A Life Well Swum (Sample)

Finding Myself in Open Water

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This is a memoir, not an instruction manual. Open water swimming carries risks. Do not treat this book as training or safety advice.

Welcome to A Life Well Swum

Thank you for downloading this sample of *A Life Well Swum*.

The memoir tells the story of my life in and around open water, from childhood swims in the Jersey sea and English lakes to the long distance challenges that came later.

In the full book, I write about my return to the sea in midlife, a journey that leads across the English Channel, around Manhattan Island and finally to the North Channel. Along the way, I become part of a community: supporting other swimmers, joining relay teams and giving back to the sport that changed my life.

This sample starts near the end, with my hardest swim, before returning to where it all began.

Prologue: The Swarm

The sting in my mouth was the worst. The tentacle of the jellyfish slid down my cheek, falling between my lips as I turned my head to breathe.

The first appeared soon after the start of my 21-mile swim from Northern Ireland to Scotland. After one hundred, I gave up counting.

Halfway across I saw a swarm the size of a football pitch. The water was alive with them, an alien world.

I had two choices: give up or carry on through. I kept going.

Most were just below the surface. Tensing my stomach, I glided over the top, anxious to avoid brushing them.

Every few minutes one would be higher, large, white and translucent. Its touch like stinging nettles.

More worrying were the lion's mane jellyfish, dirty brown and hidden among the rest. Their trailing tentacles lashed with a pain worse than a dozen bee stings.

I saw hundreds, maybe thousands, clustered in a dense mass. During my North Channel crossing, I passed through two swarms.

That memory, immersed in the sea and surrounded by these creatures, stands out as the highlight.

Strange and full of wonder. Something few get to experience. What greater privilege could there be?

It was the most vivid moment, leaving me asking: how did a middle-aged, overweight family man end up taking on one of the toughest open water challenges in the world?



Early Adventures

Memories of the Pool

One of my earliest memories is the public pool in Darlington, in the north of England. The whiff of chlorine, all of us together, Mum, Dad, my sister and me. It was a cheap family outing and a chance to splash, laugh and play.

Afterwards we breakfasted on a mountain of toast thick with marmalade. From the start, the water was my happy place.

In 1970, when I was five, my parents separated. They married young and had grown apart. At the time, I didn't understand, but later I recognised the father-shaped hole it left in me.

My mother, wanting the best for us, moved to Jersey, where her parents had moved in retirement and their steady love filled the gap.

The island is 100 miles south of England, only 9 miles by 5, with the sea always close. Its beaches, bays and harbours became part of my life.

Residency laws meant my grandparents couldn't buy property, so they rented a small flat attached to a millionaire's house. In exchange for Grampa helping with the gardening, we were allowed to use the owner's pool.

My younger sister, Kirsty, and I swam there all summer, and it became our own little paradise. We ran down the path on bare, hardened feet and jumped in, staying in for hours after school, water babies without a care.

Growing up, the sea was both backdrop and playground: sailing with my grandfather, laughing in the spray as Atlantic breakers crashed into the seawall, belly-boarding in the waves.

Over time the sea worked its way into me and never left.

My mother, Annette, was a single mum working as a social worker, with little time and even less money. She poured everything she had into raising Kirsty and me.

In 1971, the year we moved to Jersey, the island got its first public indoor pool, Fort Regent. We were regulars from the start, building on the 25-yard certificates we'd earned before leaving Darlington. Two years later, a group of parents formed a club at the pool. Mum became one of the poolside assistants, Kirsty was a swimming star in the making, and, for me, the pool became a new home.

In July 1976, when I was 11, a teacher at the pool entered me in the Castle Harbour swim, a 1-mile race in the sea. It seemed a long way, but I loved it: the freedom of open water, the camaraderie of competition, doing something others couldn't.

This led me to join the Jersey Long Distance Swimming Club, the JLDSC, or simply the Club. Looking back, that decision made all the difference.

The Club was new, founded on the inspiration of Denize Le Pennec. She was the first person from Jersey to swim the English Channel, 20 hours of breaststroke with no cap and no goggles. A pioneer, she was still

sending congratulatory cards more than 40 years later to mark successful Channel swims.

Success came quickly to the Club. In August 1975, its second year, it was invited to enter a team in an English Channel relay race celebrating the 100th anniversary of the first crossing. The six Jersey teenagers finished second in the mixed category, behind Egypt, with Great Britain in third.

They were the big kids, the ones I looked up to.

By the winter of 1976, I was training with them in the sea. I was a chubby kid, comfortable in the cold. I couldn't keep up with the older kids in speed, but I could stay in as long.

My coach was Maurice Lakeman, the first Club President and a driving force in its early success. He gave up countless hours to help me, and I remember him with gratitude, even if his methods, like all coaching in Jersey then, were old-school.

We trained at the Fort Regent pool after school. A typical session was simple: Mr Lakeman, in his PE teacher's tracksuit, told me to do a mile without stopping. After plodding up and down, I finished and looked up, expectant.

"Now do another mile."

Bored and unmotivated, I started again, alone with my thoughts and the endless lengths, never thinking about pacing or technique.

Distance was all that counted.

As the open water warmed, we moved to Havre des Pas, a seawater lido. We swam 300-yard loops of the circular pool. I was at the back, and when no one was looking, I would cut the corner to catch up.

In 1976 there was another big change. At 11, I had to move from primary to secondary education.

Soon after arriving in Jersey, I had started at St Peter's, a small country school with only 20 children per year. It was next to the airport, and when planes took off, the noise made the teacher pause mid-sentence. We would sit frozen at our desks until she could be heard again.

By my last year, I was settled and happy, a good, hard-working kid near the top of the class. The only time I remember getting told off was when a worried teacher ran across the playground to stop me spinning around, holding a smaller classmate by the hands, his feet lifted high from the ground like a fairground ride.

Rather than send me to the local secondary, Mum put me forward for a scholarship at Victoria College, a fee-paying school in a Gothic building on a hill above town. During the occupation of the island in the Second World War, the Germans had used it as their headquarters.

To qualify for the scholarship, I had to complete a written test. After the exam, I was taken with the other candidates to a classroom, where we waited to be interviewed. One of the others was carrying a model castle made from hundreds of matchsticks, and I thought, *I don't have a chance against that*.

In the interview, I was asked to read the poem *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost. It didn't make much sense to me, and the teacher smiled kindly as I tried to come up with something to say.

Walking out, I wasn't worried about failing. I had tried because Mum wanted me to, and I hadn't thought about where I wanted to go. When I was accepted on a full scholarship, I was unmoved.

Reality hit me hard when I arrived at the new school in September. Only one other person from St Peter's was in my year. My old friends had gone to the school out west, and many of my new classmates had moved up together from the fee-paying prep school. Their friendships

had been forged over years. I was one of the outsiders, too posh for my old mates in my gold-edged blazer, but not welcome in the new group.

One morning, before assembly, I was teased for having greasy hair. My protest that it was wet from an early-morning session in the pool was drowned out by laughter.

But through it all, swimming remained. That year, aged 11, I took on a 3-mile swim from the port at St Helier to the harbour at St Aubin. All I wore was a costume, cap and goggles. Wetsuits were against the rules, and there was nothing between me and the sea.

Heading past Elizabeth Castle, a conger eel slid below me, threading between the rocks. It didn't feel threatening, just another strangeness on a strange day.

Mum escorted me in a small dinghy, her dark brown hair tied back against the wind. Her usual warm smile had gone, her eyes fixed on the route. Sitting alone at the tiller of the two-stroke outboard, miles from shore, took her far beyond her comfort zone. She did it because I needed her. That was her way of showing love: practical help and steady encouragement.

The swim took an hour and a quarter, a small stepping-stone that felt big at the time.

The local newspaper ran a headline: "Long Distance Swimming Hopes". The story described me as a promising long-distance swimmer.

At school I was a quiet child, happier reading in the playground than joining in with football. Traditional sports weren't for me. Already five foot six at the age of 11, I felt big and awkward, but time in the water made me proud. It gave me an identity: Graeme, the swimmer.

Buoyed by that, a month later I took on something bigger: 7 miles along the coast from St Helier to Gorey, helped by the tide.

Before the start, I walked along the harbour wall past a dead shark strung up by its tail. Two fishermen glanced at me in my costume, then at the shark.

"I wouldn't fancy swimming with that," one said to his mate.

Then they looked at me properly: tall for my years, broad-shouldered, but still a child, with baby-blue eyes half-hidden by a blond fringe. "Don't worry," he said. "It was caught far offshore."

The swim took me three and a half hours. My body could take on these challenges, but I was still young. At that age it's hard to know what is normal and what is extraordinary.

Whatever I was asked to do, I did.

Coniston Water

The next test was a long way from salt water.

The JLDSC was still new, keen to learn from others. The British Long Distance Swimming Association, the BLDSA, ran a summer circuit of events around the UK and the Club started to take part.

In the summer of 1977, aged 12, I travelled to England for my first trip with the Club.

Debbie Banks, my training partner, came too. She was the same age as me. We spent a lot of time together, but I went to an all-boys' school and hadn't learned how to talk to girls. Debbie was no exception. We never clicked. Just two kids doing the same things, teammates. At that age, I didn't know how to be her friend.

Our first swim was the BLDSA Lake Bala Championships, a 3-mile race in 15-degree water. Three swimmers didn't finish, but after my longer, colder sea swims, Bala felt comfortable.

Three days later, in September 1977, Debbie and I took on the five-and-a-half-mile length of Coniston Water as a training swim.

We set off from the old steamer jetty at High Nibthwaite under a grey, misty sky. Rain fell and a strong south-westerly drove up the lake. The water was choppy and visibility poor.

Lakes were different, and I preferred the salty ocean to this brown, murky, flat-tasting freshwater.

For the first stretch we were side by side, stroke for stroke. After halfway Debbie edged ahead. We hugged the eastern shore to hide from the wind.

After two hours 47 minutes, Debbie finished, and I followed eight minutes later.

It was windy, cold and rainy, but we still managed the full length of Coniston Water.

Useless at most sports, swimming let me succeed at something and that confidence has stayed with me. The achievement behind me, I was ready for the next step.

Ecrehous

In July 1978, when I was 13, the Club organised a crossing to the Ecrehous, a small group of uninhabited islands seven miles from Jersey and halfway to France. By then, only three people had swum to them.

Now four of us were going to try: me, Debbie, our teammate Jane and David Morgan, a visitor from the UK. He had crossed the Channel the year before, aged 13, the youngest person to do so at the time.

We started from St Catherine's on Jersey's east coast. Wading in at the back of the group, I kept fiddling with my cap and goggles. The sea wrapped around me, comfortably cool, a soothing embrace.

From the slipway to the end of the breakwater it was only half a mile, but the granite stayed beside me, a relentless presence. By the time I reached clear water I thought: *That took forever; how am I going to make it the whole way?*

Anxious not to be left behind, I hurried to keep up. Heading away from Jersey into open water for the first time, I felt small in the big sea.

The waves built once we were past the wall and I sensed depth beneath me. The island fell away, shrinking to a thin green line. The finish was too far away to see, and I had no idea where I was or where I was going.

To steady my nerves I edged closer to the dinghy. Mum sat at the outboard engine, her eyes never leaving me.

After four hours we all finished within 10 minutes of each other, stumbling ashore on the rocky reef.

My body felt drained, but I smiled at the thought that I had kept up with David, already a Channel swimmer, and Jane, who would cross it that summer.

The adults on the support boat called out congratulations as we climbed aboard. Their expectations were high, and I was ready for whatever they asked. Maybe one day, the Channel.

Lake Windermere

At the end of August 1978, still aged 13, I faced a big step in my English Channel journey. The next challenge was Lake Windermere, ten and a half miles. This was nearly twice as far as Coniston, but I knew nothing about it, only a name and a distance.

Travel to England from Jersey was expensive, so we combined the swim with our family's summer holiday. Flights cost too much, so we took the ferry. After an eight-hour crossing to Weymouth, my mother drove her rusty Fiat 128 up to the Lake District. The roof rack was

crowded with luggage and the soundtrack from *Grease* looped on the car's cassette player.

We camped, and cooked meals on a portable gas stove. A trip to the cinema was a rare treat, and I worried about the money being spent on my hobby. *Could Mum afford it?*

The Banks family pitched in the next row as Debbie was swimming with me.

Mum and Kirsty shared one pod of our tent; the other was mine. A sleeping bag on a thin foam mat over bumpy grass made me fidget all night.

"Wake up, sunshine," Mum said as she passed me a bowl of Ready Brek. I sat up in my sleeping bag and started to eat the hot porridge covered in golden syrup.

It was before dawn. The campsite was silent and still. The start of the swim was early to get the calmest conditions and avoid the ferries, water-skiers and pleasure craft.

We drove down through the narrow lanes. A cat ran out from the gloom and Mum threw her left arm across my chest, a mother's reflex in the days before seatbelts.

The start was at Waterhead jetty in Ambleside, at the north of the lake. The others were waiting with two small wooden rowing boats hired for the day. Mr Lakeman was in charge of my escort, and his wife was in charge of the other. Debbie's older brother would row for her and Debbie's father would row for me, sitting on a hard wooden seat. My mother had to look after Kirsty, so would follow from the shore.

I should have thanked Mr Banks for giving up his day to help me rather than being with his daughter, but I was too intimidated to talk to him.

I stood in my costume, and Mum smeared pale white channel grease under my arms, across my shoulders and the back of my neck, applying it thickly to shield against the cold.

We started at 6:30 a.m. under a heavy sky. The water was 16 degrees and tasted sweeter than the sea. There was no end in sight, only a mass of green trees and a small castle a mile away where the lake bent out of view.

As I set off, I felt strong and sang 'Greased Lightning' underwater. We made good progress across the first big stretch, known as the Deeps. There was no bottom in sight.

We followed the eastern side. Dotted on the shore were a few large houses with lawns leading to private jetties. They reminded me of a comic book about a school for teenage spies who swam a mile every morning as part of their training. *One mile would be easy,* I thought.

After an hour we cut across the lake to the headland at Red Nab and hugged the western edge. Trees stretched out over the water, their branches dipping low. The lake shallowed and I could see thin weeds growing from the bottom, reaching up towards me.

The weather worsened and raindrops stung as they peppered my shoulders. With each breath, my face cleared the lake and met the raw air.

Bubbles rose from my left hand as I pulled it beneath me. A week earlier Kirsty had swum half a mile in Bala Lake but got out saying she was afraid of the white monster she kept glimpsing below her. She was only 11, but I had laughed. I wished I had been more sympathetic.

After four miles we neared the island of Belle Isle and stopped for our first break. The water was shallow enough to stand, chest deep, my feet squelching in the soft mud.

The rubber rims of the goggles pressed into my face. I shoved them up for a clearer view and tugged my latex cap back into place.

"Well done," Mr Lakeman said, pulling a dented green Thermos from his bag. He unscrewed the stopper and poured coffee, sweetened with evaporated milk, into an enamel cup, passing it to me over the side. Steam curled in the morning air. My hands were stiff with the cold, but I grabbed the drink and gulped it, grateful for the heat spreading into my stomach.

"Do you want anything else?" he said. My mouth was too frozen for words, so I nodded and he handed me half a Mars bar. Two bites and it was gone, the sugar cutting through the flat lake taste.

"Lucozade next time?" he asked, waving the bright golden orange bottle.

"No, more coffee, please." I was already longing for its warmth.

We continued down the western side of Belle Isle, threading our way past the moored yachts. After Bowness we moved back to the eastern side for the last stretch.

The rain fell steadily and Mr Banks pulled gently at the oars, matching my slow speed. A car ferry crossed the lake, stopping me for a few minutes. As I floated, I looked at the boat. Mr Lakeman's face was stern as the water dripped down his raincoat. *Perhaps he is unhappy with me*, I thought.

Three weeks earlier I had quit on a five-mile sea swim because I was too cold. No one said anything, but I was sure I could see disappointment on my mother's face. I couldn't do that again.

I don't remember the last two hours. I wasn't there; my arms kept turning by instinct.

Debbie finished first and I came in a moment later at six hours ten minutes. I walked up the landing stage at Lakeside, staggering into my mother's arms.

Sitting in a nearby café, I shivered, my mood as black as the lake. Mum set down a mug of tea. "Drink this. It will warm you up."

As I stirred in sugar, my hands shook and tipped the cup over. Tea spilt onto the table as I blinked back tears and looked away while Mum cleaned up my mess.

Glancing across, I saw Debbie chatting happily with her parents and thought back to racing her in the 3-mile Club Championships. Near the end, after an hour in the sea, we'd stayed even, muscles straining, lungs heaving, and finished together. Physically we were equals, well matched. Emotionally, she was more mature and could handle the long swims in a way that I couldn't.

She caught me looking at her and stared back. Lowering my head to the table, I hid my damp eyes in folded arms and fell asleep.

Swimming as a child gave me skills and confidence on land as well as in the water. But I'm struck by how young I was when I took on those early challenges and how young others were too.

David Morgan's record as the youngest Channel swimmer did not last. The age kept falling until, in 1988, Tom Gregory crossed at just 11. Eventually the rules were changed, and solo Channel swimmers now have to be at least 16. Attitudes have changed.

At the time it seemed normal. Now I can see how demanding and isolating it was. Coaches, pilots, and a support team surrounded me, but they were adults. I was a child and felt alone. At that age, hours in the water are a long time to be left with nothing but your thoughts.

It was too much for me at 13. The sea at home was a joy, but Windermere was dead and dark, and it made me question why I was doing this.

It wasn't fun.

An answer came when Kirsty joined a new club focused on pool racing, not sea distance. Paul du Feu was in charge. He was born in Jersey but had coached in the UK and brought modern ideas back to our small island. Another PE teacher, he had a rugged build, a dark beard and thick, curly hair. He had set up a hard-working squad of the island's best swimmers.

It looked more fun than the cold, lonely sea, so one day I worked up my courage.

"Mum, I think I want to stop long distance."

She looked at me, concerned. "Of course, if that's what you want."

"And join Kirsty in the pool," I said.

"That's great, good idea." She looked relieved that I didn't want to quit altogether.

"But what about everyone, won't I be letting them down?"

She came closer, putting an arm around my shoulders, recognising the child in me even though I was inches taller.

"Don't worry, they'll understand."

The move was the right choice for the boy I was.

Pool training brought me some of the happiest memories of my teenage years. There's a kind of magic in a well-synchronised lane, a ballet in water, each swimmer holding their place, sharing the work. The joy came from getting fitter and trimmer, pushing my heart rate higher. Best of all I had friends beside me.

When I finally broke 60 seconds for 100 metres the whole squad celebrated. Everyone knew I had been chasing that milestone for months.

The year after I stopped long-distance, Debbie swam the English Channel. This barely registered with me; I had moved on.

Perhaps, if I had stayed in open water, I might have made it across as well. But I had left the sea for the pool, and my childhood dream of the Channel was behind me, a chance that, as far as I knew, was gone for good.



Graeme, aged 12

Thank you

If you enjoyed this extract, you can read the full story in *A Life Well Swum,* as I return to the sea in middle age and discover whether the childhood dream is still within reach.

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