

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



Elizabeth Agnes Beckwith AKA Lizzie [1878-1905]



For much of the 19th century the development of organised sport depended on the drive and innovations of individuals and their families rather than on formal organisations. Although there were numerous restrictions placed upon women's sports participation at this time, there was a slowly emerging sport and leisure culture that provided employment for working class females and nowhere was this more evident than in swimming, where the expansion of the sport was characterised by aquatic families such as the Beckwiths, often referred to as The Beckwith Frogs. Any discussion relating to the history and

development of swimming, particularly that of women's involvement, cannot fail to include the name Agnes Beckwith but also that of her lesser-known half-sister Lizzie.

Agnes and Lizzie's father Professor Fred Beckwith, as head of the family swimming empire, included every member of the family in his troupe; both his wives, all of his children, his inlaws and his grandchildren and if they weren't swimming, they were playing the piano on the poolside, creating costumes for performances, managing the exhibition diary, taking gate money or organising venues and accommodation – nobody escaped!

Agnes and her younger sibling Lizzie had a lifetime's association with swimming, they and their fellow professional swimmers were commonly referred to as 'natationists' and these women displayed their swimming and diving skills, both indoors and out, swam in endurance events, raced for money and taught swimming and lifesaving. A popular feature of their performances was ornamental or scientific swimming, which displayed a range of aquatic skills in an artistic manner much like modern-day synchronised swimming.

Agnes was a super-star in her day and the newspapers during the latter years of the 19th century were full of her exploits. However, Lizzie's short and comparatively sad life-story is not so well known or as well documented as Agnes and although I have spent a good 25 years researching the family [indeed my partner and myself are considered the leading Beckwith experts], some parts of Lizzie's life elude me still. Coming from such a famous family at the time, her life was marginalised after the death of her father, when she seemed to be excluded from the family subsequent activities and her burial place is unrecorded and unmarked, you can read her story as far as it goes at

the moment on my website <https://www.playingpasts.co.uk/articles/gender-and-sport/lizzie-beckwith-the-forgotten-sister-part1/>.

Neither Agnes or Lizzie, like most working-class women, left any written evidence in the shape of journals or diaries, and so their thoughts and feeling remain hidden from the modern-day observer. The result is that the impact of both women on the history of female sport has up to now been overlooked. My research however demonstrates that Lizzie's life course illustrates the intersection between sport and entertainment, especially that of the music hall stage, which would be an important venue for natational performances in the latter years of the 19th century. Although she died young Lizzie's legacy and those of her fellow natationists cannot be forgotten, constantly pushing at the limits of acceptable society while successfully bridging the gap between entertainment and sport and starting a revolution that has allowed for the widespread participation of women in many contemporary sports.

Throughout their swimming careers both Lizzie and her sister Agnes, who continued to perform up until the start of the first world war, not only managed to transcend society's norms regarding gender boundaries but through their teaching, exhibitions and orchestration of female aquatic troupes firmly established an interest in swimming among women, helping to pave the way for the first women to represent Britain in the Olympic Swimming Pool in 1912.

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