



## Stranger Than Fiction: Bathing Machines

Sue Lisk suggests some websites to consult to learn about these strange contraptions your ancestors might have used

**S**WIMSUIT? CHECK. SANDALS? CHECK. SUNSCREEN? CHECK. Beach towel? Check. These items might be part of a short list you'd refer to when ensuring you've remembered everything essential before heading out to spend a day at the beach.



New fads have always seemed odd. Here, the dancer, Mlle. Rhea, inaugurates the garter flask fad in Washington, during Prohibition, at a time when liquor had to be concealed, c. 1926. (Library of Congress)

But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even in the early years of the twentieth century, preparing for a trip to the seaside must have been quite a different affair.

At that time, in the UK and portions of the British Empire, but also in France, Germany, the U.S., and beyond, bathing in the sea typically involved a strange contraption known as a “bathing machine”.

To learn about this bizarre invention some of your ancestors would have used, I'd like to suggest a few websites you might consult.

### Bathing Machines in Photos

Before exploring the phenomenon of bathing machines, it's helpful to see some examples of them up close. You'll appreciate the collection of images Thomas Nybergh has included in his post, “Victorian Beach Life: Photos of 19th Century Bathing Machines in Operation”, at [www.whizzpast.com/photos-19th-century-bathing-machines/](http://www.whizzpast.com/photos-19th-century-bathing-machines/).

The bathing machine or “bathing van” was designed to allow seaside bathers, particularly females, to change into their swimming attire inside the vans. Horses pulled the vans out into the water where, at least theoretically, the women could bathe in privacy. When finished with their dips in the sea, the bathers changed back into their regular clothing inside the van before the horses pulled them back to the shore.

Many of the images you'll find here are striking. A detail that caught my attention in two of the photos are the ads that appear on the sides of the bathing machines.