

# BATHING BEAUTIES

SEEK OUT RESTORED AND RESTORATIVE VICTORIAN POOLS AND TURKISH BATHS TO ENTER AN EXOTIC WORLD OF MOSAIC HALLS AND MARBLE POOLS

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We have a lot to thank municipal baths for. Memories of swimming-costume anxiety, changing-room self-consciousness and blowing up your own pyjamas aside, they are where many of us learned to swim.

What we probably didn't notice at the time, however, is that some of those pools were architecturally splendid.

Fortunately, others did and several Victorian and Edwardian baths have recently been reinvigorated with the handsome details of those periods – glazed ceramic tiles, stained-glass windows, elaborate ticket booths and vaulted, glazed ceilings – restored to their former glory.

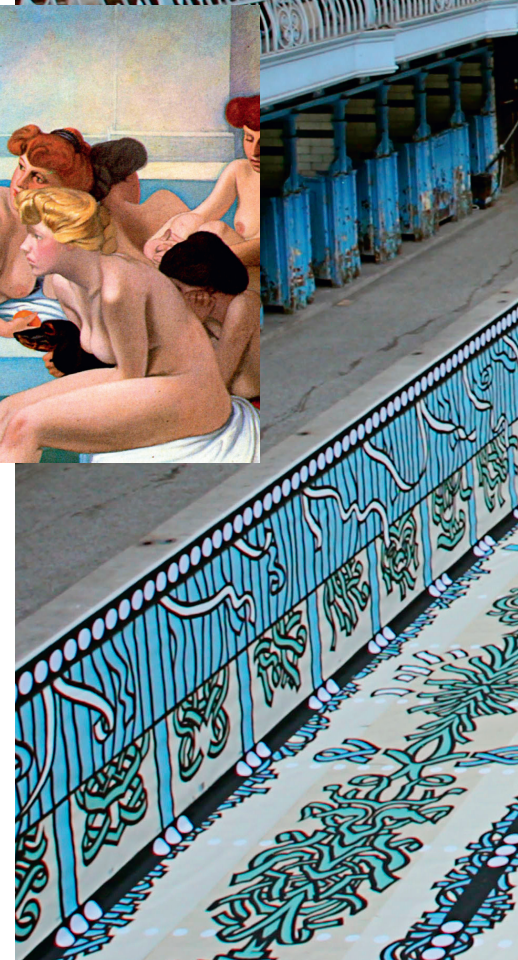
Many still remain in a state of dilapidation however, as councils and swimmers abandon them in favour of spanking new leisure centres, but the old pools, and their glamorous sidekicks, Turkish baths, are there waiting for you to take a plunge if you seek them out.

## THE BATH HOUSE: COMMUNAL SLUICING

A visit to the local pool these days is a leisure activity: where you head for swimming galas, lane swimming and aqua aerobics. Back in the day, however, the first public baths were all about hygiene. Tales of families living in one room and washing rarely and if then, in rivers and the sea, reached the ears of zealous Victorian municipal reformers. As a result, the first public wash house opened in Liverpool in 1842, and prompted by the Public Baths and Washhouses Act of 1846 (the purpose of which was “to promote the health and cleanliness of the working classes... and raise their moral tone”), the first London public bath opened in St Pancras in 1845. Although the well heeled were familiar with the »



“Water Palace”  
Victoria Baths in Manchester (right), which is being lovingly restored, was opened in 1906, around the time Félix Vallotton painted this wild scene of a Turkish bath. We're not sure the dachshund would be allowed in these days...



PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY; ARTISTICS/ALAMY



## POOL SCHOOL

**Victorian Turkish bath:** a series of rooms heated by hot dry air, followed by a cold plunge, wash and period of relaxing in a cooling room. Similar to ancient Roman bathing practices, the focus is on water rather than steam.

**Russian steam bath (banya):** traditionally a small room with an oven in the corner with red hot coals, over which water is ladelled to generate wet steam, as opposed to dry heat.

**Turkish hamman:** steam baths, similar to the Russian banya, usually with no plunge pool – the bather splashes cold water over themselves, post steam.

**Finnish sauna:** water is ladled on to a stove, banya style, to create wet steam increasing moisture and heat in the air.



health-giving properties of bathing, visiting spas such as Bath for the water cure, the poor were unwashed. Unlike modern spas with their emphasis on pampering and indulgence, their early bath houses were all about scrubbing and hygiene. These were the days of cholera and slum dwellings and bath houses were where you went to sluice your body in a slipper bath and wash and iron your clothes in the laundry. By 1918, every town with a population of more than 200,000 had either a public baths or a laundry, which although utilitarian were also places to gossip and make deals, and provided relaxation in a time of little leisure.

### SWIMMING POOLS: THEIR MURKY PAST

Alongside bathhouses came the first swimming pools. These no-nonsense structures were a response to the number of drownings in open water as the authorities realised that people needed a safe place to learn to swim.

Initially, many pools were seen as a cheap place to bathe – many had a second-class pool which was cheaper to use than a tub in the bath house. As a result, they grew murkier and murkier as the rinsed-off dirt and grime of city dwellers built up. The introduction of filtration and chlorination, which replaced the time-consuming empty-and-fill system, put an end to this, and as pools became cleaner and more hygienic, they were increasingly seen as places of leisure. This was given a further boost in 1896 when swimming was introduced at the Olympic Games and more people

began to swim competitively. Today, there are 116 listed municipal baths in Britain, most of which were built before 1936, but only 52 are operational or being refurbished. Seek out your nearest one while you can.

### TURKISH BATHS: A TRIP TO THE ORIENT

The introduction of the exotic and sybaritic Turkish bath is down to one man: MP and diplomat David Urquhart. In his account of his travels through Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Moorish Spain in 1848, *The Pillars of Hercules*, he described those countries' systems of hot-air baths and became evangelical about the benefits of hydrotherapy and thermal treatments (he even had a Turkish bath built in his home in Rickmansworth).

His influential publication inspired the first public Turkish bath to open in Ireland, followed by Manchester, then Marble Arch, London in 1861. Their popularity spread rapidly with over 600 opening in the next 150 years, many being tagged on



to existing bath houses and pools, taking advantage of the water-heating boilers on site.

Visitors flocked to enjoy the novel and pleasurable experience of spending a day moving from one hot chamber to another, hotter, one. Each chamber had a Latin name: the tepidarium (warm room); the calidarium (hot room); and the laconium (hottest room), a nod to the ancient Romans who regarded languorous bathing as a necessity. The hot chambers were followed by a plunge in an icy pool and half an hour lying down in a cool room (frigidarium). The process was said to relax and clean the body and leave the bather in a state of euphoria.

In keeping with their exotic provenance, these Turkish baths were decorated in elaborate, Moorish style, with cavernous rooms linked by tiled Islamic arches, marble pillars, glazed brickwork and golden ceilings. Harrogate Turkish Baths, which opened in 1896, attracted European royalty and Queen Victoria's granddaughters. Closed in 1969, it was renovated and reopened in 2002 and is the most historically complete of the remaining 12 Victorian Turkish baths in the UK. Spend the day flopping about on loungers cosseted by warmth and towels, drifting from room to room of increasing heat, before braving the plunge pool.

Many of London's Turkish baths were built in the 1930s, and Art Deco embellishments such as dancing nymph statues boosted the glamour further. At the Porchester Spa in west London, also recently refurbished, the day is spent getting hot, then cold, then scrubbed, then massaged, in a building of architectural note; an invigorating change from the often characterless rooms of the modern spa. <sup>S</sup>

- ❶ Stained glass at restoration-in-progress Victoria Baths, Manchester.
- ❷ Roll up, roll up: tickets from Victoria Baths' heyday.
- ❸ Cavernous halls and intricate Moorish decoration at Harrogate, home of the UK's most historically complete Turkish baths.
- ❹ Bramley Baths in Leeds was originally a public wash house with Russian steam baths, which are still in use today, alongside a modern pool, gym and fitness studios

## RESTORED POOLS AND BATHS TO VISIT

### BRAMLEY BATHS, LEEDS

Opened in 1904 as a pool and public bath house with Russian steam baths, this is now a community-run, not-for-profits pool. The poolside cubicles, ornate iron balcony and mosaic tiles remain, as does the steam room, and everything has been generally spruced up for the modern age. [bramleybaths.com](http://bramleybaths.com)

### GOVAN HILL BATHS, GLASGOW

Operated by a Trust of committed locals who rescued it after closure by the council in 2001, this Edwardian bath house originally comprised public baths, a wash house and three swimming pools. One pool has re-opened and plans are in place to reopen two more plus a sauna and steam room. [govanhillbaths.com](http://govanhillbaths.com)

### TURKISH BATHS AND SPA, HARROGATE

This, the most complete Turkish bath in England, was refurbished in 2002, restoring its highly decorative and exotic Moorish arches and screens, terrazzo floors and polished hardwood furnishings. It boasts four heated chambers, one plunge pool, and a relaxation room to lounge about in afterwards. [turkishbathsharrogate.co.uk](http://turkishbathsharrogate.co.uk)

### MARSHALL STREET BATHS, LONDON

Built in 1928-31 (although a bath house dating from 1850 existed on site before), this marble-lined pool was re-opened in 2010 following an £11-million refit. Its white-Sicilian-marble-lined pool and Swedish green marble walls were restored, as was a bronze fountain of merchild and dolphins. Changing cubicles line the 30m long pool which has a barrel-vaulted ceiling. [everyoneactive.com/centre/marshall-street-leisure-centre](http://everyoneactive.com/centre/marshall-street-leisure-centre)

### VICTORIA BATHS, MANCHESTER

No need to pack your cozzie, this is open as a heritage attraction for now with open days across the year. Described as a 'water palace' when it was built in 1906, this complex of Turkish and Russian baths and pools closed in 1993 when the council couldn't afford to keep it open. So far, £5 million has been spent on restoring its original features including stained glass, mosaic floors and terracotta tiles. The aim is to reopen one swimming pool and the Turkish baths. [victoriabaths.org.uk](http://victoriabaths.org.uk)