

Making waves

Meet the women swimming their way into the record books, and battling jellyfish and more along the way. By **Jane Yettram**

LAND'S END TO JOHN O'GROATS

FIRST WOMAN

Jasmine Harrison had already become the youngest woman to row any ocean solo, crossing the Atlantic alone at

the age of 21. A year later, she wanted another challenge.

'I was looking at a simple coast-to-coast walk or cycle. Then I met Sean Conway, the first man ever to swim from Land's End to John O'Groats.' And Jasmine's decision was made.

'I began swimming in the pool for three or four hours at a time. When spring came, I started open-water swimming, including in the lake at Ripon Racecourse.'

On 1 July 2022 – with sponsors, kit and a boat and crew organised – Jasmine, from North Yorkshire, plunged into the sea at Land's End to start the 900-mile swim. 'It was exciting but scary too! Swimming so far away from the boat was a completely new experience. It took a while to get used to it.'

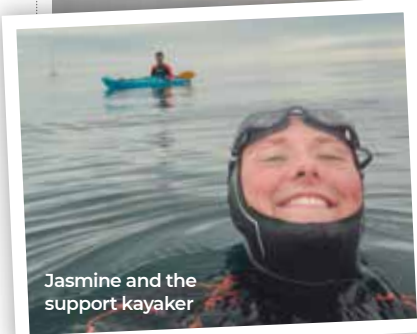
From then on, Jasmine swam anything from one to 27 miles a day. 'Distance depends on the weather and tide,' she explains. 'Sometimes I'd swim for six hours, but only make two miles' progress because the tide was running two miles per hour in the opposite direction.'

Sometimes, bad weather stopped swimming entirely. 'In strong winds, the boat would get pushed far away and the crew would lose sight of me. And of course, you can't swim in a storm.'

Tides determined when Jasmine swam too. 'Sometimes I'd start in the daylight and get out in the dark, or vice versa. But I only swam in the dark when a kayaker



Jasmine rejoices at reaching John O'Groats



Jasmine and the support kayaker

was on the team, because they could stay right by me.'

Jasmine wore a wetsuit. 'But it was pretty cold. I had to keep moving in the water, not even stopping for a snack.' She'd warm up after a swim. 'A hot shower, hot drinks and straight into my sleeping bag!'

Swimming up the coast meant other boats and commercial shipping to contend with. 'The support boat would radio to say we're coming through, and they'd speak to the coastguard.'

MARINE LIFE

Jellyfish were another hazard. 'I liked them in a way, because they were something to look at! But I did get stung, which hurt and kept me awake at night.' To stave off stings on bare skin, Jasmine wore socks and gloves, and made a neoprene mask with holes for just eyes and mouth.

She also encountered a shark. 'It was a basking shark, which isn't dangerous,

but we didn't know that so I got out of the water! In northern Scotland there were orcas. They've never been known to attack people, but they're killer whales and I looked like a seal, so I was a bit scared.'

Most wildlife, though, was wonderful. 'Dolphins played around underneath me – I could almost touch them. And seals and eagles followed me. It was incredible.'

FINAL STRETCH

The most challenging stretch was the final part in northern Scotland. 'The sea was really rough, with big waves and nowhere for the support boat to shelter if the weather turned worse.' But Scotland also brought some of the best times. 'Swimming between the islands, with mountaintops either side of me, was just beautiful.'

After 110 days, Jasmine reached John O'Groats. 'All my crew and support team were there. We celebrated with a bottle of champagne – and ended up in the pub for pizza and lots of beer!'

Simon Price/Firstpix; Jasmine Harrison – The Full Length

ENGLISH CHANNEL

FIRST DEAF WOMAN

'My mother took me swimming from a young age,' says Verity Green, 42, from North Yorkshire, who has been deaf since she was a baby. 'I started with a swimming club at age seven, and at 12 I won the British Ladies Deaf Backstroke and was selected to represent Great Britain at senior level for the Deaf Team.'

However, Verity had been showing signs of dizziness since she was six, and by 11 she had tinnitus. 'They put these symptoms, along with my deafness, down to Ménière's disease.'

The dizziness grew worse and worse. 'When I was 17, they decided on a last-resort treatment to destroy the semicircular canals – the inner ear balance system.'

It's a treatment that wouldn't happen today, and Verity ended up with her vision affected too. 'It's like when you sit on a train next to another train, and one train starts to move slowly, your brain is unable to work out which train is moving.'

Three months before the treatment, Verity had achieved her highest ranking – World Number 3 for Deaf Women in 200m. But now she was told she'd probably never swim again. 'I couldn't accept the loss of not only swimming but the travel and friendships that went with it.'

Verity tried to get back into the pool. 'But each length I swam, my head felt like a bowling ball, separate from my body. Each tumble turn I took sent me into oblivion. After three-and-a-half lengths of front crawl I stopped. I didn't know where I was. My friend had to pull me out. I just wept. I realised what the consultant said was true.'

Pure stubbornness got Verity back in the British team two years later. 'But I was making myself miserable and, when swimming, my head felt like

it was falling off.' Her rankings never reached the same level, and she retired aged 20.

A DREAM COME TRUE

Two decades later, though, Verity was to attempt her childhood dream of swimming the Channel – despite Covid thwarting her detailed training plans. 'I used windows in the lockdowns to get in long swims across the Lake District,' she says. 'In 2020 with some friends, we managed four lakes in 36 hours!' She also swam regularly off the north-east coast.

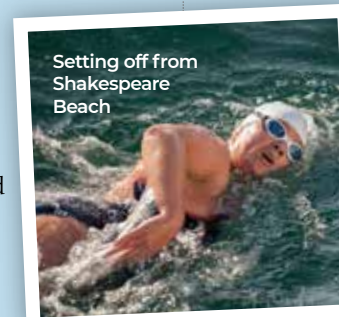
In fact, Verity found that open-water swimming is better than being in a pool. 'Outdoor swimming

removes the visual input of repetitive patterns (tiles), glaring lights and tumble turns. I still have to be careful, though, as I don't hear hazards and don't always know where I am.'

As well as fulfilling her dream, Verity wanted to raise money for Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, a charity that has supported her so much. 'My first Hearing Dog was a lovable mixed breed called Benjy. Now I have a black Labrador

called Bow. They're trained to high standards, alerting me to daily sounds such as the doorbell and alarm clock. They have a different type of alert for danger sounds like the smoke alarm.'

Finally, at 5am on 2 August 2021, Verity set off from Dover's Shakespeare



Setting off from Shakespeare Beach

Verity found that open-water swimming is better than being in a pool

Verity achieved her dream of swimming the English Channel



Beach. At first the water was choppy. 'Once it settled, I was faced with so many jellyfish! The crew watch over you with amusement as they can see your potential collisions. I was actually glad for the return of the choppy water because the jellyfish disappeared.'

CHALLENGE COMPLETED

Then there were the boats. 'The Channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. We had to stop for a while for a Russian naval boat, which refused to slow down!'

In the final two miles, just short of France, swimming against the strong current was tough. 'I had to stop myself being swept south and having a longer crossing.'

But just after 5pm – 12 hours and nine minutes after leaving Dover – she reached Cap Gris-Nez in France, becoming the first deaf woman to swim the English Channel. Thinking back to that moment, Verity's eyes fill with tears. 'The sense that I'd actually achieved it was immense, especially after all that had happened, not just physically but emotionally, when everything had seemed stacked against me.'