

ARLINGTON BATHS CLUB



HEALTH

HISTORY

HERITAGE

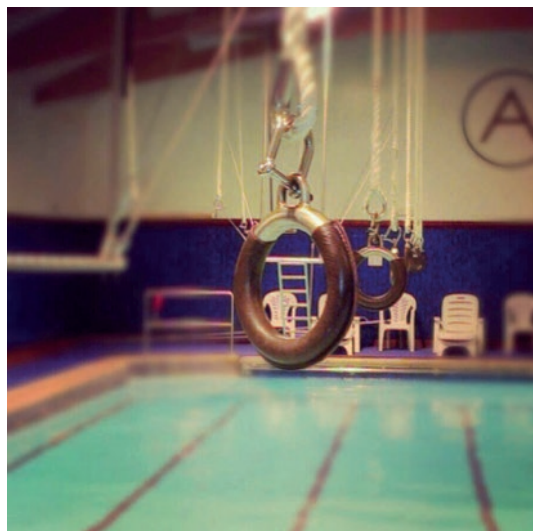


WELCOME TO THE ARLINGTON BATHS CLUB!

The Arlington Baths is an historic Victorian bathing complex, owned and run by members for members on a not-for-profit basis.

Founded in 1870, this community club is the oldest of its kind in the world. Our 'A' listed building is home to a community with rich memories.

Many members joined as children to swim with their parents; they're now bringing their own children to the Baths. From learning to swim, to swinging across the pool on the rings, to relaxing in the warmth under the star-studded dome of the Turkish Room, the Arlington Baths is a special place with a colourful history and strong sense of community and heritage.



WHERE DOES THE STORY OF THE BATHS BEGIN?

Today we see the West End as an historic part of Glasgow. But at the time that the Arlington Baths was built the area was a smart modern suburb for middle class families escaping the crowded and dirty city centre.

The Botanic Gardens arrived in 1841, construction started on the Park district in the 1830s and Kelvingrove Park (then West End Park) was laid out in 1852 though Kelvingrove Museum wasn't there until almost 50 years later. Glasgow University moved into the new Gilbert Scott building on the hill in 1870 and by 1873 local residents could also see the Kibble Palace glasshouse. But the area was still developing; in between the elegant villas, parks and grand terraces there were still open fields and gap sites.

When the Arlington Baths opened its doors on 1 August 1871, there were no public swimming pools in Glasgow. Though the creation of the Loch Katrine reservoir and aqueduct in 1859 meant that the city had a plentiful supply of clean water for the first time, it wasn't until the late 1870s that Glasgow had any public swimming pools. So the Arlington offered its members a very new and special experience.

The earliest part of the Arlington Baths was a single-storey building by architect John Burnet senior, who also designed the original Western Infirmary and the John McIntyre building on University Avenue, among many other buildings in Glasgow.

RUN BY MEMBERS FOR MEMBERS

The Arlington Baths is a not-for-profit organisation run by a board with a chair and secretary - elected by the members. Originally the Arlington Baths Club paid rent to the Glasgow Swimming Bath Company, a separate organisation which had financed the construction of the Baths and owned the building.

In 1895 they agreed to merge the management under a joint committee. In 1924 the Baths Club bought the building and the Glasgow Swimming Bath Company was dissolved.

The style is restrained and modest Classicism. Burnet's design features variations on the idea of subdivision by twos and threes. It had two pavilions, one at each end of the building, with arched windows arranged in groups of threes. Later extensions continued the style and the three arches motif can be seen at several places around the building, notably at what is now the front entrance.

The bathers - all men on that opening day - would walk in through the front door in the centre of the building and were almost immediately in the pool hall. On either side of the entrance there was a changing room and a small reading room - for relaxing, reading the newspapers and having a smoke.

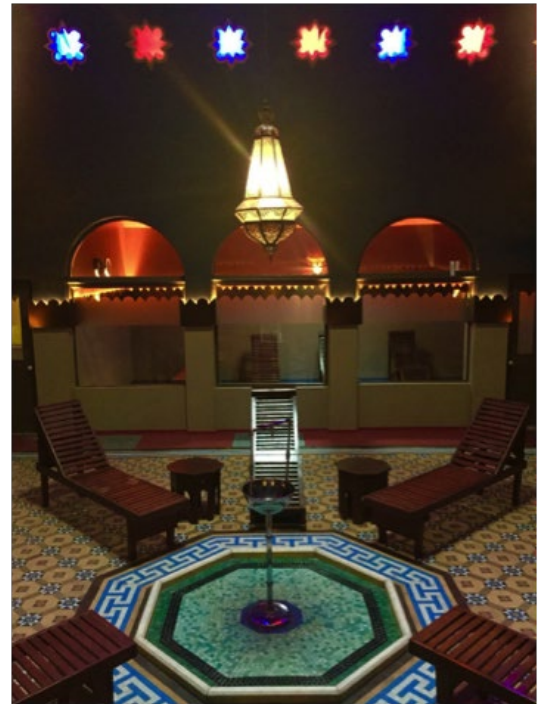
Since then the building has undergone many additions and changes. And the area around it has changed too. At that time Arlington Street ran through to Great Western Road; the tenements that now cut off the street weren't constructed until 15 years later. Perhaps the greatest change of all has been the motorway sweeping its way through Charing Cross in the late 1960s.

THE TURKISH SUITE

The highlight of the Arlington Baths is the Turkish Suite; a glorious Glaswegian homage to the Moorish architecture of the Alhambra in Spain.

It's a beautiful big square room, with a bee-hive dome, painted a rich blue and studded with a pattern of coloured glass stars.

It seems there was a small Turkish bath in the basement almost from when the building opened, but the new Turkish Room was opened in 1876 along with the cool room, washing and shampooing rooms with masseurs on hand, which were all part of the Turkish Bath experience. There was a plunge pool where you could swim under a plate glass wall straight into the swimming pool. We got electricity in 1902, and in 1920 the terrazzo was laid around the swimming pool.



WHAT IS A TRADITIONAL TURKISH BATH?

In a traditional Turkish Bath you would gradually move through progressively warmer rooms until you reached the hottest room of all. After soaking up the heat you plunged into a cold pool, progress to the shampooing room - 'shampooing' meant getting a massage - and then sit for a while in the cool room to relax.

They became popular in Britain in the 1860s thanks to Scot David Urquhart, an eccentric advocate of all things Turkish, who encouraged groups in many towns across Great Britain to set up private Turkish baths.

The Turkish Bath is a dry heat, unlike an Islamic hammam or a Russian banya which are steamy. It's believed that you get the most benefit by allowing the skin to sweat freely, so Victorian bathers wrapped a cotton sheet around their naked bodies. It's a practice we still adhere to in the Arlington; each member is handed a fresh towel and wrapping sheet as they arrive.

WHO CAME TO THE ARLINGTON BATHS?

In 1871 there were 500 members; now we have more than 1,000 and growing.

Today anyone can join but in the early days it was more limited. You had to be nominated and seconded by two existing members so it really depended on who you knew.

Our records show that in 1896 – when this photo was taken – the members included accountants, clerks, businessmen, shop owners, lawyers and doctors.

There were architects, engineers, shipbuilders and naval architects and an electrician with the Glasgow District Subway. Journalists, artists, clergymen, teachers and university professors and students were also members.



In 1872 women could join the Baths. Fifty ladies took the plunge in that first year but within a few years there were more than 170 women members. They formed their own section but had no formal role in running the Arlington Baths.

The Baths was becoming a family institution, with husbands, wives and their children all becoming members. But, unlike today, they couldn't swim together. Women and girls had access on Monday and Thursdays from 11am to 2pm, later also on Saturday mornings and finally, by 1919, they could swim until 9pm on Thursdays.

The 1872 subscription fee for women of 20 shillings per annum included swimming lessons, for many women would not have had the opportunity to learn to swim. They were taught by club master William Wilson who was a strong advocate of women being able to swim.

"Of a truth, swimming should form part of the education of every boy and girl, not only as a healthy and lively accomplishment, but also from motives of prudence and safety. Why should the women of this country not enjoy the privilege of indulging in such an exercise, and thus be in the possession of that which would enable them more practically, to understand the first law of nature, self preservation and know how to save their own lives in cases of accidental immersion?"

'SWIMMING, DIVING AND HOW TO SAVE LIFE' BY WILLIAM WILSON, 1876

By 1875 the ladies had their first swimming competition though the programme for the event stressed that prizes were to be *"to be decided for Graceful Performance. Little importance will be attached to speed."* That didn't last long! By the following year the event included "fast swimming" of one, two and three lengths. From then on the ladies competitions included races. In 1910 ten of the ladies passed the tests for the Bronze Medalion in lifesaving.

Despite being keen swimmers and users of the Baths it wasn't until the 1970s that women were formally involved in running the Baths. Journalist Sheila Reid became secretary of the Ladies Committee in the early 1950s. More than 25 years later, the May 1978 newsletter announced her retirement from the Ladies Committee and also from the Baths Management Committee. She was the first woman to be appointed to what the newsletter describes as *"the newly constructed Management Committee of 1972."* The first female chair of the Arlington Baths was Elaine Bankier in 1995.



WHAT DID THE SWIMMERS WEAR?

Regulation costumes used to be insisted upon! We don't all have to wear standard costumes nowadays but one of the charms of the Arlington is that you can leave your bathing suit after your swim, it's then laundered and hung on your own numbered peg, ready for your next visit. Lots of our older members remember having to wear red knitted trunks, with laces up the sides, while women had red knitted costumes. One member has told us that when he joined as a boy in the late 1960s he had to wear *"loose fitting comical blue trunks which were made from a material similar to denim. When they were dry you could balance them upright on the end of your finger, but as soon as they became wet, the crotch sagged half way to your knees. They didn't do much to preserve your modesty!"* Going further back, a news report from the 1875 ladies' gala said, *"The lady swimmers are simply dressed in dark and light blue flannel bathing costumes, the wide knickerbocker reaching below the knee, the arms of course bare, the hair simply arranged without any padding."* Quite how 'graceful swimming' was achieved in such costumes can only be imagined!

In 1909 the Ladies Committee decided bathing costumes *"... shall be of Turkey red twill, and of patterns approved by the committee..."* In late 1922 it agreed to a request that *"stockinette bathing suits should be adopted by the ladies, especially those who compete in the competitions."*

CLUB MASTERS, PANTS BOYS AND MAIDS

People working at the Baths today include a general manager and our lifeguards, some of whom are also qualified personal trainers.

In the past, the staff roles in the Baths included the clubmaster, shampooers (masseurs), maids and the pants boy. The 'pants' were the men's swimming trunks! The Ladies section had their own female shampooers and maids. Our first clubmaster was William Wilson, who was well-known at the time for his journalism and books on 'natation' or the art of swimming. He was an innovator in swimming and racing techniques. When at the Baths he apparently experimented with ideas for a team water ball game, and in 1877 he drew up a set of rules for what he called "aquatic football". In 1885, the Swimming Association of Great Britain officially recognised the game and formalised the rules made by Wilson, which formed the basis of the international sport of water polo.

He was succeeded by Mr Robertson in 1876, who was noted for having saved many people from drowning.



SOME OF THE STAFF IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY ON THE STEPS OF THE BATHS.

One of them may be Sarah Johnstone, a qualified shampooer, who, on leaving for Canada in 1907, received a small testimonial from the lady members in recognition of her services.

The War Memorial in the reading room lists the names of 71 members who died fighting in the First World War and 39 men who were killed in the Second World War.

The memorial was unveiled and dedicated in April 1922, "when there was a large attendance of Members and of Relatives and friends of the deceased." and the Second World War section was dedicated in October 1951.



We have much to learn about these individuals but we can put a face to one of the names of the fallen of the First World War: Thomas Gentles was a member of the water polo team and is in the team photos which still hang in the Baths.

Some women members also volunteered to serve. In November 1914 Miss Ethel Perry and Miss Margaret Hutchison were choosing prizes for the ladies annual competition. A month later they were in Serbia, working as orderlies with Scottish Women's Hospital, a voluntary medical organisation led by Dr Elsie Inglis from Edinburgh and supported by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

During the First World War, the subscriptions of the men in the forces were suspended, and from 1916 nurses could join at a reduced rate.

FASCINATING HERITAGE, EXCITING FUTURE

At the 50th anniversary of the Arlington Baths in 1920, Club Chairman W Boyd Anderson said, "The Arlington was the first Club of its kind in the kingdom... Its success led to the establishment of similar Clubs in Glasgow and elsewhere, all of them, taking the Arlington as their pattern... the Arlington may truly have said to be the mother of them all."

We've now enjoyed almost 150 years of new buildings, changing costumes and glamorous galas, and survived though wars, financial crises and the changing city.

We'll be diving in for many more years to come!

Join us at www.arlingtonbaths.co.uk

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Picture credits: Images of the Baths by Vicky Lee-Middleton of I Love Ruby photos. www.iloverubyphotos.com



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