

Bathing Belles and Bathing Machines

When one of King George III's daughters came to stay with the Hon. Colonel Hood in Catherington for a few months in 1805, she came over to Emsworth 'to take the waters' for her health, and a bathing machine was specially built for her use. Robert Harfield had built a Bathing House, now the Emsworth Sailing Club, on a corner of the common land known as 'Seafield', at the end of what is now Bath Road. When later the Bathing House was offered for sale the particulars described it as:

A new erected Bathing House containing the necessary apartments for a small family, with two capacious baths, constantly supplied with fresh sea water, and dressing closets adjoining, with a furnace, pipes and apparatus for a hot bath. The above premises are standing by the waterside in Emsworth Harbour near the pleasant town of Emsworth (*Hampshire Telegraph & Sussex Chronicle*).

Bathing machines had come into being almost a century before; the earliest ones were square boxes on four small wheels with a pyramidal roof and sometimes a tiny window on the side. It was essentially a beach hut on wheels, a sort of mobile changing room pulled directly into the sea by a horse or, where the shore was too steep, by a capstan and rope. Once in the water, the driver would unhitch the horse and return to the beach for another machine. Almost every seaside town soon had them and after paying the hire charge, would-be bathers waited by the shore for a machine to become free and then stepped up into the dark, dank box to remove their street clothes. There was little light to change by and when the machine got moving the jerks of the horse made it an even more difficult task.

Though men traditionally chose to bathe naked, and did so until the 1860s, they still undressed in a bathing machine so as to make their entry into the water as decent as possible. After disrobing and getting into her bathing costume, a lady occupant disembarked from the sea side down steps into the water. It was considered essential that the machine blocked any view of the bather from the shore for modesty's sake and the machine would often be equipped with a small flag which could be raised by the bather as a signal to the driver that they had had enough and were ready to return to the shore. In the early days women paid for guides or 'dippers' who helped them into loose fitting, sack-style bathing gowns before taking charge of the ritual act of bathing. By this time, too, often the beaches were segregated, men's bathing machines on the men's part of the beach and women's bathing machines on the women's side, sometimes with a pier between them such as that at Worthing.

Like so many 17th and 18th century fashions, sea bathing began as an exclusive pursuit of the moneyed classes — only they could afford to spend extended periods away from home and work and the day of the seaside 'tripper' was to come later on, popularised by the railways. Hiring a bathing machine was initially an expensive activity, which consequently became a status symbol.

Weymouth was lucky enough to be favoured by the Duke of Gloucester and later in July 1789 by his elder brother George III, whose doctors had recommended a series of dips. His bathing machine was larger than normal and on the roof, above its landward door, was fixed the royal coat of arms and inscribed 'the machine of the great and good King George III, the friend of the poor, the patron of Weymouth'. The Weymouth townspeople showed their delight by providing a band to serenade King George on his first excursion into the sea, where, stepping naked from his bathing machine, he was met by female attendants whose bonnets were decorated with 'God Save the King' — the imagination boggles. Unlike his father, the Prince Regent, later King George IV, preferred Brighton to Weymouth and became a regular bather there and essentially revitalised the town. Bathing machines were introduced early on Worthing beach in 1789, and by 1813 there were 60. Using a machine there then cost between 6d. and one shilling, including towels. Royalty continued to think sea bathing beneficial and there is a scene in the film *Mrs Brown* at Osborne in which Judy Dench as Queen Victoria, steps decorously from her machine clad in a heavy costume and bloomers of navy blue serge with white piping complete with matching hat exhorting her daughters to follow suit and take the plunge. She preferred the Isle of Wight, finding Brighton people 'very indiscreet and troublesome'. Her luxurious bathing vehicle was hand-crafted by a Portsmouth coachbuilder. It measured 12ft x 7ft with a plumbed-in water closet and the door and window handles were of silver, with a deep canopy which shaded the steps into the sea.

Unfortunately for Emsworth the *haute monde* became more and more demanding, requiring their chosen resort to have not only a circulating library and wide promenade but several tea rooms where they could see and be seen. Although Robert Harfield's Bathing House continued to be moderately popular for some little time, the town could not then capitalise further on the fashion for bathing, one reason being that in the eyes of the gentry they considered the town to have a lack of sufficiently high-class boarding establishments.

But for most of the working class population of early 19th century Britain hiring a bathing machine remained an infrequent, if not impossible, luxury. In the first place they needed the time and money to get to the coast. But when the railways arrived, in Emsworth by 1847, that made journeys to the coast quicker and cheaper. As the railways spread across the country more and more people were able to enjoy a seaside holiday, or at the very least, a day excursion. In 1837 around 50,000 passengers travelled to Brighton by stage coach during the course of the year; in 1850 the railway carried 73,000 in a single week, putting Brighton and places like Southsea and Bournemouth firmly on the map. Pleasure had superseded health as the main reason to travel to the coast and those still unable to hire a bathing machine could now make do and enjoy a paddle in the briny.

Margaret Rogers