

We had a problem

Work on the Drumsheugh Baths has been completed and they are back in use. Jan Ambrose reports



(Top) The gymnasium, previously the site of the Turkish baths
(Above) The Baths restored to their traditional glory

Devotees of BBC2 tv's *Restoration* were undoubtedly delighted when the Victoria Baths in Manchester was announced as the winner of the first series. It was duly awarded £3.5 million for restoration purposes from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Sadly, when Griff Rhys Jones, presenter of *Restoration*, revisited the Baths, he found that, to quote a report in the *Daily Mail* of 5 September, "hardly anything but talk has happened since". According to the *Daily Mail*, Fran Toms, head of cultural strategy for Manchester City Council, owners of the Baths, "put the lid on the idea that the Victoria Baths will ever return to the purpose for which it was built" saying: "The Baths are not an appropriate use for today."

But across the border, Edinburgh's Drumsheugh Baths, another traditional swimming baths, was restored to its Victorian glory and fully re-opened in April this year. The history of the Baths was covered previously in *Building Conservation Journal* (Number 36 2004, *A Scottish swimming lesson*). The successful restoration demonstrates what can be achieved through meticulous research, professional advice, dogged determination, and uncompromising budgetary control.

James Murray, chairman of the Drumsheugh Baths Club, explains: "The Drumsheugh Baths Company Ltd, the oldest private swimming club in Edinburgh, was set up by Edinburgh locals in 1882, only to burn down 10 years later. The company went into liquidation in 1902 and the present company, Drumsheugh Baths Club Limited was formed to acquire the building and its fixtures and fittings from the liquidator. The shareholders, again local

residents, included doctors, clerks, merchants and a mining engineer. The Memorandum and Articles of Association prohibits the shareholders from receiving dividends – all profits are ploughed back into the club."

Over the years, the Baths suffered a few crises: in 1980, the roof started leaking profusely, there was lack of good dehumidification, and new boilers and filtration plant were installed. In the mid-1990s, the Turkish baths, which were very expensive to run, were turned into a gymnasium and sauna, and major works, facilitated by a Historic Scotland grant, were undertaken to the rather elderly fabric of the walls and the air conditioning.

The pool was closed for 51 weeks from April 2004-April 2005 for more major remedial work. Forum Board member Keith Dyer, of Lorn Macneal Architects and Building Surveyors, recalls when James Murray phoned him in May 2003: "James said: 'We've got a problem. The tiles in the pool tank are lifting. If the work isn't done, we'll have to close.'"

"The work involved gutting the pool hall, and replacing all horizontal surfaces including those in the pool tank, although the original structure was itself sound. The services were installed in 1882, and theoretically, could have been put back, but in view of the major works we were undertaking, it would have been imprudent not to replace them."

Stripping the tiles and render was a logistical nightmare, and the narrow roads surrounding the building only allowed contractors restricted access. Near disaster was averted when, just before the order was given to get rid of it, a mysterious pipe was discovered to be a live water main.

Throughout the project, many difficulties had to be overcome, including the shortage of skilled labour accustomed to working on historic buildings, sourcing the tiles and getting the right kind of tiler: “We weren’t dealing with a tiled wall in a large retail outlet,” said Keith.

Health and safety legislation – not so prevalent in the late-19th century – meant that tiles at the shallow end had to be slip-resistant. Having tracked down a specialist book on collecting Victorian tiles, Keith discovered that the manufacturers could be identified from markings on the back. He found a London-based company, In Situ (which also supplies tiles to London Transport), that made and supplied bespoke tiles, including lane markers and numbering rosettes. A “before and after” assessment was made by Historic Scotland.

The coping stones were made of reconstituted crushed limestone bound with epoxy resin,

a stain-proof and slip-resistant material. The stainless steel handrail has been replaced with brass, which oxidised following installation and has now mellowed to a dark golden patina.

Lighting was difficult, admits James: “We wanted to have sufficient light to see if someone was in difficulty underwater, but nothing too harsh.” The problem was solved by directing 70% of the overhead lighting to the roof, while 30% shines down on the pool.

Today, the pool is open seven days a week, and its traditional facilities comprise an entrance hall containing seating, a cloakroom and pigeonholes for indoor footwear. Members then go downstairs to the members’ lounge, gym, sauna and pool.

The pool is 70ft long by 35ft wide and has remained unaltered with its rings and trapezes still in use over the water, whose quality is considered among the best in Edinburgh. Individual poolside changing cubicles have been

retained and members have a small locker in a separate room for items such as costumes and goggles.

There are two saunas, one near the shallow end and the other at balcony level. The building has an arched vestibule at street level. The Baths are at a much lower level with an open timber roof resting on seven bays of cast-iron columns and red brick arches. The roof is punctuated by two glass cupolas, and at an intermediate level, the members’ lounge, complete with daily papers, overlooks the pool hall, and an open balcony houses the second sauna and a fully equipped gym. The gym has a Moorish tiled entrance screen, vaulted ceiling with cupola and apsidal east end.

The project cost £1.15million in total, of which £294,000 came from a Historic Scotland grant; however, this was significantly eroded as the club had to pay VAT amounting to £171,000. The Baths, a private club, was

unsuccessful in a bid for Lottery funding, and other funding was raised from members’ subscriptions, donations, a levy and long-term bank loan.

The next planned phase of works is to replace air handling equipment in a sympathetic manner to ensure protection of the fabric, but James Murray takes time to reflect on what has been achieved to date: “It was a big project for a relatively small organisation, but we’ve done it. The major components are secured for the next generation.”

And, it has to be said, Drumsheugh Swimming Baths proves that traditional swimming baths are still appropriate for use today.

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Drumsheugh Baths: as appropriate for use today as they were in Victorian times