



Memory Lane

Former champion diver Anne Green Jessel recalls her eventful life in the pool and on the boards



'After a while I found myself in a harness being carried up and down the bath by someone who, to me, was a very old lady with a loud mouth. I didn't like it'

Clockwise from opposite page: Anne performs a swallow dive; with 'teaching Sis'; paddling at Bournemouth; collecting the school shield; Anne today; jumping into Kingfisher Lido

I was born into a swimming family, the last girl to arrive, my older sisters eight, 14 and 16 years away from me. Poor Dad was hoping for a boy but it wasn't to be.

Mum and Dad were busy members of West Bromwich SC, sitting on committees and officiating at galas and eventually becoming life members. My sisters were already Midland and club swimmers and champions. Dad had an ambition that one of my sisters would swim the Channel but, by desire or design, this never happened.

One day, when I was toddling

around, I was scooped up into the car and driven to the West Bromwich Gala Baths. I remember being carried into this big building and suddenly faced with a huge bath of blue water. From that day on, after my first introduction in the arms of my big teaching Sis, I was taken frequently and got used to the idea. I couldn't stand up to paddle nor could I swim so I had to rely on my teaching Sis and her boyfriend carrying me around, dousing me up and down.

After a while, I found myself in a harness being carried up and down the bath by someone who, to me, was a very old lady with a loud

mouth. I didn't like it.

At the galas, I watched my sisters swimming to victory and picking up trophies, their beaux playing water polo, Mum and Dad at opposite ends of the pool with stop watches. Between the galas I was taken to another big pool, but this time it was under a blue sky - the Kingfisher Lido near Kingswinford. I remember those lovely weekends, playing in the fountains during what seemed to be persistently lovely summers.

It had a higher-up camping field and my soon-to-be brother-in-law took his youth squad on camping trips for treats. My sisters and I joined them. It was wonderful.

Shallow end

They apparently thought nothing of me wandering into the shallow end of the pool, where I could stand up and tried - oh so tried - to get my feet off the bottom. The old lady hadn't been a great success with me over the last year. I was about five then.

Eventually, I could swim a little and retrieve myself after jumping in. It became the practice to move me slowly into the deeper water >

with assistance, the goal being that they could plant me on the pooldeck midway down the length of the bath, stand on the opposite side and beckon me to jump in and swim across.

I didn't like the idea much and they often had to patiently await my effort, offering bribes of lovely milkshakes on the way home. That usually did the trick and, with a struggle, I made it to the other side. However, on one occasion, I vividly remember almost reaching the other side but then starting to sink.

Down I went, waiting to touch the bottom when I could give a good push up, but as I was making these plans, a body splashed down to my side, and my sister hoisted me up.

Amazingly, I hadn't panicked, and surprisingly wanted to do it again straight after - then perhaps I'd get two milkshakes. And I did.

More confident

As weeks progressed, I became stronger and more confident. Sis started to think that I should tackle swimming the bath lengthwise.

Either she or my brother-in-law would start me off jumping in at the deep end while they were in the water to pluck me to the surface if I didn't come up. They swam alongside me and soon I was able to at least get towards the shallow end and stand up if I wanted to cheat. And then carry on.

When I was able to swim the whole length in a kind of dogpaddle-breaststroke, and with great sighs and gasps, they walked along the bathside as I swam near the wall. By this stage, my visits to the milkbar were very enjoyable. I was now six years old.

I enjoyed lots of camping visits to the Kingfisher Lido and another great Sunday trip, after Sunday school, was to Grimley-upon-Severn, where Mum and Dad, my sisters and brother-in-laws picnicked and messed about and played in the river.

With family assistance, I swam across the river, which seemed an awful long way, but in fact on visiting in recent years, it was less than the 33.3yds bath.



Diving stage

The diving stage at the baths contained 'a ladder' of four boards up to the fifth and top board, which was about 4.5m. I was perched on the end of the first board, legs dangling over, with head and arms placed pointing down to the water. I was 'helped' off the board and, if lucky, didn't 'splat' on all fours onto the water. I learned to keep my legs out of the way under the board as I toppled in. By the time I was six-and-a-half, I had moved up to the top board. The first time up there I sat... and sat... and sat... on the end of the board. My sister, bro-in-law and others were shouting, 'Come on', 'Go', 'One-two-three go', but I remained stuck on the end of the board and wouldn't budge.

From the fourth board up, it was a gigantic leap and, besides, there was an ugly black drain on the pool bottom directly below. Queues were forming from the bottom board and by the time they were forming from the poolside, I was called down the steps. Oh dear. No milkshakes that day. Just a shaky me.

Sis was not to be beaten. On subsequent visits, I carried out the usual routine of diving from the

bottom board up to the top board, but it was still 'no go' on top. I was encouraged to swim over the horrid black drain and even surface dive towards it. I was a tiny wisp of a nearly seven-year-old and I'd never reach down nine-and-a-half feet of water, not even toppling off the top board.

Over the course of the next few sessions, my confidence grew and, again, I found myself 'up on top'. There was a moment of hesitation, and... I took a big breath, closed my eyes (tut! tut!) and let myself fall. I waited for the impact into the water, then *splish splash*. Upon swimming up towards the light, I heard a muffled roar of 'hurras' across the building, as many had been following my progress. I emerged from the pool a bit shaky and into the arms of teaching Sis. This was the start. I was rewarded with an enormous pink iced bun.

My technique was improved and just before my seventh birthday, I was able to sit on the end of the board, roll my stretched legs with pointed toes over my head and swing them back again giving the momentum to leave the board in a very streamlined dive into the water. I felt the bee's knees.



West Bromwich Gala Baths; opposite (top and bottom): at Kingfisher Lido

'The gala opening saw me swimming diagonally across the floodlit pool, floating a bouquet of flowers with the mayoress awaiting my presentation'

The annual club gala was coming up soon and this little demonstration to a gasping audience was included in the programme. It made the newspaper columns.

By this time, my attempted breaststroke had become stronger, and the gala opening saw me swimming diagonally across the floodlit pool, floating a big bouquet of flowers behind me with the mayoress awaiting my presentation. My sisters won most events including the diving trophy.

During the course of the next few months, my big teaching Sis and bro-in-law extended my swimming goal to 10 lengths of the pool. It was exhausting and boring but with the gradual increase I managed it. I'm sure Sis added extra lengths because I had to

concentrate on my swimming rather than counting and wait until she called out the last length.

Top board

Gradually I was turning my stroke into some kind of crawl and backstroke. Style was to be introduced later.

Meanwhile my top board diving developed from starting on my bottom to standing up, arms pointing straight out front, swinging down, up on toes and off. I was very nervous at first, again testing the patience of teaching Sis and the public wanting to use the board because standing made me feel the board was much higher.

As a break from routine, my bro-in-law used to collect a very excited me from primary school on his Ariel motorbike and I rode pillion -

wearing my thick black stockings on Mum's orders - to Rolfe Street Baths in Smethwick.

After a few lengths paying attention to my stroke, it was a playful session. It was *fun*.

On odd occasions I was taken to Kingstanding Baths, Thimblemill Baths in Smethwick and Northfield Baths (after which was a pleasant trip to the 'Lickies' [Lickey Hills Country Park for anyone not from the Birmingham area - Ed]). The object of this was to try me out on an even higher board - a 5m. All these boards were covered in carpet (my interpretation).

After much bribing, teaching Sis got me off the board - a particularly high achievement for her at the Kingstanding Baths, where I gave much trouble and caused much hanging around. I did, however, get my chocolate milkshakes and an extra painting book - for the extra half-metre.

Lido days

Lovely days at the Lido and the river continued during the summer but, one day, my sister said we were going on a bus journey to a swimming baths in Birmingham.

We arrived at the so-called

Woodcock Street Baths after a walk from Snowhill Station. We entered the building not too dissimilar to West Brom Gala Baths in size. The first thing I saw was a lady diving from the top board that seemed very high in the curved ceiling. A lady waiting at the door wearing a green overall coat ushered teaching Sis and me towards one of the spectator tiers and we sat and waited. We watched the lady doing 'swallow' dives from the top 5m board and the high and low springboards (West Brom did not have these facilities). The boards were built out from a spectacular balcony behind. She was being taught by someone who appeared to be a very gentle man standing on the side. After their session, they came to teaching Sis and I was introduced to them. Alf Jones and Edna Spencer were to be my new diving coaches.

I began travelling by bus from West Bromwich to Snowhill to walk to the baths two or three times a week. I walked past the General Hospital, as it was then, past the Fire Station, crossed the road and walked to the top of Woodcock Street. Before I got to this point, I wound a scarf around my nose and

mouth because the smell of the hops cooking from the nearby brewery made me feel sick. I passed the little back-to-back houses and the tuckshop and arrived at the baths. Alf used to arrive on his motorbike and give me a good hour's session, followed by hot steaming Bovril, Horlicks or Cow & Gate in the café. I always looked forward to this.

Riding pillion

As I was good at pillion riding by this time, my coach always saw me safely onto the bus back to West Bromwich.

I was eight years old and had become an independent traveller and I remember the bus conductress looking after me on these journeys. I used to get out of Mum's way for odd hours by begging her to give me a penny to catch the bus to the Gala Baths with a friend or two or on my own.

I had much fun without big teaching Sis around, and played games using the steps midway down the bath, diving down and gliding back to the top, imagining them to be as high as mountains. I had fantasies of becoming a famous stuntwoman one day.

Meanwhile, the next annual gala was looming before the pool closed to become a grand dance and concert hall during the winter months. I don't remember entering any of the swimming events but, definitely, I was to make my appearance in the diving.

After my swim across the pool to present the usual bouquet to the mayoress, the diving event came along. My two sisters (including teacher big Sis) were my main rivals. They performed their required dives well but I kept up with them. Then came the final round. They cockily performed something like a pike dive from one of the lower boards. This always won the competition for one of them. Then it was my turn. There was much whispering in the packed gallery as I climbed straight to the top board. I took off into a 1.5 somersault with tuck and cut the water. I came up and there was silence. What had I done wrong? Then suddenly the place erupted. The jaws of my sisters and other contestants dropped. I was the winner at eight years old.

A visit to the Gala Baths learner bath was part of my primary school's routine. Instead of being the first to get dressed, I was always last. This exasperated my



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teachers, 'considering all the swimming experience you have, young lady'.

Chestnuts

Training continued at Woodcock Street through the years and some icy, snowy winters. I loved the jacket potatoes and chestnuts roasting by the bus stop at Snowhill, and the lady newspaper seller with the missing teeth, a cigger hanging from her lips, her hair held in a turban. 'Spatchy Mail! Spat-chy Mail! Come and get your Spat-chy Mail!' [*The Evening Despatch* was the sister paper of *The Birmingham Mail* - Ed].

Another real highlight was my coach and his other lady diver taking me to see Father Christmas at a big department store after training, before seeing me onto the bus home.

During the seemingly hot

summers, I'd arrive for my diving training to find queues all the way up Woodcock Street waiting to get in. Alf would beckon me onto his motorbike and take me to Cadbury's Bournville Lido for my training. I loved it there and managed to practise at least my 1m board dives.

When I achieved anything new, the lady diver always rewarded me with chocolate misfits, which I devoured on the bus home. I also had the perks of seeing the chocolates whizzing by on moving belts. Edna worked at the Cadbury's factory until she married my coach and then became a full-time ASA teacher.

She eventually became my main diving coach but not until we gave diving exhibitions at the Bournville indoor pool. My worst moment came when we were synchronising from two boards, and she emitted

an awful scream. She had ruptured her Achilles tendon.

Lifesaving

When I was in secondary education, my middle Sis was the teacher responsible for taking my group to Woodcock Street Baths after school on those icy evenings to put us through our lifesaving practices in the second-class bath. We craved the chips we bought on the way home. There were also many visits to the Gala Baths, just 10 minutes' walk away.

During the balmy summer months, Dad drove some of us to take our tests and, on the journey home, squeezed two more into the boot of his Sunbeam Talbot!

My swimming and diving continued through the years. I took part in exciting town schools swimming sports days, West Bromwich SC team events and at

one stage my two sisters and I, plus schoolfriends and a reserve, won the Midland District Division Tournament Trophy.

For the photo session at a later date, big teacher Sis - now seven months pregnant - sat at the front holding the large shield which also served to conceal her bump.

During my very early teens, the Midland Championships were held at Tamworth Lido and Derby Baths, and Dad bribed attendants with a shiny half-crown (12.5p) to allow me extra training time beforehand.

Training was at Woodcock Street in the morning with the competitions in the afternoon. I

was always taken to the News Cinema between times. I also remember diving at the University College Hospital Pool in London, when my lady coach and I travelled by train. Oh, the excitement of the underground! We met up with Mum and Dad at my uncle's place in Tottenham Court Road.

There was also Banbury Lido, where my training sessions towards an eventual Midland competition were held. My coach now had a sidecar fitted to his bike. Lady diver (now wife) sat inside like a queen while I, wearing my thick black stockings, rode pillion.

Our days at the Derby Baths in

Blackpool for the nationals were wonderful. Dad drove us around and I eagerly waited to spot Blackpool Tower on the skyline.

Around this time, I was beginning to notice a special 'specy' called 'the boy'. Boys always started by befriending my very wise dad and asking if they could peep under the bonnet of his Rover. Then they'd follow us home pretending not to know the way - especially after some Birmingham Amateur Diving Club exhibitions, including Walsall Baths. These baths were the proud owners of a 7.5m board. Four years later, I didn't just want to show off with my

dives but also arrive at club sessions driving Dad's car.

10m dive

I did my first 10m dive at the South Shore Open Air Pool, Blackpool [opened in 1923, and you can even see a clip from 1926 on Youtube of activities there including diving - Ed]. I was feeling particularly confident because I'd just come third in England. Mum was sitting there in pouring rain and wind. Coach was beckoning me off the swaying coconut matted board, and eventually I went. If I hadn't, I would surely have been blown off. How painful would that have been?

I was eventually to become a lover of 10m diving, becoming a little more fledged at the National Diving Training Centre in the Dawdon Pit Pool, near Sunderland. I was horrified at the thought of jumping into the murky pool let alone diving head-first. I hated the thought. But I got over it and made sure I never went down deep for fear of something grabbing hold of me...according to the stories. I worshipped my diving heroes, watched them train - and now I was among them.

Diving accident

An unfortunate diving accident halted my progress and doctors told my parents I would never dive again. I was devastated but a couple of years later I returned to Woodcock Street to regain my Midland crown.

After marrying and living in Sussex, I swam at Horsham outdoor lido, taking my babies for picnics with friends. I had a spell of teaching and received some diving training from a coach at Crawley pool, dived in exhibitions at Worthing Lido and King Alfred's Baths, trained at the ladies' section of the Highgate Diving Club at Crystal Palace, then turned to coaching, which took me all over - but that's another story.

I founded the Albatross Diving Club in Reading. I was privileged to be one of eight on the national panel of diving coaches in the 1980s and the only woman. I took my ASA swimming teachers certificate and helped with courses for Reading council and private swim schools, and for five years, had my own little school, AGJ.

Today, it's as though it happened yesterday. All the pools and lidos instrumental in my progress are sadly gone or redeveloped but the memories live on. 📸



Anne with her trophy after she returned from injury to regain her Midland title; opposite: Anne (far left) with her sisters and schoolfriends after winning the Midland District Division Tournament trophy