

THE ROYAL AUTOMOBILE CLUB,
PALL MALL,
CITY OF WESTMINSTER:

The Swimming Pool and Turkish Baths

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Outline History

The Royal Automobile Club was designed by the Alsatian Charles Mèwes (1860-1914) and his partner Arthur Davis (1878-1951), in conjunction with E. Keynes Purchase. The site was cleared in 1908 and the final approved drawings for the building are dated July 1910. ¹ club opened to its members in March 1911; some £250,000 had been spent. The last of the great clubhouses of London, it was also the most luxuriously appointed in terms of facilities. ²

The club house (**see illustration 1**) stands on the site of the Old War Office, the successor to the Board of Ordnance, which moved into Cumberland House in 1806, and expanded into adjoining houses –including Soane’s outstanding Buckingham House- thereafter. The popularity of the new-fangled motor car was rowing rapidly, and the support offered to this new means of transport by Edward VII (the king became the club’s Patron in 1903) was crucial in overcoming disapproval from the horse-driven country establishment. ³ This sense of the growing importance of motor cars, and hence of the first dedicated organisation, is reflected in the opulence and grandeur of the club house. ‘Perhaps the RAC Club is a better expression than the Ritz of the opulent and rather vulgar character of Edward VIII’s cosmopolitan circle’ mused Gavin Stamp. ⁴

The RAC might have been in the vanguard of the transport revolution effected by motor cars and aeroplanes, but was solidly backward-looking in terms of architectural inspiration. Just as car technology and competition was dominated by the French, so did 18th century Parisian buildings provide the main architectural sources. Jacques-Ange Gabriel’s buildings in the Place de la Concorde of the 1770s were the principal inspiration: the Hôtel de Crillon, in particular, which was the headquarters of the French Automobile Club, was drawn on extensively. The *Builders’ Journal* dwelt on this debt at some length:

It follows that the character of the architecture of a club must be dignified, the style correct, the and the individual element in design which makes a home charming to one person and unbearable to another must be eliminated... It is for these reasons that impersonal, if not strictly monumental, architecture has been the rule for the best clubs of the West End... The Royal Automobile Club... owes its inspiration to the former Hôtel Crillon-Croislin –now the Automobile Club- in the Place de la Concorde, Paris. It would be difficult to find a more beautifully studied example of modern architecture than the fine fronts by Gabriel... second only to Perrault’s colonnade of the Louvre. ⁵

The building was innovative in other respects, however. It was constructed around a daring steel frame designed by the Swedish enginer Sven Bylander, resting on a concrete basement. ⁶

¹ London Metropolitan Archives, Building Act case file 32172.

² See *Survey of London volume XXIX: the Parish of St James Westminster Part One* (1960), 359-68 on the buildings formerly on the site. On the RAC building itself, see 415-17.

³ Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh, ‘The Royal Automobile Club’, *Country Life* October 14, 1971 966-69.

⁴ *London 1900 (Architectural Digest Profiles 13, 1978)*, 341.

⁵ *The Builders’ Journal*, December 31, 1909, 654.

⁶ Richard Fellows, *Edwardian Architecture. Style and Technology* (1995), 64-68.

The Baths: Description

Splendid as the 18th century revival upper structure is, it is the basement and its Turkish bath which are so memorable. Together, they constitute one of the most outstanding bathing complexes in the country, and form an integral part of the building's special interest. 'Turkish' might be the generic term for such baths, but the architectural flavour of Mewès and Davis's design is overwhelmingly 'Neo-Grec', that French-inspired fusion of classical motifs which was so popular for civic buildings at this time.⁷ The opulence of the facilities attracted much notice at the time of opening, as *Building* magazine remarked:

This building... made a sensation when it was first erected, but more for what it contained in the way of swimming pools and banqueting halls and general luxury. Never had a club been planned on so splendid a scale.⁸

The plan of the basement (see **illustration 7**) indicates how dominant this element is. The centre contains the apsidal vestibule (see **illustration 2**), reached via twin flights of curving stairs, over which is located the fine bronze statue by Gilbert Bayes entitled *The Guardian of the Seas*, installed here in 1927.⁹ Once the basement is reached, the overwhelming architectural flavour is Roman: the grey marble floors and door surrounds, the bronze window grilles and torchères (as well as the apsidal room shape) all express this forcibly.

The centrepiece of the complex is the swimming pool, which is first seen from the vestibule, framed by a pair of square, marble-lined columns *in antis* (see **illustrations 3-4**). This corresponds in plan with the 'Great Gallery or Lecture Hall' of the main floor. It is a double-height space, dominated by the marble lined pool. Around this stands the procession of baseless Doric columns, each of which is sheathed in a highly French form of decoration consisting of a fish-scale pattern (with guilloche banding) executed in a mosaic of broken pieces of ceramic. The fish-scale motif is repeated in the two registers of bronze window grilles. Along the south side are apsidal recesses with plain door openings, with curtains, set into the Sicilian marble wall lining: these were originally changing cubicles. More torchères, hanging lamps and bronze screens repeat the Roman effect. The former spectators gallery at the east end has been turned into a barber's shop. The coved ceiling is plain, and lit with concealed up-lighters; the decoration ceases with the meander pattern along the frieze.

On turning east from the vestibule, the Turkish baths proper are entered. The first room is the frigidarium, the rest room which is filled with curtained off bed alcoves and Roman-inspired writing tables with matching *klismos* chairs (see **illustration 5**). The low ceiling is carried on squat fluted Doric columns. The architectural effect of

⁷ This inspired the following ditty from Stanley Ramsay, of Adshead and Ramsay, quoted in Stamp, op. cit., 310:

'Georgian in the country,
Neo-Grec in the town,
That's the stuff to give 'em
If you want renown'.

⁸ Cgharles Reilly, 'Arthur J. Davis, FRIBA', *Building* April 1929, 159.

⁹ The statue is distinctly comparable to Bayes's best known work, the female statue above the clock on the exterior of Selfridge's.

the room has suffered through the partitioning-off of the North-east corner and the insertion of a solarium (or sun bed), as well as from the insertion of service pipes across the already low ceiling. This room is, in some ways, the most unusual of all of the component spaces within the baths complex. Its function as a place of relaxation marks it out as an amenity of a very smart club: no public baths would ever have an elegant chamber devoted to the cult of lounging.

The south-east corner of the basement is taken up with a number of separate chambers, each with a distinct bathing purpose. The tepidarium, which adjoins the swimming pool, is a semi-hot room which has suffered badly from unsympathetic past interventions; only the alabaster-like marble veneer to the door surrounds, the columns and the dado remains. The laconium (lit. 'the sweating room') is a hot steam room, and survives in a similar condition to the tepidarium, only with more surviving marble wall lining. A modern sauna and WCs have been inserted in the south-east corner. The steam room (virtually invisible, so dense is the vapour) retains marble-faced benches along the southern and western walls. The plunge pool is essentially unaltered: its narrow marble-lined pool is entered via steps at the west end. The massage room (formerly the shampooer's room) is without interest.

The Baths: Lay-out and Alterations

The swimming pool is largely unaltered (save for its gallery), but this cannot, it seems, be said of the rest of the baths complex. Further documentary research is needed in order to establish the precise chronology of changes within the Turkish baths. The RAC no doubt possesses such information within its archives, and an historical account of such developments should be compiled as part of the current application.

Complications are caused by there being two different early plans of the basement by Mewès and Davis, showing certain of the rooms in different places. In one, published in *The Builders' Journal* in 1909 (see **illustration 6**), the calidarium and tepidarium are shown along the east wall, beyond the Frigidarium, which extended southwards, almost into a separate room space. The other early ground plan (taken from a photograph held by the firm of Mewès and Davis: see **illustration 7**) shows the frigidarium as laid out on an apsidal plan; the calidarium, laconium and tepidarium are shown to the south of the frigidarium, rather than along the east wall, and the whole complex is labelled 'Turkish Bath'. The latter plan corresponds far more closely with the baths as they exist today, and are almost certainly the 'as built' layout. A modern plan is attached with the original lay-out of the Turkish Baths superimposed (see **illustration 8**).

Differences between the latter plan and the baths today are several. For one, the tepidarium has grown in size through being amalgamated with the former smoking recess. Secondly, the former shampoo room and vapour bath have been turned into a steam room and a modern shower area. Thirdly, this steam room contains marble-faced seating which appears to have been introduced from the earlier calidarium.

According to the architect, the numerous recent alterations to the interior of the bath were carried out in c1988 by a firm of surveyors. Internal inspection of the hot rooms

of the Turkish bath reveal these to have been extensive. The finances of the RAC were not at their most robust at this time,¹⁰ and there is a clear contrast between the Edwardian surfaces and fittings, and the modern insertions.

The Baths: Assessment

The RAC's baths are very unusual for England and of great interest. For Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh, the pool was 'the most beautiful swimming bath in England', a verdict which is hard to dispute. Joe Friedman's *Inside London* (1988) described the 'torch-lit' pool as 'Byzantine. Descending the staircase one instantly feels like an extra in an epic motion picture by Cecil B. de Mille, or a classical sybarite in a suggestive painting by Alma Tadema'.¹¹ As the SAVE Britain's Heritage report *Taking the Plunge* has it,

The spectacular swimming pool of the Royal Automobile Club... is well known. With its clusters of mosaic clad columns and pilasters, it not only predates, but outshines the Hollywood filmsets of the 1920s in recreating the opulence and luxury of the baths of the ancients.¹²

Private baths of anything like this magnitude were very unusual. A London club, the Bath Club, was founded in 1894 with the express purpose of creating a swimming pool for gentlemen of Distinction, and a pool was created (with attendant Turkish baths) in the former ballroom of the Dover Street town house of the Marquess of Abergavenny. This survived until 1941.¹³ This appears to have been the only comparable example to the RAC in London. Clough Willilams-Ellis designed a basement swimming pool at the Ladies' Carlton Club, but it is not known whether it survives.

Mewès and Davis¹⁴ did much design work for ocean liners, and it is possible that the closest analogies with their work in the basement of the RAC were to be found in this generally short-lived area of construction. The firm advised the German Hamburg Amerika Line of ocean liners, and the company's vessels *Imperator* and *Vaterland* are said to have had indoor baths based on the RAC's pool.¹⁵ Mewès, an Alsatian, is said to have designed a similar bath at the spa complex at Contréxeville in the Vosges.¹⁶ This was the practice's only such building project, according to a typescript list of the practice's output.¹⁷

¹⁰ Anthony Lejeune, *The Gentlemen's Clubs of London* (2nd ed. 1984), 223-25.

¹¹ Op. cit., 43.

¹² Op. cit. (1984), 2. This is the best overall introduction to the architecture of swimming baths, and places the RAC squarely in context

¹³ Lejeune, op. cit, 47.

¹⁴ The fullest accounts of the firm are to be found in A. Stuart Gray, *Edwardian Architecture* (1985), 158-60 and 259, and Alastair Service ed., *Edwardian Architecture and its Origins* (1975), 432-42. According to Charles O'Brien of the *Buildings of England*, Davis's daughter Anne is still alive and is a fruitful source of information on the firm.

¹⁵ *Taking the Plunge*, 2 and 5.

¹⁶ This point is made in the list entry for the building, and is probably taken from the article 'The Creator of the Modern Luxury Hotel: Charles Mewès, Architect', *RIBA Journal* October 1947, 604.

¹⁷ Copy in bibliographical file with HART.

Turkish Baths

According to *The Builder* in 1878, Turkish baths were introduced to England in the 1850s.¹⁸ The term appears to refer to any bathing complex which combines steam rooms (of ascending orders of temperature) as well as plunge baths. The firm of J. and H. Nevil opened several Turkish baths in London in the 1880s and 1890s: one of these, now a restaurant, survives in Bishopsgate Churchyard which dates from 1895 and which retains Moorish ceramic decoration within.¹⁹ The finest surviving complex of Turkish baths are probably those at Harrogate's Royal Baths, designed by F.T. Bagally and F. Bristow and built in 1897-98: this almost certainly represents the closest comparison with the RAC. The survival rate of this sort of complex has generally been low. The remains of a Turkish bath survive at the Assembly Rooms at Leamington Spa dating from the early 1860s.²⁰

The baths at the RAC are clearly Roman in character, but nonetheless the Mewès and Davis plan labels the eastern side of the basement with the generic term of 'Turkish Bath'. Stylistically, 'Roman' or 'Pompeian' would be more suitable given the complete absence of any specifically Moorish decorative features, but nevertheless the term 'Turkish Bath' has stuck.

The most comparable survival in London are the Turkish Baths at the Porchester Street Baths in Bayswater, built in 1927-29 to the designs of Herbert Shepherd.²¹ These are very different in planning to the RAC's, however: they consist of a central, plunge pool within a double-height chamber resembling a Roman thermal hall, with curtained-off alcoves around the upper gallery. Newcastle's 1928 City Hall is also said to retain a bath complex of Roman, rather than the more common Moorish, inspiration.

The Survival of Baths

Given their former numbers, early bath complexes have not fared well. Public baths are far more numerous than private ones, and comparisons between the two are not entirely valid. There was a wave of reconstruction during the 1950s and 1960s as modern installations replaced long-in-the-tooth Victorian and Edwardian complexes. Thus, poor comparisons as they are, there are precious few turn-of-the-century public baths left today. An extensive gazetteer of survivals is contained within the *Taking the Plunge* Save report.

In terms of imposing public swimming pools, the marble-lined pool at the Marshall Street Baths²² (1928-31 by A.W.S. and K.M.B. Cross, specialists in this field) is

¹⁸ 'Dr Mackenzie traced the history of the Turkish bath from the time of the Romans to its introduction into England about twenty years ago': op. cit., December 28 1878, 1356.

¹⁹ See HART report City189 on this building, which is listed Grade II.

²⁰ See HART report Out-County 381.

²¹ See HART report WM 844. They are listed Grade II.

²² See HART report WM 269. It is listed Grade II.

perhaps the nearest comparison to the RAC's, but the similarities are not close at all. This too originally had a frigidarium, but compared with the RAC's example this was a relatively plain affair, resembling a tile-lined saloon. Altogether more modern, but also imposing, is the Empire Pool at Wembley of 1934, which was covered over with the one-time largest concrete arch on the world.²³

Other surviving London examples²⁴, all listed Grade II, include:

- St Pancras Public Baths, Prince of Wales Road, LB Camden (T.W. Aldwinkle, 1898)
- Haggerston Baths, Whiston Road, LB Hackney (A.W.S.Cross, 1904)
- Cheshire Street Baths, LB Tower Hamlets (Ayling, Holloway and Berry, 1898-1900)
- Laurie Grove Baths, LB Lewisham (T. Dinwiddy, 1895-98)
- Wells Way baths and library, LB Southwark (Maurice Adams, 1902)
- Fulham baths, North End Road, LB Hammersmith & Fulham (H Deighton Pearson, 1902)
- Chelsea Public Baths, Chelsea Manor Street, RBK&C (Wills & Anderson, 1902)
- Silchester Baths, Silchester Road, RBK&C (Verity, Kirk & Randall, 1886)
- Brentford Baths, Clifden Road, LB Hounslow (Parr and Barnes, 1895)
- Tottenham public baths (former), Town Hall Approach Road, LB Haringey (Taylor & Jemmett, 1905)

Summary Conclusion

Although the Turkish Baths at the RAC have undergone some alteration, they remain of considerable importance since they belong to the outstanding bathing complex in London. The swimming pool is of international renown and arguably the finest in the country. Surviving Turkish Baths are now very rare; surviving private Turkish baths are even rarer. The frigidarium is highly unusual and largely intact, right down to its furniture and fittings.

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²³ See HART file BRE 17. It is listed Grade II.

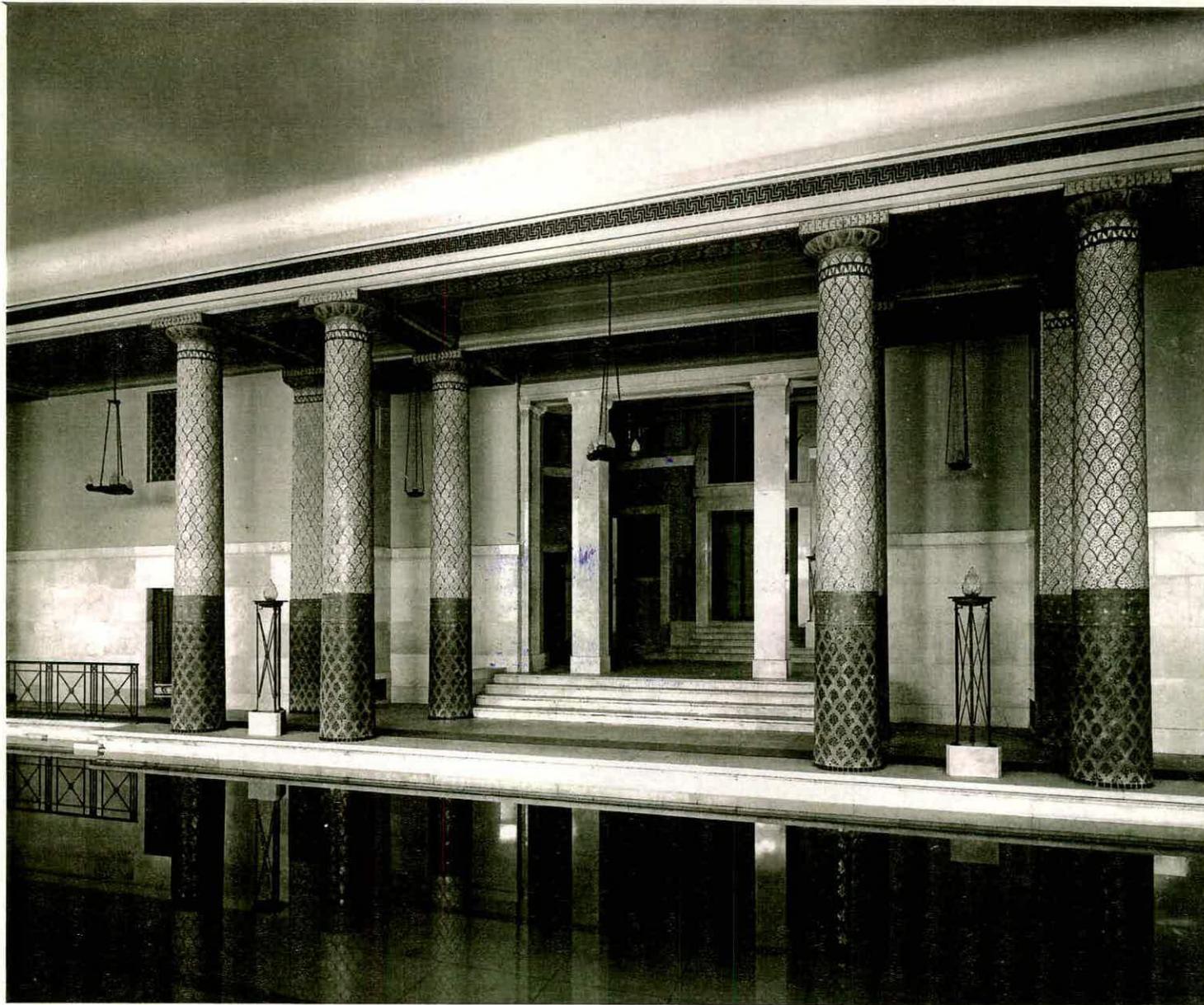
²⁴ See the HART building type file 'baths' for more information on municipal baths.



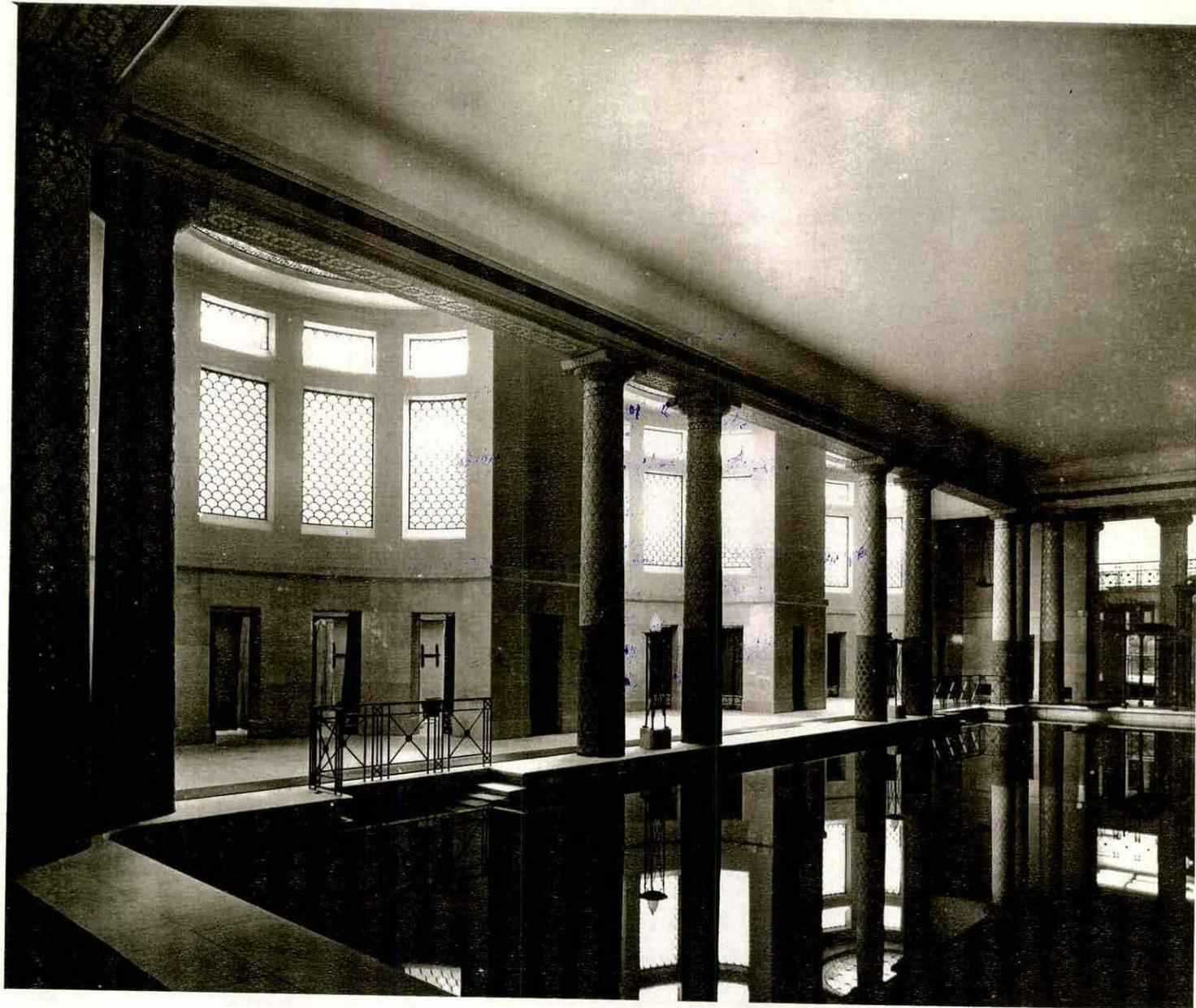
1 Royal Automobile Club, Pall Mall. Exterior, 1956 (London Region)



2 Royal Automobile Club: basement vestibule shortly after opening in 1911
(Mewès and Davis/NMR)



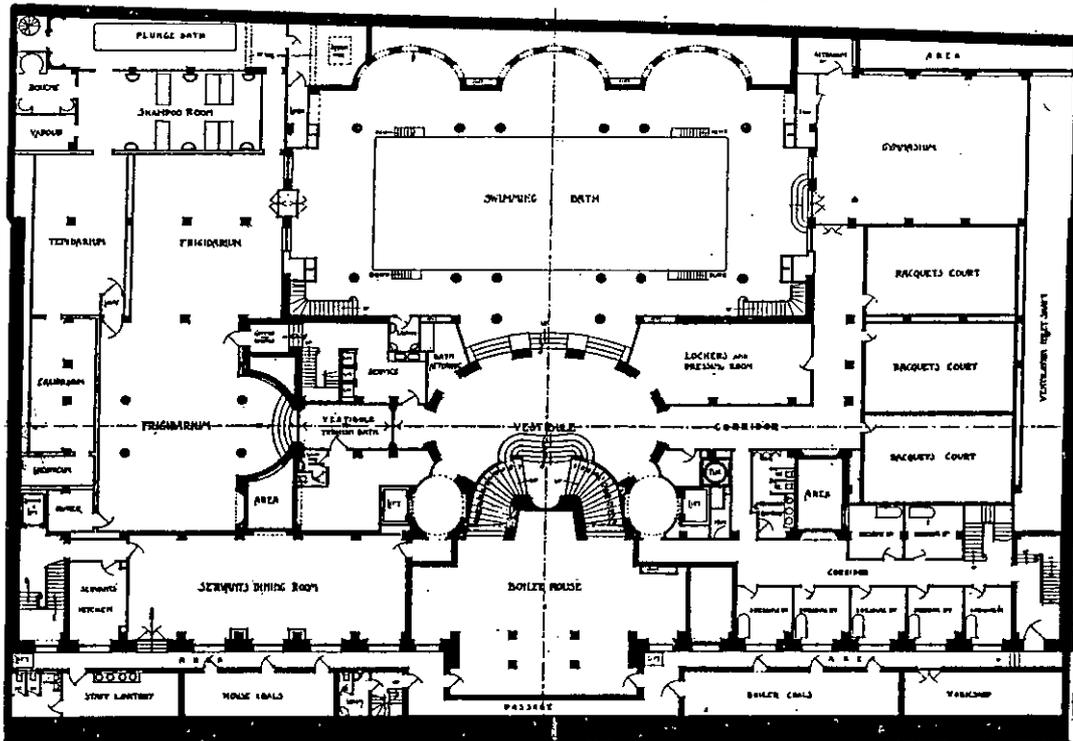
3 Royal Automobile Club: entrance to swimming pool from vestibule shortly after opening in 1911 (Mewès and Davis/NMR)



4 Royal Automobile Club: swimming pool shortly after opening in 1911
(Mewès and Davis/NMR)



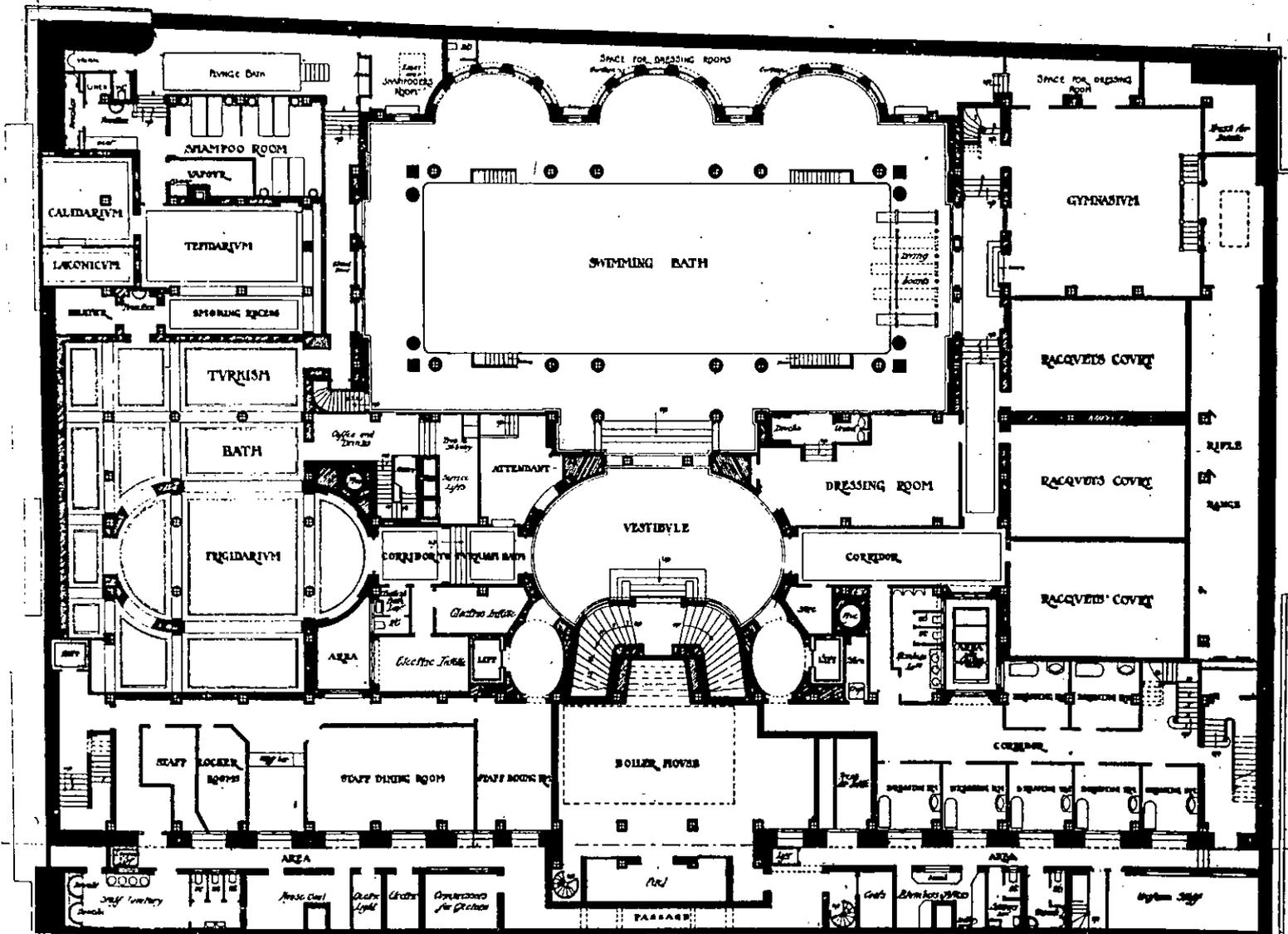
5 Royal Automobile Club: frigidarium shortly after opening in 1911 (Mewès and Davis/NMR)



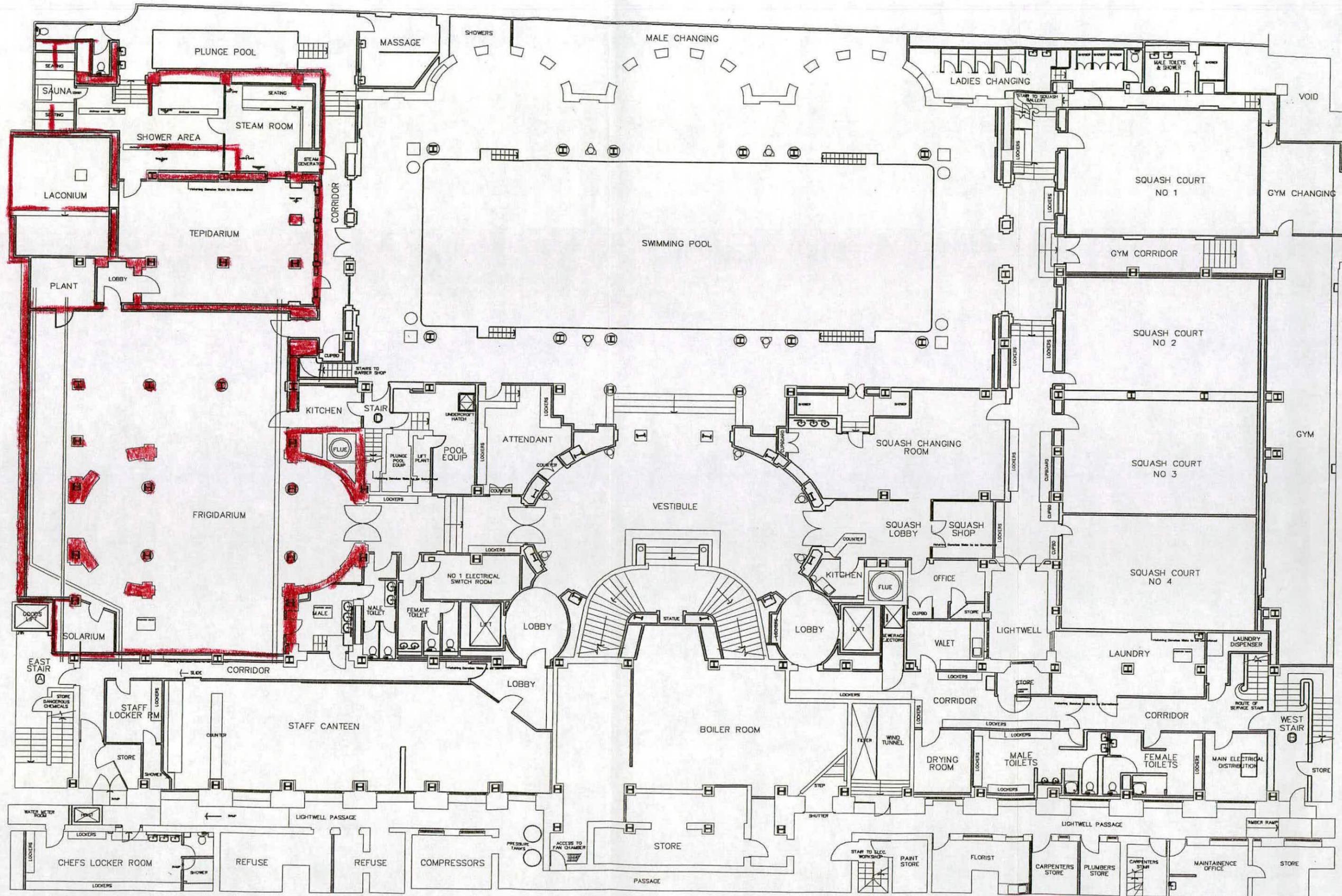
Basement Plan.

ROYAL AUTOMOBILE CLUB, PALL MALL: PLANS. MEWES AND DAVIS AND E. KEYNES PURCHASE, ARCHITECTS.
 (For View, see overleaf.)

- 6 Royal Automobile Club: plan of basement (preliminary design). From *The Builders' Journal and Architectural Engineer*, December 31 1909, 651.



Royal Automobile Club : Basement,



8 Royal Automobile Club: current plan of basement, with original arrangement of the Turkish Bath overlaid in red.