

TALES OF THE RIVERMAN

112 Teach him to swim.



Greenhead Public Baths and Wash-house in William Street (later Templeton Street) in the early 20th century.

Unlike the wonderful continental resorts where Glaswegians enjoy their holidays, there aren't outdoor swimming pools in our immediate area. Things might have been different had ambitious plans for Glasgow Green (our largest park) gone ahead. Back in 1939, work to construct a pool between the People's Palace and Nelsons column began, to provide the city with its very own lido. Unfortunately, due to World War Two, a decision was made to cancel the swimming pool plans and the area was backfilled in the 1960's.

During the early 1800's people washed themselves and their clothes in the river. They swam in the river, they drowned in the river, by the dozen. Glasgow Humane Society was at the forefront of the public demands for proper swimming pools to be built to stop these deaths. This resulted in the building of the Greenhead baths, opened in 1878. The building had a large swimming pool (75 x 40 ft) and a small one (40 x 20 ft). The building remained in use until 1960.

On May 24th, 1869, at a meeting of the Police Board, an instruction was given to the Sanitary Committee to provide four Public Baths and Wash-houses all in terms of the Glasgow Police Act, 1866, clause 387."

In 1875 a Special Committee on Baths and Wash-houses was set up.

Many swimming pools and baths were opened under the direct management of this Police Board, and the School Board of Govan who, at this time also covered the area of Partick. There were pools in London Road; Kennedy Street; Greenhead; North Woodside; Cranstonhill; Townhead; Gorbals; Hutchesontown; Springburn; Maryhill; Whitevale; Dalrnarnock; Kinning Park; Parkhead; Church St; Balshagray; Lorne St; Bellahouston and others. Private swimming pools were also available. Arlington, Dennistoun and Western.

Glasgow Council organised Community Swimming Clubs, free swimming for pensioners and others, free summer swimming for children. I am unsure of how much of this still exists, but everything should be done to encourage safe swimming.

Let me tell you an interesting story involving swimming.



Bennie Parsonage rushed upriver when he heard that a child had fallen into the water off the banking. Fortunately, a passing man, who was unemployed, and having an afternoon walk, jumped in after the child and managed to bring the youngster to the banking and lift the child out. Bennie had only to see that the man and the child were none the worse of their dip and left a Policeman, who had been summoned by the public, making notes, arranging dry clothes and parental attendance. The Police Officer and Bennie were later discussing how really brave the man had been, as they had discovered that although the man was a non-swimmer, he had not hesitated to jump into the river after the child and bring him to the bank by means of a “doggy paddle”. A magnificent rescue. It was decided that Bennie would ask his friends in the Corporation (Town Council) to find employment for this brave man. Arrangements completed, the rescuer as instructed, reported to the Greenhead swimming pool to work. The Boss of the pool phoned Bennie and asked “What’s this all about Bennie, sending me a man that cannot swim?” Bennies reply was “The man deserves a job because of his bravery, He was exceptionally brave because he could not swim. He is a good man. so, teach him to swim” (which they did). Never judge a book by its cover.



In my young days teaching swimming and lifesaving at a Council pool.

© Parsonage George