

The neat and perfectly white-washed South Foreland lighthouse atop the famous White Cliffs allows walkers an epic view over the Channel and, on clearer days, the French coast.

If the weather is right, you can linger outside on the grass and watch the cliff shelf give way to the most glorious panorama of blue sea and sky. Meanwhile on the water, the vast ferry boats and other smaller shipping vessels go about their daily business.

Just over 20 land miles from here is the Cap Gris Nez, the rocky cape which is the nearest stretch of coastal France to the UK, also a target destination for the hundreds of intrepid swimmers who attempt the crossing every year.

From up here, France looks so close that you feel as if you can reach out and grab it. But for the many who have attempted, or are planning to attempt the journey, the reality is rather different.

For a solo long distance swimmer, reaching the other side could mean an ordeal of over 20 hours with life-threatening dangers awaiting them such as rough seas, shifting tides, fog and hypothermia, not to mention hazards including fast-moving shipping, shoals of jelly fish, floating timber, oil slicks and mouthfuls of sickness-inducing sea water.

This hasn't deterred the hundred or more swimmers from all over the globe who, looking for the next big challenge, chance their luck against the tides every season. But over a century ago, the prospect of swimming unaided across this stretch of water must have felt a little like journeying by foot to the Arctic or traversing the Sahara by mule.

DIPPING IN AT DOVER

Despite an earlier failed attempt, one man remained utterly un-phased by such a challenge on the morning of 26 August, 1875. He was 27-year-old Captain Matthew Webb from Dawley in Shropshire.

The son of a doctor and one of 12 children, Webb had learnt to swim in the River Severn. Later, whilst serving as a second mate on the Cunard steamship *Russia*, he distinguished himself by diving heroically into the treacherous Atlantic sea in order to save a man who had fallen overboard. Witnesses say that he spent a good three quarters of an hour in the choppy seas before returning to the safety of a life boat.

Now covered from head-to-toe in porpoise oil in order to keep out the cold, and diving in from Admiralty Pier in Dover accompanied by the local lugger *Anne* piloted by George Toms with a safety crew and several newspaper reporters in tow, his second attempt was well underway.

Sticking throughout to his preferred breast stroke, Webb began travelling in a westerly direction at an impressive rate of a mile and a half per hour. Newspaper reports of the time refer to him being 'passed by the afternoon mail packet from Calais' and indulging in 'refreshments... in the shape of a half a pint of beer'.

Despite the rising fog and the increasing heat of the day, Webb swam on purposefully, occasionally surrounded by live porpoises which were scared off by a volley of pistol shots which came from his pilot's boat. At five o'clock it was reported that, while continuing his swim, the captain took a slug of beef tea then remarked that he felt "capital".

The lighthouse at Cap Gris Nez was sighted at around eight o'clock in the evening. Webb was about half way through his journey when he was stung on the shoulder by a jellyfish. Still he carried on, fortified at regular intervals by mouthfuls of coffee, beef tea and brandy.

As dawn broke, Calais was in sight, but the sea became



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rougher and Webb's strength started to wane. Cheering from a passing rowing boat manned by men from the London, Chatham and Dover Railway packet service seemed to rouse the swimmer, however. By rowing on the windward side of Webb, they also saved him from the worst of the natural elements. At exactly 19 minutes to 11 in the morning, he landed on the Calais sands not far from the bathing machines to enthusiastic cheering from a crowd which had quickly gathered.

A report from the Manchester Guardian, which was later telegraphed from Dover stated: 'Captain Webb appeared somewhat exhausted, and stumbled as he left the water. He was immediately rubbed down and taken to the Hôtel de Paris. Some local physicians recommended him to take some port wine, and he did so, and then went to bed, where he enjoyed a sound sleep.'

Averaging an impressive 20 strokes per minute, the 'Shropshire lad' had been in the water for a total of 21 hours and 45 minutes.

BIRTH OF THE CELEBRITY SWIMMER

After this incredible achievement, hero status beckoned for Webb. In outpourings of national celebration akin to those witnessed during our recent golden Olympic summer, Webb became the poster boy for English sporting success and subsequently helped to promote the popularity of swimming in the late-Victorian era. Open water swimming became the new craze.

Crowds turned up to greet him wherever he went and his face appeared on everything from comic books to match ➔