

Embarrassing Channel Swims

Terry Sutton

Each summer scores of long distance swimmers, with their families and friends, descend on Dover ready to swim the Channel. It is estimated they inject about £5 million into the town's economy during their stay.

Around half of those who take on the Channel are successful but I remember the time when a success, possibly one in ten, hit the national headlines.

My close involvement with the sport of channel swimming came in 1950 when, as the official observer, I spent more than a day in an open boat that was piloting the young Yorkshire lad Philip Mickman. He failed on a swim from Dover to France but was in the water for an incredible 25 hours 30 minutes. He was less than half a mile off the French coast when he gave up but an over enthusiastic French journalist on Cap Gris Nez reported he had made it. The BBC and other media reported his great success.

Back on Dover beach, after we had chugged back across the Strait, my fellow reporters on the Dover Express rushed to congratulate Philip and me for an excellent scoop. They refused to believe me when I revealed Philip had failed. His success was being reported on the BBC, insisted my colleagues. I had to explain I was the official observer and my decision was final!

Billy Butlin, the holiday pioneer, financed channel swim races and he flew me to Calais in his private aircraft. There, on the beach at Sirene near Calais, were the swim



*Shirley May France
Unsuccessfully tried to swim the
channel three times the first time
in 1949 when only 17yrs
became an international
sensation for her looks*

competitors lined up being prepared to be covered in protective grease.

One young woman I knew quite well (no, not that well) was all alone. Her support team had failed to arrive. She appealed to me to cover her in protective grease. Eventually I agreed, to be cheered on, under the glare of TV lights and cameras, by my journalist colleagues who took glee in my embarrassment as I discovered parts of the woman's body I never knew existed!

Another embarrassing time was when I worked for the BBC, as a local "stringer", and

they wanted a speedy interview with a woman who had just swum the Strait in a record time. With my recording equipment I arrived at the Dover house where she was staying only to be told by her mother she was in the bath removing her protective grease. "Who is it?" shouted the reclining swimmer. "Only Terry Sutton" was the response. "That's all right then, send him in". And with that there was me gazing down at this naked woman as the soapy water crept up her well-developed valley.

You try thinking of clever questions to ask someone in the news when in such a close encounter situation. Anyway she provided me with a good interview which, despite the lapping of bath water, made a few minutes slot on the BBC. And, of course, a good yarn about her swim for the Dover Express. To spare her, and my, blushes I never revealed the intimate details about how the bathroom interview took place.