



Sea bathing

The golden sands of Weston Beach have attracted visitors for over 200 years. Holidaymakers today, however, are not always tempted to go into the sea. It is full of sediment from the rivers which flow into the Bristol Channel further upstream. The sand also soon changes into the thick, sticky mud for which Weston-super-Mud is well known!



Glentworth Bay in the late 1800s © courtesy of Weston Library

Despite the murky water, sea bathing here has a long history. It became fashionable after King George III began swimming in the sea at Weymouth during the 1780s. He was advised to do so by his doctors, as a cure for recent illness. Doctors from nearby Bristol and Bath soon began sending their wealthy patients to Weston “for the cure”.

Swimsuits, or the lack of...

Until the mid-1700s men and women bathed together, naked. The first swimsuits were introduced later that century, as sea bathing became more popular. Men and women began to keep apart on beaches, so nobody of the opposite sex might see them. Bathing costumes were extremely modest compared to modern swimwear, but were not considered proper clothing in which to be seen.

Women had to bathe fully clothed from head to toe. This included wearing a bonnet and slippers. They wore bathing gowns, a loose, ankle-length smock with full sleeves. The gowns were made of heavy material such as flannel or wool. These fabrics would not become transparent when wet, thus protecting a lady's modesty. Weights were sewn into the hem to stop the gown from riding up in the water.



A bathing gown from the mid-1800s

Men and boys wore long swimsuits in public baths, but could bathe naked outdoors. In addition to Weston beach, men swam at the Bathing Coves past Birnbeck Island on the Kewstoke Road. They needed to be good swimmers, as the water was deep and the currents strong.

Bathing Machines

Once bathing gowns were introduced, it was decided that a “proper” lady should never be seen wearing one! The rigid code of behaviour for sea bathing led to the widespread use of bathing machines. These mobile changing rooms first appeared in the 1730s, and were soon in use at seaside resorts throughout Britain.

Bathing machines looked like wooden carts with roofs and walls of wood or canvas. Bathers – usually female – could change into swimming clothes inside and enter the sea without being observed. Machines were usually horse-drawn, and would be wheeled into the water. Bathers entered the water down steps on the seaward side. They would usually signal when they were ready to return to shore, often raising a small flag.

Some resorts employed strong female attendants called “dippers”, who would help female bathers in and out of the sea. Dippers often simply pushed their client into the sea from the back of the machine. Weak swimmers would be attached to their bathing machine by a cord around their waist, to prevent them being swept away by the current.

Anchor Head was reserved for ladies who wished to bathe without using a machine. The cove was presided over by one Betty Muggleworth, who would chase away any men who came in sight while ladies were bathing.

Weston’s first hotel (now The Royal Hotel), opened in 1810. It owned the first bathing machine in what was still a small fishing village. By 1822 there were three machines on the sands.



Bathing machines on Weston beach, c. 1900 © courtesy of Weston Library

The number steadily increased during the 1800s. By mid-century there were about 50 “nicely painted and trim-looking vehicles” (Whereat’s Guide Book 1855). However, there were always people who preferred not to use them. In 1848 there were complaints of men bathing naked near the ladies’ machines.

Nude swimming was banned in the UK in 1860, and men were now required to wear bathing suits. Some Weston men ignored the ban, stripping off on the beach and running naked into the sea.

Segregated sea bathing ended in 1901, and mixed bathing became socially acceptable. Around 100 machines were still operating on Weston Beach in 1903. A large number were wrecked in the storms of September that year, however, and most were not replaced. Bathing machines had become old-fashioned, and had mostly disappeared by 1914.

Marine Lake

In 1929, Glentworth Bay was enclosed by the completion of a causeway linking Knightstone Island to Claremont in the northwest. The Marine Lake was created, providing a safe bathing area which could be used at all times. The shingle beach was replaced with sand. A diving stage, rafts, water chutes and paddle boats were all provided. Entrance was by admission fee. A colonnaded walkway and the Rozel bandstand were added in the 1930s.



An aerial view of the Marine Lake, 1964 © courtesy of Weston Library

The lake’s creation reflected the popular mood of the 1920s and 1930s. Strict rules concerning dress and behaviour were relaxed. Sunbathing and beach parties became fashionable. Men began swimming topless. Women’s swimsuits, often made from lightweight synthetic fabrics, were tight-fitting and revealed the whole figure.

The Marine Lake suffered severe storm damage in December 1981, and the walkway and bandstand were later demolished. The lake has been dredged in recent years to improve water quality, and the causeway strengthened. Admission to the lake is free. It is popular with families and anyone wishing to bathe without risking dangerous currents or becoming trapped in mud.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council