

boxes (Bryant and May matches were said to be the inspiration for Peter Sellers's Inspector Clouseau character—perhaps it was the moustache).

Tragically, Webb's new found celebrity and record-breaking streak was not to endure. He drowned eight years later in a reckless attempt to swim across the Whirlpool Rapids at the bottom of Niagara Falls, aged just 35.

A memorial to Captain Webb was unveiled outside the Burlington Hotel in Dover in 1910 and still stands on the site today. His moustachioed, impassive face stares unflinchingly out to sea.

In the wake of his historic swim, hundreds of glory seekers tried their luck in the Channel, but it took another 36 years before they were able to emulate Webb's feat. On his 13th attempt and helped possibly by wearing motorcycle goggles in the water, Thomas Burgess from Yorkshire managed it in 22 hours 35 minutes in 1911. Later, in 1926, Olympic gold medal winner Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to do it. Realising a promising marketing opportunity with the sport, luxury watch manufacturers Rolex cashed in with Mercedes Gleitze's swim of October 1927— she was hauled out of the water wearing a still-in-tact waterproof Rolex Oyster around her neck. It was the start of Rolex's involvement in sports sponsorship which survives to this day.

**REGULATORS AND RECORD BREAKERS**

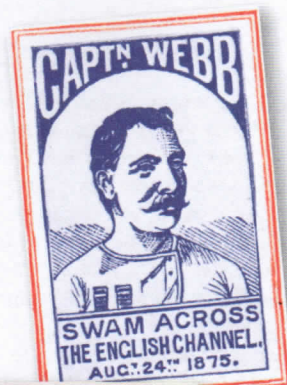
It was around this time that the Channel Swimming Association (CSA) was founded in order to authenticate claims for crossings and to accurately verify crossing times.

Since their formation in 1927 they have helped over 1,100 swimmers cross the channel safely and in accordance with their strict guidelines, which include the prohibition of wearing wetsuits or using 'artificial aids'. By registering with the CSA, swimmers can be sure that they are put in touch with a reputable pilot boat and crew (this can cost applicants around £2,500). Experienced crews, such as the Brickell Brothers from Dover, can offer a number of crucial services in what is today one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. These include support and safety on the day and offering an inside knowledge of the local tides and weather conditions. They will also maintain radio contact with the coastguards throughout the crossing.

"Enquiries to us about swimming the Channel simply do not stop," reports Dr Julie Bradshaw who is an open water swimming coach as well as the CSA's secretary.

"There is definitely more publicity surrounding Channel swimming these days and with the widespread coverage of David Walliams's swim in 2006 for Sport Relief and the

**Previous page:** (main photo) The Victorian hero poses for the camera; (right) Webb was fortified by mouthfuls of coffee, beef tea and brandy  
**This page (right):** Popular Captain Webb merchandise included collector's cards and match boxes



inclusion of open water swimming in the Olympics, it remains one of the best known sporting challenges in the world."

Over 120 swimmers registered with the organisation last season (including relay swimmers) and Dr Bradshaw says that there is a "good success rate" with over 60% of their swimmers making it to the other side.

Says Dr Bradshaw, who herself swam the Channel aged just 15 years and holds the record for the fastest crossing by butterfly stroke in 2002 (timed at 14 hours and 18 minutes): "To do it, you must have the right attitude and the right training. You must be prepared. One of the biggest challenges is the cold water temperature and being outside for so long. Then there are the changeable weather conditions and the big waves, the jellyfish, the floating debris and other annoyances."

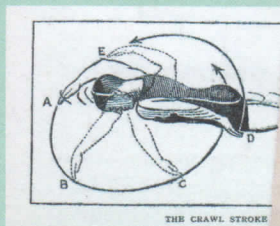
But whatever the English Channel has in store for the world's endurance swimmers, it seems that all the pain and the hardship pales in comparison to the warm glow and unrivalled sense of achievement that awaits every successful bid.

It would also be impossible to imagine the romance and mythology of cross-Channel swimming without the story of Captain Webb and his memorable triumph during the glorious summer of 1875.

Adds Dr Bradshaw: "It is amazing to start out from England and finish in France. I remember when I finished my crossing, it was night time on the French beach so I just sat there in the dark quietly collecting pebbles. I listened to the lapping of the waves; it was a truly amazing moment."

[www.channelswimmingassociation.com](http://www.channelswimmingassociation.com)

[www.getset4success.co.uk](http://www.getset4success.co.uk)



**STRAIT AHEAD**

In the modern era, a number of records have been broken in the strait between Dover and Cap Gris Nez. 'King of the Channel' Mike Read swam it 33 times before his record was broken by Kevin Murphy in 1990 (he has 34 successful crossings to his name). Meanwhile former currency trader and 'Queen of the Channel' Alison Streeter has

swum it 46 times, more than anyone else in history. The fastest time between the two countries remains 7 hours and 17 minutes, which was set by American Chad Hundebly in 1994 and is yet to be beaten.

**Pics (from left):** Captain Webb's swim launched a national craze for open water swimming; a Channel swimmer gets ready to brave the waves