

## DRSA REMINISCENCES 1951-2014 (AND SOME SWIMMING EXPERIENCES)

By Brian Ferrand BEM

Born in 1943, at the age of 5 I travelled to Malta where my father, who was in the Royal Navy, was serving in a Cruiser. I attended the Royal Naval schools where swimming was not on the curriculum. However, the warm Mediterranean climate and fine beaches were an immediate attraction to me and during these formative years I developed a lifelong love of the sea and swimming from local beaches became a daily event. My father taught me to swim by giving me rides on his back and suddenly submerging! I noticed that water polo was a very popular sport in Malta and that the people of the island gathered in crowds to watch whenever the game was played. Whenever I was on the beach the local lads would always invite me to join in their fun with the polo ball. It was at this time that I decided that swimming would be the sport for me.

In 1951 my family returned to England in the liner Empress of Australia, a ship of the same vintage as the Titanic, (having been launched the year after Titanic was sunk). During the voyage home one of the ship's officers heard that I would miss swimming very much on returning to Plymouth and he suggested that I join the Devonport Royal Swimming Association. This I did and have remained a member for the past 63 years.

While DRSA was predominantly a teaching club, they also had a strong water polo team and regularly competed in swimming galas with the Port of Plymouth and Plymouth Leander clubs. DRSA was based at the Mount Wise swimming pools situated on the banks of the Tamar with both pools being refilled by sea water at high tides. The pools (known as the men's pool and the ladies pool) were used by both genders and most galas were held in the slightly longer men's pool (50 yards in length). The pools were owned by the city council and a much loved superintendent Jack Jewell was in charge of the day to day management of the pools. Jack would ensure that the young swimmers did not become too boisterous and was always most helpful to DRSA in all its activities. He was also a well known magician who would perform at children's parties. The swimming galas were always well supported by the people of Devonport and the stepped seating around the pools would be filled for these events. The high wall above the pools would also be crowded with spectators and club officials would pass amongst them with collection boxes to help fund club activities. At that time I recall that the membership fee was half a crown per annum (15 pence today) and a season ticket to swim from 1<sup>st</sup> May to 30<sup>th</sup> September was 5 shillings (25 pence). At the end of each gala members of the club would provide hilarious entertainment by holding a mock 'crossing the line' ceremony from the spring board. (This was based on the traditional ceremony performed at sea when young mariners first crossed the equator and were introduced to King Neptune's domain!). A popular event was the 'plunge' competition in which competitors would dive from the side of the pool with their head under water and their arms outstretched above their heads and the skill was to see how far the competitor could drift before taking a breath. Having dived in, competitors were not permitted to move their arms or legs, but would have to remain perfectly still during their drift. If you were too old and slow to compete in any other event, there was always 'the plunge'!



The above photo was taken at the Annual Club Gala held at Mount Wise in the year that Brian joined the club, 1951.

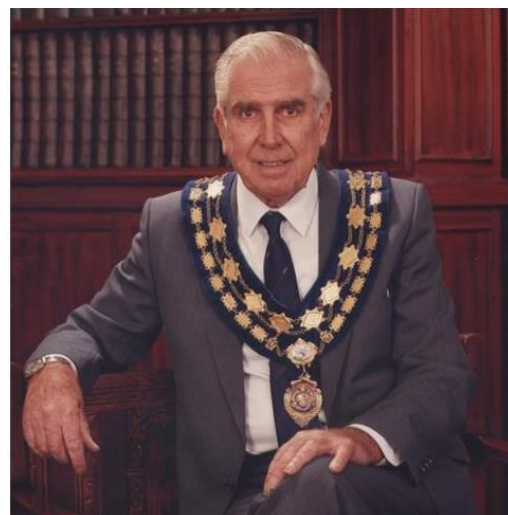
"Well supported" swimming galas an understatement - the floodlit gala held in 1951 was reportedly attended by 4,000 people.



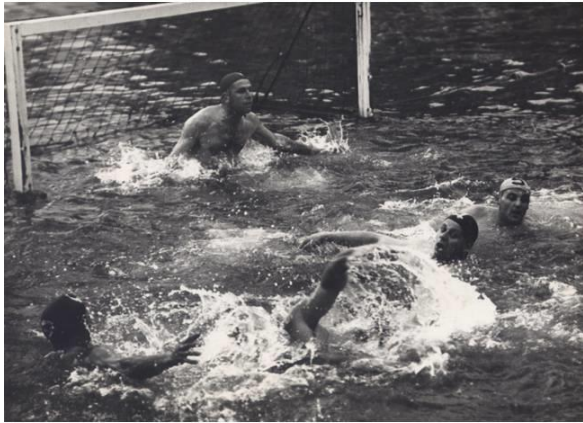
The club had its great personalities that included Mrs Strong (who taught hundreds of children to swim and was the 'mother' to all the little ones) and Reg Bossom (who later became the Devon County ASA President). Eddy Dean was also a club stalwart and a keen water polo player and in later years became the president of the ASA. Swimming equipment was very basic consisting of a canvas belt pulled by a rope to teach youngsters to swim and a rectangular wooden board with hand holds cut into one end to provide support to learners at a later stage. I suspect that most of these swimming aids were manufactured in Devonport Dockyard, evidenced by the 'rouges yarn' (a coloured strand incorporated in rope to identify it as government property!)



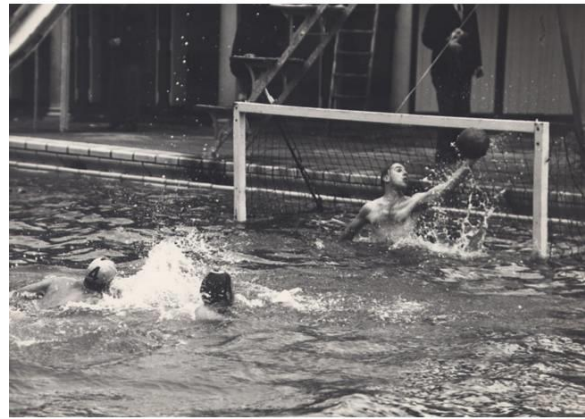
Reg Bossom - Devon County ASA President 1962



Ed Dean - ASA President, 1990



Ed Dean in goal, Reg Bossom (dark hat no 4), in action against Exmouth at Mount Wise in 1956.



Ed Dean, who made over 1,000 appearances in goal for Devonport, makes a fine save in the same match.



Ed Dean was also a fine swimmer, breaking the Devon County 200 yards Breaststroke record in 1948 with a time of 3 minutes and 3 seconds at Mount Wise.



Reg Bossom (pictured here in 1928) also enjoyed a successful swimming and water polo career.

A significant event held in September of each year was the 'Cremyll Swim' when club swimmers, some as young as 8 years, would be taken across the Tamar to the beach at Cremyll approximately half a mile distant from the pools. Each swimmer would be accompanied by a rowing boat and would race back to Mount Wise. Due to the strong set of tides the event could only be held at high water and always with the permission of the Queen's Harbourmaster to ensure that conflict with naval shipping did not occur. For some this event was an introduction to long distance swimming and both Marguerite Pike and I were later to become presidents of the British Long Distance Swimming Association in 1983 and 1996 respectively (to this day Marguerite Pike continues to run both the Plymouth Breakwater and Oddicombe open water swims). I recall that hot Bovril was the beverage offered to swimmers on leaving the water at Mount Wise - a welcome reward on leaving the cold waters of the Tamar.



Brian Ferrand, 1957 Plymouth Secondary School Senior Champion. Also pictured is the Junior Champion, David Bate of Port of Plymouth.



Brian Ferrand, BLDSA President, 1996/1997



Ladies preparing to compete in the 1956 Cremyll to Mount Wise Race



Men preparing to compete in the 1956 Cremyll to Mount Wise Race

The Barbican Regatta was a big event in Plymouth in the 1950s. Amongst other events, a swimming area was marked out with wooden pontoons in the inner harbour alongside the steam trawler 'PERVEROUS'. One year I entered the swimming events and was fortunate enough to win a race. My prize was half a crown and the results were duly reported in the Western Evening Herald. At the next DRSA club night I was sternly told by a club official that in accepting my prize I had become a professional swimmer (this being incompatible with my amateur status in those days) and that under no circumstances should I do it again!



Sutton Regatta 1951

Swimming competitions were also held with the Royal Navy and water polo matches were also held with the Artificer Apprentices establishment HMS FISGARD at Torpoint in Cornwall. The apprentices had built their own 25 yard pool as part of their training. Subsequent classes built diving boards, covered the pool and built a solar heating plant. One attraction of an away match with FISGARD was the slap-up meal provided in the dining hall after the game.

DRSA always fielded a strong water polo team and played matches all over Devon and Cornwall and entered the National League in the late 1960s. As a youngster I recall a match in Cornwall held in a harbour (Charlestown I think it was). The fiercely fought game got out of hand when the referee was tipped out of the rowing boat from which he was controlling the game. On completion the local policeman held up traffic from the parking area to give the referee a 10 minute start on his journey back to Plymouth to ensure that he was not followed by any aggressive players!

Occasionally DRSA swam in the Royal Naval Barracks heated pool in HMS DRAKE. One novel feature was two trapeze structures suspended from the roof at either end of the pool. I recall that at the age of 8 being allowed to swing from these during family swimming sessions. On most occasions I fell into the pool after a few swings, but on rare occasions managed to jump from one trapeze to the other circus fashion. It is a sad reflection that in later years 'Health & Safety' decreed that the trapeze should be removed as being too dangerous for Royal Navy physical training instructors to use (the purpose for which they had originally been installed). The HMS DRAKE pool must be one of the oldest heated pools in the country having been built in 1900 (approximately). This year (2014) the pool has been closed and a new pool built as part of rehabilitation process for members of the armed forces who are recovering from serious injuries following conflicts abroad and accidents in service.

For a number of years the Western Counties swimming clubs held a pre-season training week at Easter in Torquay. Swimmers were accommodated in the Barton Hall holiday camp and trained in the camp's pool and in the indoor pool that was situated on the sea front where the penguin display is

now located. I recall that the course was run by Mrs Stella Margetts and Mr Scott-Ormsby and coaches included Eddy Dean, Mr Bowler Ray Bickley (later to coach Sharon Davies) and Mr Lyons. George Ayres, a long time stalwart of DRSA (who for many years held the breakwater swim record) also helped with the coaching. The course was demanding and included land training using the excellent facilities of Barton Hall. At the end of the week swimmers would have improved their performance considerably and would be entitled to wear the badge 'Torquay 1959' (in my case) on their track suit. The course was great fun and I have fond memories of that great period of freedom as a 16 year old before embarking on the rigours of life in the Royal Navy that immediately followed the course.



Swimmers and staff at the Western Counties ASA Course held at Torquay in Easter 1959. Brian is in the centre row, fourth from the right.

In later years a similar course was held at Weston super Mare and I attended the 1974 course as a coach. On this occasion the course was accommodated at a holiday camp and used the camp pool and a second pool at Brean further down the coast. These courses were always great fun and an excellent means of developing young swimmers and meeting up with other keen and enthusiastic participants in our sport.

In 1959 I joined the Royal Navy as an Artificer Apprentice at HMS FISGARD. Regulations required as a swimmer the Service should have first claim on me as a swimmer. While still being a member of DRSA, for the next 39 years I would always have to swim for the RN when competing with DRSA. I well recall the first competition when this situation arose and it was with some trepidation that I appeared at Mount Wise in a Royal Navy tracksuit. I need not have worried as the strong bonds of friendship with DRSA prevailed and always have done.

A step change occurred in the early 1960s when the indoor pool was built in Central Park. DRSA transferred its base from Mount Wise to the new pool. All year round swimming was now possible and the opening and closing dip events that had been so well supported in the cold water pools were to become memories of the past.



Left: Brian pictured at HMS Fisgard in 1960.  
Above: The newly-opened Central Park in 1965.

In 1967 I was based at HMS CAMBRIDGE at Wembury. Being close to Plymouth I was able to attend DRSA club sessions regularly and took up the teaching of children with the club. Amongst them was a 7 year old Sharron Davies, who later became an Olympic silver medallist. I have taught with the club whenever my duties have taken me to Plymouth and continuously since 1995.

I joined the DRSA club committee in 1967 when our meetings were held in the Royal Fleet Club at Devonport. I recall that Mr Roseman was the treasurer and committee members included Reg Bossom, Jack Nosworthy, Eddy Dean, Mrs Critten, Dave Gregory and Jimmy Curtain. We also held winter land training sessions there that consisted mainly of running in Devonport Park. DRSA has always been a very social club and I recall many river trips to Calstock being undertaken and even a trip around the Eddystone rocks to Looe and back in one of the old tenders (based in Millbay Docks) that were designed to take passengers to and from the great liners that called into Plymouth some 90 or so times per year before the days of transatlantic air travel. Children's Christmas parties would also be held in the Fleet Club and in 1978 we took a group of our young members for a week-end on Dartmoor, living in a scout hut and visiting a number of Tors.



Jack Nosworthy retires as Swim Secretary at Prizegiving after 27 years of service in 1979 (some current DRSA Masters are also pictured).



Sharron Davies with 2 other graduates of DRSA, Clare Maxwell (left) and Katherine Clarke.

In the early 1970s I recall a tragic accident in Central Park pool on a DRSA club night. A young boy dived in during a teaching session and did not surface. He was rescued by life guards and an ambulance was called. The boy managed to walk to the ambulance but subsequently died in hospital due to the effects of chlorinated water in his lungs. I recall Eddy Dean asking me to drive him to the boy's home to inform his parents of the accident. It was a terrible experience and the boy's swimming teacher was inconsolable.

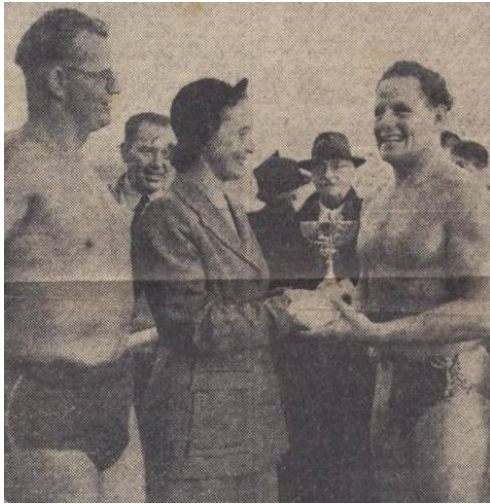
In 1977 Christine Sifleet (who trained with DRSA) decided that she would attempt the 14 mile swim from the Eddystone rocks to Plymouth. She successfully completed the swim, becoming, I believe, the first woman to do so. I accompanied her in the safety boat as her lifeguard. I remember that on leaving the water she appeared as fresh as she had been at the start of the swim.



Left: Christine Sifleet on completing swim from Eddystone Lighthouse to Plymouth Hoe in 1977.  
Above: Civic Reception for Christine Sifleet for swimming the English Channel in 1978.

In later years Marguerite Pike attempted the same feat, but was defeated by the tide just short of the breakwater. Marguerite also won the Breakwater swim in 1951, 1952 and 1953 and completed a swim from the Tamar Bridge to Laira Bridge in 1953. Maurice Mills, was also a club stalwart and water polo team member and he successfully completed the challenging Windermere and Torbay open water swims.





Maurice Mills wins the Breakwater Swim in 1951.



The crowds on the Hoe for the Breakwater Swim in 1951.



Maurice Mills (front row, left), Jimmy Curtain (back row left), Dave Gregory (back row centre) and Ed Dean (back row, right) were members of the team that won the 1967 Devon County Cup.



Marguerite Pike (left) and Sheila Hopkins starting out on their swim from the Tamar Bridge to Laira Bridge in 1953.

The friendship and camaraderie of DRSA members is something that I have always valued. This became particularly important to me during the Falklands conflict of 1982 during which I served in HMS INVINCIBLE. We spent 166 days continuously at sea and Reg Bossom wrote to me regularly passing on the good wishes of the club members. In one letter he expressed the wish that I should not join the South Atlantic Swimming Club! Such correspondence did much to keep my spirits up during this tense period.

Other swimming activities included my becoming a Royal Navy ASA coach in 1975 and the Royal Navy swimming team manager subsequently. I was team manager for the 1975 Captain Matthew Webb centenary channel swim in 1975 and joined the British Long Distance Swimming Association (BLDSA) in the same year, I became an executive committee member in 1992 and ran the BLDSA Coniston Veterans championship for a period of 8 years. I also ran open water swimming courses for the Royal Navy for a number of years. In 1979 I ran this course at the Mount Wise swimming pool. Also on the course was the former English Channel record holder Commander Gerald Forsberg OBE Royal Navy. During the course he swam with DRSA on their club nights at Central Park and was made most welcome by club members. In 1995 I was the swimmer/manager of the Royal Navy relay team that successfully swam the English Channel. DRSA have always expressed an interest in my swimming activities with both the Royal Navy and BLDSA and have been most supportive of my activities with them.

Between 1972 and 1975 I was based in Devonport and travelled the world with a team of technicians maintaining the electronics of naval ships when they visited foreign ports. On a DRSA club night at Central Park pool I was approached by a member of the ship's company of a ship that was due to undergo a maintenance period in the naval base at Ireland Island in Bermuda. On learning that I would be flying out to meet the ship he asked if I would arrange an open water swim for the ship in waters off the base. This I did and a half mile course was chosen and a list calling for volunteers to take part was duly displayed on the ship's notice board. Some 15-20 swimmers entered their names for the event and arrangements for the competition were put in place. Unfortunately, the day before the swim the ship's fishing competition was held and a healthy catch of sharks, barracudas and all manner of other evil looking fish were landed. On boarding the next day I was dismayed to see that almost all the would-be competitors had drawn firm lines through their names on the list and the swim had to be cancelled! Notwithstanding this experience, I found that Bermuda had some of the finest beaches in the world and was a great place for recreational swimming.

The correct title of our club is the Devonport Royal Swimming Association and Humane Society. This suggests that we are also an organisation that is benevolent and charitable and 'does good'. With this in mind I was able to help the swimming community in the North West in 1979. I was living for a year in Dalton in Furness while my ship (HMS INVINCIBLE) was being built in the shipyard at Barrow in Furness. On learning that I was a swimmer, I was approached by the 'Dalton Bath Building Association' which had recently been formed to raise funds to build a swimming pool in the town. They had not raised any funds hitherto and were keen to motivate the local community into doing so. I was in the habit of taking Wednesday afternoons off to train in Coniston Water some 13 miles away in the Lake District. My fellow swimmer for these sessions was the Royal Navy water polo coach (Lieutenant Commander Dave Auton) from Somerset. On a brilliant sunny day in August, while swimming in Coniston, I suggested that the two of us might undertake a sponsored swim of the lake (a swim of some 5.5 miles) to become the first people to raise funds for the project. Dave agreed and we proceeded to raise sponsorship with the cooperation of local schools and our own ship's company. On examining our diaries, the earliest date that we could undertake the swim was in late September. On the day of the swim the weather was appalling, being cold with torrential rain. Poor weather had raised the level of the lake by some feet and reduced its temperature considerably. On greasing up under a tree before the swim Dave gave me that look that said 'what have you got me into this time?' but we both entered the lake somewhat reluctantly to start the swim. We completed some 4 miles before having to retire due to the cold, but fortunately we had arranged to be sponsored by the mile resulting in almost £700 being raised. The local press gave us considerable publicity and applauded the fact that two men from the west country had been the first people to raise funds for the pool. Some years later I understand that the pool was built.

In 1970 I discussed the history of DRSA with Reg Bossom and was interested in learning more about the club's past and its connection with the Royal Navy and the Royal Dockyard. Reg told me that he believed that all documentary records dating back to the club's formation in 1863 had been lost or destroyed in the terrible blitz that Plymouth suffered during World War 2. However he passed the verbal history to me as he understood it to be. The people of Devonport formed the Devonport Swimming Club and swam in a small pool alongside the River Tamar opposite the Royal William Yard near Mount Wise. Anchored off Cremyll were a number of Royal Navy hulks (sailing ships retired from seagoing duties due to their age), one of which was HMS IMPREGNABLE. These ships were used for the training of young sailors prior to going to sea. Realising that these young men endured an extremely hard existence with poor living conditions, harsh discipline, poor food and very little pleasure in their lives, the Devonport Swimming Club invited the trainees to join in their swimming activities on their club nights. The Commander-in-Chief in the 1890s was the then Duke of Edinburgh who lived in Admiralty House at Mount Wise. He noted the way in which the people of Devonport had offered the hand of friendship to the Royal Navy and used his royal patronage to allow the club to be renamed the Devonport Royal Swimming Association. This is reflected in DRSA's club badge that

includes the hull of a sailing ship under construction (in recognition of the fact that most of the club members would have been dockyard workers who were largely employed in building and repairing the Royal Navy's ships). Surmounting the badge is the Royal Navy crown that is normally reserved exclusively for the use of Royal Navy organisations. Permission to use this crown would probably been given by the Duke of Edinburgh at the same time that the privilege of using the 'Royal' title was granted.



Club badge - current



Club badge - early 1950s



Club badge - late 1950s