

“... in Johannesburg, baths are a necessity, not a luxury”¹

The establishment of Johannesburg’s first municipal swimming bath, 1900s-1910s

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Abstract

Following on the commitment of the Johannesburg Town Council and an increasing demand to provide facilities for exercise and relaxation, Johannesburg’s mayor opened the Town’s first public swimming bath on the 18th of January, 1909. Unease was felt in Britain about the health of urban residents at the time. These municipalities’ efforts of improvement reflected in the psyche of members of Johannesburg’s Town Council to ensure a healthy urban environment. One of the ways was to provide a swimming bath, as many viewed swimming as an ideal way to relax and exercise, especially considering Johannesburg’s warm climate. An additional, and potent, reason for a swimming bath was the belief that it would further contribute to the prestige of the Town. Financing the swimming bath, both in terms of its construction and maintenance, was always a concern. With this in mind, the Town Council initially proposed the conversion of the Berea disused reservoir but eventually, the Town Council decided to convert the Doornfontein reservoir, on par with world standards. Despite the fact that the bath always ran at a loss, white Johannesburgers frequented the bath in their droves, proving that it successfully served its purpose of providing a public space and swimming facilities for healthy exercise.

Keywords: Leisure facilities; Prestige; Popularity; Middle class; Finances; Protagonists; Johannesburg; Public swimming baths.

Introduction

On the 6th September 1902, a correspondent wrote the following letter to the Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*: “All sport lovers and the inhabitants of Johannesburg would welcome and support a swimming bath”. He allayed fears of what might be the main impediment, namely lack of finances maintaining that the construction cost would be “a mere drop in the ocean”

¹ Historical Papers (hereafter HP), University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits), Johannesburg Public Library Press Cuttings (hereafter JPLPC), AF 1913, File 513: Letter, Secretary of the Johannesburg Swimming Club/ *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 October 1904.

as the revenue from ticket sales would justify the outlay.² Soon afterwards, another correspondent, the same vain, wrote: “I was sure that there was a large number of men, young and old, who are ‘enthusiasts in the art of natation’”.³ These letters represent the early appeals for a swimming bath for Johannesburg. The aim of this article is to tell the story of how these early pleas were met by the end of the 1910s within the context of Johannesburg’s rapid urban growth during this time.⁴

The article tempts to answer the question why the provision of a swimming bath became a priority of the Town Council, amidst other demands such as, inter alia, the provision of housing and sanitation. Furthermore, how, within 20 years of the founding of Johannesburg, a swimming bath became a significant facility for Johannesburg’s white residents for both leisure and exercise?⁵ In addition, to what extent the first swimming bath fitted into the narrative of “modernising” Johannesburg?

The article introduces the topic with a brief description of swimming facilities in and around Johannesburg during the turn of the century, the purpose being that Johannesburg was lagging behind in the provision of these facilities. This is followed by a discussion of the reasons and motivation for a swimming bath. The response, role of and challenges to the Town Council as the main protagonist driving the venture, significantly assisted by the power it wielded as a municipality, are investigated.⁶ Likewise, an examination of the part played by white members of civic society is similarly significant in this story. The process was not always plain sailing though. Hence, the article describes how the Town Council juggled the pressure to establish a swimming bath on the one hand and finding a site and negotiating financial constraints. The article concludes with an evaluation of whether the Town Council’s investment payed off, using the popularity of the swimming baths as a yard stick.

A history of swimming baths inevitably includes aspects of the history of swimming and other aquatic sports. There is a significant corpus of studies on

2 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, “CLACH”, *Leader*, 7 November 1902; Wits, HP, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, Secretary of the Johannesburg Swimming Club/*Rand Daily Mail*, 18 October 1904.

3 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, “AQUA”, *The Star*, 22 September 1902.

4 The historical context of early Johannesburg had received ample attention by scholars during the past 40 years.

5 Since the establishment of Johannesburg, the Town Council paid scant attention to even the basic needs of the black urban residents. It can safely be assumed that the very thought of providing them swimming facilities never occurred to the Town Council at this stage.

6 Civic leaders were often among the first to recognize the need for public space for recreation. RS Kossuth, “Dangerous waters: Victorian decorum, swimmer safety, and the establishment of public bathing facilities in London (Canada)”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 22(5), 2005, p. 796.

the latter,⁷ mostly done in the United Kingdom and Australia, with scholars like Love and Parker leading the way.⁸ Surprisingly little, however, is known about the municipal provision of swimming baths, the prerequisite for any aquatic sport. General studies of leisure, recreation and popular culture make but passing reference to municipal sports provision.⁹ However, Dillon points out that Van Leeuwen¹⁰ was one of the few initial scholars addressing the topic by successfully “eliciting an awareness of the swimming pool as a distinct form of space while he explores its historical and typological development”.¹¹ However, Love and Wiltse’s studies represent the current leading scholarship on the topic.¹²

The historical context of early Johannesburg where racial, class, gender and cultural differences were pronounced, had received extensive attention amongst historians during the past 40 years. However, rather scant consideration had been paid to the very influential middle- and upper class Johannesburger. The

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- 7 C Ayriss, *Hung out to dry. Swimming and British culture* (Lexington, Lulu.com, 2009); L Bier, *Fighting the current: The rise of American women's swimming, 1870-1926* (North Carolina, McFarland & Co Jefferson, 2011); V Cregan-Reid, “Water defences: The arts of swimming in nineteenth-century culture”, *Critical Survey*, 16(3), 2004, pp. 33-47; D Day, “‘What girl will now remain ignorant of swimming?’ Agnes Beckwith, aquatic entertainer and Victorian role model”, *Women's History Review*, 21(3), 2012, pp. 419-446; W Hayes, “The Professional Swimmer 1860–1880s”, *Sports Historian*, 22(2), 2002, pp. 119-148; R Hess & C Parker, “Against the tide: New work on Australasian aquatic cultures”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26(14), 2009, pp. 2060-2068; R Light & T Rockwell, “The cultural origins of competitive swimming in Australia”, *Sporting Traditions*, 22(1), 2005, pp. 21-37; K Myerscough, “Nymphs, Naiads and Natation”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29(13), 2012, pp. 1907-1926; MG Phillips, “Public sports history, history and social memory: (Re) Presenting swimming in Australia”, *Sporting Traditions*, 15, 1998, pp. 93-102; G Swallow, “Imagining swimming: Discourses of modernity, identity and nationhood in the annual swimming matches in late Victorian Cornwall”, *Cornish Studies*, 18(1), 2010, pp. 101-120; T Terret, “Professional swimming in England before the rise of amateurism, 1837–75”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 12(1), 1995, pp. 18-32; R Winterton & C Parker, “‘A utilitarian pursuit’: Swimming education in nineteenth-century Australia and England”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26(14), 2009, pp. 2106-2125; R Winterton, “‘A question of propriety?’: Women’s competitive swimming in Melbourne, 1893–1900”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26(14), 2009, pp. 2086-2105.
 - 8 C Love, “A chronology of English swimming 1747-1918”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 24(5), 2007, pp. 707-712; C Love, “Local aquatic empires: The municipal provision of swimming pools in England, 1828-1918”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 24(5), 2007, pp. 620-629; C Love, *A social history of swimming in England, 1800-1918: Splashing in the Serpentine* (London, Routledge, 2007); C Parker, “The rise of competitive swimming 1840 to 1878”, *Sports Historian*, 21(2), 2001, pp. 54-67; C Parker, “Swimming: The ‘ideal’ sport for nineteenth-century British women”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27(4), 2010, pp. 675-689; C Parker, “The North/South divide and the development of swimming in nineteenth-century England”, *Sporting Traditions*, 25(2), 2008, pp. 55-77.
 - 9 C Bowker, “Parks and baths, sport recreation and municipal government and the working class in Ashton-under-Lyne between the wars”, R Holt, *Sport and the working class in modern Britain* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 84.
 - 10 T van Leeuwen, *The springboard in the pond: An intimate history of the swimming pool* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1998).
 - 11 JR Dillon, “Modernity, sanitation and the public bath Berlin, 1896-1930, as archetype” (PhD, Duke University, 2007), p. 15.
 - 12 C Love, *A social history of swimming in England*; J Wiltse, *Contested waters: A social history of swimming pools in America* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

article explores their considerable influence as they were the driving force in modernising Johannesburg, of which the provision of a swimming bath was one of their endeavours to this end.

Reasons

In justifying the necessity of a swimming bath as well as the consequential financial outlay, correspondents to the main Johannesburg newspapers as well as members of the Town Council highlighted three key reasons.

Health

For most of the working class in Britain, the urban environment, driven by rapid urbanization and industrialization, meant poor health and sanitary conditions and virtually no means to keep clean. Deaths from contagious diseases, such as cholera, occurred frequently. In response, the public baths and washhouses movement began in the 1840s. The result was a growing awareness of the benefits of the cleansing and healing properties of water.¹³ Consequently, by the turn of the century, the bath and washhouse had an established place on the menu of standard features of major progressive, industrial cities throughout Europe and North America reaching its heyday in the late 1870s to 1914.¹⁴

As Town Councils made major changes to housing and sanitation, the utilitarian need for washhouses diminished,¹⁵ becoming places for physical

13 C Love, "Taking a refreshing dip: Health, cleanliness and the empire", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 24(5), 2007, p. 693. The use of water for medical treatment was based upon a revision of the previous belief that water was the cause of disease (FH McLachlan, "Poolspace: A deconstruction and reconfiguration of public swimming pools" (PhD, University of Otago, 2012), p. 25. The same sentiments prevailed in France and America. In France, driven by the combined efforts of the political and medical authorities, the 'hygienisation' of the country, received particular attention (T Terret, "Hygienization: Civic baths and body cleanliness in late nineteenth-century France", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 10(3), 1993, p. 396). In America, medical support for bathing, bolstered by religious doctrine, created among the upper and middle classes a new, higher standard for personal cleanliness. As in Victorian Britain, bathing was regarded as something that may prevent germs, disease and illness and should be encouraged (FH McLachlan, "Poolspace: A deconstruction and reconfiguration", pp. 25, 28; MT Williams, *Washing 'the great unwashed: Public baths in urban America, 1840-1920* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 135.

14 JR Dillon, "Modernity, sanitation and the public bath Berlin", p. 5; J Skoski, "Public baths and washhouses in Victorian Britain" (Ph.D, Indiana University, 2000), p. 15.

15 G Marino, "The emergence of municipal baths: Hygiene, war and recreation in the development of swimming facilities", *Industrial Archaeology Review*, 32(1), 2010, p. 39; W Hayes, "The professional swimmer", pp. 122-123.

recreation and sport.¹⁶ The line between public “bath” and “swimming bath” thus began to blur. Small swimming baths, or “plunge-pools”,¹⁷ and steam baths were added to the new bath complex, eventually becoming the most popular facility in the washhouses.¹⁸ The construction of swimming baths and the conversion of parts of washhouses into larger swimming baths was a logical next step.¹⁹

The inclusion of swimming baths represented a fundamental shift in bathhouse ideology: from demands for cleansing to the need for recreation and exercise.²⁰ Government and social reformers actively promoted swimming. This was part of the evolution of municipalities' role to provide additional public leisure facilities.²¹

The noteworthy difference between Johannesburg and Britain was that it was not necessary for the former to follow the “cleanliness” route to swimming baths.²² Nevertheless, the members of the Anglophone Town Council were in

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- 16 C Parker, “An urban historical perspective: Swimming a recreational and competitive pursuit 1840 to 1914” (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2003), pp. 47, 110, 112, 158-159; P Bird, “The origins of Victorian public baths, with special reference to Dulwich Baths”, *Local Historian*, August 1995, p. 145. This transition from baths to swimming baths brought substantial standardization in design (RE Pick, “The development of baths and pools in America, 1800-1940, with emphasis on standards and practices for indoor pools, 1910-1940” (PhD thesis, Cornell University, 2010), p. 1.
- 17 “Plunge baths” best describes most of these early public swimming pools, due to their small sizes compared to larger pools of the 1880s and later, used for competitive swimming (J Skoski, “Public baths and washhouses in Victorian Britain”, (Ph.D, Indiana University, 2000), p. 69).
- 18 JR Dillon, “Modernity, sanitation and the public bath Berlin”, p. 106; K Chan, “Ordinary heritage of the ordinary people: Hong Kong's public bathhouses” (MA, University of Hong Kong, 2012), p. 6; C Parker, “An urban historical perspective”, p. 110. The line between public “bath” and “swimming bath” began to blur as the result of mixing traditional uses. Baths continued to be associated with hydrotherapies of various sorts happening indoors whereas swimming baths were outdoors and clearly differentiated as being for recreational purposes (P Bird, “The origins of Victorian public baths, p.145; RE Pick, “The development of baths and pools in America”, pp. 27-28; 33).
- 19 W Hayes, “The professional swimmer”, pp. 122-123. In Berlin, new legislation in 1878 officially incorporated the swimming pool into the national model for the public bath (JR Dillon, “Modernity, sanitation and the public bath Berlin”, p. 114).
- 20 S Sheard, “Profit is a dirty word: The development of public baths and wash-houses in Britain 1847–1915”, *Social History of Medicine*, 13(1), 2000, p. 85; A Renner, “A nation that bathes together: New York town's progressive era public baths”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 67(4), 2008, p. 522; J Skoski, “Public baths and washhouses in Victorian Britain” (Ph.D, Indiana University, 2000), p. 105. A similar pattern manifested itself in the USA. In keeping with the strong progressive spirit and health movements of the late 19th century, New York Town, for example, built “public baths” which had the same utilitarian function as those in Britain. However, they ironically evolved as primarily places for swimming (K Chan, “Ordinary heritage of the ordinary people”, p. 9; C Parker, “An urban historical perspective”, p. 104; JR Dillon, “Modernity, sanitation and the public bath Berlin”, p. 263; RE Pick, “The development of baths and pools in America”, p. 1; Williams, *Washing 'the great unwashed'*, pp. 16, 135).
- 21 Other such undertakings was the establishment of Joubert Park. See L Grundlingh, “‘Imported intact from Britain and reflecting elements of Empire’: Joubert Park, Johannesburg as a leisure space, c. 1890s-1930s”, *South African Journal of Art History*, 30, 2015, pp. 94-118.
- 22 Only once did I pick up that swimming was justified for its cleansing function: “From a hygiene point of view, swimming is a grand exercise” (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 14 January, 1909).

tune with the views in Britain. It can therefore safely be assumed that these ideas were also part of the psyche of Johannesburg's public and Town fathers and thus played a significant role to justify their investment in swimming baths.

Swimming and sunbathing

The link between the healing properties of water and the benefits of swimming as a healthy exercise soon became apparent. As Cruikshank and Bouchier suggest, some viewed swimming as “an appropriate response to the problems associated with Town life...”.²³ This growing interest in recreational swimming fuelled the building of large, elaborate and luxurious institutions.²⁴

Simultaneously, more than ever, the sea, lakes and town rivers became the venues of water games and leisure activities.²⁵ Thus, by 1900, the view that bathing and swimming were fringe activities and regarded by many as unsafe and unseemly was fast giving way to an acceptance of swimming as an important element in the development of the masses' physical condition.²⁶ This provided fertile ground for health reform, directly justifying the construction of baths.²⁷ Thus, beginning as an “experiment in disease prevention during the 18th century, bathing winds up at the end of the 19th century as a public imperative...”.²⁸

From the start, Johannesburg's newspaper reports confirmed that the health benefits of swimming was of great importance for Johannesburg's citizens, despite the costs. Eventually, this seems to have been the most important card played to convince the authorities and to justify the building of swimming baths.

Mr Kuper, the mayor of Benoni,²⁹ pointed out that the “old parochial idea as to whether municipal swimming baths would or would not pay had been

23 K Cruikshank & NB Bouchier, “Dirty spaces: Environment, the state, and recreational swimming in Hamilton Harbour 1870-1946”, *Sport History Review*, 29(1), 1998, p. 65. Also see FH McLachlan, “Pool-space: A deconstruction and reconfiguration”, p. 36.

24 J Skoski, “Public baths and washhouses in Victorian Britain” (Ph.D, Indiana University, 2000), pp. 15; 83.

25 T Terret, “Hygienization: Civic baths and body cleanliness”, p. 397; W Hayes, “The professional swimmer”, p. 120.

26 FH McLachlan, “Pool-space: A deconstruction and reconfiguration”, p. 25; C Love, “Local aquatic empires”, p. 625. However, C Parker argues that, despite improvements in public health, through both medical expertise and environmental improvements, the British remained an unhealthy people and Town life continued to cause many of the nation's physical problems (C Parker, “An urban historical perspective”, pp. 37-38).

27 RS Kossuth, “Dangerous waters”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 22(5), 2005, p. 800. The link between the baths, cleanliness and swimming was clear (W Hayes, “The professional swimmer”, p. 137).

28 RE Pick, “The development of baths and pools in America”, p. 39. Likewise, in early 20th century Australia, the focus shifted from bathing to swimming (J Gosseye, A Hampson & J Gildersleeve, “Queensland making a splash: Memorial pools and the body politics of reconstruction”, *Queensland Review*, 23(2), 2016, pp. 178-195).

29 A neighbouring town that already had a swimming bath before Johannesburg.

scrapped in favour of the larger view that the health of the town must take precedence of any such monetary consideration.”³⁰ He looked forward to the time when the teaching of swimming in public schools would be compulsory. “Every child should know how to swim. It was more important than Latin or Greek”.³¹ Councillor D Dingwall, chair of the Parks and Estates Committee, also underlined the benefits of swimming, particularly for school children.³² Although these remarks were made in 1917, it can safely be assumed that they were equally valid in the 1900s.

Sunbathing – and the popularity of sunlight – added a further purpose to swimming baths as it was believed that exposure to sunlight was a proven medical treatment for many ills.³³ Consequently, in Britain outdoor exercise became all-pervading in the 1910s and 1920s. Public open-air outdoor swimming baths (also called lido’s³⁴), the desire for exposing the body to as much sunlight as possible and participation in water sports encouraged an outdoor lifestyle.³⁵ This point did not escape Geo Neal Luntz. In a letter to the *Rand Daily Mail*, he linked the context of living in Johannesburg and the necessity for a swimming bath as follows: “In a climate such as ours... the hot weather enables bathers to remain much longer in the water, thus obtaining a double benefit from the exercise of swimming and for exposure to the sun – one of the great benefits of bathing”.³⁶

Prestige for the town

There was a widely held consensus amongst municipal governments in Britain, Europe and the USA during the 19th century that the provision of Town parks, museums, town halls, art galleries and libraries, all physical structures, were showpieces to visitors, designed to be visible signs of the Town’s achievements. In addition, it would instil a feeling of public order amongst the Town’s residents. They thus became essential elements in the

30 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *The Star*, 20 December 1917.

31 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *The Star*, 20 December 1917.

32 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 9 August 1917.

33 “The belief in the positive influence of sun on the body was based on two concepts – that of ‘physical culture’ and fashion” (G Marino, “The emergence of municipal baths...”, *Industrial Archaeology Review*, 32(1), 2010, p. 40).

34 “Lidos were purpose-built, open-air swimming pools in urban parks or by coastal resorts, encouraging a less regulated, more hedonistic swimming experience that problematises traditional narratives of codified sport as a stalwart of the rational recreation movement” (H Pussard, “Historicising the spaces of leisure: Open-air swimming and the lido movement in England”, *World Leisure Journal*, 49(4), 2007, p. 179).

35 The ‘Sunlight League’, founded in 1924 by CW Saleeby, was a good example of “helio-therapy” (G Marino, “The emergence of municipal baths...”, *Industrial Archaeology Review*, 32(1), 2010, pp. 39-40).

36 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 9 August 1917.

general process of public and urban modernisation and improvement.³⁷

Robinson and Taylor state that, along with other sporting facilities such as cricket and rugby fields as well as tennis courts, swimming baths became an important part of local authorities' initiative at grandeur, civic pride and leisure provision. Their contribution to sporting opportunities were significant.³⁸ Love pointed out that some British Town councils spent hefty amounts of money on baths in the pursuit of civic pride and competitive status.³⁹ These considerations were also part of the evolution and growth of Johannesburg public services.

They were therefore not only "metaphors for the progress of the age in public health," but also monuments mirroring the change to leisure and pleasure rather than serving "the great unwashed".⁴⁰ The Doornfontein swimming bath would likewise form part of the Town Council's grand scheme to bestow Johannesburg with the trappings of empire.⁴¹

A correspondent of *The Star*, in support, stated that a public swimming bath would be a boon for Johannesburg. Moreover, "every town of any note in South Africa is provided with such an institution and surely Johannesburg which is

37 RS Kossuth, "Dangerous waters...", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 22(5), 2005, p. 799; C Parker, "An urban historical perspective...", pp. 56-56; RE Pick, "The development of baths", p. 36; K Chan, "Ordinary heritage of the ordinary people", p. 6; D Glassberg, "The design of reform: The public bath movement in America", *American Studies*, 20(2), 1979, p. 19; H Pussard, "Historicising the spaces of leisure...", *World Leisure Journal*, 49(4), 2007, p. 178; I. McShane, "The past and future of local swimming pools", *Journal of Australian Studies*, 33(2), 2009, p. 198; C Bowker, "Parks and baths, Sport recreation and municipal government", pp. 85-86; 95. Renner indicated that Britain and Germany were at the forefront of the public bath movement (Renner, "A Nation That Bathes Together", p. 508) See further discussion on how swimming baths fit into this endeavor.

38 L Robinson and P Taylor, "The performance of local authority sports halls and swimming pools in England", *Managing Leisure*, 8, 1, 2003, p. 1; FH McLachlan, "Poolspace: A deconstruction and reconfiguration", p. 3; W Hayes, "The professional swimmer", p. 123; J Skoski, "Public baths and washhouses in Victorian Britain", (Ph.D, Indiana University, 2000), pp. 15-16.

39 C Love, "Holborn, Lambeth and Manchester: Three case studies in municipal swimming pool provision", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 24(5), 2007, p. 633. According to JR Dillon, at the end of the 19th century, architecture in Berlin underwent a dramatic change. Ludwig Hoffmann, the artist- architect, reflected a new identity of the urban middle class who embraced his designs with enthusiasm: "The urban liberal elite identified with Hoffmann's optimistic vision of the metropolis as dwelling place, comfortable, prosperous, cultured...". This corresponds with similar trends in Britain and the USA (JR Dillon, "Modernity, sanitation and the public bath Berlin p. 139. Also see H Eichberg, "The enclosure of the body – on the historical relativity of 'health', 'nature' and the environment of sport", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21(1), 1986, p. 110; G Marino, "The emergence of municipal baths...", *Industrial Archaeology Review*, 32(1), 2010, p. 35; RE Pick, "The development of baths and pools in America", p. 36; H Pussard, "Historicising the spaces of leisure...", *World Leisure Journal*, 49(4), 2007, p. 178; C Bowker, "Parks and baths, sport recreation and municipal government", p. 86; C Parker, "Improving the condition of the people: The health of Britain and the provision of public baths 1840-1870", *Sports Historian*, 20(2), 2000, pp. 31-32; 39; K Chan, "Ordinary heritage of the ordinary people", p. 6.

40 J Skoski, "Public baths and washhouses in Victorian Britain" (Ph.D, Indiana University, 2000), p. 91.

41 For a discussion how the Doornfontein swimming bath formed part of the development of Ellis Park, see L Grundlingh, "Transforming a wasteland to a premium sporting arena: The case of Ellis Park, Johannesburg, 1900s-1930s", *Historia*, 62(2), 2017, pp. 31-33.

so much to the front in all other branches of sport, is not going to be found wanting in this respect...".⁴² He further alerted the readers of *The Star* that the government spent large sums of money towards the erection of baths in Pretoria for the use of soldiers who fought in the Anglo-Boer War. He was sure that if an application were made from the "proper quarter", Johannesburg would receive similar government support for the erection of public baths.⁴³

Two years later, the Secretary of the Johannesburg Swimming Club, reiterated this point, even comparing Johannesburg with the wider world, urging the Town Council to pay attention to the matter as "our Town stands almost alone in the world as being un-provided for in swimming and bathing accommodation".⁴⁴

The above-mentioned factors proved a potent mix and used as key justifications for the establishment of public swimming baths and informed further decisions. For Councillor Godbold financial obstacles should not play a role. He was convinced that the revenue would be sufficient and made a strong appeal to the Town Council not to delay further and so remove a "crying disgrace" to the Town.⁴⁵

Initial alternative options

In 1888, realising the necessity of water for animals, the government authorized the construction of a cattle dam between the fountains on the farm Braamfontein. This turned out to be a great attraction for the people of Johannesburg who began using it as a swimming pool,⁴⁶ thus already early on indicating the need.

Nearby municipalities, such as Germiston and Benoni already had swimming baths and they regularly hosted swimming and water polo competitions. Similar competitions took place at swimming baths at mines, such as Simmer and Jack and Village Main Reef⁴⁷ Galas and aquatic events at Pretoria's Central

42 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, CLACH, *The Star*, 6 September 1902. Also see a similar letter from "AQUA" HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, AQUA, *The Star*, 22 September 1902.

43 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, CLACH, *The Star*, 6 September 1902. He wrote, "I invited the views of "other of your readers interested in swimming". AQUA responded, hoping that "they will see the force of this" (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, JPLPC, File 513: Letter, AQUA, *The Star*, 22 September 1902).

44 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, Secretary of the Johannesburg Swimming Club/*Rand Daily Mail*, 18 October 1904.

45 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, JPLPC, File 294: *Leader*, 17 January 1908.

46 JR Shorten, *The Johannesburg saga* (Johannesburg, Voortrekkerpers, 1970), p. 96.

47 Readex Newsbank, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 February 1903; 14 March 14 and 28 December 1904.

Swimming Baths between Johannesburg and Pretoria regularly took place.⁴⁸ Boksburg Boating Club and the Johannesburg Swimming Club frequently held very popular aquatic events such as swimming, boating, water polo and life-saving exhibition.⁴⁹

It is interesting to note the initial role of private enterprise in providing swimming facilities for Johannesburg. In their advertisements, hotels in Orange Grove, Parkhurst, Craighall, Booysen's emphasised the availability of swimming baths on their premises. The latter, for example, boasted with its "beautiful gardens, swimming baths, tennis courts and good stabling".⁵⁰

Meantime, the Johannesburg swimming fraternity, wishing to expedite the provision of swimming baths, suggested to the Town Council's Health Department to open up the various dams, pools and lakes in Johannesburg neighbourhoods to the public and to erect fences and bathing shelters. A small charge would easily recoup the outlay. However, the municipality stated that it was unable to do so as the dams, pools and lakes were not municipal property.⁵¹ Despite this apparent lack of enthusiasm, the Club, eager to pursue the matter, took the initiative by investigating other alternatives. They had been negotiating with one of the mines, endeavouring to acquire the use of a storage dam to practice in. The Secretary acknowledged that nothing had been achieved yet.⁵² This being the case, he asked if "some private company could be floated to build baths?"⁵³ Five years later, this became a real possibility.

Role of the Town Council

Late 19th century urban society saw the rise of the interventionist municipality.⁵⁴ This was due in part to the emergence of a more expansive, service-based conception of municipal government. In addition, "the former upper-class ethos gave way to the more democratic one of civic reformism."⁵⁵

48 Readex Newsbank, *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 March 1903 and 8 February 1904.

49 Readex Newsbank, *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 December 1904 and 27 December 1904.

50 Readex Newsbank, *Rand Daily Mail*, 30 May 1903; 22 January 1904 and 16 July 1904.

51 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, Secretary of the Johannesburg Swimming Club/*Rand Daily Mail*, 18 October 1904.

52 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, Secretary of the Johannesburg Swimming Club/*Rand Daily Mail*, 18 October 1904.

53 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 513: Letter, Secretary of the Johannesburg Swimming Club/*Rand Daily Mail*, 18 October 1904.

54 C Love, "An overview of the development of swimming in England, c. 1750-1918", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 24(5), 2007, p. 571; C Parker, "An urban historical perspective", pp. 45; 74.

55 T Crook, "Schools for the moral training of the people: Public baths, liberalism and the promotion of cleanliness in Victorian Britain", *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire*, 13(1), 2006, p. 24.

The promotion of swimming and the provision of swimming facilities⁵⁶ were part-and-parcel of this development.⁵⁷ As a result, the real boom in public baths construction came during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Almost all of the baths dating from this period were paid for from the ratepayer purse.⁵⁸ Consequently the most popular method of public bath provision, and in the long term the most successful, were baths built by town councils.⁵⁹ A study of Johannesburg Town Council's municipal minutes confirms similar thinking behind the decisions to build swimming baths. In addition, the minutes provides an insight into the social and practical expectations of the Town Council.

Johannesburg's middle-class became a dominant social and political force. It was a complex social formation, consisting of leading businessmen, mine owners, members of professions, shopkeepers, small businessmen and clerks. From their ranks, a rather small but powerful group of Anglophone, white collar elite controlled the Town Council, determining the establishment of priorities of which the acquisition and use of public land and the provision of sporting facilities was one. They were among the first to recognize this need. Decisions about the sites for swimming baths demonstrated the connection between political power, class and racial differences and the organisation of space.⁶⁰

In declaring the first Johannesburg bath open on 18 January 1909,⁶¹ the Mayor, Mr Chudleigh, emphasised the necessity of such a "municipal institution as a swimming bath... and of which Johannesburg has always felt the need".⁶² He explained that, as far back as 1903, the Town Council had discussed the matter and the feeling was that "public baths would be very desirable". However, the main obstacle was a cheaper water supply – water being a major concern in Johannesburg.⁶³

56 C Love, "Local aquatic empires", p. 627.

57 Also see earlier discussion on the prestige for the town.

58 In the case of Manchester, Love pointed out that private investors initially backed the provision of swimming baths. However, the privately-financed baths soon gave way to municipal involvement in swimming provision. By 1914, almost all swimming bath provision within England was offered by municipal governments. This was an example of municipal provision pushing aside, or taking over from, private provision (C Love, "Local aquatic empires", pp. 620; 626-627)

59 C Parker, "An urban historical perspective...", pp. 103-104,

60 H Eichberg, "The enclosure of the body...", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21(1), 1986, p. 115.

61 Also see discussion below.

62 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 18 January, 1909.

63 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 18 January, 1909. Johannesburg is in a unique situation, for unlike most other major cities in the world, it is not situated on a major river. The conditions are semi-arid, rainfall is seasonal and in short supply. Water was a scarce commodity and gave rise to an entire infrastructure based on the delivery and removal of water (VA Zangel, "The seething masses'. Housing, water and sanitation in the lives of Johannesburg's poor, 1886-1906" (MA, North-West University, 2004), pp. 11; 131.

Establishing public swimming baths for many years, it had been under consideration by successive municipal authorities. For example, prior to the South African War, the former “Stadsraad” of the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek (South African Republic) had already discussed the matter on several occasions but found it impossible to make the necessary financial arrangements.

After the South African War, a new British administration ran the Town Council. Slowly but surely the Town Council realised the urgency to provide public swimming baths for Johannesburg’s white citizens. Consequently, the Town Council arrived at a feasible scheme by January 1908. Reporting this decision *The Star* was convinced that the public would welcome the news, especially as it was announced “at a time of terrible heat, when the mind of jaded Johannesburg is turning naturally to the thoughts of water and swimming”.⁶⁴

The first step was to secure a site. There were two options. The first was to request the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the Rand Water Board⁶⁵ to dispose of its old and dated reservoir in Doornfontein⁶⁶ and reach an agreement with the Town Council to convert it into a swimming bath.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *The Star*, 22 January 1908.

⁶⁵ In 1903 the Transvaal government realised that water was too important to be left in the hands of concession companies and was best controlled by a public utility company. This led to the establishment of the Rand Water Board which took over the concession companies (VA Zangel, “The seething masses”, pp. 17; 246.)

⁶⁶ Initially the Johannesburg Waterworks Company, a private company, financed the building of the storage reservoir on the Doornfontein farm as well as the laying of underground pipes to relieve the pressure on the numerous wells and water carts with which the community had to make do until then. On the site was a spring emerging from a steep ridge on the edge of the northern boundary of the farm, VA Zangel, “The seething masses’...”, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Municipal Offices (hereafter MO), Johannesburg, (hereafter Jhb), Law Library (hereafter LL): Minutes of the Town Council, 191th meeting, 22 January 1908, p. 872.

Image 1: Enlarged map of Johannesburg and suburbs. The swimming bath was built between Doornfontein and Troyville suburbs.



Source: Johannesburg Public Library, Plan of Johannesburg and suburbs, 1897.

The other option was the conversion of the Berea reservoir on Harrow Road that belonged to the Town Council.⁶⁸ This reservoir was used as a low-pressure reservoir for the town's water supply, but had become redundant. The site was also not suitable for any other purpose.⁶⁹ The first great initial drawback, the cost of a site, could thus be avoided.⁷⁰

Berea scheme

Referring to the disused reservoir in Berea the *Leader's* reporter, "the bath is already made and only requires a few alterations".⁷¹ The reservoir was 200 feet long and 100 feet wide, about two-and-a-half times the size of an ordinary

68 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 191th meeting, 22 January 1908, p. 872; HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *The Star*, 22 January 1908.

69 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *The Star*, 22 January 1908.

70 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 8 January 1908; HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Star*, 22 January 1908.

71 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 24 January 1908.

swimming bath and much larger than any other public bath in the country. Moreover, it was strongly constructed of solid masonry. He continued: “The beautiful sheet of water... will undoubtedly be easily the finest bath in the sub-continent”.⁷²

The reporter was lyrical when he described the envisaged plan. A row of dressing rooms (to the south) and a pavilion (to the east) would be built. “The high ground to the north would be terraced, and the large space beyond will be laid out with flower beds, and converted into a miniature park... It can, and will, be made one of the prettiest rustic retreats in the town...”.⁷³ Furthermore, all of this could be built at a reasonable cost.⁷⁴

Thus, initially, the Berea scheme seemed to be, in the words of the *Leader*, the “most practicable scheme yet mooted for supplying Johannesburg with a public swimming bath”.⁷⁵ Financially it would be inexpensive. The financial officer made meticulous financial calculations. The final decision hinged on costs.⁷⁶ It was calculated that an expenditure of between £ 3,000 and £ 4,000 would be sufficient to do what was required.⁷⁷ Coincidentally, at the same time the Town Council considered the building of a municipal swimming bath, the Cape Town municipality after deliberations of nearly 20 years, finally accepted a tender in 1908 for the construction of the first public swimming bath at the top of Long Street in Cape Town at the expense of nearly £ 10,000. The annual expenditure of the baths was estimated at £ 3, 345, and the annual income £ 1,325.⁷⁸ The Town Council could thus use the expenses of the Long Street bath as a guide.

72 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 24 January 1908. Also see HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 January 1908.

73 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 24 January 1908.

74 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 191th meeting, 22 January 1908, p. 872. This would entail sloping the bottom of the pond, clear a path right round, erect dressing boxes and improve the grounds. A sustainable supply of borehole water could be obtained from Councillor JD Ellis's ground, his house situated on a nearby hill (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 8 January 1908; HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January, 1908; HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 24 January 1908.

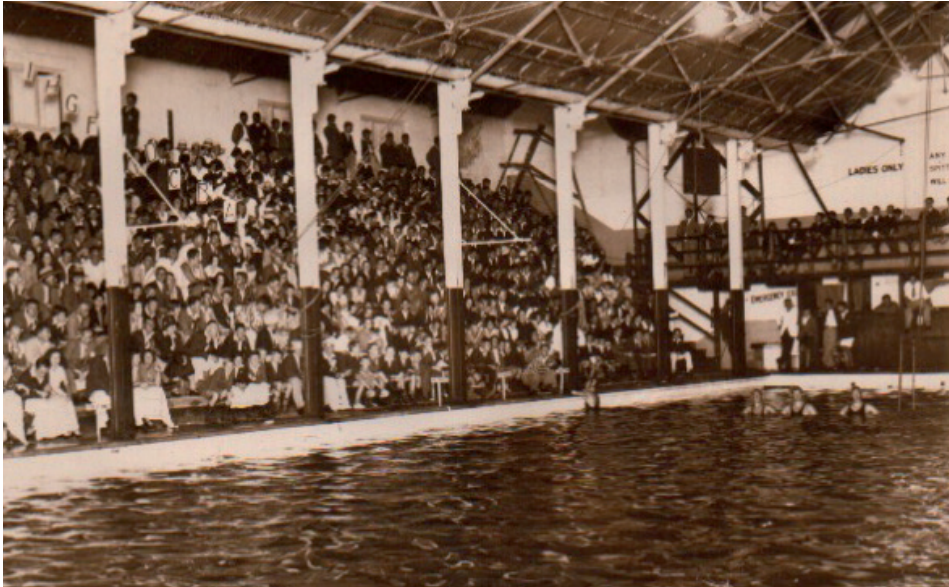
75 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 8 January 1908.

76 Costs/expenditure Berea: £ 4070; Costs/expenditure Doornfontein: £ 5066. Annual maintenance charges. Berea: £950; Annual maintenance charges Doornfontein Berea: £ 1050; Revenue necessary to cover annual charges: 400 club season tickets at £ 1 = £ 400; 200 ordinary season tickets at £ 1 5s = £ 250; 67 persons per day for 6 months = 12060 at 6d = £ 301; Total £ 951. The estimates did not include the value of the reservoir (£ 6228) and the value of the land (£ 3000) (MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 191th meeting, 22 January 1908, p. 874).

77 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 8 January 1908 and HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January, 1908.

78 This allowed 18,000 bathers at 6d per head, 6,000 club members at 4d per head, 12,000 school children at 2d (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 17 January 1908.)

Image 2: Long Street Swimming bath, Cape Town



Source: Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Public Library Press Cuttings, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 17 January 1908.

Hence, the conversion of the Berea reservoir received serious consideration.⁷⁹ *The Star* believed that its readers would endorse the proposal to spend £ 4,000 in the establishment of “fully-equipped, up-to-date swimming baths.” This outlay and any possible deficit in the cost of running the baths are small matters in comparison to the benefits the scheme will confer...⁸⁰ The *Leader* emphasised the urgency of swift action: “... If we had to wait for a perfect scheme, the young would become old and the old be in their graves before any practical step was taken. The fact is that the time is convenient and the opportunity is to hand for carrying out a good idea”. The Town Council meeting of 22 January 1908 was an animated affair with financial considerations to convert the Berea reservoir into a swimming bath being the major issue. Mr Jeppe, considered the expenditure of £ 4,000 too hefty, “even on such a good object as a swimming bath”. He hoped that the private company being formed to provide baths “would save the council all the expense”.⁸¹ In its recommendation, The Parks and Estates Committee likewise stated that it was prepared to waive the Berea scheme if a bona fide private scheme

79 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 191th meeting, 22 January 1908, p. 872.

80 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *The Star*, 22 January, 1908.

81 All quotes in the paragraph from HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 23 January, 1908.

with the necessary financial backing behind it, took shape. Nevertheless, the Committee was of opinion “that such an eminently necessary institution as public baths should not be delayed for an indefinite period, awaiting the arrival of the private speculator”.⁸² The “indefinite period” did not last long.

Coincidentally, while the Town Council considered the Berea scheme, Johannesburg’s entrepreneurs showed their metal. In January 1908, prominent townsmen floated the “Johannesburg Swimming Bath Company Ltd.” to provide public swimming baths.⁸³ The Company hoped that building operations would already start in February 1908.⁸⁴

A grandiose plan, as reflected in the prospectus that was on a large scale intending to replicate similar baths in Europe. Regarding water supply, the company had already arranged with the Town and Suburban Gold Mining Company. Moreover, this water had been recently analysed and declared fit for bathing purposes. Swimming and aquatic sports clubs for women, men and school children would be established and a qualified staff would be in attendance for the purpose of teaching diving and swimming. Season tickets for schools and clubs would be issued at greatly reduced rates.⁸⁵ From a financial point of view, the promoters completely believed in their scheme.⁸⁶

A report in the *Rand Daily Mail*, remarked that “if Johannesburg is to have a swimming bath, let it have a good one”, irrespective of whether it is provided by municipal or by private enterprise. Probably referring to the Berea scheme, the report continued: “It is no use putting up a small and poorly equipped bath in a distant suburb. It must be fairly central. It must be of sufficient size and must be up-to-date in every respect.”⁸⁷ As it turned out, this grand scheme never materialised and Johannesburgers had to be satisfied with a much more modest swimming bath.

The ball was now back in the Town Council’s court. It finally agreed on the Berea scheme and sanctioned an expenditure of £ 4,000 to convert the reservoir into a public swimming bath. The *Leader* welcomed the Town

82 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 January, 1908.

83 Messrs JM Buckland (chairperson), WF Lance, JI Hoffmann, Emile Nathan and M Hathorn (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January, 1908.)

84 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 January, 1908.

88 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January, 1908.

86 They estimated that the takings of average £ 25 per day would amount to £ 9,100 per year. The estimated expenditure was put at £ 5,000, leaving an estimated profit of £ 4,000 and thus an annual dividend of 20 per cent per year (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January, 1908).

87 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 January, 1908.

Council's decision: "After struggling along for 20 years without a place where a dusty, hot, and uncomfortable soul might indulge in the luxury of a swim, Johannesburg now will be well supplied with such facilities".⁸⁸

There were, however objections to this scheme. A report in the *Rand Daily Mail*, pointed out that the argument that the Berea district did not really need a swimming bath, carried weight. Being an affluent neighbourhood, the residents could easily use the nearby swimming bath of the Orange Grove hotel. Reflecting the class differences, the *Rand Daily Mail* contrasted Berea with the basic needs such as proper housing for the poor whites in the impoverished suburbs of Fordsburg, Vrededorp or the Jeppes district.⁸⁹

The objection of a correspondent of the *Rand Daily Mail* to the site came from a different angle, namely that the site was "a most inconvenient one" for the public residing in Jeppes, Belgravia, Troyeville, Turffontein and Fordsburg as well as the Town. He suggested that, if the Town Council could finance it, a swimming bath should be built in a more central position, such as Von Brandis Square or the Wanderers.⁹⁰

On the other hand, it was recognised that it would be impossible to find a site pleasing every one in every district. Berea would not serve Jeppetown or Fordsburg, being far apart, but "the attraction of a good swimming bath will certainly induce a large number of people to make the journey". It would nevertheless serve the large population in Doornfontein and the adjoining suburbs.⁹¹

Other objections related to the physical nature of the project came from the same correspondent known as "AQUATICK", claiming "wide experience in construction and management of swimming baths in different areas of the British Empire", was very sceptical, as it would not provide facilities on a par with those in Britain "which are essential." He doubted whether there would be sufficient money, pointing out that, in addition to converting the reservoir, a substantial sum of money had to be set aside for sufficient water.⁹² He also questioned whether the charge of 3d per head would cover the use of a swimsuit and a towel.⁹³ He closed his letter on a very sceptical note.

88 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Leader*, 25 January, 1908.

89 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January, 1908.

90 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: Letter, "AQUATICK", *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 January 1908.

91 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January, 1908.

92 The bath required an enormous quantity of water each week, amounting to 1s.3d per 1,000 gallons (HP Wits JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: Letter, "AQUATICK", *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 January 1908).

93 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 294: Letter, "AQUATICK", *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 January 1908.

Whether the Town Council paid any attention to “AQUATICK”’s remarks is not clear. Nevertheless, merely two months later, the Town Council abandoned the Berea scheme. The official reason was that, although the cost for the alterations were low, it was inadvisable to give up the use of the reservoir. The baths should rather be established on the site of the Doornfontein reservoirs.⁹⁴ Moreover, Doornfontein was more centrally situated and, revising the views on accessibility, better served with tram routes contiguous to Doornfontein, Bertrams, Judith’s Paarl, Lorentzville, Troyeville, Jeppes and the eastern part of Johannesburg.⁹⁵ It seems that this was a crucial motivation “as an efficient tram service is an important factor in the success of swimming baths, wherever they may be established...”.⁹⁶

Doornfontein scheme

Already in 1907, the then chair of the Rand Water Board, Sir William St John Carr, suggested that the disused reservoir at Doornfontein, owned by the Board, might be a cheaper proposition for a public bath scheme. This coincided with considerations pertaining to improvements to the Ellis Park sporting grounds in Doornfontein.⁹⁷

The Town Council entered into negotiations with the Water Board for the purchase of the property, which was quite substantial - 24 acres, including the freehold.⁹⁸ Perhaps because of the slump in the price for landed property, the Town Council could purchase the grounds for the fair price of £ 4700. In addition, the Town Council purchased from the Consolidated Investment Company 7 acres of adjacent land for £ 500, giving a total area of 31 acres for £ 5200.⁹⁹ On 27 May 1908, the Town Council approved the Doornfontein scheme at a combined cost of £ 5934.¹⁰⁰

94 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 195th meeting, 18 March 1908, p. 1005.

95 Wits, WCL, HP, AF 1913, JPLPC, File 447: *Leader*, 18 January, 1909.

96 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 197th meeting, 15 April 1908, p. 1100.

97 L Grundlingh, “Transforming a wasteland to a premium sporting arena”, pp. 31-33.

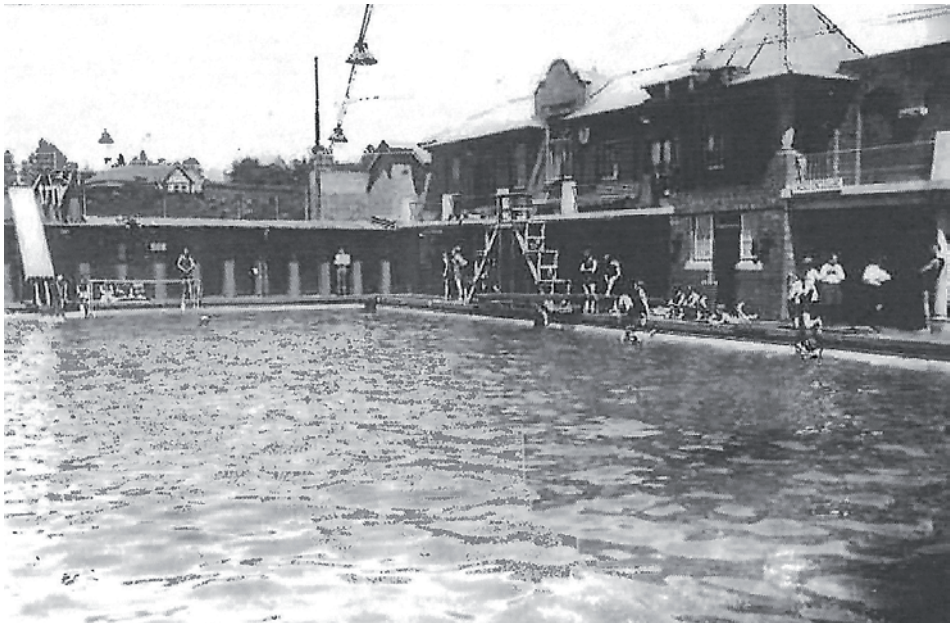
98 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 18 January, 1908; MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 197th meeting, 15 April, 1908, p. 1103.

99 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 197th meeting, 15 April, 1908, p. 1103; HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 18 January, 1909.

100 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 200th meeting, 27 May 1908, pp. 1224-1227.

Eight months later, the Doornfontein swimming bath was ready.¹⁰¹ *The Star's* report, in a rather hyperboles style, and brimming with pride, is worth quoting: "... nothing is more remarkable than the reclaiming of the area known as Doornfontein brickfields and the metamorphosis of that area into Ellis Park... Starting with unpromising material in the shape of clay pits and heaps of bricks lying about... on an almost hilly piece of ground, the council has changed the face of nature to an extraordinary degree and have already evolved out of the original chaos one institution which will be the centre of the park scheme when it reaches full maturity.... This is the swimming bath, one of the biggest in the world and certainly the largest in South Africa".¹⁰² Likewise, the *Rand Daily Mail* praised the Town Council as it "acted upon the principle that if a thing is worth doing it is worth doing well".¹⁰³

Image 3: Initial lightning and diving facilities, ca 2007



Source: Museum Africa, City of Johannesburg Heritage, PH 2007 – 3902.

101 The bath was 150 feet (45.72 metres) long, 100 feet (30.5 metres) wide and 3 feet 4 in (1 metre) to 7 feet 4 in (2.2 metres) deep. The council awarded the tender to Messrs Harper Brothers to build the largest bath in South Africa at the time. The design provided for international competitions. In addition, accommodation for 3 000 people, dressing rooms, a children's shelter and ticket office were built (MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of Town Council, 2 December 1908, pp 1648; MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of Town Council, 22 July 1908, pp. 1356-1357, 1361; C Leigh, "Ellis Park swimming bath", p. 2 (As cited in Doukakis and Meisel, *The story of Johannesburg's Doornfontein*, forthcoming).

102 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *The Star*, 11 January, 1909.

103 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 January, 1909.

Popularity

The opening of Johannesburg's first public swimming bath on 18 January 1909¹⁰⁴ was a grand occasion. According to newspaper reports, this event was met with huge excitement.

Image 4: Opening ceremony of swimming bath, 18 January 1909



Source: Museum Africa, City of Johannesburg Heritage, PH 2007-3901.

Beforehand, there were plenty of visitors to the baths “who contemplate with pleasure the splendid proportions thereof” as well as the first-rate facilities.¹⁰⁵ Publicity of the opening was carefully choreographed, presided over by the mayor and a posse of council dignitaries. With the press in attendance, speeches were made, followed by a swimming gala. All aquatic sports, not only swimming events, were on the programme. The water polo match – which was a first-time experience for the spectators – fascinated them, ensuring future support.

¹⁰⁴ Also see earlier reference to this event.

¹⁰⁵ HR, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 14 January 1909; HR, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 January, 1909.

Image 5: Water polo competition, ca 2009



Source: Museum Africa, City of Johannesburg Heritage, PH 2007-588.

The life-saving demonstration, which was particularly appropriate in view of recent drownings and near-drownings strongly appealed to the crowd.¹⁰⁶

The reporter of the *Leader* was convinced that it would be popular. All the indications were already there with its opening: “Who said that Johannesburg did not want a swimming bath? Whoever said it would have been dumfounded had he seen the tremendous crowd that rendered the banks surrounding the baths a living picture – had he witnessed their delight and heard their enthusiastic cheering. There were at least 4000 enthusiastic spectators present described as “a large, orderly and good-humoured gathering...”¹⁰⁷ The *Rand Daily Mail*, shared these views, convinced that the inaugural water gala/carnival... “ended in triumph, socially, financially and for the organisers and the swimmer of the Rand.” Swimming would become as popular as any other out-door game.¹⁰⁸ In a letter to the *Leader*, “SPORT”, a spectator at the

106 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January 1909.

107 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 18 January 1909.

108 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January 1909.

opening, and a swimming enthusiast, praised the Town Council “for having given us one of the finest swimming baths in the country”.¹⁰⁹

Congratulating the Town Council on the “splendid way in which the swimming bath scheme has been carried out”, the *Rand Daily Mail* remarked that the huge attendance was a confirmation that the proverbial “long felt want” of a swimming bath was indeed needed. Praise was also given for the enthusiasm and drive of Mr J Dowell Ellis, Chairperson of the Parks and Estates Committee. According to the *Rand Daily Mail*, “it was the best step the Town Council could have taken, as by deeds this gentleman, as also the Town Engineer, showed what can be done if people will only work in unison and put their shoulders to the wheel”. The *Rand Daily Mail* expressed its confidence that the undertaking would be a financial success.¹¹⁰

The immediate period after the official opening boded well for the future “as proved by the “deluge of the past week”.¹¹¹ In October 1910, the *Rand Daily Mail* confirmed the bath’s popularity for both swimmers, bathers and spectators.¹¹² The yearly increased popularity of swimming was indeed not in the slightest doubt. Proof of this could be found in visiting the Doornfontein bath on any Saturday and Sunday.¹¹³ The *Rand Daily Mail* reported 1600 people, mostly adults, on a Sunday in March 1919.¹¹⁴

The performance of the Johannesburg Swimming Club at the opening ceremony was a “glowing tribute to a fine body of sportsmen who have done more for swimming than any other association on the Rand”. This was an important compliment, as clubs would form the life-blood in maintaining the popularity of the baths. Various clubs such as the Post Office Club, the Municipality Club and clubs for men and women as well as schools were established “to make the fullest use of the new baths”.¹¹⁵

109 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: Letter, “Sport”, *Leader*, 20 January, 1909. He was also pleased that the surrounding area of 31 acres of land would be turned into a beautiful lake, with boats and steam launches, also that the western portion of the grounds would be turned into a stadium for all sorts of sports and the balance turned into a beautiful park.

110 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 January, 1909.

111 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January 1909.

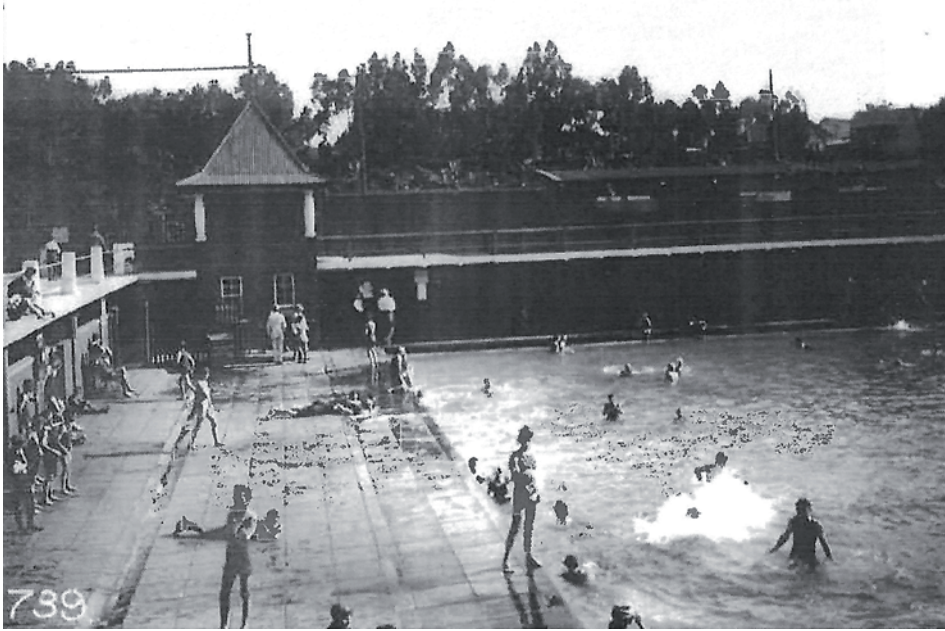
112 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 October 1910.

113 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 December 1921.

114 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 March 1919. Likewise, in Britain baths thrived up to 1914 as they fulfilled growing leisure demands (J Skoski, “Public baths and washhouses in Victorian Britain” (Ph.D, Indiana University, 2000) p. 46.)

115 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 January 1909.

Image 6: Popularity of Ellis Park swimming bath, ca 1910



Source: Museum Africa, City of Johannesburg Heritage, PH 2007-588.

In 1915 the *Evening Chronicle* reported that “Large crowds are availing themselves to relax their muscles by taking a little swimming exercise daily”. It proudly pointed out that Johannesburg had produced “some very fine swimmers” since the baths were opened. Judging by the number of young swimmers, “the coast experts will not have matters all their own way in future”.¹¹⁶

Attendance at school galas were another indication of the popularity of the Doornfontein bath. For example, early during the 1917 season over 8000 people patronised two school swimming galas. The keenness and enthusiasm of the teachers and competitors was further proof of how much they appreciated the baths.¹¹⁷

Expenses

The reality of the costs of running the swimming bath soon struck home. From the start, a lucrative economic management of the baths was problematic. For example, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that the profit was a mere £ 50 per week since the baths were opened five months ago.¹¹⁸ In March 1910,

116 All quotes in this paragraph are from HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 452: *Evening Chronicle*, 28 September 1915.

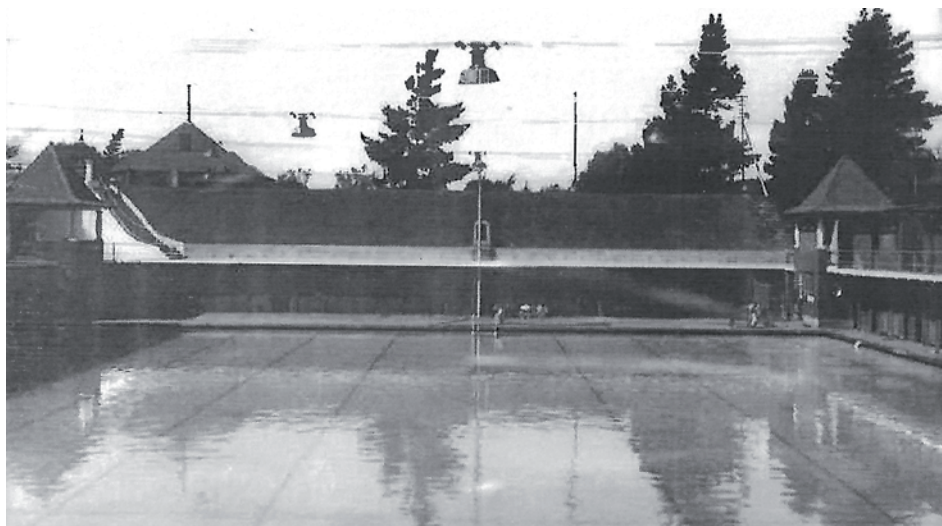
117 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *The Star*, 28 February 1917.

118 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1909.

the town treasurer reported that the running of the swimming bath for that year would only result in a slight surplus.¹¹⁹ This was already an ominous prediction that proved to be true.

There were three major running expenses. Johannesburg did not have a regular natural supply of water. The Town Council had to buy water for the bath from the Rand Water Board, which was very expensive.¹²⁰ Keeping the baths clean also had serious financial implications.

Image 7: Successful results of keeping the bath clean, ca 1910



Source: Museum Africa, City of Johannesburg Heritage, PH 2007-3906.

A delay in filling the baths meant a significant loss of revenue. As the baths were filled on a Sunday afternoon, it meant that the whole of Monday was lost.¹²¹ Another expense was the washing machines at the bath laundry,¹²² which had to wash huge quantities of towels and swim suits.¹²³ It soon became evident that it was impossible to make the swimming bath a financial success.¹²⁴

119 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 233th meeting, 31 March 1910, p. 1088. Further detailed expenses given on pp. 1088-1089.

120 The price paid for water from the town mains was 4s 6d per 1000 gallons. As the bath holds about half a million gallons, each time the bath was filled the cost was approximately £ 112 10s (£12,096 today) (MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 244th meeting, 1 December 1910, p. 1608).

121 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: Letter, "Swimmer", *The Star*, 28 January 1910; HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 20 October 1910.

122 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 321th meeting 2 November 1912, p. 558.

123 MO, Jhb, LL: Minutes of the Town Council, 276th meeting 17 December 1912, p. 1053.

124 Johannesburg's swimming baths constantly ran at a loss. Investment in the public leisure was indeed not a

The only income was the admission tickets. These were regularly adjusted in an effort to keep a balance between the urgency to generate income and the necessity and obligation to ease accessibility and maintaining the popularity of the swimming bath. In an editorial, the *Leader* reiterated the importance of the latter: "... for the baths are a public convenience, and should be brought within the reach of all, independently or where they reside".¹²⁵ The Town Council never really solved this issue and continuously had to approve funds to cover the deficit.

Conclusion

Although the context differed, the road to Johannesburg's first municipal swimming bath mirrored similar developments, especially in Britain. By the early twentieth century the principle of municipal involvement in recreational and cultural life in the Western world had been firmly established with the advance of "municipal socialism".¹²⁶ Johannesburg's Town Council similarly reflected the municipalisation of leisure in this period. It indeed played an important role in actualising the dream of a swimming bath in which the white male middle- and upper classes played a significant role. From its actions and decisions, it is clear that the overarching obligation of providing leisure spaces as well as sporting and recreational facilities for the white population, was an important consideration.

Providing a swimming bath was another brick in the Town Council's endeavour to raise the prestige of a fast-growing town. Apart from its functionality, the swimming bath was simultaneously seen as a recognised urban "monument". In the end, the serious financial concerns of the Town Council was somewhat assuaged by the knowledge that the bath was popular, thus proving that the effort was worth its while.¹²⁷

Studying the history of the provision of Johannesburg's first swimming baths,

cheap affair. Records from 1928 indicate that the up to date the Council spent £ 400,000 on all forms of public recreation, which included swimming baths and the library (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 320: *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 December 1928).

125 HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 30 January 1909; HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *The Star*, 11 February 1909. As there was only one bath in Johannesburg, there was not, as in big towns in England, a second-class bath as well as a first class one. Hence the *Leader* deemed the charges to be reasonable (HP, Wits, JPLPC, AF 1913, File 447: *Leader*, 20 October 1910).

126 SG Jones, "State intervention in sport and leisure in Britain between the wars", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22(1), 1987, p. 167.

127 It is noteworthy that the popular press, although sometimes critically, generally enthusiastically and sympathetically supported the Council's endeavours to provide swimming facilities.

lead to a better understanding of the relative importance of providing leisure spaces and facilities such as swimming baths, vis-a-vis the other vital demands such as housing, sanitation and road construction of a fast-growing Town. It seems that leisure facilities were on a par with the importance of the latter.