In the 19th century the majority of local people would have been living in cramped houses with no facilities to wash their clothes, or themselves. Filth caused bad air and disease. In 1846 an act of parliament was passed which encouraged councils to build public baths and wash houses; these also had laundry rooms to wash and dry clothes.

**1846**

Our story begins...
To the Clerk,
Kings Norton and Northfield
Urban District Council.

September 18th 1903

Dear Sir,

We have the pleasure of offering to the
Kings Norton and Northfield Urban District
Council a piece of freehold land containing
about 1,240 square yards for the erection of a
public swimming baths, slipper or spray baths
and washhouse.

This building is to be erected at a cost of not
less than £5,000 and is to be begun before
January 1st 1905 and completed before
December 31st 1907. The plans to be submitted
to us for approval.

Your acknowledgement will oblige.

Yours truly,

Cadbury Brothers Limited.
In April 1904 the council commenced boring operations or ‘sinking the well’ with a view to supplying water to the swimming baths. The contractors had bored down 184 metres (604 feet) without finding any water. After two years of attempts, in 1906 they decided to discontinue the search. As a result, Stirchley Baths became the first Public Baths in Birmingham to use water from the mains supply.

The location of the ‘bore hole’ is still visible in the café area of the building today.
John P Osborne’s architectural plans, dated March 1909, show the location of the swimming bath hall, laundry, shower room, scholar’s room and ticket office, as well as the (washing) baths for men and ladies.
The building was completed in 1910. The inscription on this ceremonial key records the official opening of Stirchley Baths by George Cadbury Junior on 25 July 1911. It was presented by the architect John P. Osborne, who also designed the library next door which was built in 1905. The key is on loan to Stirchley Baths from Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, where it was spotted a few years ago by a local resident.

In the November of 1911 the Parish of Birmingham was enlarged to include the Kings Norton and Northfield Urban District, and Stirchley Baths’ name was changed to Bournville Lane Baths, and remained so for much of its history. They are used interchangeably within this timeline.
When the Baths were built there were laws which segregated swimmers and washhouse users by class and by gender. You bought tickets that were either First Class or Second Class (presumably for people who were poorer, working class).

During its first year of opening, there were 3,428 second-class male ticket sales compared with 39 first-class male ticket sales or uses of the swimming pool. This tells us how important the Baths were for ordinary people.

Stirchley was a small village at this time, surrounded by industry and many homes did not have a bathroom, but a tin bath in front of the fire. People would come straight from work to use the washhouse and get clean before going home.
Memories of the washhouse at Stirchley Baths

“We were grateful for it. There was no hot water in our house and it was a lot easier using the baths at Stirchley than getting the tin one out at home and heating the water up for that. Much easier.”

“We used to go to the washing baths once a week – you were allowed half an hour.”
1914-18

World War I

“Take Cover”

The Baths were kept open during the First World War, although with reduced opening hours. Soldiers and refugees could use the Baths free of charge. As daytime air raids got more frequent, the city’s municipal baths were made available as places of shelter for the public.
Mixed bathing was introduced in 1927 and swimmers would have to enter and exit the pool by the male or female side where changing cubicles were designated. Bye-laws were changed to ensure that proper bathing costumes of a thick material were worn (to prevent indecent exposure!)
1939-45

World War II

The Baths were closed for swimming during the first two years of the Second World War and used as a first aid post, reopening in 1941. People rendered homeless by local bombings were allowed to use the Baths free of charge. Two hot showers were installed during this time due to the number of people during wartime using the Baths.

“They boarded it over so they could use it for a first aid place in emergency and bombing.”
During the winter months in the 1940s and 1950s the swimming pool was boarded over to create a dancefloor. Bands like Den Jones and his Orchestra played regularly.

“In the war me and my girlfriend (she’s now my wife) used to go dancing when they boarded the Baths over.”
“We liked waltzes and quicksteps - you couldn’t believe that you were dancing on top of the swimming pool!”
During this time the Baths continued to be a place for recreation, swimming lessons and galas, and for children to have fun.

“I remember in particular the long hot summer of 1976 when I used to go swimming there; there were queues to get in. It was just so lovely to have this local body of water considering there was a drought all that summer. I was 8 years old”.

Images: Paul Jones
The Finnish government presented Bournville Lane Baths with a sauna to promote Finland. This original sauna suite was in use until 1978.
This City of Birmingham Baths Department summer timetable from 1966 shows that Bournville Lane offered the only public sauna bath within the city at this time.
The washhouse was still being used by local people, although fewer in number; bathrooms were being built in new housing, and extensions added to existing terraced housing.

“I used the washing baths until I was about 17, probably about 1972 when I stopped using them. It was the only place you could go to have a bath.”
In 1973 a privately-run Mikvah was built at Bournville Lane Baths. It had its own entrance from the street.

A Mikvah is a sunken bath used in ritual immersion in Judaism. Rainwater was collected on the roof and heated. A former worker remembers people leaving wedding presents at the Mikvah for the groom-to-be as part of a pre-marriage cleansing ceremony. The Mikvah closed in 1992, four years after the rest of the Baths.
With few paying customers left, the washhouse closes at Bournville Lane Baths and the sauna suite is expanded to also include a multi-gym, six beds, solarium and TV lounge.
In 1987 there were 89,000 recorded visits to the Baths.

In March 1988 Bournville Lane Baths closed due to fears for swimmers’ safety as the iron supports holding up the balcony and ladies’ changing cubicles had corroded. The ceiling of the women’s toilets had collapsed.

The mural in the photo, painted by former worker Paul Jones, hides the structural supports to the balcony which had been in place since the previous year.
There was wide-spread anger amongst local communities, including the sauna users. The one week notice of closure prompted a ‘sit-in’ with a difference; men invaded the ladies’ sauna night for a ‘steam-in’ protest.
1988

According to this internal council memo, the cost to repair and renovate Bournville Lane Baths was estimated at £1,079,000.

“We simply don’t have £1 million to spend on repairs” (newspaper quotes Councillor Bird).
Stirchley Action Group (later Stirchley Community Group) called public meetings, wrote to the newspapers, and organised two petitions which 7,000 local people signed. 500 signatures were collected in one day at Stirchley Carnival that year, over 100 from children. It made no difference.

The group believed that the council’s decision-making was ‘un-democratic’ and a ‘lack of funds’ was being used as an excuse by the council to close the Baths. They were told that other public baths across the city were also closing to fund an Olympic pool.
Stirchley Community Group fight on to save the Baths

For 15 years after closure there were campaigns and proposals to find a new and sustainable future for the Baths. They included various schemes for housing and community facilities. In 1997 Stirchley Community Group commissioned a feasibility study to assess the suitability and cost of converting the Baths into a community-run sports and leisure centre. All development proposals during this time were rejected or not progressed during to available funding.
During this period of uncertainty, a big concern for local people was that one day the building would be simply demolished. A group of residents teamed up with the Victorian Society and asked Historic England (formally called English Heritage), to add the Baths to its national list. In 1998 the historic significance of Stirchley Public Baths was recognised and the building given a grade II listing. Its listed status now gives it a statutory level of protection against alteration and is preserved for the future.
The Neighbourhood Forum, a group of local active citizens, organised open days in 2008 with the support of the council. There was an overwhelming response; hundreds of people queued to go in. The forum wanted to raise awareness and put pressure on the council to do something about the decaying building. Another popular open day was held in 2011, marking 25 years since its closure.
After years of negotiation the council agreed to sell the land on which the old Stirchley community centre, indoor bowls centre and social club stood, to Tesco.

The capital receipt created by the sale of the land provided around £2.7m of the investment needed to refurbish the Baths as a new community facility. The first of a two-stage application for an additional £1.2m was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2012.
A professional team of consultants were brought in to work with the council and local people to develop plans to convert Stirchley Baths into a new community hub. Local residents showed their support by putting their hands up with messages of support around the Baths, sharing their memories and attending events. A group of active resident stakeholders met with the council regularly to discuss and advise on planned uses and design schemes.

In 2013 a £1.2 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and planning permission were secured. The scheme was given the green light!
Contractors Balfour Beatty commenced building works in April 2014. The site manager believed that the building was only a winter away from complete collapse and rescued in the nick of time.

As well as repurposing the Baths as a multifunctional community facility, the project restored and refurbished the historic building fabric, preserving and interpreting key historic features. These included the conservation of the original kiosk and entrance area, balconies and tiling. The project also reinstated some lost features such as the cupola and clock over the staircase turret.

The project wanted to retain as much of the building’s history as possible; a marble slab from the footbaths was reclaimed and is now used as the café counter top!
The capital works of the project cost just under £4 million. The completed building was officially handed back to Birmingham City Council in November 2015.
On 14 January 2016, almost 105 years since Stirchley Baths was opened by George Cadbury Junior for the first time, the building was officially re-opened.

Brenda Thomas, an active Stirchley citizen, who had been campaigning for the Baths since 1988 was invited to cut the ribbon. Paul Jones, holding a new ceremonial key for 2016, was the last person to leave Stirchley Baths the day it closed in 1988. He locked the door behind him. At the re-opening, Paul was asked to ‘unlock’ the next period in the building’s history.

Paul Jones is the author of the booklet *A History of Bournville Lane Baths*, and his research and memories have been used within this timeline.
And the rest, they say, is HISTORY!