

Kildwick swimming carnivals 1909 – 1914

The public interest in recreational swimming seems to have largely originated with the first successful cross-channel swim, performed by Captain Matthew Webb in 1875¹. It is certainly the case that the years following this saw a large increase in the number of public swimming pools; including the one built as part of Glusburn Institute, which opened in 1892². One of early suggestions for the institute building in Farnhill was that it too should have a swimming pool, on the ground floor³.

Small beginnings - 1909

In the early years of the 20th century, the local schools began to send classes to the Glusburn Institute for swimming lessons under the tuition of the swimming instructor, Mr. Arthur Greenwood.

It's not clear whether or not it was Greenwood's idea, but in 1909 it was decided to hold a swimming carnival in the river Aire: to include both races and demonstrations. The course was set up at Kildwick bridge, with the competitors entering the river from a pontoon.

It seems the 1909 carnival was a rather small affair. Extensive searches through the local newspapers of the time, have failed to find any reports of the event. However, in their report on the 1911 event, the Keighley News referred to the 1909 competition as being "... none too heartily received" ⁴.

Nevertheless the carnival realised a profit of £4-9s-8d⁵, and the Kildwick carnival went on to become a very popular annual event: held on the last Saturday in July until 1914.

"Clean and healthy sport" - 1910

On July 30th 1910 an estimated crowd of 3000 people gathered on Kildwick bridge and on the banks of the river to watch the second carnival.





Fig1 / Fig 2: Crowds gathered to watch the second Kildwick Swimming Carnival

Throughout the afternoon the crowd was entertained by Kildwick Brass Band. Refreshments were provided by Mrs. Scott, whose husband had provided the use of one of his fields.

The following events were contested.

- **100 yards Challenge Cup – for scholars attending local schools:** Won for the second year by C. Lambert of Sutton National school.
- **100 yards race for scholars in Standard VI and VII:** Won by J. Parrett, in a time of 1 minute 45 seconds.
- **80 yards race for scholars in Standard IV and V:** Another victory for C. Lambert, in 1 minute 26 seconds.
- **100 yards for 14 years and younger:** Although he won his heat, Lambert failed to be placed in the final and victory went to P. Heaton.
- **120 yards for 18 and younger:** H. Pickles won by less than a yard, in a time of 2 minutes 7 seconds.
- **200 yards for over 18s living within a four-mile radius:** After three heats, the final was won by C. Oyston who swam under the finishing rope a good 25 yards ahead of his nearest rival. Time: 3 minutes and 2 seconds.

In addition to these contests, Mr. Greenwood demonstrated his aquatic skills by removing a full suit of clothes whilst in the water. Trick swimming was performed by Mr. Greenwood and his brother Sydney; and a demonstration of life-saving was carried out by Mr. J. Sturdy and Mr. H. Thompson. Finally, the crowd were surprised and delighted by Mr. Greenwood's 7 year old son who made a dive from a raised platform into water 13 feet deep.

Prizes amounting to £10 were distributed, along with cup and trophies.



Fig 3: Prize-giving in a field belonging to Owlet Hall Farm

At the prize-giving, Mr. James Woodrow thanked the public for their support and promised that the event would continue the following year, saying that "... the committee would be only too eager to provide clean and healthy sport such as they had witnessed that afternoon."

The afternoon's proceeds came to £30.

Diving, and races for girls (!) - 1911

After the success of the 1910 event, special care was taken to ensure that the 1911 carnival was even better. As reported in the Craven Herald⁶:

Extensive arrangements had been carried out during the week prior to the event and the [carnival] committee were repaid by the large crowd of spectators who assembled on both banks of the river, the number being estimated at about 4000.

and in the Keighley News⁴:

For weeks past the boys attending the schools in the Glusburn education area had been preparing for the great event, and they took [to] the water on Saturday with splendid confidence. In every department the arrangements were excellent, the programme, which extended over four hours, being gone through without a hitch.

The carnival featured 13 events for which there were over 120 competitors. New events included a series of short races for young girls (30, 40 and 60 yards) and diving contests for both girls and boys. (Although a prize for diving had been awarded in 1910, arrangements for the contest were described by the Craven Herald as having been "inadequate".)



Fig 4: A remarkable photograph of a boy leaving the diving board, taken by George Whiteoak of Sutton

In addition to the usual prizes there were a number of special awards:

- **Mr. James Bairstow's silver cup and rose bowl:** Awarded to the schools whose boys (cup) and girls (bowl) had the best level of performance, adjusted for the size of the school roll. Both awards were won by Eastburn School.
- **Mr. J. Greenwood's cup for the winner of the 100 yards scholars' race:** Won by P. Firth (Glusburn Council School).
- **Mr. A. Greenwood's cup for the best dive made by a boy or girl:** Won by R. Greenwood of Sutton Council School (Mr. Greenwood's son).

At the end of the afternoon, the prizes were awarded by Lady Horsfall who said, to much applause, that the afternoon's display "reflected great credit on the teachers and all who had been connected with it".



Fig 5: Lady Horsfall (on the platform in the distance) presenting the 1911 carnival prizes.

A diving triumph (of sorts) and a near tragedy - 1912

You may find it difficult to believe but there are times when it rains in Yorkshire, even in July; and Saturday July 27th 1912 was really not a nice day at all. As the Keighley News put it⁷:

Dark clouds hung about most of the day, and several heavy showers fell whilst the sports were in progress, thus causing interest in some of the events to be quite lost.

The Craven Herald viewed things more positively⁸:

The frequent showers, in fact, were the only disappointing feature of the carnival ... The attractive programme sustained the interest of the on-lookers to the end, and the only indication of their discomfort was a sudden shooting up of umbrellas, and an occasional rush on the part of a few to the shelter which the massive arches of the bridge afforded.



Fig 6: The crowd, several with umbrellas raised, watch one of the 1912 girls' races.

The carnival followed the by-now usual pattern, with the races interspersed with displays of trick swimming and life-saving while the Kildwick Band played selections of music. The newspapers found two incidents particularly notable. The first, only reported in the Keighley News, occurred during the girls' diving competition:

One the competitors approached the stand with halting steps and then, just as she was about to make the plunge, hesitated. Wistfully she looked at the water and was heard to complain that the dive was a high one. One of the officials spoke words of encouragement and again she essayed to dive, but got no further than the holding of her hands above her head.

Several times was the process repeated, and one expected the crowd to become annoyed, but they took the matter good humouredly and greeted each attempt with shouts of laughter, accompanied by a cry or two of encouragement, or advice to the officials to "push her in". Eventually another competitor was allowed to take her turn, and afterwards the first girl returned and made her dive, though perhaps not in orthodox style.

The second noteworthy event was of a more serious nature and only quick-thinking by one of the competitors averted a tragedy. This from the Craven Herald:

The carnival was drawing to a close ... the [boys'] diving competition was in progress and a lad named Bentley Whitaker, of Sutton, had just entered the water. Suddenly he was seen to be helpless and actually sinking. No one, however, appeared to realise he was in difficulties until a competitor named Tom Whitaker dived from the full height of the platform and swam vigorously towards his exhausted rival.

Introducing all his knowledge of life-saving into a rescue, at once real and thrilling, Whitaker kept his colleague's head above water, and amid enthusiastic cheering swam with him to the bank, assisted by Mr. Greenwood. Both lads were in an exhausted state and the rescuer was heartily congratulated by his friends.

In every sense his act was magnificent, and has been rewarded by a prize from the Swimming Carnival Committee, and a promise that the circumstances of the rescue will be placed before the Royal Humane Society.

A record turn-out - 1913

The weather was much better for the fifth annual event, which took place on Saturday 26th July 1913. The crowd started to arrive early and by the time of the first competition, up to 5000 were gathered in the stands erected on both banks of the river.

Perhaps the most unlucky competitor of the day was Albert Dessant. After winning the 100 yards Challenge Cup in 1912, Dessant was hoping to repeat his performance but was forced to retire part-way through the race when he was taken ill. Although he later recovered sufficiently to take part in the diving contest he was obviously below par and failed to make the top three.

The winner of the Challenge Cup was John Greenwood, the 12 year old son of Arthur Greenwood the swimming instructor. He also won the 70 yards race for his age group, the boys' diving contest, and the cup for the best dive by a boy or girl. Later, he posed with a selection of his trophies:



Fig 8: John Greenwood with some of his swimming trophies

As always, there were swimming and diving demonstrations and in a feat which might have been admired by Harry Houdini, Mr. Arthur Greenwood jumped from a high-diving board tied in a sack from which he escaped while in the water.

Although the standard of both the swimming and diving was high, there were fewer competitors than in previous years. Only one girl, Frances Mary Davy, took part in the 50 yards race for under 11s and when it looked like she might not complete the course, the crowd shouted to her to “keep it up” as she was sure to win !

At the end of the afternoon, in addition to the usual prizes, a special award was made to Mr. Fred Greenwood in recognition of his bravery when saving a young boy, Willie Thompson, from the river the previous January. The award was⁹:

... a magnificent marble timepiece ... a very fine specimen indeed, and has the following inscription upon it:

Presented to Fred Greenwood, of Crosshills, by the people of the district for his gallantry in jumping into the River Aire at Kildwick on January 26th, 1913, and rescuing from drowning a boy named Willie Thompson.



Fig 9: This photograph is undated but the table in the centre has a large clock on it.
Is this 1913, and the clock Fred Greenwood's award ?

The incident had occurred in January and was reported in the Craven Herald^{[10](#)}:

KILDWICK.

A Plucky Rescue.

A drowning fatality was narrowly averted on Sunday, the 26th inst. A small boy named Willie Thompson (6), of Junction, when going home from Sunday School, stopped to play on the river bank at the bridge in Kildwick. He was observed by some youths on the bridge just after 11 o'clock to be perilously near the water, which was rather high after the recent rains, and they shouted to him to get away. The child on hearing their shouts realised his danger, and tried to run to the top of the bank, but the bank being slippery after the frost overnight he slipped and rolled into the water, which at that place is very deep at any time of the year. The boy's comrades at once gave the alarm, which was heard at the Church steps by a youth named Fred Greenwood, who immediately rushed to the spot, and quickly divesting himself of his outer garments dived into the water, and just caught the child as he was sinking for the last time. The boy, who was still conscious when rescued, was at once carried to the house of Mrs. John Barritt, where he was attended to. The rescuer, Mr. F. Greenwood, who has suffered no ill-effects from his icy dip, is to be highly commended for his pluck.

Gee-up ! - 1914

A year is along time and in 1914, Frances Mary Davy, who had such difficulty in her 50 yard race in 1913, returned unbeatable. She won both the girls' 60 yard race for 13s and under, and the diving competition. The Keighley News was particularly impressed, noting "Both her swimming and diving were remarkably well executed"¹¹. The Craven Herald thought "In the latter event she showed excellent ability, her diving being clean and neat and evoking much applause"¹².

For the first time, the contests included a novelty race. The Craven Herald reported:

The 100 yards horse race for males, 16 years and over, created much amusement. The competitors were possessed of a barrel each, and their efforts to mount their "horses" were unavailing. Only one competitor succeeded in reaching the winning post, the others being left floundering in the water unable to mount.

The Keighley News said:

This race was the first of its kind ... and judging by its popularity it ought to be retained in the programme.

But, sadly, this was not to be. Just ten days after this happy Saturday afternoon, World War I broke out. In the following years the world was changed beyond recognition, and Kildwick Swimming Carnival passed into history.

What were the competitors wearing ?

Below are details from two of the photographs showing the swimming costumes being worn at the 1912 carnival.

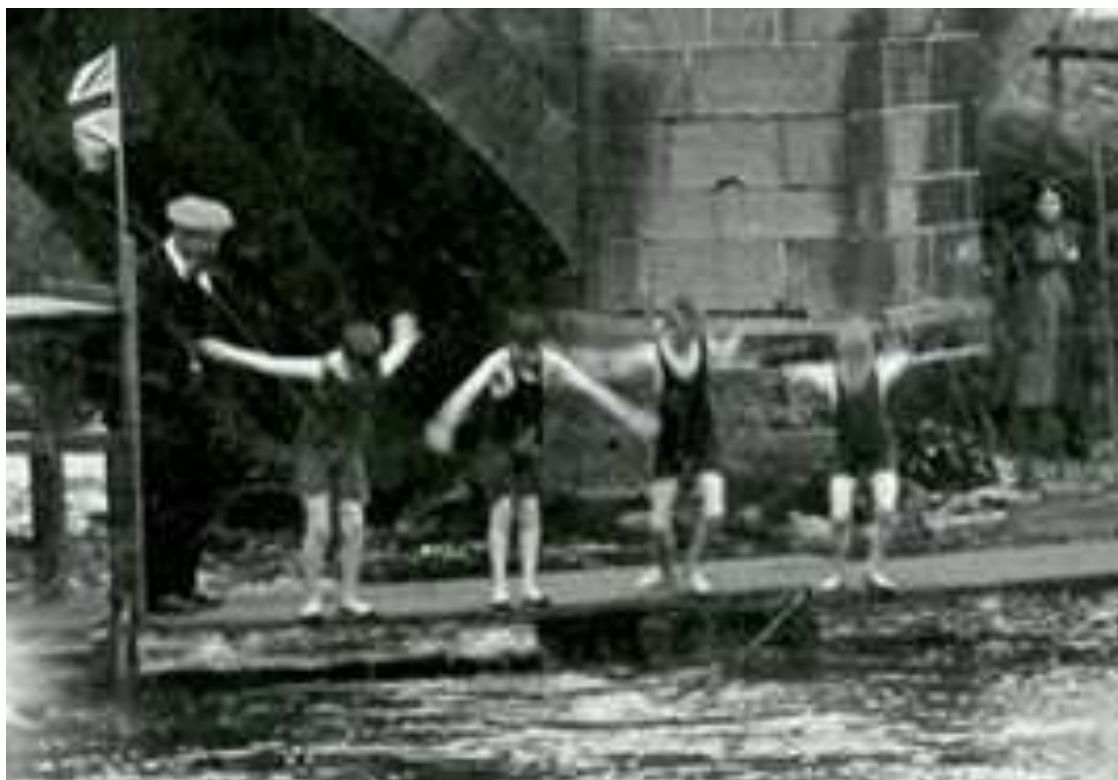




Fig 10: Photographs showing boys (previous page) and girls (above) in their 1912 swimming costumes

It looks as if the swimming gear for both boys and girls were almost identical; full-body costumes, extending down to the mid-thigh.

Of course at this time there were no man-made fabrics. All of these costumes would have been made of wool. You can imagine how heavy they would have become during the course of a race, as they got soaked through.

Acknowledgements

The photographs used in this article have come from a number of sources. Particular thanks are due to Mrs. Jill Ideson, Mr. David Smith, Mrs. Freda Topham, and Keighley and District Digital Archive.

References

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- 7 Keighley News, August 3rd 1912

8 Craven Herald, August 2nd 1912

9 Craven Herald, August 1st 1913

10 Craven Herald, January 31st 1913

11 Keighley News, August 1st 1914

12 Craven Herald, July 31st 1914