

# Armagh takes to the water

Nowadays we are inclined to take leisure facilities for granted: indoor pools, Jacuzzis, weights rooms and fitness routines tailored for individual needs etc. So it is hard to imagine the enthusiasm and excitement 97 years ago when the old swimming baths opened at the Folly.

They were described as the ‘city’s latest boon’ when close on 1,000 spectators turned up for the official opening in July,

in the Callan river in his youth donated £100 towards the cost of erecting dressing rooms and provided prizes for the competitions held after diving and life saving exhibitions by Belfast champions. Among the local winners were James Crawford of Navan Street who came first in the boys fifty yards race and Kenneth Blakely who was best at underwater swimming.

already great numbers were patronising the baths every day from seven in the morning until nine o’clock in the evening. The ladies it was said were “taking full advantage of their hours as well as the opportunities for mixed bathing”. Boys were in and out all day long and such was the enthusiasm of some of them that they returned at close on eleven o’clock one night. The poor caretaker who was paid thirty shillings a week for his responsibilities had great difficulty in getting them out of the water and then apparently had to endure abuse instead of gratitude for his efforts from their mothers.

The paper advised those who were wearers of dentures to be warned because there had been a bit of an emergency when one unfortunate bather got a loose plate stuck in their throat and “in the efforts to eject it swallowed much water below the surface”.

The baths were regarded as one of Armagh’s attractions for many years to come. In an official handbook published before the Second World War it was stated that they were “the largest and best equipped open-air swimming ponds to be found in any Irish inland town”.



1918, performed by the M.P. for the area at the time, the Hon. James R. Lonsdale who came over from London specially for the event. He told the gathering that there were very few places in Ireland that had swimming baths such as these and that he hoped the citizens would avail themselves of the benefits they would provide.

Indeed the local press made a point of noting that this amenity put Armagh ahead of the other towns in the county. Even though Lurgan had a lake in its park and Portadown was built on the Bann neither was able to provide “bathing places as safe, sanitary or as suitable as those of the Primatial City”.

Mr. Lonsdale who had learned to swim

Initiators of the baths project were A. C. McBride, H. Hirsch, W. McCrum and Father Cullen. It was they who prevailed upon the City Council to have the former city water supply basins at Folly Lane converted into two swimming pools, one of which was to be kept for learners. Within months the baths were ready, complete with ladders, diving platforms, a raft and lifeboat plus changing facilities.

Several weeks after the official opening it was reported that

