



Wild swimming

Cold comfort

Finding oneself in the rivers, lakes and ponds of England



IN THE MIDDLE of the deepest lake in England I nearly lost my nerve. Wast Water is nestled in the western corner of the Lake District, an area once beloved by Romantic poets. A winding road cuts along one bank; on the other looms Scafell Pike, the tallest mountain in England. The water glints metallic, reflecting the grey, overcast sky.

Beneath me were 70 metres of icy water; I was swimming the ceiling of Westminster Abbey or Canterbury Cathedral, a nave of darkness below me, its contents—its population, perhaps its intention—unknown. I felt vertiginous and slightly nauseous. It started to rain, streaking my sight when I lifted my head from the water below. Short, choppy waves pushed at me like a playground bully. My hands turned first pearly white and then pink, numb and raw. My wetsuit, which I had not worn in the water before, felt tight around my throat. I panicked: the water suddenly seemed sinister, my limbs sluggish.

And once I was out, shivering on the strip of shingle, the feeling returning to my hands and feet as pain, I wanted to get back in.

There is something addictive about wild freshwater swimming. Charles Sprawson, whose “Haunts of the Black Masseur” (1992) dived deep into the links between literature and swimming, wrote that for romantics who relished the pastime, like Lord Byron and Coleridge, “It was as though water, like opium, provided the

swimmers with a heightened existence, a refuge from the everyday life they loathed.” Physiologists talk of the endorphins released by the temperature shock of cold water. Swimmers call them “endolphins”, and crave them. But wild winter swimming can bring on hypothermia, pneumonia, cardiac arrhythmia. As Frances Ashcroft, a physiologist at Oxford, explains in “Life at the Extremes”, the water’s appetite for warmth grows keener the more you move through it. In that physiological stress there is a taste of the sublime. Roger Deakin, a film-maker and environmental campaigner, describes the effect of a plunge into a Scottish waterfall in his book “Waterlog”:

It was gaspingly, shockingly, ridiculously cold. This was water straight from the mountain that sends your blood surging and crams every capillary with a belt of adrenalin, despatching endorphins to seep into the seats of pleasure in body and brain, so that your soul goes soaring, and never quite settles all day.

“Waterlog”, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2019, did for wild-water swimming what Nick Hornby’s “Fever Pitch” did for football fandom. In the ▶▶

► practitioner, it evoked a sense of being understood; in the outsider, fascination. A compulsive journey across Britain's seas, lakes, rivers, canals, moats and open-air pools, its author pulling on his wetsuit at the merest glimmer of a ripple, the book had the thrill of addiction. Beyond that, Deakin was also immersing himself in the landscape, reflecting on who uses it and who can roam through it, and on the eccentric, clubby nature of his country.

At a difficult time of my life, I slipped into fresh water myself. My initiation into wild swimming was hardly adventurous, or stressful. But it gave me an inkling of what was to come, and taught me something about that clubbiness.

Ladies, gentlemen and herons

The Kenwood ladies' pond on Hampstead Heath is one of three reservoirs built in the 17th century to provide Londoners with fresh water. Today the pond is used by psychoanalysts before their day of listening begins; mothers who talk about errant children to their friends, swimming breaststroke side-by-side; elegantly-coiffed pensioners who all know each other by sight. In summer many defy the rules and sprawl topless in the meadows around the pond or drink with friends.

On one of my earliest dips there on a cool spring day in May I paused on the edge, nervously eyeing the water and the blackboard propped up by the steps on which the water temperature was scrawled in chalk (18°C). "Come on, girl!" a woman behind me boomed, loudly counting down the metal steps as she took her plunge bottom-first with no let or hesitation.

My toes remained torpid for about an hour after I got out of the river, my feet like two slabs of blubber

Soon I became hooked: racing to the pond after work, the haze of a sweaty Tube carriage stripped away as I dived in, or getting there early on an autumn morning, when the pond was cool and still. The more I went, the more I found myself part of a growing informal association of freshwater enthusiasts, many of whom Deakin had inspired to swim. For some he opened the way to writing, too. In "Swell", Jenny Landreth wrote about women who swam, often overlooked by writers such as Mr Sprawson. There are personal accounts referred to, regrettably, as "swimmoirs" and "waterbiographies". There are novels based on swimming-club friendships and poetry collections dedicated to outdoor bathing.

The devotees appreciate the pastime's freedom, comity and perspective. No lanes exist to marshal you; no demands are made upon you to swim clockwise, or end to end. You sometimes share the water with humans, always with non-humans. Herons swoop across your head, their elegance in mid-flight making you pause mid-stroke; dragonflies dance from lily pad to lily pad, flashes of blue in the gloom; even, on occasion, the mixed blessing of a nibbling fish. Unlike a walker, firmly on solid ground and below the sky, the suspended swimmer is within and without, seeing one world from a new angle while partially submerged in another that remains unseen.

When I decided to retrace a small part of Deakin's journey to understand the phenomenon he unleashed and my place in it, the Highgate men's pond, down the hill from the ladies', was the nearest of his sites to hand. It is not normally open to the likes of me: but when building works at Kenwood closed the ladies' pond for two weeks rumour had it that, if women turned up early enough in the morning, they would be allowed in.

Unlike the ladies' pond, which is tucked away modestly behind trees, the men's pond is a wide sweep of open water, clearly visible from the paths. In summer, men in very small speedos lounge

around as if in a gender-swapped version of an Ingres painting. Back in the 1990s a row broke out between the heterosexual "men of muscle" who trained boxers there, as an article in the *Guardian* put it at the time, and the gay "butterflies" who frequented the pond in the summer months, over nudity and gay men supposedly "colonising" the Heath. Most of these tensions seem to be resolved now that swimming trunks are compulsory.

Early one weekday morning, I made my way to the men's pond. As I pushed open the door to the pond, which was emblazoned with the sign "MEN ONLY", I felt the thrill of trespass, accompanied by a slight anxiety about being booted out by boxing champions. No need: I soon heard the laughter of women rippling behind a screen. The mist that had seemed to dissipate as I walked up the Heath lingered at the edges of the brown water. I did one round of the pond, my breath becoming slightly shorter, choppier, as I did so. As I hauled myself up the steps a male swimmer in his early 60s stood on the jetty and flexed his biceps like Popeye.

From Hampstead to Cambridge. Deakin takes one of his first swims there, in the River Granta: "deep, cool and inscrutable". I went farther downstream, where the river is the Cam, accompanied by Edward Williams, a cross-channel swimmer who now runs one of the largest swimming schools in East Anglia. A friend of his is a member of a naturist club which uses a stretch of the river near where the poet Rupert Brooke once swam naked with Virginia Woolf.

You come to it by a secret grassy track, and no signs point to it. We snuck in, prudishly pulled on our swimming costumes, and stepped down the slippery wooden steps into the water. It was 14°C: enough to cause a sharp intake of breath on entering, and to make my arms tingle, but not cold enough to scald. A current slowed us down as we went out through the brown water, and then sped us up as we turned back. As we got out, two elderly male naturists slid into the water without a sound, their hair silvery in the sunlight.

As at the men's pond, there was a frisson from being where you maybe shouldn't be; not quite of transgressing rules, but of their irrelevance. Deakin claimed that swimming will always be a subversive activity: one which allows you "to regain a sense of what is old and wild in these islands, by getting off the beaten track and breaking free of the official version of things." The thrill of getting into the muddy water partly springs from the feeling that, once you are in, you are obscured from a world that might want you elsewhere.

From uniform to freedom

The place Deakin swam in nearly every day was the moat in his garden in Suffolk. It is where he starts the book and almost finishes it. Since his death from a brain tumour in 2006, his house has passed to new owners, who said I could swim there like "Rog". So after Cambridge I drove to Suffolk, the landscape around me becoming more expansive and emptier as I did so. As the evening light started to fade, I got to the village where Deakin spent much of his adult life. It felt uncannily as if I would find him swimming in his moat when I arrived.

The new owner warned me that the water would be cold and to keep away from the black clumps floating on the water. "They smell like shit," she explained. As I ►►



▶ walked barefoot from where I had parked my car I stumbled through a rather vicious patch of weeds. Sitting at the edge of the water, the soles of my feet and my ankles prickling pink, I thought I spotted a snake in the moat. I put a toe in, fear suddenly rippling through me. And then, in a flash, I went in. Light-green water obscured my vision. It was cold, but not as spine-tingling as the Cam. Once in the water, the stings and my fear both faded. I swam a dozen lengths while the wind rippled through the trees, whistling like waves crashing on a shore. Afterwards I found green slime slicked under my bathing suit.

Most people I speak to about swimming outdoors say they cannot stand the idea of not being able to see to the bottom of the pond. But I found it had much the same exciting sense of possibility, of exploration, as when you land in a new country for the first time and have to navigate your way around it. Until I swam in Wast Water, I had never experienced the terror, which I learnt afterwards is commonplace, of the outdoor swimmer suddenly realising how far away they are from the shore, how far the depths stretch out below.

The aspect of swimming in Wast Water which both terrified and thrilled me most, however, was the cold. I was not unprepared. Although many who swim outdoors consider wetsuits to be cheating—the membership page of the Serpentine club in Hyde Park actively discourages new members from wearing them—Deakin got one made for himself, so that was good enough for me. While I wriggled and squirmed into different suits at a water-sports shop around the corner from *The Economist's* offices, it became apparent that years of wearing uncomfortable school uniforms had actually prepared me for something other than a loathing of woollen skirts. “When I tell men to pull the wetsuit on like a pair of tights,” sighed David, the shop assistant, “they just don’t get it.” I told myself the silky wetsuit I walked out with would be used only when the water dipped below 10°C.

Suspended by the cold

Having braved Wast Water (10°C) in the suit, I decided to try somewhere even colder. Had I wished to, I could have claimed my motive was scientific. A range of medical researchers have tried to measure the cardiovascular benefits of cold-water swims and to see whether, as swimmers sometimes claim, such immersion weakens common colds. Some of these studies hark back to the practice of sea-bathing in the 18th century or to the craze for sojourns in elegant cold-water sanatoriums a century later. A study from 2012 by Mark Harper, a British doctor, on whether the effect of an immune system bracing itself against the cold could help patients recover after surgery, quotes Richard Russell, who in 1752 claimed that sea-swimming could cure “scurvy, jaundice, Kings’-evil, leprosy, and the glandular consumption”.

Others have tried to see whether cold-water swimming could help depression and other forms of mental anguish, too. In his film “Floating”, released in 2017, Joe Minihiane, a film-maker and Deakin devotee, explored the effect of swimming outdoors on his anxiety. In 2018 a study was published in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) that followed a 24-year-old woman who had been treated for depression and anxiety for eight years as she embarked on a weekly course of cold open-water swimming. She found the cold helped her with the symptoms of depression.



Looking for endorphins strictly on an amateur basis took me to the River Wharfe. When Deakin went to the Wharfe, which cuts through the Yorkshire Dales like a dagger, he swam first in the picturesque stretch which runs past the ruins of Bolton Priory before going farther north to try his most terrifying swim of the book, a canyon called Hell Gill. I lacked the expertise, or the climbing equipment, to do the latter. But, with two other keen swimmers, I decided to go upstream to the end of the Strid, one of the most dangerous bits of water in Britain.

A little pebble beach opened up to a fork in the river, a point where the rapids broke into calmer water. It was called, rather worryingly, the Valley of Desolation (where the sign added, ominously, that no dogs are allowed). The water was 8°C. I waded in and started swimming towards the rapids. Soon my feet and hands were numb. If I put my head underwater, a knife seemed to pierce my skull. I felt suspended by the cold, as well as the water; it seemed to lift me out of my body. The current meant that my usual expansive breaststroke only inched me forwards. After an hour or so of swimming I got out. It was then that I realised I couldn’t feel my feet.

As I sat in a tearoom trying to warm up my extremities—my toes remained torpid for about an hour after I got out of the river, my feet like two slabs of blubber—I thought of the BMJ study, and the chemistry of my brain. I felt there must be something happening there. But it was also not the whole story. Often when I arrived at the ladies’ pond my thoughts were overcast, and the darkness of the water reflected my mood. Yet for half an hour all that needed my focus was the opaque water in front of me, through which my hands looked ghostly pale; the only decisions I had to make were front crawl, breaststroke or backstroke. The coldness was a stimulant. It was also a comfort: a way to remind myself that I was, that I am, alive. *