



Let's get PHYSICAL

Caroline Roberts straps on her running shoes and jogs through the history of exercise in Britain over the past 200 years

Society's current preoccupation with buff bodies might seem like a relatively recent phenomenon, but earlier generations also had their share of fitness fads, celebrity personal trainers, and handwringing over concerns that Britain was becoming a nation of weaklings.

Throughout history, the poor generally got all of the exercise they needed, and more, through hard physical graft, while the wealthier classes had their hunting, cricket and brisk constitutionals. But in early Victorian times, more attention began to be paid to the mechanics of physical training. *British Manly*

Exercises by Donald Walker (T Hurst, 1834, and available for free from the Internet Archive archive.org at tinyurl.com/arch-manly) contains hundreds of pages of minutely detailed instructions for activities ranging from walking, running and leaping to rowing, riding and wrestling. Walker assures his readers that



a way to burn off excess energy that might be turned to no good, especially among the young.

Later that century, an “orthopaedic, anatomical, and gymnastic machinist” named Gustav Ernst designed a portable gymnasium in an effort to prevent the sedentary middle classes going to seed. His ‘use it or lose it’ philosophy is set out in the 1861 instruction booklet, which is also available via the Internet Archive at tinyurl.com/arch-ernst. It was “use” he explains that “enabled the milk-woman to trudge with her heavy load day after day for many consecutive hours”. The wooden contraption incorporated handles, pulleys and weights and, writes Ernst, “the symmetrical and even ornamental structure of the pedestal renders it an unobjectionable addition to the dining-room or library”. The booklet is illustrated with drawings of gentlemen and ladies performing a series of traction, flexion and extension exercises, seemingly unimpeded by their frock coats and crinolines.

A SEESAW AND A SEA SERPENT

But there were also exercise and leisure facilities aimed at all classes. Probably the most spectacular was the Royal Patent Gymnasium, a huge outdoor facility opened in Edinburgh in 1865 by businessman and philanthropist John Cox. A combination of gym and theme park, it contained traditional exercise equipment such as parallel bars, vaulting poles and springboards along with a giant seesaw, which promised to elevate those on the ends 50 feet into the air, and the Great Sea Serpent, a circular ‘boat’ that allowed 600 people to row simultaneously. Entrance was a very reasonable 6d and, at the height of its popularity, it attracted 15,000 people a day. The gym remained in use until the end of the century, when its declining popularity meant that the site was turned into a football ground.

By the early 20th century, fitness had taken on a political dimension. In a speech at the close of the First World War, ▶

his advice will enable gentlemen to achieve strength, health and “beauty of form”.

In his introduction, he explains that exercises are important because “Their consequent influence on the moral conduct of man is such, that, by a courage which is well founded, because it springs from a perfect knowledge

of his own powers, he is often enabled to render the most important services to others.”

The statement reflects a Victorian cultural trend known as ‘muscular Christianity’ that saw physical strength as closely allied to moral strength, patriotic duty and the ability to protect the weak. What’s more, exercise was encouraged as

Passengers exercise in the gym of the Cunard ocean liner *Franconia* in 1912

► the prime minister David Lloyd George warned that if Britain was to be equal to future challenges it must “take a more constant and a more intelligent interest in the health and fitness of the people... you cannot maintain an A1 Empire with a C3 population”, a reference to the fitness categories used to classify army recruits.

A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Obviously, the most pressing concern was to improve general public health and it wasn't until the mid-1930s that attention was turned specifically to physical fitness through exercise. In 1937, the Physical Training and Recreation Act was launched along with a National Fitness Campaign to get the population moving and encourage local authorities to provide more leisure and exercise facilities. It was partly a response to the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, where Britain came a disappointing 12th in the medals table. But there was also an urgent need for a physically robust population as the prospect of another world war loomed.

Grants for the provision and



training of instructors were awarded to organisations as diverse as the Amateur Athletic Association and the English Folk Dance and Song Society, and sports and fitness festivals were organised around the country to promote the campaign.

However, opposition politicians claimed that the legislation was poorly funded and administered, and benefited the middle classes while doing little to address more urgent issues affecting the nation's health and fitness, such as malnutrition and poor working conditions. “To suggest physical training to a man who for seven and a half hours a day is performing herculean tasks of physical exertion [as a miner] is to talk utter rubbish,” Aneurin Bevan, the future architect of the NHS, argued in a parliamentary debate on 7 April 1937.

In fact, the most important mass keep-fit movement of the decade was the Women's League of Health and Beauty, which had been launched in 1930 by Irishwoman Mary Bagot Stack. Its motto was “Movement is life” and classes involved a mixture of dance, rhythmic movement and exercises. By 1937, the league had almost 166,000 members and about 50 franchised centres throughout the UK.

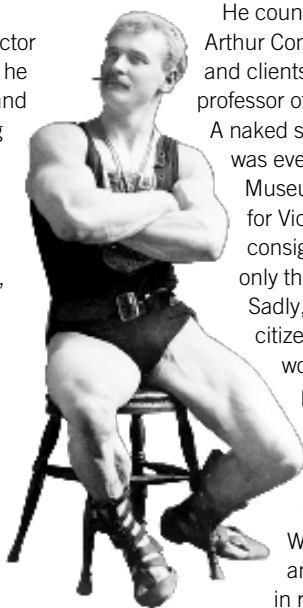
It also staged regular public displays that featured large numbers of members performing synchronised exercise routines in their uniform of black satin knickers and sleeveless white top. When one of the earliest

EUGEN SANDOW 1867-1925

This Victorian Hercules is remembered today as the father of bodybuilding

Sandow was a celebrated Victorian strongman, physical-training instructor and entrepreneur. Born in Prussia, he left his homeland at the age of 18 and travelled through Europe, spending some time in the circus. In the late 1880s, he settled in London where he found fame by taking part in strongman competitions and subsequently toured the world, flexing his muscles for music-hall audiences and performing feats of strength. His act evidently went down particularly well with ladies, who would often throw items of jewellery onto the stage.

Sandow also developed exercise equipment, opened his own gyms known as Institutes of Physical Culture, launched a magazine, and wrote several books.



He counted celebrities, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, among his friends and clients, and in 1911 was appointed professor of physical culture to George V.

A naked statue of the strongman was even displayed in the British Museum, but it proved too much for Victorian sensibilities and was consigned to the storeroom after only three months.

Sadly, despite Sandow's British citizenship and philanthropic works, such as providing free physical training for potential military recruits, his German roots were a source of suspicion and rumours in the run-up to the First World War. His businesses collapsed and he spent the rest of his life in relative obscurity.



events took place in June 1930, a newspaper rather condescendingly reported that “seventy pretty, bare-legged City girls wearing as little as possible were led by two resigned-looking policemen into Hyde Park”. By 1936, the league was able to muster as many as 5,000 members for its annual display at London’s Olympia.

Membership costs were low and the organisation welcomed women of all ages and from all

two 10-minute keep-fit classes each weekday, and the Ministry of Labour and National Service launched the ‘Fighting Fit in the Factory’ campaign. Its 1941 leaflet recommended walking, swimming and cycling, and reminded workers that “exercise must be a pleasure and not just one more strain. The kind of exercise you best enjoy is probably the kind that will do you most good.”

Children exercise in the playground of a school in 1906

The BBC Home Service broadcast two keep-fit classes each weekday

walks of life, often running free classes in deprived areas. It was much more than an exercise organisation too. The league published its own magazine containing articles on self-improvement, feminist debate and pacifism, and provided a social outlet for women with an emphasis on having fun together.

STAY IN SHAPE WITH THE RADIO

The outbreak of war soon derailed the Physical Training Act, but it didn’t completely end the drive for improved fitness. The BBC Home Service broadcast

In subsequent decades, exercise fads have come and gone. But even in today’s world of fitness-tracking devices, sports science, Boxercise and Zumba, the echoes of those early fitness drives still reverberate. The league is alive and well, rebranded as ‘FLexercise’; the influence of muscular Christianity is still visible in the health and fitness facilities attached to many YMCA centres; and the advice to find a form of exercise we enjoy if we’re to have any chance of sticking at it holds just as true today as it did during the Second World War. 🍓



CAROLINE ROBERTS is a London-based writer. Learn more about her work at carolineroberts.co.uk

RESOURCES

Take your research further

BOOKS

Let’s Get Physical

Danielle Friedman

Icon Books, 2022

Friedman explores the origins of trends in women’s exercise and fitness since the mid-20th century, and the contribution of such influential figures as workout-video star Jane Fonda. She also considers how the fitness movement has helped women’s empowerment.

Sweat

Bill Hayes

Bloomsbury, 2022

Hayes charts the origins and development of different forms of human movement, and their cultural significance.

The Perfect Man

David Waller

Victorian Secrets, 2011

This insightful exploration of the life of Eugen Sandow tells us a lot about society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

WEBSITES

LES MILLS

w tinyurl.com/les-mills-equip

This blog on the website of fitness company Les Mills explores the origins of some of the equipment we use today, from dumbbells to treadmills.

WARWICK UNIVERSITY

w tinyurl.com/war-uni-league

The university’s website includes a 1990 journal article by Jill Julius Matthews tracing the history of the Women’s League of Health and Beauty.

WELLCOME COLLECTION

w tinyurl.com/wellcome-exercise

Kate Carter’s article, which is accompanied by fascinating illustrations, provides a brief overview of the history of exercise from ancient times through to the present day.