

GOING WILD IN THE OUSE

Bridget Flanagan, Trustee of the Great Ouse Valley Trust, reflects on the recent revival of swimming in our river



The Godmanchester bathing steps revealed – a work in progress. Photograph by Alan Hooker

They are hard at work in Godmanchester. Community Association volunteers are uncovering the old bathing steps to the river. They have removed decades of silt and flood debris – 42 cubic metres so far – and with it a rather forgotten part of our river's history. The steps are sited on the Recreation Ground and were built by the Town Council in the early twentieth century as a public amenity. At that time almost all towns and villages along the river had designated swimming areas: the Huntingdon Bathing Place with covered changing areas was on the Alconbury Brook near the Gas Works. Just below the Town Bridge, St Neots had a bathing area with diving boards and steps – this was the 'Lido'. At Hemingford Abbots, the Frying Pan - a wide shallow pool on the backwater, was a popular venue. The Sandbanks at St Ives was between the Bridge and Staunch. In 1913, in an effort to promote safer swimming, St Ives Town Council had a pool dug on Holt Island, but this closed in 1949 when the Town's Medical Officer declared the river-fed and, very probably, stagnant water to be contaminated. St Ivesians returned to their old river haunts to swim.

From the mid-1960s there was national change. The new era of Leisure and Sports Centres brought swimmers indoors to large pools that were warm and clean, and consequently river swimming gradually lost its attractions. By 1990 river swimming

was actively discouraged by the National Rivers Authority due to concerns of deteriorating water quality and pollution.

But change comes again. In 1999 Roger Deakin published *Waterlog*, detailing his attempt to swim through the British Isles starting from his moat in Suffolk. His water odyssey takes him to rivers, lakes, canals, lochs and more. It is a joyful, passionate celebration of what we now call 'wild swimming' – a 'right to roam' in water. He inspired a new generation of outdoor swimmers and encouraged older ones to return. People are foregoing echoey, characterless pools with chlorinated waters to experience swimming in beautiful and stimulating surroundings. Swim England, the national governing body for swimming, advises that outdoor swimming results in better sleep, healthier circulation, and increased happiness, while a recent report suggests that it can delay dementia.

The Outdoor Swimming Society was formed in 2006 with 300 members; in 2020 it attracts over 100,000 followers. This summer there were more swimmers in the River Great Ouse than have been seen for decades: social and family groups as well as skeins of wet-suited triathletes in long distance training. The Godmanchester bathing steps will certainly be well used again.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire. And we are pleased to note that Godmanchester Community Association is a Partner Member of the Great Ouse Valley Trust.

For more information about the Trust please visit
www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk

