

THE WARM BATHS

Julie Hardy: Well, I mean it was a huge sort of metal, cold tin bath. I think it was in the lounge and then my mother used to bring in the hot water. To be honest, we didn't really know any different then so it was normal.

Narration (Tot Foster): That was Julie Hardy. It's easy to forget that bathrooms are a recent luxury; Judy Goldsmith is a member of Jacob's Wells Hub.

Judy Goldsmith: One of the reasons I am so interested in it is I come from a house without a bathroom, and I myself bathed in the tin bath for many years. My parents either bathed at work or went to warm baths. I think it's part of hidden history that's actually a big part of people's lives; it affected everybody.

Sue Wilkins: My mother and my grandfather, they used to come across on the ferry from Coronation Road, mid 20s, 1920s, to have a bath because they only had a tin bath in front of the fire.

Pat Baker: Me and my husband used them when we got married. We got a flat up Cotham Vale, it had no bathroom and my husband used to use the bath every week and I've gone there as well, that's how we kept clean. They used to run the water for you, we wouldn't bath together.

Narration: That was Sue Wilkins and Pat Baker.

Judy Goldsmith: It had six women's warm baths, six men's first class warm baths and eighteen men's second class warm baths. In Victorian times the workers didn't mix with their bosses when they were bathing.

Narration: For eighty years, local people came to wash away the dirt of daily life. John Parke and Judy Goldsmith are local historians who have researched and presented the story of the baths.

John Parke: The baths opened 1889 and everything was done of the highest quality and if you look at the minutes of the bath committee when the baths were being planned, it's fascinating to see how hard some people fought to actually provide the very best baths. The population that it was built to serve, went right the way down Hotwells Road where there was a large number of very poorly maintained buildings and a great deal of poor people.

Judy Goldsmith: They were built because of cholera, also they were used for verminous children too on occasion. But the baths were a

huge luxury, enormous cast iron enameled baths, very well scrubbed, very clean and people who have described it to me said it was like having your own private swimming pool for pennies. I think people were treated with dignity and people enjoyed their baths.

Narration: Malcolm Hussey-Yeo

Malcolm Hussey-Yeo: So every Saturday, regular as clockwork whether we needed a bath or not, we would come down to Jacob's Wells and have a hot bath. And I just remember them as being the most wonderful baths and as much hot water as you know, you could get out of the attendant because it was all down to him because the taps are actually outside the cubicle and the spout would come through. It was all really clean you know, tiled floors. Pretty cold except for the hot water from the baths so once it was full you jumped in and you sort of stayed there as long as you could. I can't remember exactly how long you got, it depended on how many people were waiting really I suppose.

Narration: But one early user of the baths was not at all impressed with the hot water.

Actor's voice: Letter to the Bristol Mercury, April 11th 1892. Sir, I recently purchased a ticket from the office at Jacob's Wells Baths. To my surprise, the attendant stated that owing to the failure of the draught in the boilers, no hot water could be obtained. I then walked into the boiler house, where I saw two splendid Galloway tubular boilers with one fire grate to each. The boiler room was completely enveloped in smoke while the large amount of sulfur was most unendurable. On opening the furnace doors I found the fires were almost devoid of flame, if my memory serves me rightly the baths cost us citizens nearly £17,000. It is only right that the rate payers should be brought acquainted with such a condition of things in a public institution.

Narration: Engineering problems resolved, the baths serviced their community for the next eighty years. Clare McKeown is a child from a well-to-do family, used the swimming pool in the 1950s and glimpsed another world through the steam.

Clare McKeown: Before I went there I didn't know that there was such a thing as a public bath, that some people would go there to wash because they didn't have bathrooms at home. It was one of the few experiences that I had as a young child where I was meeting people from all over the city, from a variety of backgrounds and a variety of economic circumstances because my growing up was very circumscribed and I resented that a lot and wanted to kind of break out.

Judy Goldsmith: You had a bath usually on a Friday night or a Saturday. You worked for the week and you would have your bath and change into your clean underwear and on a Saturday you might go out afterwards. In the 1970s before they closed, young men would go with a group of mates and they'd be singing and there was also smoking so there would be smoke going up to the ceiling and they'd be chatting to each other.

Narration: But times changed and people came to expect to have a bathroom at home.

Malcolm Hussey-Yeo: I came for hot baths for a couple of years until I met my wife in '69 I suppose.

Julie Hardy: Everybody else is getting bathrooms so I have a memory of my father installing a bathroom. They had a spare bedroom and they put the bathroom in there with his friend called Jock. And Jock stepped back when the floor was up and there was a leg through the kitchen ceiling and it was Jock's leg with a dap on it.

Narration: Of course some people still needed the facilities, it wasn't as simple as putting in a bathroom at home.

Judy Goldsmith: After they closed the swimming baths they actually kept the warm baths open because of sewer operatives who had free use of the baths, because of visiting sailors, because lorry drivers who we used to having that facility would expect to come and have a bath at Jacob's Wells Baths. So they were kept open for 6 months after the swimming pool was closed.