



Open Water Swimming – an Adventure on our doorstep!

I was born in Brighton and grew up by the sea. From an early age I loved swimming in the sea.

I joined Brighton Swimming Club at the age of 8 and some years later took part in the Pier to Pier swimming race. I first swam it in 1980 and under my father's guidance covered myself in a petroleum jelly to stay warm, but also got it on my goggles which resulted in me swimming completely off track and heading south to France!

Despite enjoying water sports I really didn't go in the sea that regularly until about 4 years ago when I started swimming with Brighton Swimming Club most summer mornings at 7.30am.

That summer gave way to autumn and I carried on swimming as the sea temperature dropped. I started wearing two hats and then divers' gloves. I saw the sun come up every morning and enjoyed the blue sky and freshness of each day – I just couldn't stop going down there. Winter closed in and the temperature fell further – I found swimming such an adventure again. I was hooked and haven't stopped going since.

I had, through my company Brighton Swimming School, introduced thousands of children to swimming at a pool but never taught anyone to swim in the biggest pool of all – the sea!

The last twenty years has seen a migration from the cities to the coast and Brighton, in many ways, has been leading this trend. Newcomers to the city often mention the sea as one of its main attractions and yet I am always surprised at how few people actually venture into the water.

Possibly we have been spoiled by exotic holidays, fears of pollution and an over the top risk averse culture. Sea swimming, once a regular summer pastime for many, had become something of an obscure activity. A few years ago it was said that as a nation we had lost our link with the countryside - I wondered whether we had also now lost it with the sea?

Last year, I decided to start changing things. One factor that seemed to be stopping people from swimming far in the sea was a lack of confidence and knowledge about the sea.

I hit on the idea of putting together a programme that looked at preparing people for the sea by developing their stroke and stamina in the pool before going into the sea. An end of course target sprang to mind, swimming around the palace (Brighton) pier – ‘Pool to Pier’ was born!

Open water swimming is about keeping fit, utilising a sustainable resource, swimming without interruption and having a bit of an adventure!

An avid local sea swimmer and instructor, Adrian Bates, joined me to help lead the programme.

We barely advertised the course – mostly just to parents at our swimming school - almost immediately 13 men and women signed up! They were all happy in the pool but lacked confidence in the sea. One or two were looking at attempting triathlons and needed to improve their swimming.

The group were very mixed – script writers, nurses, builders, stock brokers, doctors and designers – they were all very motivated and eager to learn.

We trained from the end of February once a week for nine weeks at a pool in Brighton. Everyone improved very quickly and increased their distances. Before we entered the sea we wanted them all to be up to at least 1000 metres without stopping. We added a short theory part to each week’s lesson where we taught the group about tides, currents, marine life, and aquatic first aid.

By mid may we were ready to enter the sea!

The Yellow wave beach volleyball courts on the seafront offered their changing facilities to start the swims from and along with our safety boat, we stood ready for the swimmers to arrive. It was early in the season and all of them wore wetsuits. We issued everyone with bright yellow swimming hats and following a quick briefing, we set off.

The group were very excited about their first swim and entered the water at low tide from a sandy beach. The sea was flat and the sky was blue. There was a cooling south westerly breeze gently blowing along the beach.

The first swim was a simple target - swim out to the boat and back (altogether about 300 metres). They swam to the boat, had a short rest and returned to the shore. They were enthralled to have accomplished their first swim and we were very proud of them.

They needed to swim about 1200 metres however to get round the pier and so every week we increased the distance and started swimming to the yellow marker buoys and then between them towards the pier.

The summer moved on, they readied for their big swims. We met each swimmer on the beach early in the mornings. They all felt ready and were eager to get going.

Sarah Savage was the first round and as the weeks progressed all 13 of them accomplished it including Charlotte Savins (on her wedding day!)

What we accomplished can now be seen as a part of a bigger movement towards open water swimming – (Google a book search and you will be surprised how many books on open water swimming are now being published) and with the highly acclaimed Robson Greene TV programme before Christmas, I feel confident that we are beginning to ‘connect’ with the sea again.

And as for the ‘Pool to Pier’ we are recruiting swimmers all the time and expect to start in the sea again this Spring.

Paul Smith is the managing director of Brighton Swimming School and Swim UK.

Anyone interested in finding out about “Pool to Pier” should go to www.brightonswimmingschool.com or call 01273 425745 for details.



Triumphant Pool to Pier swimmers (from left) Ashley, Darren, Paul Smith, Barry, Charlotte and Angie.