

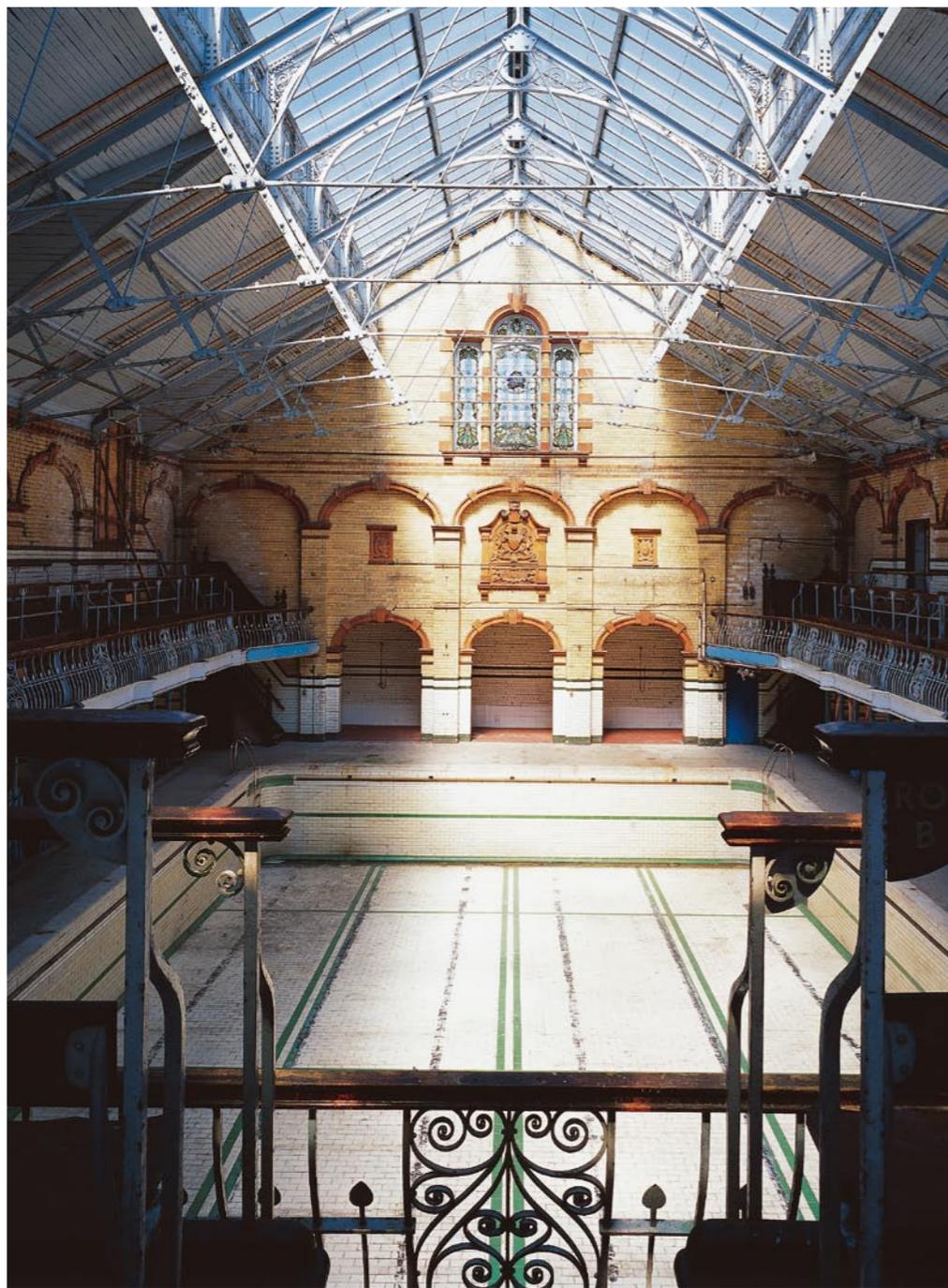
► This is the Males First Class Pool at the **Victoria Baths**, also known as the Gala Pool, with the City of Manchester's crest displayed proudly on the far end wall.

Here was an aquatic stadium for the city's swimming elite, a place where many a Mancunian watched swimming galas and water polo matches, and where in July 1912, the Hawaiian Olympic swimmer, Duke Kahanamoku, 'The Human Fish' – also known as the father of modern surfing – gave one of the first demonstrations in this country of the then unknown Australian stroke called front crawl. During the Second World War, local boys would dive in for sixpences thrown from the gallery by American GIs.

This was also the pool that in winter was boarded over and turned into a dance hall. A live orchestra played here right up until the 1950s.

Other facilities in the building included a Turkish Bath – much used by local businessmen as a place both to relax and to negotiate deals – and for the poorer classes, 64 slipper baths and a laundry, which in itself was a major focus of life for local housewives.

In 1952 the baths also installed the country's first public Aeratone, an early form of jacuzzi that apparently soothed many an injured footballer brought over from Maine Road and Old Trafford.



◄ Seeing the detail, the scale and the use of materials, it is not hard to see why, during the three years it took to complete, costs for the **Victoria Baths** rose by 50 per cent, to some £60,000. This compared to £42,500 for Bradford Baths (1909) and £13,000 for Moss Side Baths (1906).

Even so, it was the only baths to feature three pools, and was relatively good value compared, for example, with Haggerston Baths in east London, which opened in 1904 and had only one pool, and yet also cost around £60,000.

One expense which had not been envisaged was £4,788 spent on boring a deep underground well, in order to supply the pools with abundant supplies of fresh, clear water, rather than paying for the city's own, often tainted supply.

For extra durability all electrical wiring was routed through watertight pipes, and throughout the building ceramic tiles, Terrazzo and mosaic flooring were used for improved wear and tear and appearance. As the lead architect Henry Price argued before his detractors – and there were many – a building that would be hard-wearing, respected by its users, and yield lower maintenance costs, would, in the long term, be more cost effective for rate payers.

But not, alas, indefinitely. No baths designer can ever fully account for changing fashions, for the inevitable advances in technology that make baths like this one too expensive to maintain, or, just as importantly, for shifts in public policy.

Yet although the water palace has remained closed since 1993, its sheer quality shines on still.

Indeed, the Victoria Baths is one of those rare and precious buildings that virtually speaks for itself.