



This month Ella Foote swims with Henley Open Water Swimming Club (HOWSC), her local club, and relaunches our popular feature where Outdoor Swimmer joins clubs and groups across the country for a swim

Henley Open Water Swimming Club



Suits or skins... all are welcome

Some swimmers have been swimming throughout the winter despite the snow and ice, even taking the conditions on as a challenge. But for others, spring is a time to get back to the lake, rivers and seas after spending the winter in indoor or heated pools. Re-joining a club or swimming group at this time of year is like reuniting with old family, it brings joy and belonging to our sport which otherwise can be a solo experience.

I love a solo swim, enjoying my

own company with nature revealing itself to me as I quietly make my way down a river, but I am also grateful to belong to a group of swimmers who week in, week out, provide a place of support and friendship on the riverbank. HOWSC's beginnings, like many clubs, started with friendship and as the group grows each year it still sits at the core of our club.

RIPPLES OF GIGGLES

Henley swimmers meet every Saturday at 7.30am at one of four different swimming spots on the River Thames between Henley-on-Thames and Marlow. Club Captain Mark Plested invites swimmers each week, picking a spot based on river and weather conditions. Through the winter months swimming alternates between two spots which offer parking



A classic display of bobble hats

riverbank so swimmers can dress and warm quickly. Other spots involve a short walk, often in flip flops and robes, the group creating a ripple of giggles and smiles from other river users and walkers.

River swimming is such a joy, those used to ploughing round a lake or battling waves in seas should give it a go. Swimming in rivers is always a journey, taking you from one place to another, even if you swim up one side of the river and down the other. Feeling the pull of the flow as you battle upstream and the thrill of the current as you float back down is something pretty special. Each spot offers something a little different and each member of the club has a favourite. I love to swim upstream from the Flower Pot jetty in Aston, up to Mill End lock, around the island and down again. It is always a great sense of achievement, especially if the flow is strong and you have to work hard to get up river. Medmenham is a great spot for sunrise and Marsh Lock reminds me of leafy summer swims when the riverbank is lush and green.

HUGS AND WARM DRINKS

Over the years the club has grown from a handful of swimmers who met every now and then, to a regular group of 38 who swam through the summer last year. This winter 25 swimmers continued to meet every Saturday. As well as the weekly swim, members regularly join each other for impromptu swims on warm sunny days, trips to other places, barbeque swims under full moons and solstice celebrations. There is something comforting knowing that despite what



Not sure these are Channel rules...

the week ahead brings, Saturday will always offer a swim and chat with a group of like-minded people. Having a rough time? Hugs and warm drinks await with the zing of the water. Each member of the club offers something different. Jeni Orme rocks her bright red swimsuit and is always the first in, Rod Laird wakes the neighbours with his whoops and squeals, Andrew Wells inspires us all to swim further, harder and colder and Mark Reed captures it all on his camera. The Thames always surprises you too, from rushing silty water to warm clear spells, with swimmer's itch to welcome you later – it is never the same river, never the same swim 🌊

If you would like us to join your group or club for a swim, email editor@outdoorswimmer.com

Quick Q&A with Club Captain Mark Plested

How did you get into outdoor swimming?

I used to swim at lunch times when I worked by a pool, so swam for quite a long time – badly! Then my brother, who was in a bad motorbike accident, became an incomplete quadriplegic. As a result he trained to become a world record holder and world champion disabled sprint cyclist. He asked me to swim in the Bude Quadrathlon, which was a 750m sea swim. I thought, 'how difficult can it be...' so learnt to swim properly. I haven't looked back since.

What inspired you to get involved with HOWSC?

I had done the Great South Swim in London Victoria Docks. Then I did the Henley Classic and spent a lot of time swimming at a local pool where I ended up talking to some random guy about open water swimming. He had a club in Henley that met on Saturday mornings – it turns out he was Henley Swim co-founder Jeremy Laming. I went along to the Saturday meet in a nervous state, was made very welcome and everyone was so supportive and helpful. I now try to make everyone feel the same as I did when I first started.

Have you had any problems with authorities or people preventing you from swimming?

We have never been told we couldn't swim – we are quite lucky in the river.

What are the club ambitions for 2018?

This year we want to grow the club and get as many people swimming outdoors as possible. It doesn't matter if you breaststroke, or if you are a triathlete or Channel swimmer. We also want to do more social swimming weekends, more breakfast and barbeque swims and film evenings. Myself and some of the other senior members plan to run some open water swimming introductions which we did last year. I wanted to give something back to this wonderful sport by becoming an open water coach and swim teacher.

Join the group. Find HOWSC on Facebook to get notifications of swims or visit the club website: www.howsc.co.uk