

Bathing Machines in Lyme Regis Thomas Andros Journals

Graham Davies and Greg Cattell, August 2020

In July 1798 Thomas Andros (1755-1831) brought his family from Guernsey to Lyme Regis where he lived for the remaining 33 years of his life. His journals provide an insight into the social history of the town during that period. To read an overview of the journals by Geoffrey Andrews, four times grandson of Thomas Andros:

[Thomas-Andros-Journals-An-Overview-Ver-3-1.pdf \(lymeregismuseum.co.uk\)](#)

In this article, quotes from the journals are indicated in italics and colour.

- 1800, Oct 25 *Paid Mr Swan 10/6 for bathing this last season. Given him one G[uinea],
He has given me ½ G paid. that as many times as you please*
- 1806, Nov 16 *Paid Mrs Swan 15/- for this year's bathing, observed to her that I
had bathe but seldom. She observed that the machines were still
attended and I might bath yet.*
- 1808, Nov 1 *Paid Mrs Swan 10/6 for my bathing of this year she
said she would put it down in her book not being all for her.
Told her I had bathed but little, but I preferred subscribing
as it tended to make me sometimes bathe.*

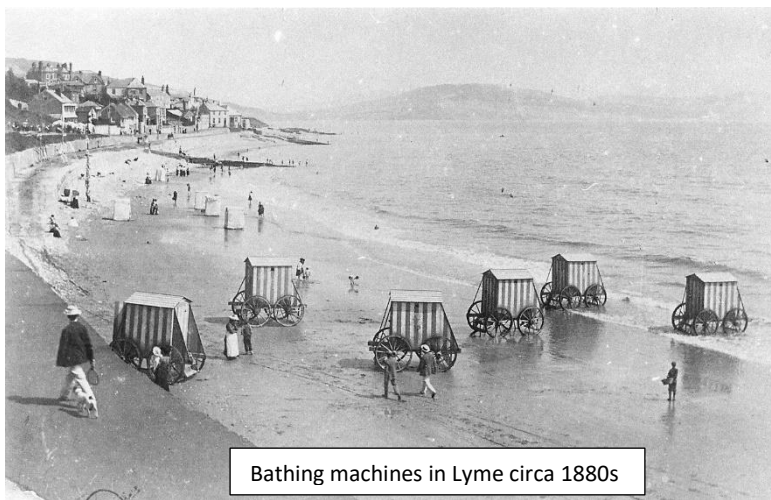
The authors explore the background of the above *quotes* from the journals.

Thomas Andros came to live in a town that had transformed itself from a 'defunct trading-port to fashionable seaside resort'. Thanks to the reported health benefits of sea water, both for bathing and drinking, by Dr Richard Russel (1750), together with the vision of town benefactor Thomas Hollis, and its equable weather, Lyme Regis was able to provide an extension to 'the season' at older inland spas such as Bath. Lyme offered sea bathing well into the Autumn, good walks and excellent scenery: to which was added bathing machines, public rooms, cheaper lodgings and from 1804, indoor hot and cold sea water baths.



A bathing machine was a wooden hut on four wheels, with a door at either end, built to overcome the problems of the seashore: depth of tidal water and waves, and allow bathers to conform to the sensibilities of Georgian and Victorian times. Bathers changed in the hut: men initially bathing in the nude, with women dressed in a loose covering garment. The bathing machine was so positioned, usually pulled by a horse, where the bather could step out of the hut through a seaward facing door onto a ladder and into the sea. Attendants were at hand if help was needed.

Part of a water-colour of the bay of Lyme Regis, with bathing machines, painted by Thomas Mann Baynes (1794-1854). The complete painting appeared as a coloured plate in only a few copies of the 1823 edition of Roberts' *History of Lyme Regis and Charmouth*, and later in C Wanklyn's *Lyme Regis, A Retrospect*, 1927.



In 1756 the Three Cups Hotel announced that their bathing machine was ready for use⁽¹⁾, and was probably placed on the beach just west of the Buddle. The Golden Lion (today's Royal Lion) advertised in 1775 that a post chaise and bathing machines were kept at the inn⁽²⁾. The Public Rooms (Assembly Rooms)⁽³⁾ were built circa 1775. The annual subscription was only 15s. 6d: ladies were admitted, there were cards, billiards, dancing, light refreshments always, and the newspapers. It was not realised by the authors, until reading the journals, that the Rooms managed by Thomas and Elizabeth Swan, also hired out bathing machines.⁽⁴⁾

They were sited on the front beach between the Public Rooms and the Cobb, and were possibly no more than four in number. Roberts wrote in 1834, "When first in use they belonged to several proprietors; now exclusively to Mr J England". The bathing machines continued in Lyme into the 1890s when they were replaced by the growing number of bathing tents.

Thomas Andros soon took advantage of the facilities offered by the Public Rooms. He was paying his subscription for the hire of the bathing machines as early as 1800, but would seem to be a somewhat reluctant bather. Likewise, on Dec 5th 1798 whilst at the Rooms, he learns of a 10 per cent tax on income: *Cap. Fawlett (Follett) has read it to me and other Gentlemen from the Courier at the Public Rooms this evening.* However, he does not enter details of paying his subscription until much later in the journals, Jan 8th 1815: *Subscribed at the Rooms in the Barr (sic), paid Mrs Swan for Mrs A. and myself, paid her two one pound notes this day Sunday and she has given back nine shillings.*

Mr and Mrs Swan are regularly mentioned in the journals. They manage the Public Rooms and run a library/bookshop nearby at today's No.4 Broad Street, *Quality Corner*⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾. They lose their jobs at the Rooms on April 29th, 1817: *This day the Proprietors of the Rooms have assembled and decided to have Mrs Salter who had been Mr Holland's House Keeper to take charge of the Rooms. The Swans have left in consequence this day.* On Feb 10th, 1818, Thomas Swan's shop has been discovered to be on fire: *The cry of fire! has reached my house at about half past ten in the evening when Chas. (Andros's son Charles) has run down street to assist and I have followed and the fire has been extinguished chiefly, I believe, by Chas. and John Truman.*

Appendix

Edward L Blanchard, English writer who is best known for his contributions to the Drury Lane pantomime, writes in *The Manchester Courier*, and *Lancashire General Advertiser*, September 8, 1847. His subject is *The Watering Place* with specific reference to the bathing machine, extracts from which are presented here.

“We consider the essentials of a watering place may be alliteratively summed up thus: Sea, salt, sun, sand, shrimps, shells, sailors and shingle The ordinary amusement of the visitors is bathing. A bathing machine is an aquatic caravan, containing respectively two towels, two rickety hat pegs, a damp flooring, a strong smell of seaweed, and a broken looking-glass, exhibiting the phenomena of oblique refraction. Though this cannot be exactly considered the ‘glass of fashion’, it frequently exhibits the ‘mould of form’ about to have a dip. To rise betimes of a bright summer morning, to invest oneself negligently in loose, cool, and comfortable clothing, to walk steadily and quietly to the seaside, to undress in one of these amphibious vehicles, whilst the music of the waves dashing against the ponderous wheels, or gurgling through the crannies in the wooden steps, greets your delighted ears – to plunge headforemost into the sea sparkling in the rays of the rising sun, and then Then to resume our abandoned habits – stop! that’s a slip of the pen – then to resume our left-off clothing and feel the ecstatic glow exhilarating the whole frame, is the apex of enjoyment – there is not a luxury in nature to compare with it And then the ladies – generally such giggling graces in their childhood! – with their flowing sea dresses, and their curiously close caps, beneath which obstinate curls will rush straggling forth – to see them cautiously stepping down the little stairs of the machine into the arms of two aquatic gentlewomen who receive them. Whish! flop! there’s a plunge beneath the onward rolling wave – a little breath and another plunge – a further respite and a third plunge, and then – all is over.”

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- (1) *Sherborne Mercury*, April 19, 1756
The Somerset Record Office has the original document of an account for painting and water-proofing a 'bathing house' belonging to the Three Cups Inn in May and June 1755.
 - (2) *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, July 10, 1775
 - (3) The authors decided to continue with 'Public Rooms' as written in the Journals.
 - (4) It is not known whether the Public Rooms owned the bathing machines or acted as a booking agent for individual proprietors.
 - (5) *Sherborne Mercury*, January 14, 1822
 - (6) *Picture of Lyme Regis and Environs* by M Phillips, 1817

General References

A Short History of Lyme Regis by John Fowles, 1991
Ebb & Flow, The Story of Maritime Lyme Regis, by Peter Lacey, 2011
History of Lyme Regis & Charmouth by George Roberts, 1834
Lyme Regis, A Retrospect by C Wanklyn, 1927

Acknowledgements

The original Andros Journals are in the Priaulx Library, St Peter Port, Guernsey.
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