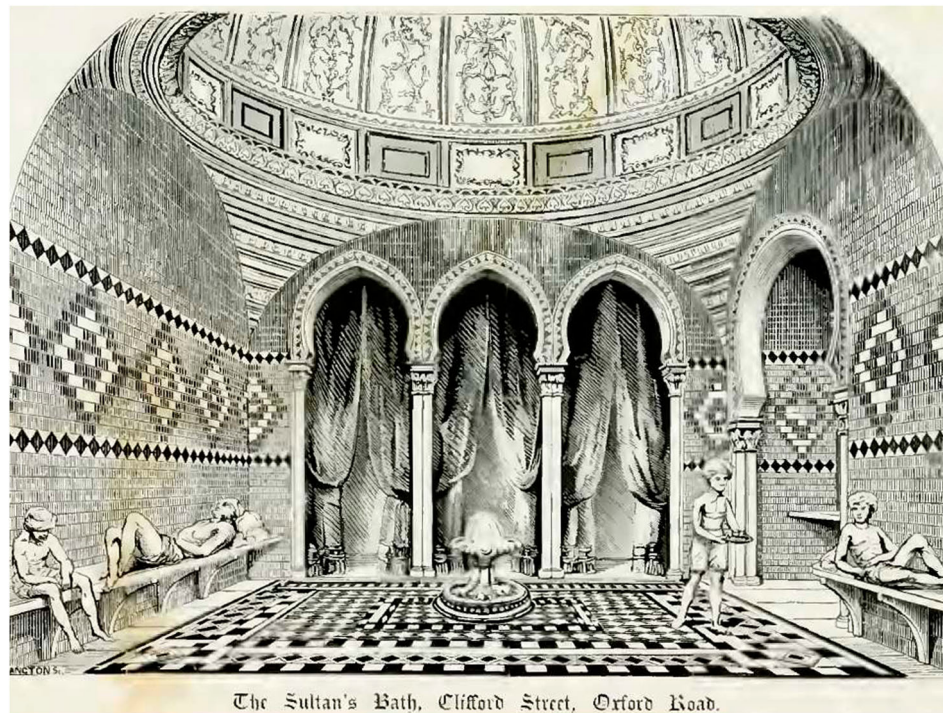
demonstrated that the foundations of the baths had been removed almost entirely during large-scale clearance of the area in the 1960s, leaving only part of the concrete floor and fragments of the drying room walls.

### The Political and Social Context of Manchester's Public Baths

The provision of public baths and wash-houses was an important measure undertaken by local government and social reformers in Victorian Britain with the intention of improving the physical, social and moral condition of the working population, but whether the motives of the philanthropists who set up the early baths and wash-houses in Manchester and Salford were driven by self-interest in ensuring that industrial progress was not hampered by poor health of the workforce or genuine Christian humanitarianism is a matter of debate. It has been suggested previously that public baths were 'designed to ensure that differentiation was built into the very fabric,



**Figure 19.** Leaf Street Baths drawn by H.E. Tidmarsh in 1880 (a), and the men's first-class pool from the same viewpoint in 2015 (b) (© University of Salford).



**Figure 20.** Design sketch of the Turkish Baths on Clifford Street (reproduced from Potter 1859).

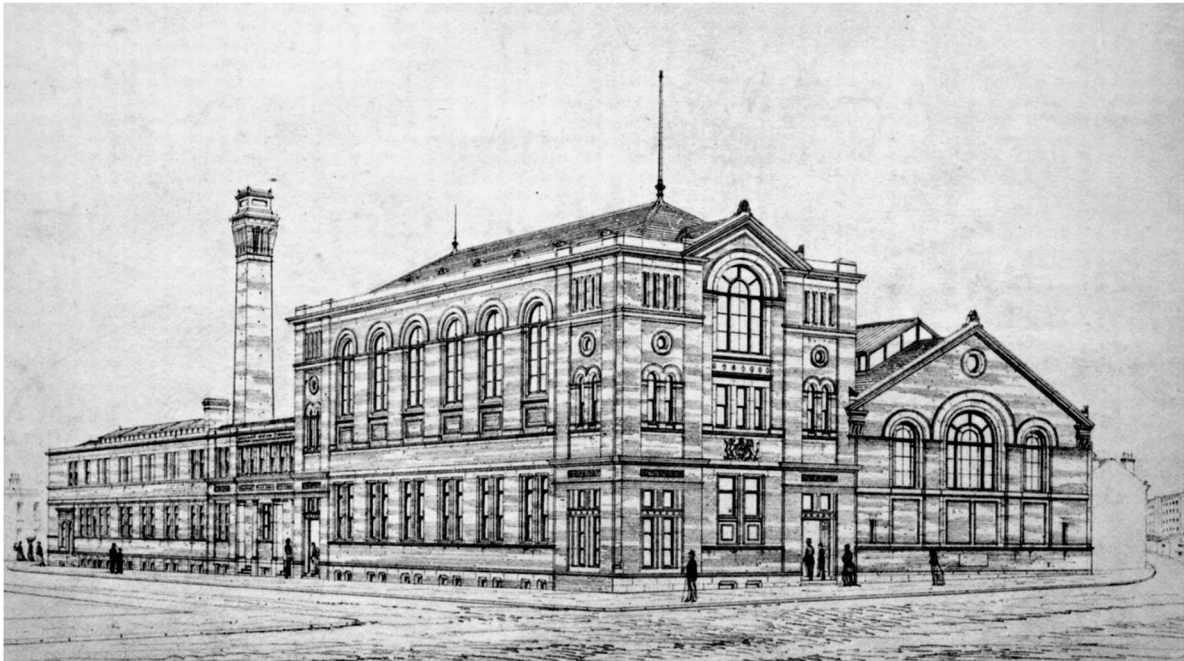
controlling individuals by the use of boundaries and so ensuring that class and gender differences were reinforced'.<sup>69</sup> In the case of the early examples in Manchester and Salford, however, the segregation between different classes of bathers was dictated largely by a need to generate an operating surplus from the first-class entrance fee that would enable the labouring classes to access vital bathing and washing facilities whilst still returning an attractive dividend to the shareholders. The successful management of the Miller Street Baths had proven the financial viability of this model, stimulating the formation of the Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company in 1855 and the provision of these social welfare facilities through private enterprise

as opposed to the municipal intervention seen elsewhere in the country.

Public baths and wash-houses were the first civil engineering projects in 19th-century industrial towns that were implemented explicitly for the poor, and brought the first significant improvement to the health of the labouring classes. In the pursuit of civic pride and competitive municipal status, some local authorities in Britain responded vigorously to the opportunity to provide public baths in the wake of the Public Baths and Wash-houses Acts of 1846 and 1847, such as Birmingham with its three baths by 1852. Others were reluctant to make the financial commitment and responded half-heartedly, a criticism that has



**Figure 21.** The excavated remains of the Clifford Street Turkish Baths (© The Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service).



**Figure 22.** Architect's sketch of New Islington Baths and public halls (© Manchester Archives and Local Studies).

been levied at Manchester Corporation for lagging behind its regional neighbours by not taking direct control of public baths and wash-houses until 1877. An element of the business classes in Manchester and Salford will typically have afforded some obstruction to intervention from the local authority initially, voicing resentment at administrative meddling with the market's abilities to address social problems through private enterprise. This apparent municipal inertia, however, needs to be set against other major civil engineering schemes that the Corporation was committed to delivering during this period, including gas supply, roads and sewage, and particularly the provision of a water supply.

In 1846, when the town's first public baths and wash-house was opened by private enterprise on Miller Street, it was reported that 76.8% of Manchester households lacked an internal water supply,

and 79.4% of all enterprises and 'public institutions' had no connections to the mains.<sup>70</sup> In the same year Manchester Corporation promoted a Bill to acquire the works of the Manchester & Salford Waterworks Company, a private enterprise that has been described as being 'outstandingly incompetent', and develop an ambitious scheme to supply water under municipal control.<sup>71</sup> This centred on the construction of a series of reservoirs in the Longendale Valley in Derbyshire with a total capacity of 4,200 million gallons of water that, once completed in 1877, was hailed as the largest chain of reservoirs to be constructed in the world.<sup>72</sup> Securing an ample water supply in 1877 enabled Manchester Corporation to be confident that new public baths could be furnished with clean water. The water in all of the public baths in Manchester and Salford was heated by steam raised in coal-fired boilers. The only exception was Moss Side Baths of 1906,



**Figure 23.** Harpurhey Baths in 2004 prior to redevelopment as part of the North Manchester Sixth Form College (© The Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service).

which was supplied with steam initially from the adjacent refuse destructor, although this experiment proved unsuccessful and a Lancashire boiler was soon installed.<sup>73</sup>

After the bath houses were acquired by Manchester Corporation in 1877, there remained a collective sense of civic pride in these institutions that was reflected in the significant investment and sustained improvement of the facilities during the subsequent decades. This was achieved through pioneering new and innovative technologies in water management and hygiene, paving the way for modern bathing and leisure swimming pools. The design and purpose of public baths evolved during the late 19th century as their prime role was transmuted from cleanliness to physical training and exercise. Galas and sporting events were held in baths across the city, including at Mayfield and Leaf Street, which helped to embody the institutions with a sense of community and for many provided an affordable and accessible means of entertainment. The opening of the new public baths on Blackfriars Road in Salford in June 1880 was celebrated by holding a swimming gala where, according to a report in the local newspaper, 'great stalwart men, in an almost complete state of nudity were paraded before a mixed company of ladies, gentlemen and children with a shameless affrontery'.<sup>74</sup>

The wider availability of baths and their subsequent use set in motion a series of changes that saw swimming expand to become a national and a respectable pastime that transcended class and social barriers. Manchester boasted two professional champion swimmers by the 1870s, rivalling London and the rest of Britain.<sup>75</sup> Central of these embryonic changes that began in the 1850s was the world-renowned scientific swimmer, George Poulton. His spectacular athletic and aquatic feats made him famous nationwide, and he used this renown as a platform to promote swimming and public health to the masses, performing at both Mayfield and Leaf Street Baths. Similarly, in 1881, Matthew Webb, the first person to swim the English Channel, gave a series of promotional performances at Mayfield, Leaf Street and the newly opened New Islington baths.

The annual number of customers to public baths and wash-houses in Manchester alone by 1904–5 was in excess of one million. Baths and wash-houses continued to be built across the city well into the 20th century, fulfilling a vital service for many who resided in sub-standard housing. Almost as important as the facilities themselves were the aesthetics of the buildings, and especially those erected before the early 20th century, with great attention paid to the architectural details that went well beyond purely functional design. Many were landmark buildings in the local townscape, symbolising civic pride in the industrial city, whilst details such as the choice of tiles that adorned the first-class plunge pools at Mayfield and Leaf Street Baths provided a reminder of the wealth and prowess of Manchester. These patterned Minton Hollins & Co. tiles featured three stylised floral motifs, reminiscent of the cotton flower floor mosaics embellishing the magnificent Manchester Town Hall that opened in 1877. Given the municipal acquisition of the public baths operated by the Manchester and Salford Baths and Laundries Company in the same year, it is not a far stretch of the imagination to suggest they drew inspiration from Alfred Waterhouse's showpiece of public architecture.

The baths were also a social hub in other respects, and several were designed to meet the diverse needs of local communities. In 1908, for instance, 'it was with no little joy that some saints and friends of the Manchester branch [of the Baptist church] gathered at the Leaf Street Baths and witnessed the baptism of seven converts by Elder David H. Clayton'.<sup>76</sup> Cheetham Hill Baths in Manchester incorporated 'a well-arranged hall, suitable for public gatherings, concerts and the like' when it opened in 1894, following the earlier example of public halls being included at New Islington Baths in 1880.<sup>77</sup> A variation trialled at Victoria Baths in 1922 involved covering the large gala swimming pool with wooden flooring in the winter months and converting it into a

public hall for concerts, meetings and other public events. This proved to be highly successful and was well patronised until the outbreak of war in 1939.<sup>78</sup>

## Legacy

Britain has a stock of historic public baths unrivalled by any other nation, and these monumental buildings form an intrinsic part of our national heritage; a study carried out in 2008 identified a total of 288 surviving public baths with a swimming pool built before 1945, of which half remained in use.<sup>79</sup> These historic buildings face perpetual attrition, however, and the number of surviving public baths continues to dwindle.

All of the early public baths in Manchester have been demolished and their sites redeveloped. The bath and wash-house on Miller Street was repurposed as a warehouse in the late 19th century, which was cleared in the wake of aerial bombing in 1940. The Mayfield Baths was similarly damaged during an air raid in 1941, which led to their closure and then demolition in the 1950s. Leaf Street Baths was also damaged by wartime bombing raids, although it was reopened after major remodelling. This period saw the clearance of large tracts of houses in the area, however, leading to a reduction in the local population and numbers that patronised the baths. This was compounded by the introduction of bathing facilities in the home, and the opening of specially designed pool complexes that contained more facilities, such as the Moss Side Leisure Centre, which ultimately led to the closure and demolition of Leaf Street Baths in 1976 in the face of rising repair costs at a time of sustained national economic stagnation. The Blackfriars Road Baths, dating to 1880 and the first public baths to be established by Salford Corporation, was also demolished during the 1970s. The site of this bath house was subject to archaeological investigation in 2019, and whilst the excavation was curtailed by the discovery of asbestos-containing materials, the northern wall of a swimming pool and elements of a boiler house and its associated flue were identified.<sup>80</sup> The Whitworth Baths built in 1890 in the Openshaw area of Manchester was demolished as recently as 2017, together with the Grade II listed baths and laundry of 1911 on Grant Street in Miles Platting.

Just four of the 28 public baths built in Manchester and Salford between 1846 and 1914 survive, together with a private baths on Blackfriars Road in Salford that opened in 1885, although these baths adjoined the distinguished Manchester Tennis and Racquet Club and access was not available to the urban poor. Three of the surviving public baths are Edwardian, and most notably include the Grade II\* listed Victoria Baths (1906) on the south-eastern fringe of Manchester city centre, which benefited from a multimillion-pound restoration project that began in 2007. Withington Baths (1913), also situated on the southern fringe of the city centre, famously hosted the first ever mixed bathing in Manchester in 1914 and is still used for swimming. These baths were actually closed by Manchester City Council in 2015, but were reopened by a charity formed of local residents who took the premises on a 30-year lease. Elements of the Grade II-listed Harpurhey Baths and Wash-house (1910) on the northern edge of the city centre also remain intact, although the premises closed in 2001 and the building repurposed to form part of the North Manchester Sixth Form College. The surviving components include the entrance block, the first- and second-class male swimming pools and the chimney, whilst the female swimming pools, boiler house and wash-house were demolished, although all the buildings were surveyed in 2004 prior to redevelopment (Figure 23).

Perhaps the 'jewel in the crown', however, is the Greengate Baths in Salford, the oldest surviving public baths in Britain and the sole remaining example of the earliest generation of public baths. The architectural and historical significance of the former

baths is reflected in its designation as a Grade II\* building, although it has been unoccupied since 1990 and on Historic England's 'Heritage At Risk Register' since 1998.<sup>81</sup> However, several options for the repair and refurbishment of the baths are currently being explored by Renaker Build Ltd, working in partnership with Salford City Council as part of a major regeneration scheme in the heart of the city, with a view to returning this important building to a new and sustainable long-term use.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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