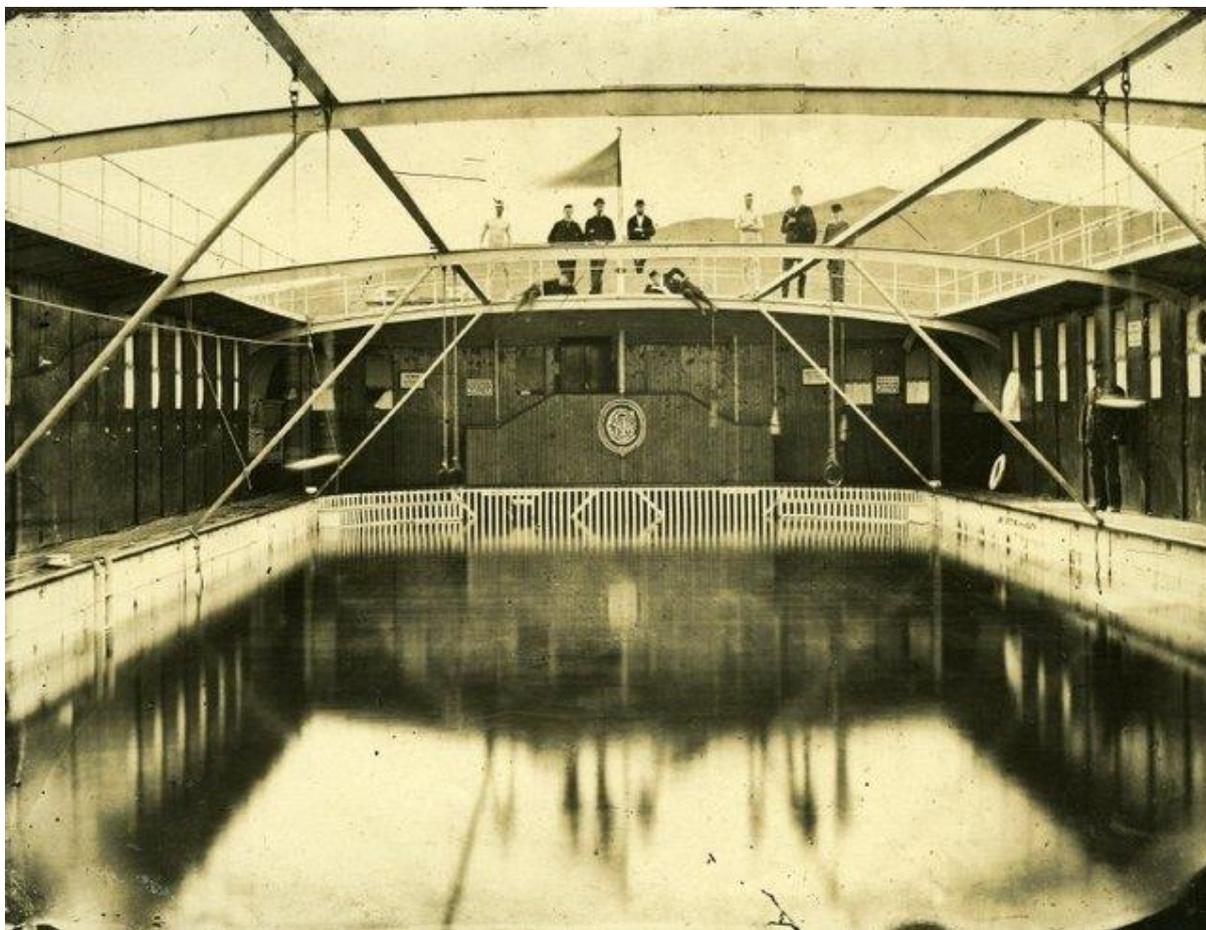


INVERCLYDE BATHS AND SWIMMING POOLS

Frances M Dunlop & Grace Binnie

THE GREENOCK FLOATING SWIMMING BATH



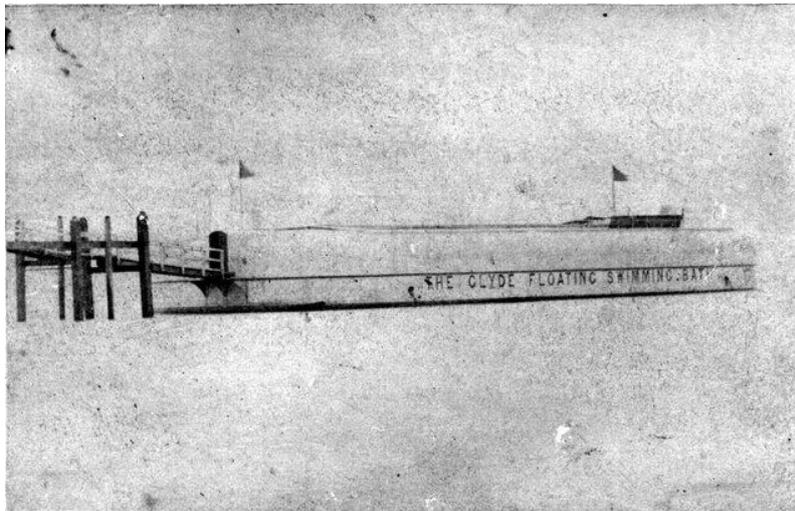
Many Greenockians of a certain age will remember going to the Battery Baths in their youth. But did you know that the first swimming pool in the area was pretty unique - the Greenock Floating Bath?

The idea was floated (!) in the 1870s that a swimming pool should be built in the town, and there was lively debate about where it should be situated.

James McCunn, a local shipowner (father of Hamish McCunn, the composer) proposed building a floating swimming pool. “He had thought for a long time on the melancholy fact that that with such fine water – with such an abundance of water – so little advantage was taken of it ... and he was so strongly impressed with the want of bathing accommodation in Greenock that the thought occurred to him to design this bath. Floating baths were no new thing. They were to be found on the Rhine, Seine, and many other rivers. The idea was to get a floating bath or vessel to ride safely in the tide way, exposed to wind and water, and yet be safe at the same time.” (*Greenock Telegraph*, 25 July 1879.)

After prolonged deliberation the Town Council agreed, a limited company was formed, and a committee under Mr McCunn, to bring the plan to fruition.

The novel idea caused ripples (!) across the country, as other towns showed an interest in the Greenock enterprise. The *Dundee Courier* carried a description of the proposed bath, which “would be composed of an iron structure consisting of two pontoons ... tied together with girders and angle irons, would be anchored in the bay to the west of Fort Matilda, and access would be obtained to them by an insubmergible ferry-boat worked by means of a handle and wire rail. Between the pontoons would be a large open space ... and this space, which would form the area for actual swimming, would be filled with sea water by means of sluices at both ends. The upper part of the floating structure is to be fitted with commodious dressing rooms. The cost of the whole scheme is said to be about £1200.” (*Dundee Courier*, 28 June 1878.)



The floating bath was built to James McCunn’s design by H Murray & Co. of Port Glasgow, and launched on 18 July 1879. It was slightly smaller than originally planned: “94 feet by 33 feet, and is capable of accommodating a hundred swimmers at a time.” (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*)

It was moored off the Battery, and reached, not by “insubmergible ferry” after all, but by a new pier. Sir Michael

Shaw Stewart, who owned the land, generously granted access at a nominal rent.

The formal inauguration took place with great ceremony on 24 July 1879, in the presence of a large number of local dignitaries. There were toasts and speeches, after which “cake and wine were served to the guests”, while the Rifle Band gave a recital, and Scottish swimming champions displayed their “natatory skill”. (*Greenock Telegraph*, 25 July 1879.)

The Floating Bath had a successful first season before being laid up for the winter, with large numbers enjoying a swim and “temperance refreshments”. The Town Council of Rothesay met to consider following Greenock’s lead.

However, the second season was to be its last. On the night of Monday 10 October 1881 the Floating Bath sank in a severe gale.



James McCunn’s season ticket for the first year of the floating bath

Vessels for Sale.

W R E C K S A L E
(FOR BEHOOF OF WHOM IT MAY CONCERN).

There will be SOLD, by PUBLIC AUCTION, at No. 67
TRANSIT SHED, Greenock, on THURSDAY, 9th February,
1882, at 1 o'clock P.M.,

THE IRON FLOATING BATH, as it
may then lie off the Bath Pier, near Gourock; and
immediately thereafter

The ANCHORS and CHAINS belonging to the Bath,
and weighing about 9 Tons. These will be exposed in
one or more lots as may be desired.

For further particulars apply, in Glasgow, to Mr R.
COOPER RUNDELL, Secretary Glasgow Underwriters'
Protection Committee, Royal Exchange; or, in Greenock,
to Messrs ROSS & MARSHALL, 18 Cathcart Street, or to
MR JAMES BOWMAN, Auctioneer.
Glasgow, 1st February, 1882. (12

A sad postscript

THE WEST END BATHS

Meanwhile a plan was afoot to provide the town with a more conventional swimming pool. The opening of the West End Baths in Campbell Street took place on 25 April 1881, in the presence of a "large and fashionable company". The ceremony was presided over by Sheriff Smith, chairman of the West End Baths Company, who raised a laugh when he referred to "a certain natural affinity for water in the inhabitants of Greenock". The Floating Bath was, of course, still operational at that date, and Sheriff Smith in his address pointed out that "there was not the slightest idea in the minds of the directors ... of rivalling any other establishment whatsoever. Referring to the floating baths, he said the not only had that establishment their very best wishes, but they of the new baths had the very best and warmest wishes of that company, and of its founder, Mr McCunn." (*Glasgow Herald*, 26 April 1881.)

The West End Baths operated until 1941. Five years later the building was bought for £1000 by the Arts Guild, a group of local enthusiasts, for conversion into a theatre. The first production took place in the small Wallace Bennett Theatre, and the main auditorium was opened in 1955. The floor of the swimming pool, sloping down to the deep end, was ideal for seating with a good line of sight from all parts of the theatre. The much-loved Arts Guild Theatre closed in 2012, to be replaced by the Beacon Arts Centre in the following year.

THE BATTERY BATHS

Proposals were made for another floating pool, but these came to nothing. In 30 May 1925 a new open-air pool was opened at the Battery, funded with public money, and not by a private company. From the very beginning it proved popular, particularly during the heatwave of June that year.

Special arrangements were made by the Education Authority for primary school pupils to be taken to the Baths during school time to learn to swim. Promptly at the beginning of May the great migration would begin, whatever the weather – and May in Greenock can still be pretty chilly! This is why many people looking back on those days display a love-hate relationship with

the Battery Baths. Many are the stories told of teachers watching from the side, well wrapped up in warm coats and scarves while the children chattered in the freezing water.

One boy noticed that there was a girl – a non-swimmer – lying on the bottom at the deep end. He promptly dived down and pulled her to safety. “Stop that carry-on!” said the teacher.

One Battery-goer remembers: “... from our school, which was St Mary’s, Captain Street, we used to get a double-decker bus on a Friday and we’d go down to the Battery and we would go into the Baths... We went on the first Friday in May, whether it was hail, rain or snow – and it was very very cold; it was freezing. It was really cruel, in a way! But they were determined ... that all the schoolchildren should be able to swim. And living, as we did, by the river, it was a good policy. The only thing is that it was always so cold. The teachers sat on the benches and watched you.

“The Baths had a deep end, but when I was young you only ever went into the shallow end. You went down, no matter how cold it was. The squeals and the screams! ... And you huddled yourself in, as if, if you hold your arms over your chest you’ll be warmer. And you had your bathing caps on, so you couldn’t hear anything. At this point I wore National Health glasses, and had to take them off, so I couldn’t see or hear! And you were being told, “Go down into that water!” When you think of it, it was really quite cruel. I can just remember being told certain things: “Do not move back too far.” But they never said how far, so if you moved back you always thought, “Will I go into the deep end?” Which you wouldn’t because it really was quite far...

“But eventually it paid off, because over the month – and you only went four times, or five times; well maybe it was into June as well; I think it must have been – because when they finished, I could swim. Not the length of the Bath or anything like that, but I could swim up and down a wee bit. Once they knew you could swim, when the school holidays came, if you went down to the Baths before ten o’clock in the morning you got in for nothing. So a lot of us on our bikes used to go down, and you’d have your bathing costume and cap in the towel, and you’d have – as you did on the days when you went with the school – you’d have your chattering bite, which mainly was a piece of plain bread with jam. And you needed the chattering bite when you came out, it was so cold!

“When we went with the school it was in the afternoon, because I can remember the bus going back up to school, and then you had to walk home. They didn’t drop you off at a central point; you had to go back up to Captain Street. And then you made your way home with your wet bathing costume, and more than likely your hair had come down and you were cold, and you’d go away back home.”

Battery Park, formed from the spoil when Fort Matilda railway tunnel was constructed, was a favourite place for families to spend the day in summer.

More memories from our informant: “When I was young we used to go to the Battery Park. My Aunt Nellie who lived next door used to come, and a lot of other women my mum knew, and they’d bring their children and we’d play in the park. We who were younger and couldn’t swim would go in the wee paddling pool, and also we’d go down on to the beach and play at the water, and collect things like stones and shells and different weeds to have a wee shop...

“When I was older and we were going to the Battery Baths, outside there was a shelter, with benches going right along. When it was grey or damp, or even raining, a lot of the women,

including my mum and aunt, they would sit there talking to one another. And then, when we came out of the Baths they would tell us to go over for a kettle of hot water, boiling water, to make a cup of tea. I think it was to Willie Gibson's ... he had a wee extended shed where he sold things like sweeties and things like that. I remember it was two old pence, and my mother would put the tea in, and for two old pence you'd go over and pay the money and you'd get boiling water and walk back with it. And if you had an accident or got burnt or anything ... the mothers would say it was your own fault!"

HECTOR MCNEIL BATHS

In due course the Battery Baths came to the end of their life, to be replaced by the Hector McNeil Memorial Baths, named after the MP for Greenock from 1941 to 1955. The foundation stone was laid by his widow on 9 Oct 1963. The baths were demolished in 2002 after Waterfront Leisure Centre opened.

The neighbouring burghs, as they then were, must have shared Greenock's "natural affinity for water". They also were provided with bathing establishments from an early date.

PORT GLASGOW BATHS

Port Glasgow Baths and Wash house opened on 23 June 1894, and served the town well, until closed in 2000 and was completely refurbished.

GOUROCK POOL

Gourock outdoor pool opened in 1909, with heating apparatus being installed in 1969. It is one of only two heated outdoor pools in Scotland.

We end with a look back at wartime days, when, among other privations, nylon stockings were impossible to obtain, and young ladies resorted to colouring their legs, with make up if they could get it, or even tea or gravy browning. Often they would draw a line up the back of their legs to look like a seam. This could cause problems at swimming pools, with "Ladies with their legs painted to represent stockings not allowed to enter the pond" at Helensburgh. It was found that the brown dye stained the towels which were hired by the bathers.

However, the *Glasgow Herald* reported that "Mrs Wood, pond mistress at Greenock Corporation's open-air swimming pool at Battery Park, said that the Greenock pool is not heated and that there had been no trouble. When the girls first came with painted legs the staff inspected them and water was rubbed on the paint. It was found that the paint was waterproof."

What a picture that conjures up!

FMD 15.03.2016

Photos courtesy of McLean Museum.