

Ongoing tribute to an essential part of the community

Eugene Byrne, our man in the shallow end, dips his toe into a new book about the history of swimming in the Bristol area.

LEARNING to swim (successfully or not) and swimming for fun and/or exercise is part of almost all our lives ... Lessons at school or being taught by parents, endless summer days spent at the local pool or lido, or on the beach, or, in more recent times, listening to people boasting about all the delightful spots where they've gone "wild swimming."

Whether you take to the water like a fish, or more like a cat, swimming flows through the story of all our lives, and yet it's not something that most of us would even think has a "history" to it. But it does, as Stephen E. Hunt demonstrates admirably in his latest "verruca and all" book *City of Swimmers: A radical history of Bristol's pools, lidos and wild swimming*.

Though it's about Bristol, it also takes in some surrounding towns, because no serious swimmer could ignore the likes of Portishead Lido, Clevedon's Marine Lake or the legendary Blue Lagoon at Severn Beach. *City of Swimmers* is partly a serious history of swimming facilities in Bristol and surrounding areas, from Rennison's Baths in Montpelier and on through the growing demand for public baths in Victorian times and on into a great phase of building between the wars, when the council's strategy was to ensure that no home in Bristol was more than a mile from a pool.

Then there was the later post-war period of pool openings in the 1960s and 70s, which ran in parallel with the construction of new estates of council housing. By then, pools, along with parks and libraries, were seen as an essential part of any community. Stephen Hunt takes us up to date with pool closures, campaigns, sometimes successful, sometimes not, to save some, and on to growing demands for the right to swim in the former City Docks. His work on the book revealed just how rich Bristol's swimming history is.

"I was ... struck by the particular connections between swimming and Bristol's identity as a maritime city, tucked in at the Atlantic edge," he told BT. "We have a rich heritage of swimming provision and in the 1930s references to a 'City of swimmers' appear in local newspapers - hence the book's title. The interwar aspiration that everyone should have access to a nearby swimming facility was reflected in the Bristol Baths Committee's motto 'every Bristolian a swimmer'." Along the way, longtime Bristolians will find a fair bit of nostalgia, and some diverting stories, such as all the moral panics over men and women swimming in the same spaces back in more prudish times. The book also includes a list of 50 different pools which existed at one time or another in the area, along with a potted history of each. "Community historians have done some great research on several of the older pools, but more recent pools that many of us swam in, such as those constructed around the 1970s 'Sport for All' era have been largely ignored to date," he says. "I was intrigued to find that original old slipper baths survive intact behind the scenes at Bristol South Baths in Dean Lane - alas, but understandably out of bounds due



Ladies and a water chute at a Weston-super-Mare pool (Knightstone?), early 20th century. The early history of public pools was full of moral panics about "mixed bathing" and immodest ladies' swimming costumes

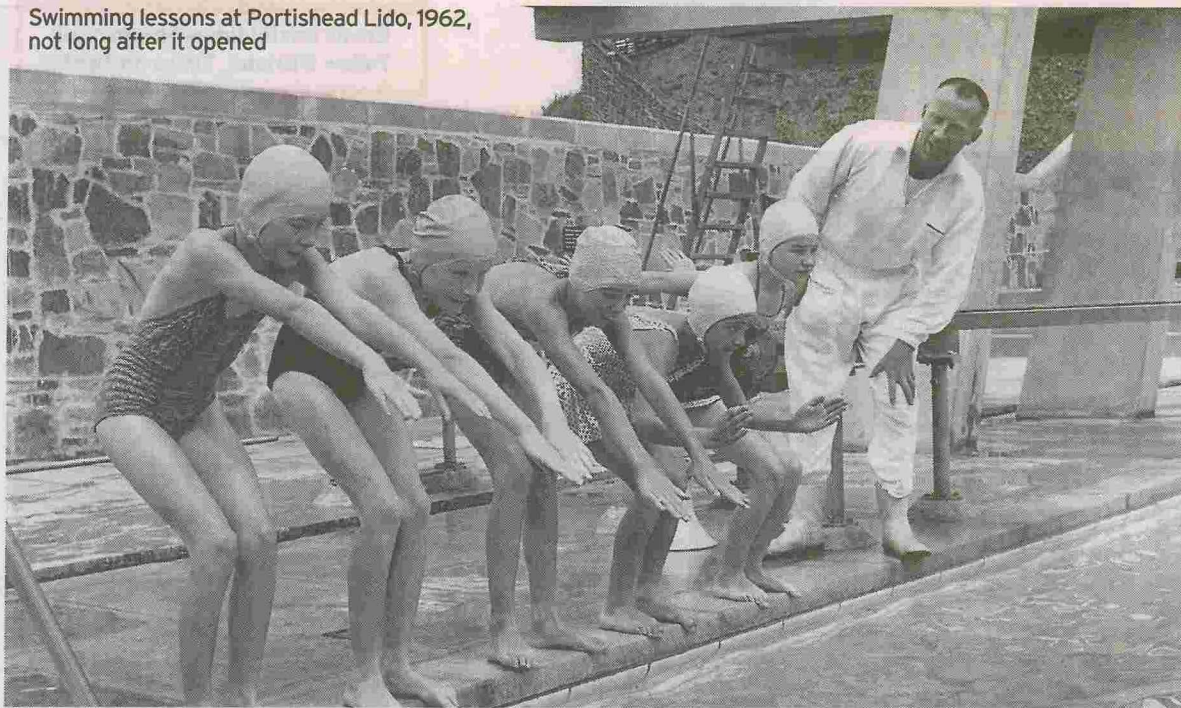
to concerns about asbestos in that space. Another pleasing and unexpected discovery was the appearance of swimming baths on a trade union banner from the 1920s in the City Museum's collection." Because yes, it turns out that the labour movement thought that facilities for swimming (and for just washing in what were called "slipper baths", or what we now just call "baths") were essential. A letter published in 1871, *The Cry of the Poor, Being a Letter from Sixteen Working Men of various trades, to the Sixteen Aldermen of*

Bristol set out a list of things which would improve the lives of Bristol's working classes - parks, clean air, libraries, an end to bridge tolls, and bathing places. In the 1880s, at least one socialist political candidate, was calling for "more free places for bathing". (Along the way, Hunt notes the close relationship between Victorian and Edwardian swimming pools and the public washhouses that were often attached. The repeal of a tax on soap in the 1850s not only boosted Bristol's huge, but now mostly forgotten, soap indus-



Author Stephen Hunt, pictured in 1969 STEPHEN HUNT

Swimming lessons at Portishead Lido, 1962, not long after it opened



try, but probably also persuaded Britons to wash themselves more often. Certainly middle-class dogooders and the medical profession were trying to persuade the working classes to wash themselves, while the working classes, not unreasonably, requested baths in which to do so.) In due course, these demands would be met, though in more recent times, "austerity" has threatened many of the gains. It's a long story in which Hunt found plenty of hero(in)es:

"I 'met' with many fantastic historical characters during my research. Thomas Rennison, the maverick creator of the earliest baths at Montpelier in the eighteenth century, sounds like he would have been a fascinating person with whom to share an ale. "There are the equally memorable sisters, Agnes and Edith Beckwith, talented swimmers who entertained with performances in tanks in the People's Palace Theatre in Baldwin Street during the late Victorian period." "In the early twentieth century, the champion front crawlers of Barton Hill swimming club were impressive. Local Conservative politician, Colonel Woodcock, who

served on the Bristol Baths Committee, mostly as Chair, for more than two decades from 1911 to 1937, is a perhaps unexpected hero for me, as a tireless promoter of public swimming facilities, especially for the city's children. "Above all, tribute must be made to local architect C.F.W. Denning, who designed all five of the swimming baths constructed during the interwar period. At the time these were considered the most innovative in the country.

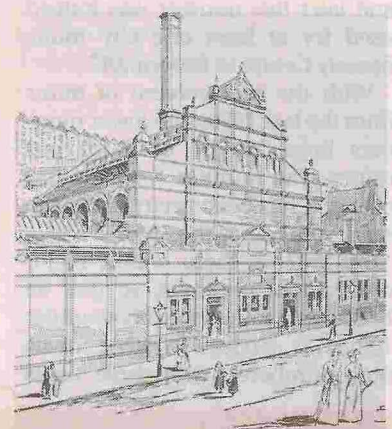
"In the present day, the intrepid Conham Bathing Group are heroically campaigning for a clean-up of the River Avon." Steve Hunt is a keen swimmer himself, but he also sees the book as a continuation of other work, such as his Bristol Radical History Group publication *Yesterday's To-Morrow: Bristol's Garden Suburbs*. (See <https://tinyurl.com/532y8u76>) "The garden cities movement promoted social wellbeing through a cooperative vision of integrated community resources and services. We are seeing that policies based on competition that have prevailed since the beginning of the 1980s ... have widely failed to deliver on promises of choice,

quality, and plenty for most people. "Disappointing numbers of primary schoolchildren are unable to swim, for example, due to reduced access to swimming facilities and opportunities to learn. "I make the case, and point to evidence that, there are economic benefits from pooling our resources to provide preventative public health measures such as swimming pools. Calculating income from admission tickets as against the cost of maintaining swimming pools fails to quantify the wider economic benefits of a healthier population across generations. Swimming pools and other public facilities for physical recreation are an unofficial wing of the NHS!" His own favourite swimming places?

"I mostly alternate between Bristol South in Bedminster which is a bit like an aquatic chapel, and the 1930s Jubilee Pool in Knowle. "During my research, I undertook many pilgrimages by bike or bus to local swimming spots, of which the wonderful lidos at Portishead and Street (the Greenbank Pool), and the marine lake or "infinity pool" at Clevedon are particularly impressive and enjoyable." Yes, he says, people should be swimming in Bristol's harbour as long as they're safely marked off from moving harbour traffic and other hazards, and of course "the cleanliness of local waters due to the sewage crisis is a concern that I

Eight lengths

- A FEW things that *City of Swimmers* tells us about some local swimming places:
- » Filton Sports & Leisure Centre, with its Dolphin Swimming Pool, used to have a bar. As the centre was run by the local council it was called the Ratepayers Arms. Sadly, it's now just a café.
- » Fishponds Lido, in use from the 1930s or sooner, and closed in the 1970s, was hugely popular with locals and had a small sandy beach and two floating pubs, the Golden Hind and the Spyglass. One user recalled that "Apparently it is bottomless and full of electric eels, oh and also I was told it was haunted by a headless horse pulling an old fashioned carriage."
- » The pool at Backwell Leisure Centre has been used in recent times as a venue for people who want to swim with mermaid tails.
- » Bristol South Baths hosted dolphin displays in the 1970s. The pool would be drained and salt water pumped in. The dolphins would jump through hoops for pilchards.
- » Henleaze Lake was bought by Henleaze Swimming Club from its owner in 1933, though they had been using it for some years before this. It was visited by Hollywood star Johnny Weissmuller, who played Tarzan, while Dave Prowse (Darth Vader in the early *Star Wars* films, worked there in the 1960s. It's had two books written about it.
- » Jacob's Wells Baths were built in the 1880s at the then-huge cost of £10,000. It would have been even more grand but the ratepayers revolted, holding what historian John Latimer called an "indignation meeting". Playwright and author ACH Smith visited to use the slipper baths in the 1960s, later recalling: "The public was not considered responsible enough to run its own water. You shouted out: 'More hot in Number Four!' Footsteps, and an unseen hand outside turned a tap, gushing the ordered water through a pipe over your bath. I never raised the courage to try shouting: 'Ass's milk in Number Four!'"
- » The ruins of the Blue Lagoon at Severn Beach featured in an episode of TV detective drama *Shoestring* in the 1980s.
- » Portishead Lido, opened in 1962, was originally heated with warm water which was a by-product of a nearby phosphorous factory.



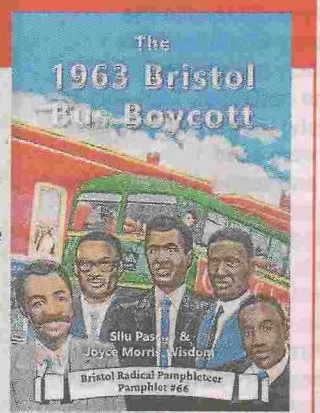
Jacobs Wells baths. Would have been even more grand, but the ratepayers held an "indignation meeting" to object

gant façade so I would love to have swam in the Victorian baths there ... although the Bristol North Baths in Bishopston, and the outdoor pool in Monkton Park, Chippenham, where I had my first swimming lessons, would also be contenders." Steve Hunt says that the book is ongoing research. "I'd love to hear from anyone with memories or additional details relating to the public swimming spots in Bristol and the surrounding area. I can be contacted via the Bristol Radical History Group at brh@brh.org.uk" If there's a second edition, he says, a friend suggests that it should be waterproof.

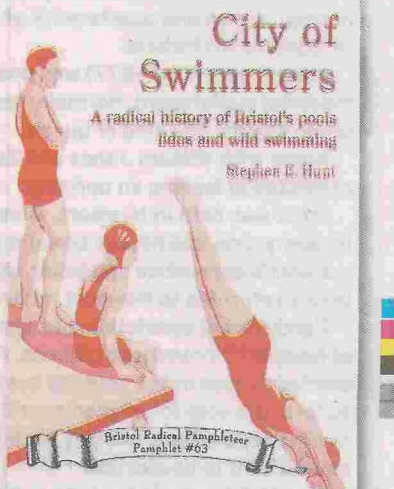
raise in *City of Swimmers*. If he could bring back just one of the facilities that we have lost, he'd opt for the baths at Jacobs Wells as the "building has a particularly ele-

Bus Boycott revisited

» WHILE we're on the subject of Bristol Radical History Group, they've just brought out - in time for Black History Month - a pamphlet about the Bristol Bus Boycott. A great deal has been written about the Boycott in recent decades. The campaign for the acceptance of what at the time were called "coloured" staff on Bristol's buses in the face of local prejudice, including opposition from trade unions, has taken on an iconic status in modern Bristol. *The 1963 Bristol Bus Boycott* by Silu Pascoe and Joyce Morris-Wilson is a very readable and insightful addition to the story, setting it in the context of the wider Civil Rights movement. It also has a lot to say about Bristolian prejudices at the time, some of which make shocking reading. It should be available by the time you're reading this, or if not, shortly afterwards. See www.brh.org.uk.



Campaigners gathered at Cumberland Basin in 2021 calling for the right to swim in parts of Bristol's docks JAMES BECK



» *City of Swimmers* is published by Bristol Radical History group, price £12 (inc P&P within UK). For details, see tinyurl.com/CityofSwimmers

Remember this sign? And did you ever try to smoke at a council pool?