
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The history of swimming



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgina

And I'm Georgina.

Neil

Can you swim, Georgina?

Georgina

I can, Neil. I learned to swim as a child and now I enjoy swimming for exercise and to relax.

Neil

In the summer hundreds of keen swimmers, like Georgina, head off to swimming pools, lakes and beaches to **take a dip** – an informal idiom meaning 'go for a swim'.

Georgina

Swimming has many health benefits and since ancient times has been used to promote strength and wellbeing.

Neil

But swimming's not just about exercise – there's far more to it beneath the surface as we'll be finding out in this programme on the history of swimming.

Georgina

Although evidence suggests that ancient Mediterranean people dived eagerly into temple pleasure pools, lakes and the sea, other cultures have **swum against the tide** – another swimming idiom there, Neil - meaning 'not to follow what everyone else is doing'.

Neil

Someone who *did* enjoy swimming was the poet, Lord Byron. He wrote poems popularising the sport and in 1810 swam the Hellespont, a stretch of water separating Europe from Asia. But in which modern country can the Hellespont be found - that's my quiz question, Georgina. Is it:

- a) Greece?
- b) Cyprus? or
- c) Turkey?

Georgina

I think Lord Byron visited Istanbul, so I'll say c) Turkey.

Neil

OK, we'll find out the answer at the end of the programme. For all its good points, swimming seems to have lost its appeal in Europe after the decline of the Roman Empire.

Georgina

According to historian and swimming enthusiast, Professor Kevin Dawson, the rise of Christian beliefs discouraged swimming, as he explains here to BBC World Service programme, The Forum:

Kevin Dawson

You have some beliefs that water is this unsafe space, unnatural space for human beings... it's a perpetuation of the chaos that existed before God created land, or that water is a mechanism for punishment like the Great Flood story or pharaoh's army being destroyed in the Red Sea... but then there's also beliefs that swimming is **immodest**... most people at the time swam **nude** and so church officials discouraged swimming because they felt that it lead to **immodest** behaviour.

Neil

As well as being considered unsafe or chaotic, swimming was seen as **immodest** – shocking because it shows too much of the body.

Georgina

This was because most people at the time swam **nude** – naked, without clothes.

Neil

Another place with a long history of swimming is the remote Maldives Islands in the Indian Ocean.

Georgina

In the Maldives access to shallow, warm sea-water lakes called lagoons makes it an unbeatable place for swimming.

Neil

But even on a tropical island, things haven't always gone swimmingly as diver and Maldives resident, Mikael Rosen, told BBC World Service programme, The Forum:

Georgina

Listen for the reason Mikael gives for the change in people's attitudes to swimming in the Maldives:

Mikael Rosen

Most citizens of the Maldives have half a mile to a lukewarm lagoon. Given that, they could be world leaders in swimming, but in the 1960s the government recruited a lot of teachers from India, Sri Lanka. They didn't know anything about the water culture and they noticed that the young students **playing hooky** – they were in the lagoons, and swimming soon **got frowned upon**, but now the government and the local organisations – they try to reclaim swimming.

Georgina

Did you hear the reason Mikael gave, Neil?

Neil

Yes, he said that young students were **playing hooky** to go swimming in the lagoons. **Play hooky** is an informal way of saying 'stay away from school without permission'.

Georgina

Right, and that meant swimming quickly got **frowned upon**, or disapproved of.

Neil

It seems a bit unfair since there was already a strong culture of swimming in the Maldives which the arriving teachers didn't fully appreciate.

Georgina

Well, I know which I'd rather do – sit in a classroom or swim in a warm tropical lagoon!

Neil

Swimming, right? But then you would never have learned about Lord Byron...

Georgina

Yes, in your quiz question you asked me about Lord Byron swimming the Hellespont, a stretch of water separating Europe from Asia.

Neil

I asked you in which country the Hellespont can be found. Is it: a) Greece? b) Cyprus? or c) Turkey? What did you say?

Georgina

I said c) Turkey. Was I right?

Neil

Yes, you were, Georgina! The Hellespont, also known as the Straits of Dardanelles, is a six-kilometre-wide stretch of water in Turkey.

Georgina

Let's recap the vocabulary from this programme on swimming, which some people informally call **taking a dip**.

Neil

Someone who **swims against the tide** refuses to do what everyone else is doing.

Georgina

In the past, swimming was considered **immodest** - shocking because it showed too much of the body.

Neil

Another word for naked or not wearing any clothes is **nude**.

Georgina

Children who **play hooky** stay away from school without permission.

Neil

And finally, if something is **frowned upon** it's disapproved of.

Georgina

That's all for our dive into the deep end of the vocabulary of swimming. As we've discovered, there's plenty of idioms and expressions relating to swimming and water!

Neil

And check us out on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Georgina

Don't forget – we have an app too, which you can download for free from the app stores. We help you learn English on the move. Grammar, vocabulary, and interesting topics – we have them all! Visit our website! Get the app!

Neil

Bye for now!

Georgina

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY**take a dip**

go for a swim (informal)

swim against the tide

to not follow what everyone else is doing

immodest

shocking or embarrassing because it shows too much of the body

nude

not wearing any clothes, naked

play hooky

stay away from school without permission

frowned upon

disapproved of