



Making a splash!

200 years of Cleveland Pools, swimming history and costume design

Britain's oldest lido will reopen in 2022

The story of Cleveland Pools is a swim through history. Built in 1815, the Pools were popular with Bath residents until the site closed in the 1980s.

Restoration is now underway.

Follow our story by reading about the 200-year history of the Pools on the panels in the cafe windows.

You can also learn about the history of swimming and costume design.

Follow the circles to find out more about swimming at the Olympics.

www.clevelandpools.org.uk

With thanks to the staff of the Holburne Museum for their support for this exhibition.



Restoration work starts. Contractors transport materials to site on a river barge, 2021.

Photographs courtesy of contractor, Beard
Credit: BarbsterMedia

Header image: Cleveland Pools before restoration, 2019.
Drone photograph by Casey Ryder



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Bathing! Not swimming



AT CLEVELAND POOLS

Bathing

Bathing at the 'Pleasure Baths' was first recorded in 1817. Men bathed in the river-fed main pool. Women used a separate, indoor, spring-fed pool.

SWIMMING HISTORY

Taking a dip

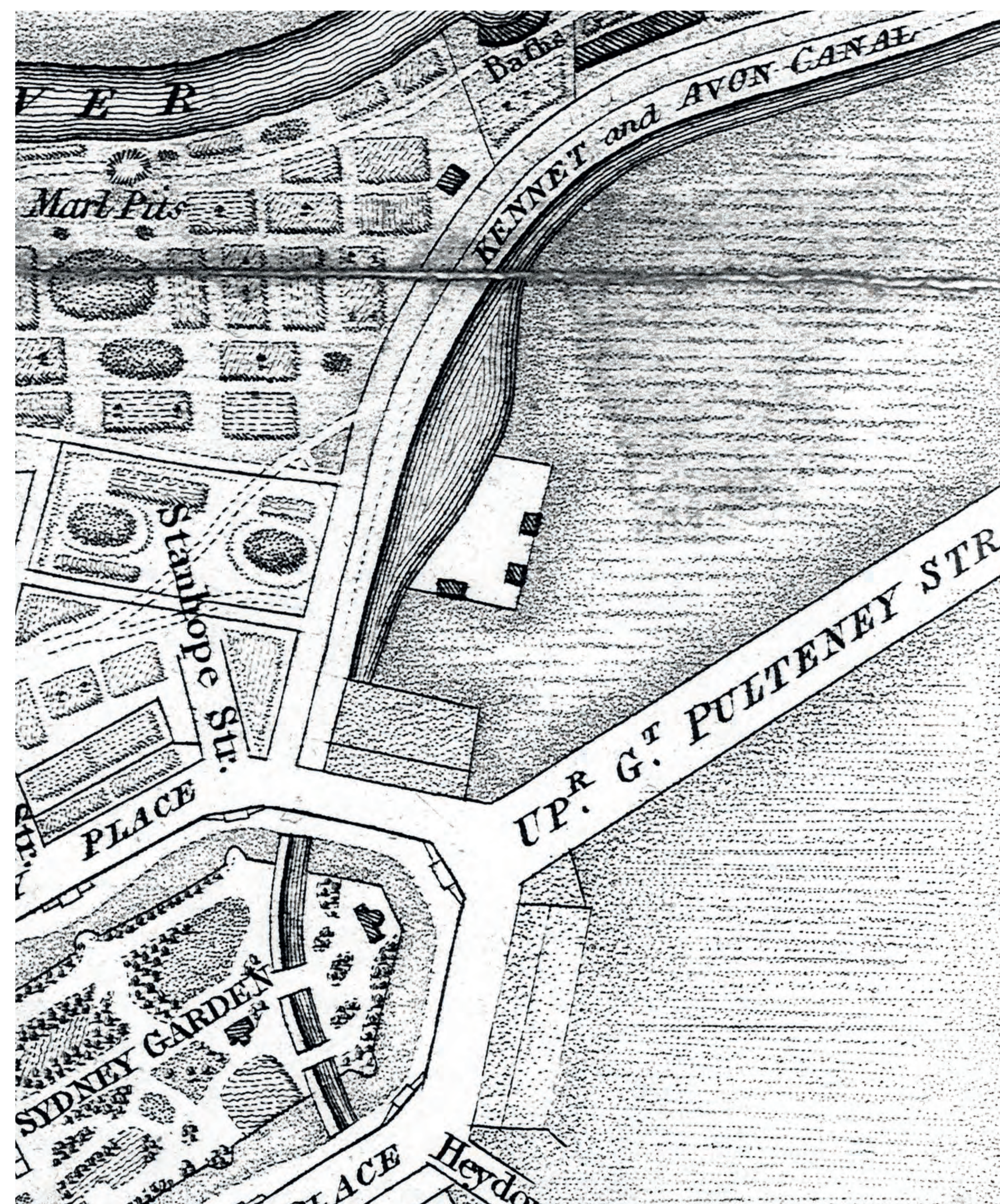
Most people couldn't swim, so they bathed: they got into the water but didn't move very much. The few people who could swim used breaststroke for swimming in rivers and pools.

Seaside bathing became fashionable. From the 1750s to the early 1900s, people used a 'bathing machine' – they changed inside the machine before stepping down into the sea. But most people couldn't afford a bathing machine.

SWIMMING COSTUMES

Naked men and modest women

Men bathed naked. Women wore neck-to-ankle shift dresses made of a hessian-like fabric or linen. These were known as bathing gowns and were beige or brown in colour. They were often weighted at the hem to promote modesty. Women covered their hair with a large, soft cap.



Extract from Barratt's map of Bath, 1818. Note the location of the 'Baths' by the River Avon and their proximity to Sydney Gardens, to the lower left.

Courtesy of Bath Record Office: Archives and Local Studies.



Bathing machines in the 1880s at Lyme Regis.

Copyright: Lyme Regis Museum.

Men and boys went first



AT CLEVELAND POOLS

Galas

Boys from private schools in Bath used the main pool – including pupils from the Bath Proprietary School, located at what is now the Holburne Museum.

William Evans was the Baths Superintendent from around 1860 until his death in 1884. He taught swimming and performed diving stunts at popular spectator events.

SWIMMING HISTORY

Swimming clubs and events

In the 1830s, swimming became competitive and the first men's swimming clubs were set up. Breaststroke was adapted into the faster sidestroke by the 1840s. Races took place in the River Avon, often between landmarks such as bridges or weirs.

It became more common for men and children to learn to swim in private schools or at baths where there were entrance fees.

The front crawl swimming stroke was introduced.

Swimming was seen as a healthy activity but people drowned frequently in rivers and pools. This led to a focus on life-saving skills.

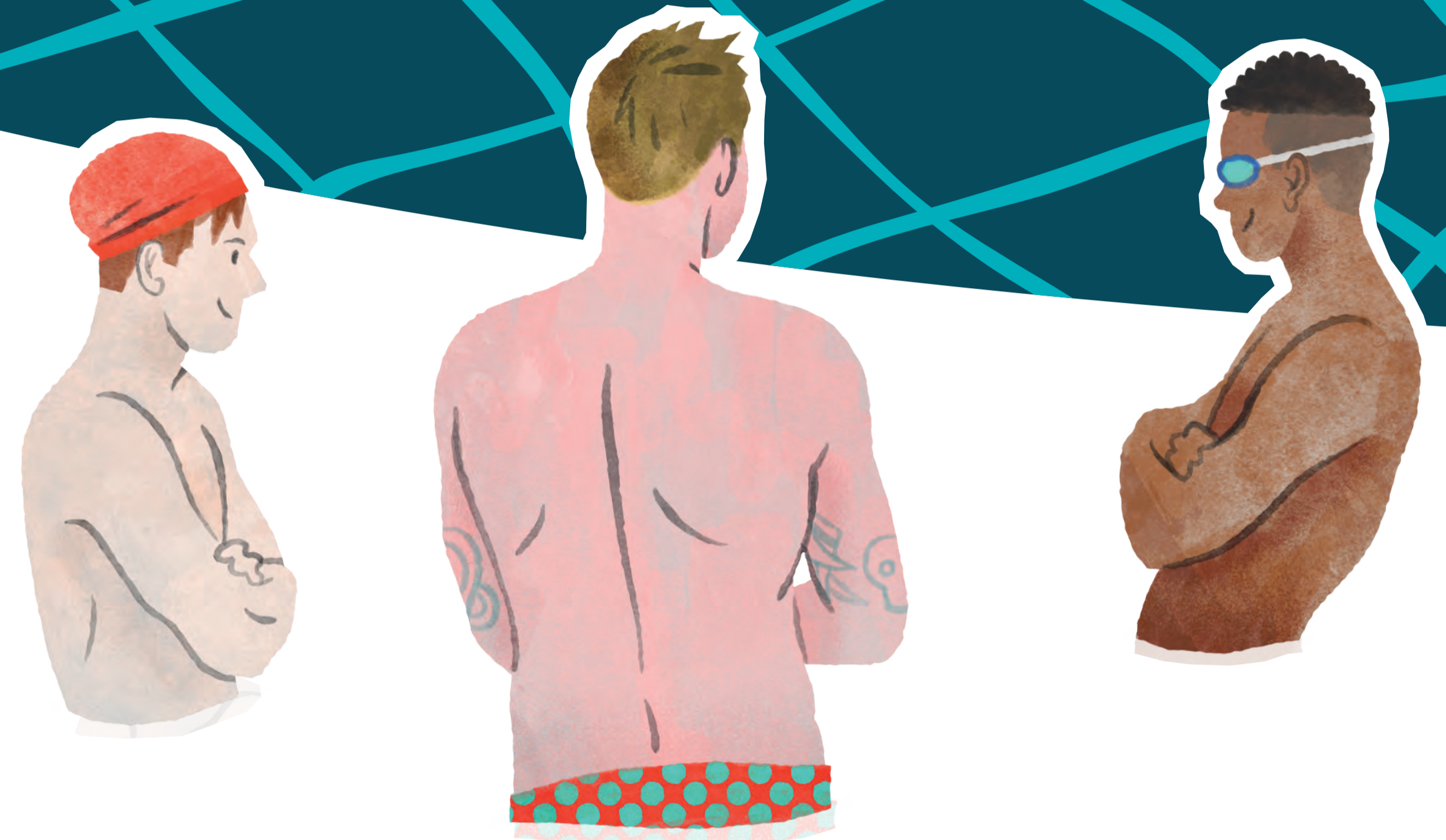
Queen Victoria tried sea bathing in the 1840s. This helped women to access bathing.

SWIMMING COSTUMES

Woolly costumes

By the 1860s, nude bathing was banned in the UK. Men wore long, sleeveless jerseys with knee-length trousers. These costumes were made of knitted wool and were heavy when wet!

Women's costumes covered the body from neck to knee (or longer). A typical costume from the early part of this period was a black dress in heavy cotton or linen. Stiff fabrics were introduced in the 1880s – mainly wool in dark colours, with matching mob caps.



Bath Dolphin Swimming Club at Cleveland Pools, 1910.

Copyright: Bath & North East Somerset Council.



'Captain' William Evans with his baboon. He wasn't really a captain – he just liked to be known as Captain Evans. But he really did have a pet baboon!

Modern sketch, courtesy of the artist.

Swimming gets competitive



AT CLEVELAND POOLS

Pools for the public

The Bath Corporation purchased the Pools in 1900 and installed mains water instead of using river water. Entry was free and thousands of people swam there over the summer.

The Bath Dolphin Swimming Club and the YMCA club practised there too. Mixed bathing was introduced.

SWIMMING HISTORY

Swimming becomes a sport

In 1875 Captain Matthew Webb became the first man to swim the English Channel. He trained at Cleveland Pools.

Swimming training became more professional and standardised.

Water polo competitions and synchronised swimming became popular. The number of swimming clubs continued to grow. Many of them had separate women's membership options.

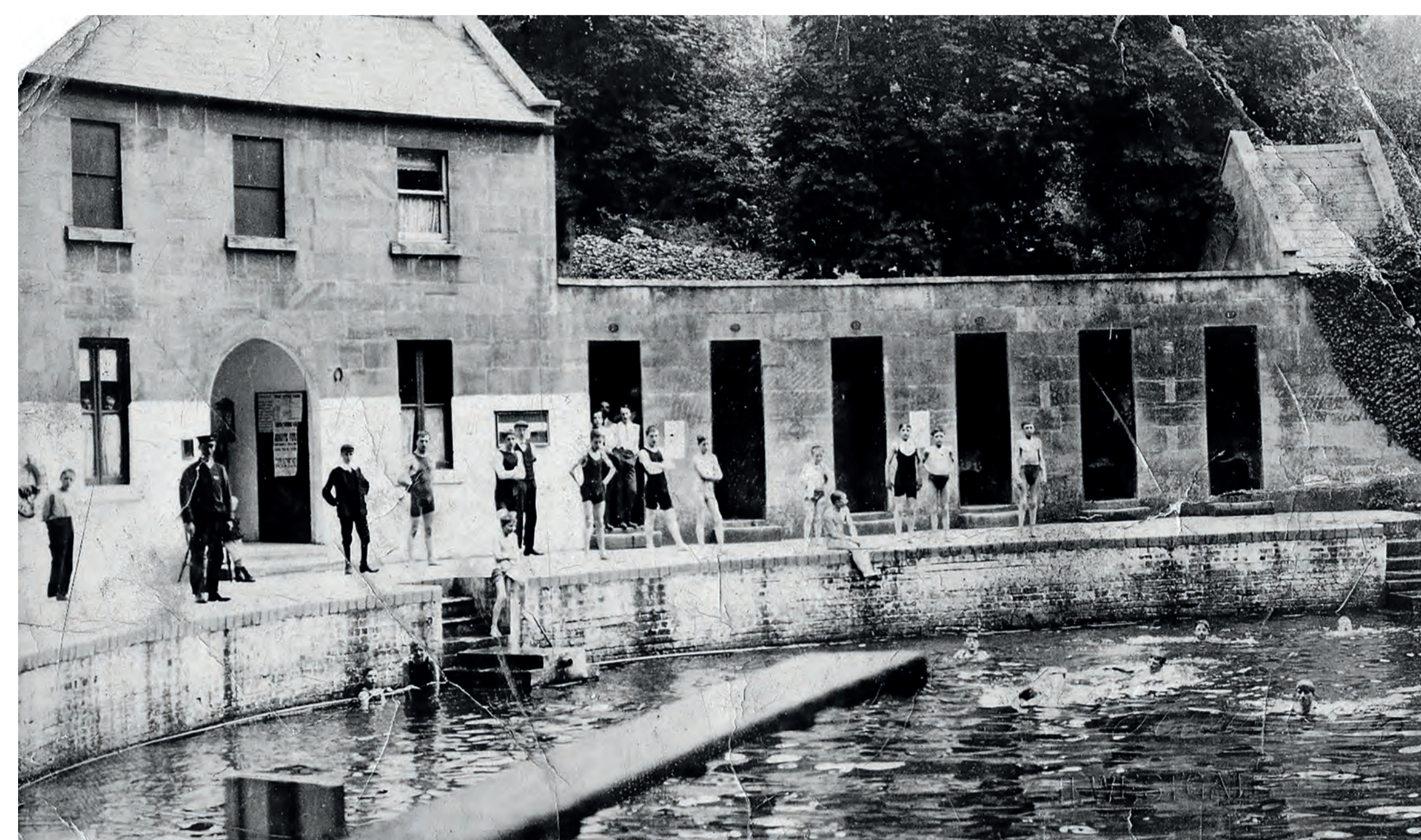
SWIMMING COSTUMES

Designing practical costumes

Women's costumes were more like normal day wear – long dresses with decorative features in material such as cotton flannel. Women also wore matching pantaloons or bloomers.

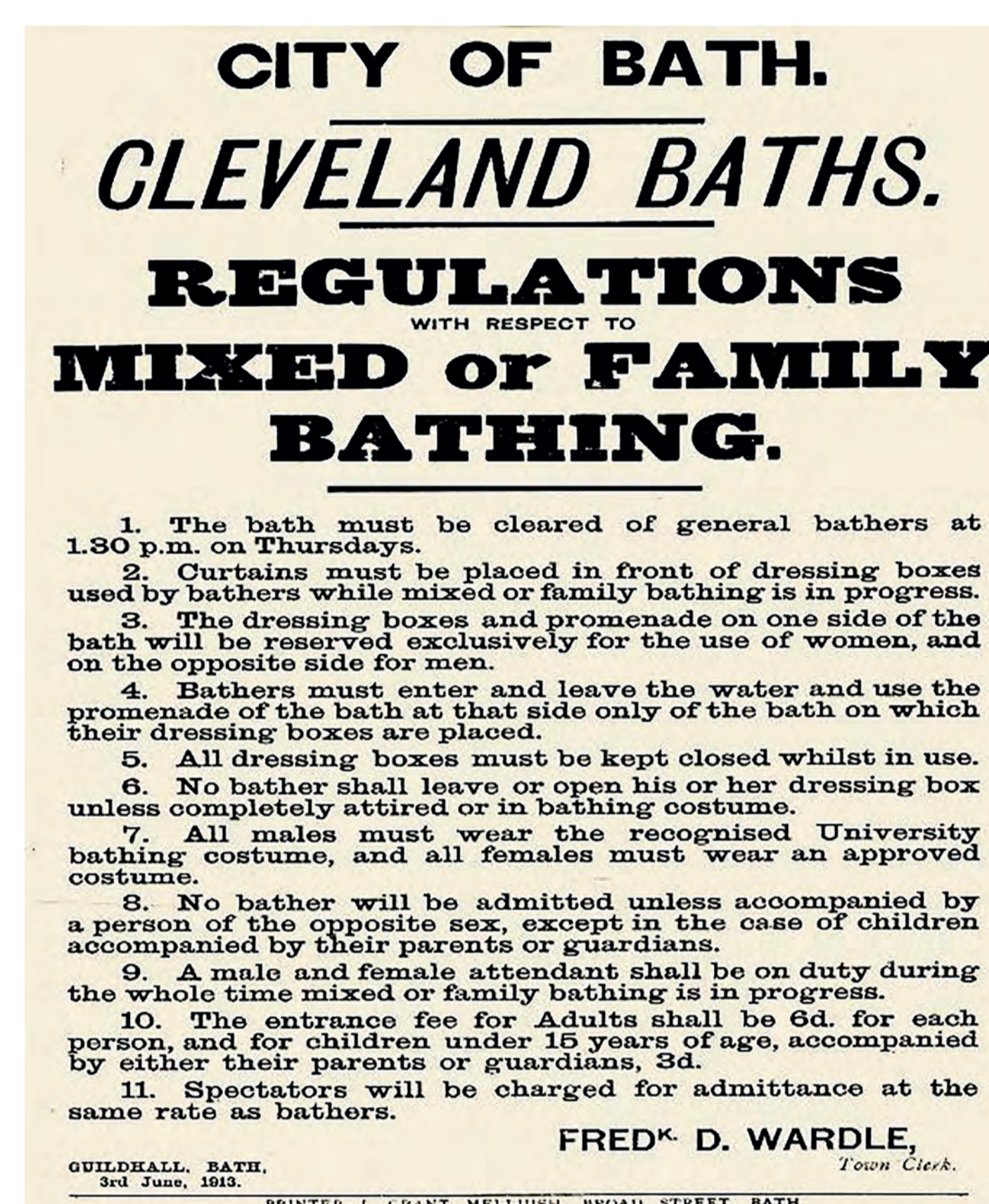
Men's costumes were usually in one piece with sleeves, called tank suits. These covered the body from the neck to mid-thigh.

Sport became commercial, and more functional costumes were needed for competitive swimming. By 1912, women and men wore a similar costume: a one-piece, thick cotton, sleeveless garment. It covered the legs to the mid-thigh and was cut wide at the shoulders with a high neckline.



Photograph of Cleveland Pools around 1910 including Samuel Inkerman Bailey.

Courtesy of his descendants.



Regulations issued by the local council in relation to mixed bathing, June 1913.

Courtesy of Bath Record Office: Archives and Local Studies.



1913 Bath Dolphin quarter-mile medal.

Copyright: Julie Kent.

Heyday of outdoor swimming



AT CLEVELAND POOLS

Large crowds

Swimming clubs used the Pools more. Diving displays and water polo competitions attracted large crowds. A wider range of schoolchildren swam at the Pools.

During World War 2, Cleveland Pools were popular with servicemen and servicewomen and the site closed for a season to repair bomb damage. After the War, the local council worried about the cost of running the Pools.

There was a surge of interest in long-distance swimming in the 1950s. Commander Charles Gerald Forsberg, an English Channel swimmer, trained at the Pools.

SWIMMING HISTORY

Health and fitness

New lidos were built across Britain, mainly in the 1930s. Swimmers exercised on the lido terraces. Spectators enjoyed events and days out.

Swimming and life-saving skills became important, particularly for young men who were likely to be conscripted to the armed forces.

Post-war, swimming lessons were promoted for all school pupils on public health grounds.

SWIMMING COSTUMES

Fashion

In 1935, men went bare-chested for the first time in an international competition. But in the early 1940s, men still usually wore a one-piece costume, combining trunks with a vest, sometimes with a belt. In the 1950s, swim shorts became popular, including printed fabric designs.

Women's costumes also had a sleeveless top, and either a skirt or shorts ending just above the knee. In 1928, the 'racerback' swimsuit was introduced by Speedo, allowing much greater arm movement. In the 1930s, costumes often exposed the wearer's shoulders and sometimes had a plunging back. Leg lines were raised to the upper thigh. The bikini was designed in France in 1946, inspired by wartime fabric shortages. 1950s fashions included halter-neck costumes.

More affordable costumes were still made from woollen fabric or hand knitted. Rayon was used but it was not durable – shirred elastic cotton was more common. Nylon was used from the late 1950s. This was stronger, reduced water resistance and was quicker to dry.



A busy day in the main pool at Cleveland Pools, 1960.

Copyright: Museum of Bath at Work.



Women in their fashionable swimming costumes, 1940s.

BATMC 2009.38.1

Photographed by Monica Malins for Marshall & Snelgrove.

Courtesy of Fashion Museum Bath.



Glamour – and swimming for speed



AT CLEVELAND POOLS

Days out

The Pools were hugely popular during the summer in the 1960s and early 1970s. Families and groups of schoolchildren brought picnics and spent whole days there.

State schools used the Pools for teaching swimming and for events. Many people from Bath remember learning to swim in the very cold water!

SWIMMING HISTORY

Races with rules

By the early 1960s, training for experienced swimmers focused on interval training: a series of swims of the same distance, with controlled rest periods.

In 1969, international swimming was regularised. The strokes allowed were reduced to freestyle (crawl), backstroke, breaststroke and butterfly.

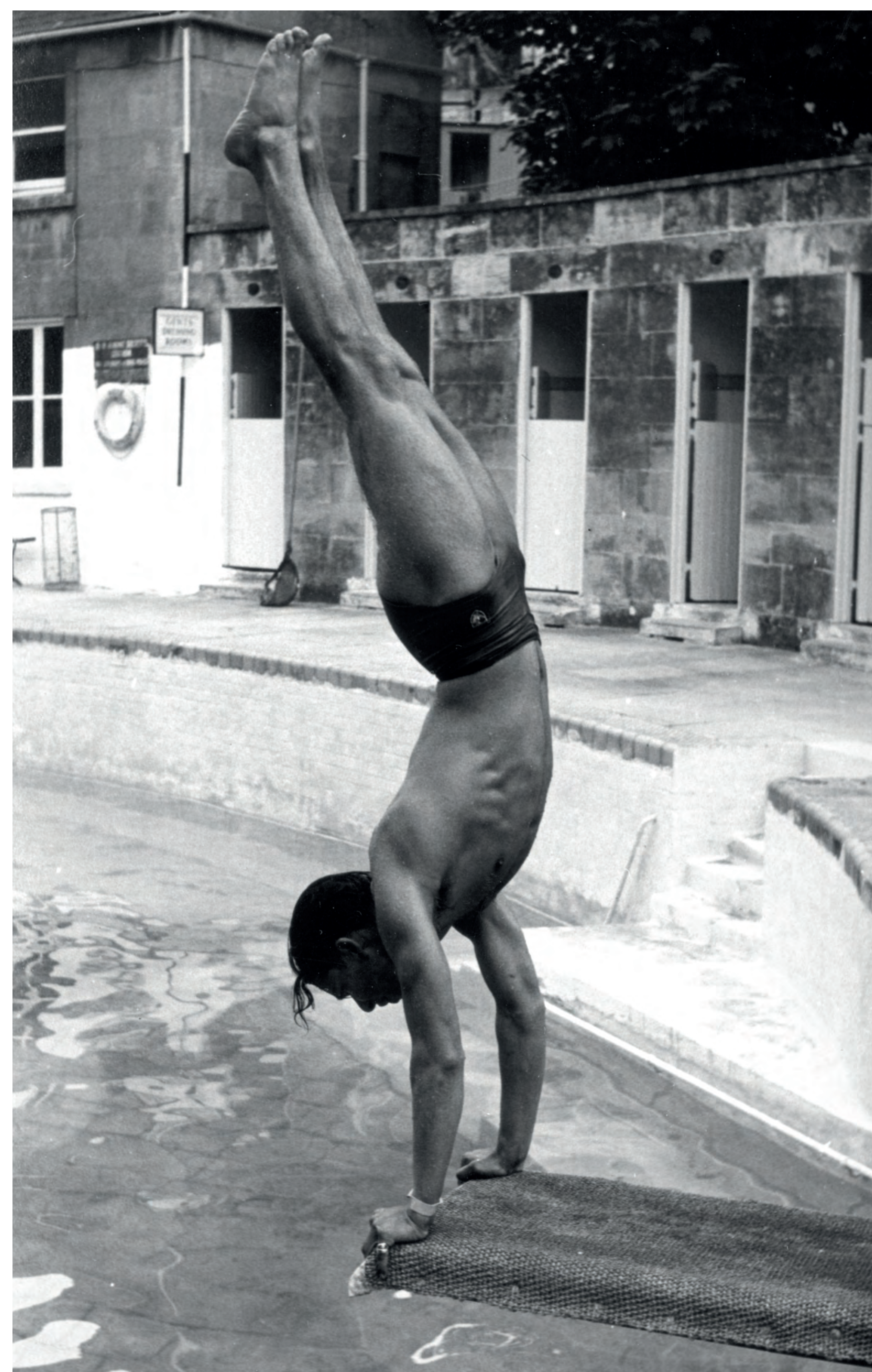
SWIMMING COSTUMES

New fabrics

Early in this period, most affordable costumes for women were still made in thick cotton. The fabrics were often printed with polka dot patterns or, later in the 1960s, pop art designs.

Lycra, also known as Spandex, was invented in 1958 and then produced by the DuPont company. It revolutionised the use of fabrics for sportswear and replaced the heavy, slow-drying swimsuits with light, quick-drying garments.

The Speedo company was founded and produced lightweight costumes in the new fabrics.



Photograph of Ron Gray, champion diver, 1960.
Copyright: Museum of Bath at Work.



The rise of indoor swimming



AT CLEVELAND POOLS

The Pools loses swimmers

The Pools continued to be well used in the 1970s, but indoor, heated pools were becoming more popular. The local council built a city-centre sports and leisure centre in the 1980s, and Cleveland Pools were closed. The site then became a trout farm, before eventually closing again.

SWIMMING HISTORY

Swimming lessons for all

Most local pools offered swimming tuition to the public. More advanced swimmers participated in competitions at various levels.

Since the 1956 Olympics, there had been a rule that breaststroke races could not be swum with the swimmer's head under water throughout the race – this reflected safety concerns. In 1987 this rule was scrapped.

SWIMMING COSTUMES

Designer swimming costumes

Leisure swimmers still wore knitted costumes in the early 1970s, before the lighter, stretch fabrics became more affordable.

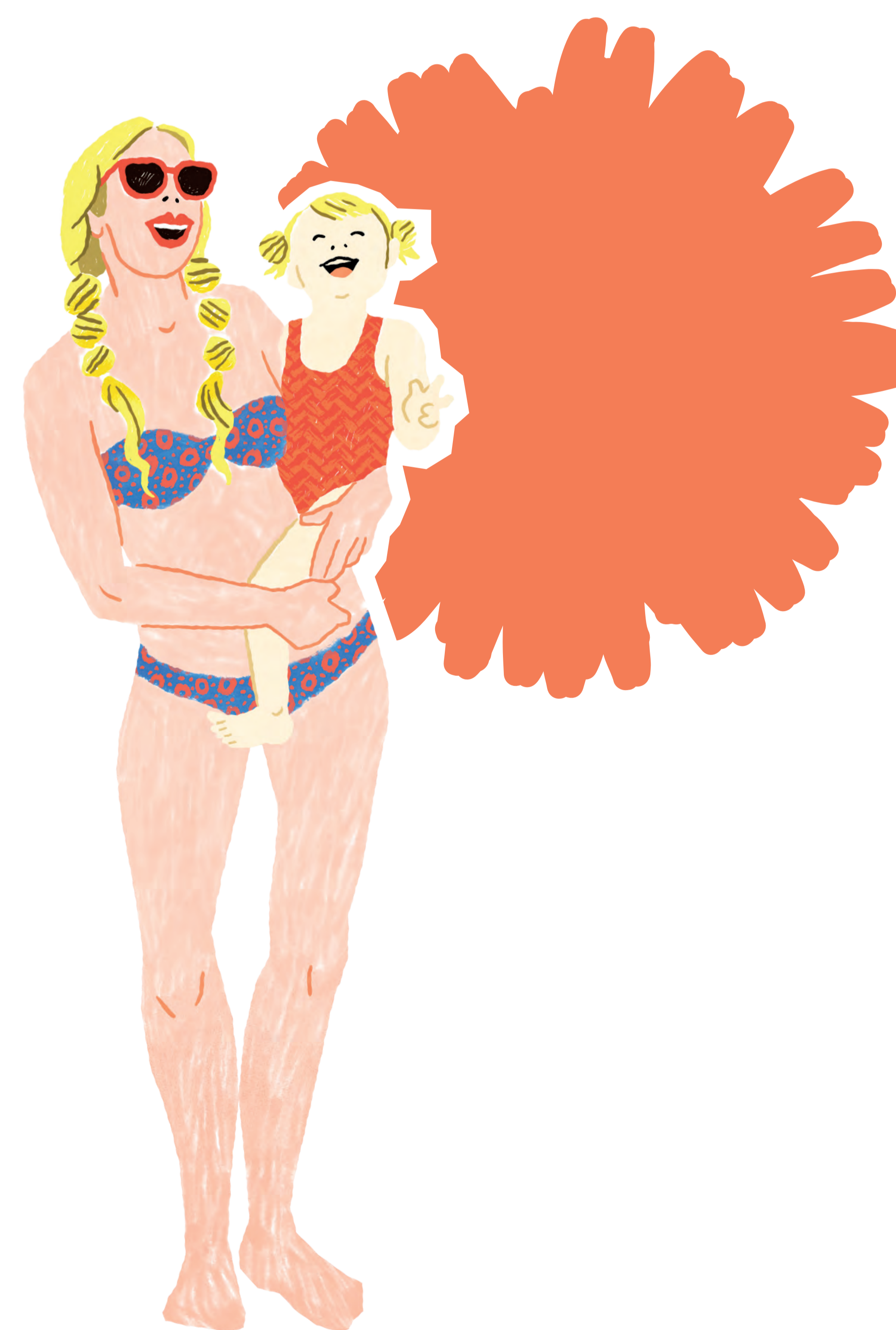
Fashion swimsuits for women were cut very high at the thigh. Men's designs became more diverse, ranging from long, cotton, boxer-style shorts to brief trunks.

In the 1970s, Olympic swimmers benefited from the sleek lightweight suits made with cotton at first, then Lycra or nylon/elastane. They were also allowed to use swimming goggles.



A boy on the fountain at Cleveland Pools.

Copyright: Bath & North East Somerset Council.



Swimming for everyone!



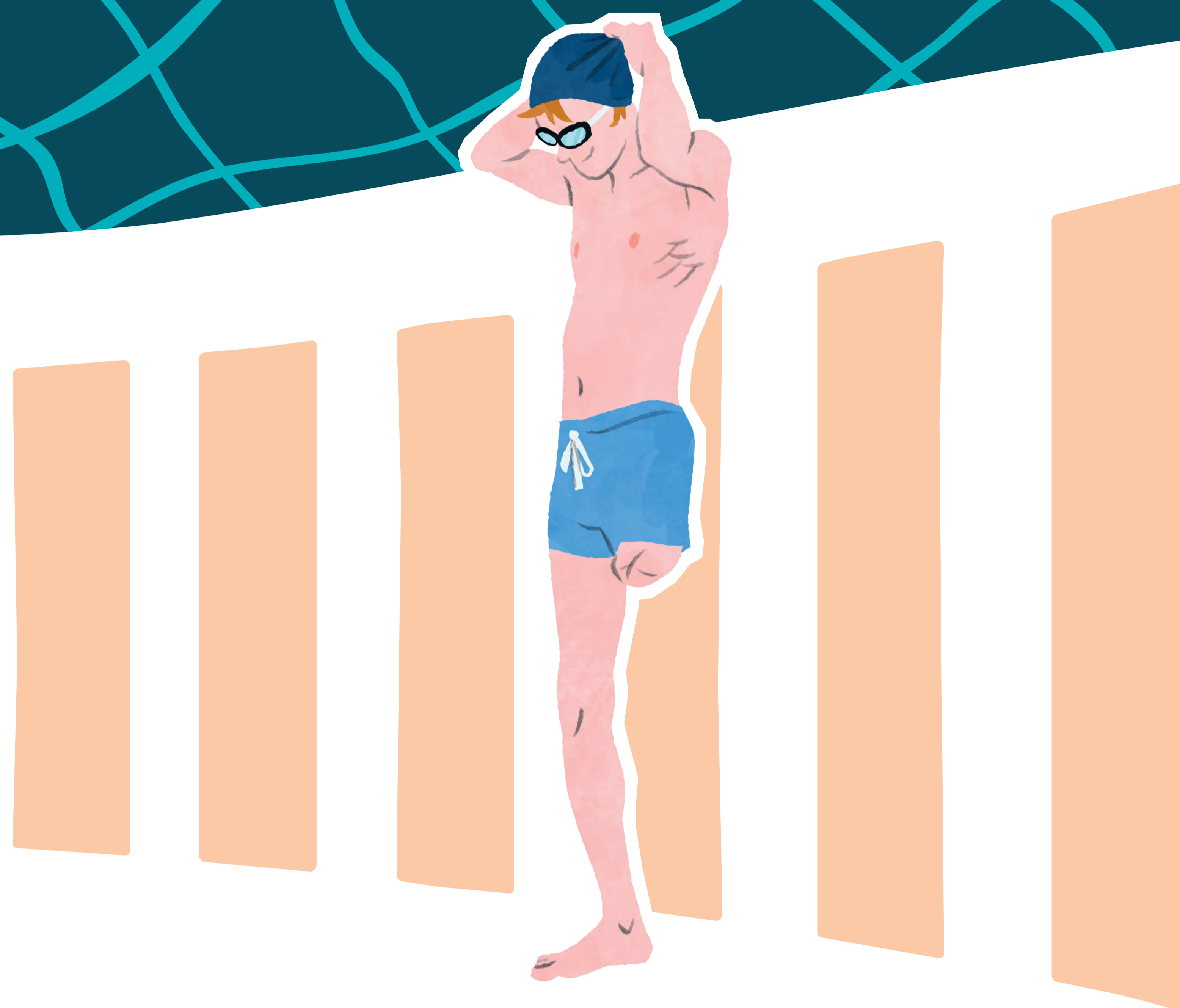
AT CLEVELAND POOLS

The Pools are saved

In 2004, the Council put the Pools site up for sale. Some local people started a campaign to save the Pools and founded Cleveland Pools Trust.

Volunteers worked to maintain the site.

Finally, in 2018 the National Lottery Heritage Fund and other organisations awarded funds for restoration. The Pools will reopen in 2022 for everyone to enjoy!



SWIMMING HISTORY

Swimming for fun

Elsewhere in the UK, other outdoor pools and lidos are being restored.

Wild swimming is more popular again due to the benefits of cold-water swimming and of connecting with nature.

Swimming is still popular because it's fun, healthy and promotes wellbeing.

SWIMMING COSTUMES

High-tech costumes

Men's loosely fitting surf-style board shorts became fashionable. The emphasis for all costumes became comfort, fashion and rapid drying.

For advanced performance swimming, costumes have developed into high-tech bodysuits that have more buoyancy and less water resistance. An example is the Speedo Fastskin suit.

An international ruling from 2010 states that, in professional competitive swimming, men's costumes may only cover the area between the navel and the knee, and women's costumes may only extend between the shoulder and the knee.



Artist's impression of the restored Cleveland Pools.

Courtesy of the artist, Ben Holmes.