

People

When British Gas operations manager Ian Butler rediscovered the joys of swimming, he couldn't keep it to himself – and ended up organising lessons for colleagues



Ian Butler (centre, in yellow) with Channel relay team-mates (l-r) Kevin Moloney, Juliet Thomas, Lee Reed, Richard Tiller and (horizontal) Lloyd Clarke

When British Gas operations manager Ian Butler rediscovered the joys of swimming, he found he couldn't keep it to himself. After a 20-year break, he threw himself back into the water and remembered what he loved about it. It renewed a passion for all things aquatic and changed his life.

From a two-length breaststroker, Ian quickly progressed to become an open water enthusiast, training and swimming in part to raise money for Cancer Research UK, having lost his grandfather to the disease. He has swum in two Channel relay teams, completed a double crossing of the Solent and lost three stone since he took up swimming again and found it has revitalised his life.

In his role as British Gas swimming ambassador for the Leicester region, Ian set about spreading the word to his colleagues. He put out feelers about setting up a learn-to-swim scheme and after 15

people responded positively, he approached a local coach.

'A number of people from the Leicester office couldn't swim and showed some interest initially,' said Ian. 'I saw a few different people before obtaining a local coach through Simple Swim in Leicester to take the lessons. He was teaching in a school pool, which was private, and his approach was really good.'

As with any adult learn-to-swim group, there were difficulties to overcome and the group eventually shrank from 15 original enthusiasts to six hardy swimmers. 'I think they took 12 sessions all told to learn,' said Ian. 'A few went the first time and didn't want to go back. All involved were complete learners and lacked any confidence in the water.'

'In fact, a few were pretty scared and didn't really want to get in the water at all when it came to the lessons. There were also a number of Asian ladies, who didn't want to reveal their swimming costumes or get in the pool.'

But for all the tribulations, the end result for those who did see it through was, unsurprisingly, a huge positive. Keen to build on their enthusiasm, Ian has been trying to set up further initiatives, although he admits the lack of private pools in the city is restrictive. And even if he doesn't oversee another group of adult learners, he feels the half-dozen who have welcomed swimming into their lives made his efforts worthwhile.

'The feedback from the sessions has been immense,' said Ian. 'One of the ladies now takes her grandchildren swimming as well, which is something she thought she would never do. It's a change in lifestyle for many of them.'

'Once you learn to swim you don't forget. The main reason I put forward the plan is that it made such an impact on my life and I wanted to share that. I'm pleased it's had such good feedback as well. It's made a dramatic difference to them in their confidence.'



Why I swim

Jenny Sparkes

The former competitive swimmer Jennifer Sparkes, 21, from Germany, still enjoys swimming. She participated in numerous regional competitions in Germany. Her favourite stroke is freestyle. Although she has stopped competing, swimming is still part of her life, which is perhaps as well for the daughter of the ASA chief executive.

'I swim two to three times a week, if I have time while studying, and try to keep myself fit generally. I have reduced my training and actually stopped competing four years ago because of time constraints. Nevertheless, I would say swimming is the best sport you can do as it keeps your whole body fit. I still enjoy every minute when I do get in the water. Every time I start swimming a few laps I can feel the daily stress melting right off me. When I am travelling, I look for pools to carry on my training. While staying in Loughborough for three weeks I used the pool at the university and I'm sure that swimming will remain part of my future life.'