

Captain Webb: Britain's Swimming Hero [B2]

Centocinquant'anni fa, questo ufficiale della Marina Mercantile divenne il primo uomo ad attraversare la Manica, la sfida per eccellenza per i nuotatori di lunga distanza.

One hundred and fifty years ago this month, Captain Matthew Webb became a national hero and famous around the world when he made history as the first person to swim the thirty-four-kilometre-wide [English Channel](#) della Manica”), one of the most [treacherous stretches](#) of water on the planet. Born in Dawley, Shropshire, on 19 January 1848, Webb developed his swimming skills as a child playing in the River Severn. Aged twelve, he started working on ships, finishing up fifteen years later as captain. In 1872, Webb read an [account](#) of an attempt to swim the Channel and became inspired to try. [Endurance](#) swimming was becoming popular, but this [feat](#) was considered impossible. Webb began to prepare, swimming in the Thames and in the sea [off the Dover coast](#).

CROSSING THE CHANNEL

Finally, on 24 August 1875, Webb was ready. Insulated by [porpoise](#) oil, and fortified by a breakfast of bacon and eggs with [claret](#), he [dived](#) off Dover [pier](#) at 12.56pm in his red [silk swimming costume](#). Three boats followed him. Swimming [breaststroke](#) (the [front crawl](#) was almost unknown), he occasionally [snacked](#) on [cod liver oil](#), [beef tea](#), brandy, coffee and [ale](#). He recovered from a [jellyfish](#) attack with a shot of brandy. For five hours, currents stopped him from reaching the French [shore](#). The [crew](#) on a [rowing boat](#) sang Rule, Britannia! to encourage him. On 25 August, at 10.41am, suffering from delirium, he finally landed at Cap Gris-Nez, near Calais. Powerful [tides](#) had forced him into a zig-zag route of sixty-three kilometres! No one would swim across the Channel for another thirty-six years.

TRIUMPHANT RETURN

Tens of thousands [greeted](#) his arrival in England, and he received a testimonial [fund](#) of £2,424 (£300,000 today.) Webb became a professional swimmer, participating in long-distance swimming races and floating for days in public pools. He also licensed his name for merchandise. Finances were always a problem, however, not helped by his generosity and expensive lifestyle. His health was also suffering. When he contracted tuberculosis in 1883, he had already lost nineteen kilos since his Channel triumph.

NIAGARA CHALLENGE

In 1882, Webb announced that he would accept the challenge of swimming through the highly dangerous [Whirlpool](#) Rapids below the Niagara Falls in the US. His friends, horrified, tried to dissuade him, but Webb needed money — the public would pay to watch him. On 24 July 1883, a young [ferryman](#) took him out to the middle of the Niagara River. The [ferryman](#) tried to stop him, but Webb just said, “Goodbye, boy”, and jumped into the water. Almost immediately, he disappeared into the whirlpool. His body was found four days later. Paralysis caused by water pressure had led to respiratory failure. The British public was devastated.

A VICTORIAN HERO

Monuments to Webb were quickly erected in England and France, the one in Dawley with the inscription “Nothing great is easy.” One historian described Webb as a hero of the Victorian Age, “a man whose brand of [dogged](#) persistence and self-belief captured the spirit of the times.”

ENGLISH CHANNEL RECORDS

Since Captain Matthew Webb’s first successful swim in 1875, there have been over 133 successful crossings. Each year, around three hundred swimmers attempt the journey, but only a few make it to the French coast. The record time is now six hours fifty-five minutes. Tom Gregory became the youngest

swimmer to complete the crossing at just eleven years old in 1988. One woman has swum the Channel forty-three times, and in 2019, another swimmer set a world record by completing four consecutive crossings without stopping.

Glossary

- **jellyfish** = medusa
- **swimming costume** = costume da bagno
- **breaststroke** = a rana
- **front crawl** = stile libero
- **English Channel** = canale della Manica
- **treacherous** = insidiosi, pericolosi
- **account** = racconto, resoconto
- **porpoise** = focena
- **silk** = seta
- **rowing boat** = barca a remi
- **ferryman** = traghettatore
- **dogged** = tenace
- **feat** = impresa
- **Whirlpool** = vortice, mulinello
- **dived** = tuffarsi
- **pier** = molo
- **fund** = fondo
- **beef tea** = brodo di manzo
- **off the Dover coast** = lungo la costa
- **claret** = chiacchetto, vino rosso
- **Endurance** = resistenza
- **cod liver oil** = olio di fegato di merluzzo
- **ale** = birra
- **crew** = squadra
- **tides** = maree
- **stretches** = tratti
- **snacked** = fare uno spuntino
- **shore** = costa, sponda
- **greeted** = salutare, accogliere