

Morecambe Cross - Bay Swimming 1907-1991

Seeing a picture of the crowds on Grange-over Sands shore in the 1950s gathered to see the start of the Morecambe Cross - Bay swimming race made me realise that I knew nothing about the race. There is plenty written about the Cross-Bay walks led by the Guide Cedric Robinson but I was not aware of anything written about the history of the Cross - Bay swim. Searching through digital newspapers online I have been able to explore the history of Morecambe Cross-Bay swimming and I have researched some of the swimmers using genealogy sites and google searches.

The swim was made possible by the Bay fishermen who knew the currents and the dangers of the Bay. They acted as pilots and their trawlers were key to enabling the event to take place. The swimmers, pilots and timekeepers arrived at Grange in the escort trawlers that towed the rowing boats (1) starting from Green Street Landing, Morecambe. Large crowds gathered on Grange Promenade to watch the start of the race. Though described as a 'dive in' because they originally had started from the pier (presumably Bailey Lane Pier) in later years they waded into the water from close to where the Promenade Cafe is located and at a signal started to swim, following the pilot boats. The length of the race varied depending on the channel position and ended at West End Sands, Morecambe when the swimmer could stand up and raise their hands above their head signalling that they had finished. A relay race had also taken place from Grange to Morecambe from 1923 until 1925. However, between 1926 and 1932 it was swum at Morecambe, between Central Pier and the Old Harbour, in order to entertain the crowd (2). Due to the lack of entrants the race ceased after the 1932 event. In 1933 a special swim by Miss Sunny Lowrey of Manchester, a professional channel swimmer, took place despite the destruction of Morecambe Central Pier by fire (1). The largest crowd ever to watch a swim, according to reports at the time, estimated at over 20,000 (3), paid a small pier toll but were disappointed as she stood up on a sandbank thinking she had reached the shore. She was supposed to swim to the pier and leave the water by a house staircase that had been attached to the damaged structure. She considered that the Morecambe Bay swim was more difficult than the Cross-Channel swim (4).

Morecambe received much publicity from the Morecambe Cross - Bay Swim which encouraged funding (by grants) from Morecambe Corporation (5) and tourism benefited. Swimmers came from as far away as Australia and New Zealand (6). I have not found any reference to the benefits to the Grange tourist economy but pictures show that many people were attracted to view the start of the race on Grange Promenade.

Morecambe Cross - Bay Swimming Association celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1957 (1). It was formed on 8 April 1907 at the Clarendon Hotel, Morecambe following an argument about whether it was possible to swim across the Bay. The local fishermen said that it was not possible. Morecambe, Victoria (Bare) and Lancaster

Amateur Swimming Clubs members called the meeting. When setting up the Association they decided to hold a championship but first they needed to test if it was possible to swim across the Bay and so they asked 41 year-old Professor Stearne of Manchester who was training to swim across the English Channel to try the route. He pioneered using this swim as training to swim the English Channel. He became the first person to officially swim across Morecambe Bay on July 13 1907 (1). Before swimming it was reported that he ate an enormous meal, specially prepared for him, of soup, bread, fried steak and boiled potatoes and more bread. He was also tempted to have two helpings of boiled fresh salmon which the other guests had been served. Thankfully he decided not to have a sweet. However during the swim, drinking from an invalid's cup, he ate 'a shilling's worth of eggs' (12-15 eggs), a quart of milk, a quart of beef tea, some extracts and chunks of chicken. During the swim he discarded his costume as it was too heavy and so when he arrived in Morecambe after 3 hours 45 minutes and 41 seconds he left the water backwards. A collection was taken on the Morecambe and Grange promenades, 75% of which went to the professor and 25% was used to form the Morecambe Cross - Bay Swimming Association.

Professor Stearne was born in Brandon, Norfolk in 1866. He was described as a gas stoker in the 1901 and 1911 census. He was married to Hannah and had 2 children, Thomas and Bertha. He was 6-foot tall and weighed 15 stone (7). He lived in Manchester for most of his life and he died there in 1935 (8). Where he obtained the 'Professor' tag remains unexplained. He had 4 failed attempts to swim across the Channel from England to France on 31 Aug 1907, 16 Sept 1907, 11 Aug 1909 and 1 Sept 1910 (9). Captain Webb had been the first officially recognised swimmer in 1875 but there were 80 failed attempts and 36 years passed before Thomas Burgess who succeeded in 1911 achieved it (10). In 1931, when Professor Stearne was 65 he attempted the Morecambe Bay swim again but failed to finish as it was colder than usual (11).

In October 1907 the first awards were presented in the Morecambe Cross Bay Championships (12). Brierley Law of Chadderton, Oldham, the winner, swam between Grange and Morecambe with a time of 3 hours 5 minutes 15 seconds and Mr MacMahon of Preston was second in a time of 3 hours 15 minutes. 50 guineas and a silver Challenge Shield was the prize for which the swimmers were competing and Mr Law received the Shield from Lord Ashton and a diamond ring that he had chosen and Mr MacMahon a gold watch. Mr MacMahon thanked the committee for allowing them to choose their own prizes. It was not clear if the 1907 championship was two or more races (13). However, in 1908 seven swims took place (14). Brierley Law was again in a commanding position having the leading time of 3 hours 25 minutes 6 seconds. Three competitors took part in the seventh swim but two did not complete it because of the cold. At Arnside Knot, Kearsley, the remaining swimmer was 3 minutes ahead of Law's time but he finished in 3 hours 46 minutes and 54 seconds exhausted and suffering from the cold. The newspaper report stated that Law took no refreshment whatsoever during the swim (15), a stark contrast to the amount of food that Stearne had consumed the previous year.

A member of the Chadderton Swimming Club of Oldham Brierley Law (1883-1961) won the first Championship of 1907. This swim also set a record as the longest time to cross the Bay (16). Over the next forty years he swam the Bay eleven times and was champion six times (3). His last attempt was when he was 66 in 1948 and he completed the course.

He was born in Chadderton, Oldham in 1883 and lived there most of his life. In the 1901 census he was described as a plumber but by 1911 he was a publican running The Wheat Sheaf Hotel, 14 Derker Street, Oldham. He was married to Clara and had 2 children, Harriet and Charles. The 1939 Register recorded him away from home at Bristol and he was described as a chemical plumber. He died and was buried in Oldham in 1961 (8).

Harry Taylor was probably the most successful swimmer. In 1910 he took 2 hours 5 minutes 52 seconds but he set the record, in 1914, for the fastest swim at 2 hours 2 minutes 55 seconds which was still standing in 1952 (16). In 1911 he took 2 hours 19 minutes 8 seconds and in 1913 2 hours 13 minutes 52 seconds (16). He, also, was a member of the Chadderton Swimming Club of Oldham which won the Championship 16 times in 32 years. Henry (Harry) Taylor (17 March 1885 – 28 February 1951) was an English freestyle swimmer who representing Great Britain competed in the 1906, 1908, 1912 and 1920 Summer Olympics (17) (8). In the 1901 census his occupation was recorded as cotton spinner but in the 1911 census he was described as a general engineer's labourer. In the 1939 Register his occupation was given as swimming instructor (8).

A Ladies' Championship was introduced in 1912 (18) although Miss Pickering of Burnley was the first woman to attempt the swim in 1910 but gave up after 3 hours (1). Miss M Wensley of Blackburn set the fastest speed for a woman competitor in 1914, the same year that Harry Taylor set the men's record (16). She swam the Bay in 2 hours 21 minutes. She had competed in 1912 and became the first woman to complete the course but had finished out of bounds but she was awarded a special souvenir prize (1). Miss B Entwistle of Blackburn became the first ladies champion in 1913 (2). Miss E England of Huddersfield held the endurance record having taken 5 hours 47 minutes on 23 August 1930 (1). Miss V Anderson of Glasgow, in 1932, became stranded on a sandbank and is remembered for that rather than her swim (1). On 21 August 1937 two female swimmers, Miss Dorothy Simpson of Morecambe and Miss E K Hodgson of Grange, jointly won the championship with a time of 4 hours 30 minutes 35 seconds (16).

The swim was not held between 1915 and 1919 because of the Great War. In 1920 the event was held and Harry Taylor won (19). The 1921 event was won again by Harry Taylor and he was presented with 100 guineas and the challenge shield. This was the 10th year of the event and in total 56 people had successfully completed the

swim over the 10 years (20). By now the race was firmly established and popular. In 1924 Brierley Law won back the championship (21). In 1926 there were 3 races and 14 competitors took part in the third race (2). However only 4 completed the swim. Charles Daley of Manchester won this race in 3 hours 19 minutes despite very choppy conditions but Henry Taylor had won the second race in 2 hours 45 minutes 20 seconds and thus with the fastest time was declared the champion for that year, the ninth time he had won.

In early August 1932 the competitors in the third race of the season experienced dreadful conditions and Miss Marjorie Simpson of Morecambe was in and on the water for 6 hours as the pilot boat that rescued her was blown off course (22). Conditions were bad at Morecambe but they decided to cross to Grange to start the race where the changing facilities at the new Bathing Pool at Grange were used for the first time. The tide lashed against the landing deck and the timekeeper fell into the sea as he tried to get into his boat but was not hurt and continued to supervise the race. Stormy conditions endured across the Bay with the boat passengers getting soaked but finally the sun came out as the swimmers approached Morecambe. On the 18th August, the day of the opening of Grange Bathing Pool, the fourth race of the season took place. The report stated that the course was 14 miles in length and 4 swimmers were competing (23).

Tom Blower of Nottingham, who was Morecambe Bay champion from 1935 –1938, became the first to graduate from the Bay to a successful Channel swim, Morecambe Bay being one of the leading training grounds for English Channel attempts (18).

Charles Daly of Cheetham, Manchester won the championship in 1925, 1927 and 1931 (24). He was still swimming the Bay in the 1950s. He took part 29 times, failed once and finished out of bounds once (1).

Between 1907 and 1939 there were 706 entries, of which 187 men and 54 women had succeeded in completing the swim. The youngest girl, Miss Adams, was 13 years old and the youngest boy, Alan Gorton, was 14 years old. Both were members of the Chadderton Swimming Club. May Adams was from Chadderton and completed the swim in 1923 in 4 hours three and a half minutes (25). Alan Gorton was from Farnsworth and despite having only started swimming in 1932 he attempted to swim across the Bay in 1933 (26). He succeeded in completing the swim in 1934 in 3 hours 46 minutes (27). He was one of three finalists that year but because of bad weather the final race had to be cancelled twice and it was decided to divide the winner's prize money equally between all three swimmers (27). His trainer was Harry Taylor, the nine times champion (25). Alan claimed at the award ceremony that if he had known he would be asked to give a speech he would not have swum the Bay (27). He received £5 and was presented with a silver cup from his trainer. He came second three times and third once but in 1939 he succeeded in winning (28). In 1940 he won for a

second time in 2 hours and 51 minutes (29). Sadly, he was killed in action during the war (3).

Another notable swimmer was Commander C G Forsberg who won the championship in 1951 having swum it for the first time in 1950 and competed 29 times (30). He wrote the book "Long Distance Swimming" in which he described the challenge. He said the water was 2 degrees colder than the channel (1).

In 1952 15 year-old Shirley Dunbar of Nottingham, an office worker at Players Tobacco Factory, made history by recording the fastest time since 1914 (16). She won the women's championship with the time of 2 hours 23 minutes 8 seconds over a course of 8 miles. The water was very cold being 9 degrees colder than other races that season. Three races had been cancelled during the season and the men's final that should have taken place that day was postponed to September 20 to allow an extra swim.

Early year swims were much bigger events than those that took place from the late 1940s onwards because pilots were in short supply (1). In 1957, when the championship celebrated 50 years, rules changed because of bad weather in the mid-1950s (31). The women's championship was decided on the fastest heat time of the season but the fastest men qualified for a final race and the winner of that was declared the champion unless bad weather resulted in the final having to be cancelled (1).

I have not been able to research the event from the 1960s onwards as newspapers for that period are not yet digitised. The British Long-Distance Swimming Association took over running the championships in 1974 but with the encroachment of weed and the changing flow of currents and consequently the lay of the sandbanks, the Championship was suspended in 1991 (18).

The history of the Morecambe Cross - Bay swim is fascinating and the early pioneers in 1907 had no idea how popular and successful an event it would become. Over the years the event and the world had changed considerably. It is remarkable that it continued for so many years. It came to an end because of changing conditions in the Bay making it too dangerous to attempt the swim.

Pat Rowland, Feb 2019

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