

History of Cambridge swimming| Sports & Outdoor| localecrets

- With the opening last weekend of the Jesus Green Lido swimming pool, the outdoor bathing season in Cambridge officially begins -- or rather continues a long history dating back to origins in the 17th century.

Two Cambridge University colleges -- Emmanuel and Christ's -- vie for the title of having the oldest swimming pool still in use in the UK. Both dug pools around 1690. But most swimming in the early days was in the River Cam, with famous bathers including poet Lord Byron, after whom a [weir pool on the river](#) is still named, and fellow poet Rupert Brooke, who with Virginia Woolf and their Bohemian pals are said to have enjoyed bathing naked under the stars in the river.



Until September 1923 when the Lido pool was built, the River Cam was where people swam, with men and women using separate swimming areas around Sheep's Green in the Coe Fen. In those days women swam in what is described as 'voluminous' swimming outfits. Men would swim naked and only began wearing bathing attire when it was made compulsory in 1909, after many letters to the press from women complaining about the situation.

The Lido, the city's first purpose-built public swimming facility was built on Jesus Green for its closeness to the natural flow of fresh, clean water falling from the nearby lock and nearness to a number of schools, making it accessible for young people. The mayor opened the Lido -- which was to make bathing safe for all -- with around 1500 curious locals watching.

At 90 meters, the pool remains one of only a few examples of lidos from the 1920's and 30's. It's relatively cold waters -- many users don wet suits -- remain popular among elderly, end of term school swims, university swimmers training for cross-channel relays, people training for triathlons and the disabled, who are served by a hoist and changing rooms. It was used by convalescing soldiers after World War one and for a 'dambusters' documentary re-enacting how bouncing bombs blew up a World War Two dam, according to manager Ed Smith of [Grenwich Leisure Ltd](#).

Today swimmers still dip into the river too, inspired often by the popularity of wild swimming. Conservators of the River Cam, Cambridge's statutory navigation authority, have designated a 4 km stretch on the

upper section of the Cam as safe for wild swimmers, much of it between Byron's Pool in the Grantchester area and King's Mill Weir, close to Jesus Green lock.



If you are keen to try wild swimming for yourself, but have concerns about your ability or safety, [Milton Country Park](#) offers [wild swimming courses](#).

Rumours have circulated that we could see the relaunch of a successful River Cam 'swim through' event popular throughout the 1960s, with men's and women's competitions continuing until the early 1980s when they were cancelled for the first time due to health concerns and never held again.

Before the 1920s, when the river at Sheep's Green in the Coe Fen was the focus of swimming, facilities included wooden bathing sheds used as changing rooms and a diving board. Although these no longer exist still small signs remain, such as a handrail from the ladies section of the river.

The ladies bathing area was opposite a structure now known as Hodson's Folly, built in 1887 by local resident John Hodson. Now in a state of neglect, though a restoration project is in the offing, it allowed him a view of his nearby fish hatchery while he could keep an eye on his daughter who swam in this part of the river.

Several private schools used this part of the river for their students, as did children also learned to swim in a shallow section veering off from the river called The Snobs, close to the Lammas Land. One child who learned to swim there was Jack Overhill, who took his first dip in the river as a one year old and taught himself when he was three. He was to become a celebrated all-season swimmer known as 'The Boy Merman', going on to found the famous Granta Swimming Club in 1934. It became one of Cambridge's most successful swimming clubs, building a strong rivalry with another club, The Amateurs.



Swimming at the University has the longest history. Originally four colleges had their own pools. Emmanuel's pool has been in use 1690, if not earlier, with thatched changing huts first constructed in 1745.

Christ's is said to have been dug in mid 17th century and in use by 1688, its perimeter furnished with busts of college scholars, such as the poet John Milton. The pool slipped in to decline and was recently rescued, with the help of donations, including a large amount from an ex student who swam in it during the 1930s. The water was once fed by nearby Hobson's Conduit but is now fed by mains apparently kept clear and sparkily with the help of a roving robot.

Christ's pool is said to have a ghost of a college fellow, who has haunted its grounds ever since he came to an untimely end in the pool after a drunken fight with another colleague. Both were seeing the same woman, and to this this day it is said the man can be seen walking around the pool.

In 1855 the university's swimming club was formed, making it one of the oldest swimming clubs in the country, although its earliest record of swimming is when one of its students died whilst swimming in the river in 1567. In 1572 The University were so concerned about the dangers of swimming in the river the Vice Chancellor banned undergraduates from its waters. Anyone breaking the rule would be whipped severely in public. It remained a popular place to bathe however, so by 1705 the university had built its first pool nearby.

The university swimming club's training base was located at the bathing sheds at Grantchester Meadows, where a straight 120-yard stretch makes it perfect for racing. Competitive gala swimming events quickly followed with meets against London clubs and college versus college. A fine tradition of aquatic varsity matches with Oxford saw the first competitive event in 1891, with a men's water polo match. Swimming was added to the list the year after.

The first known record of the university ladies swimming club is 1903, reporting an inter-year water polo match played at Girton College by ladies in 'long flowing white dresses', whilst in 1921 the ladies took part in their first varsity swimming meet. The two clubs merged in 1970, causing controversy with some members who were unhappy the ladies were allowed to use the bathing sheds. Find out more about [University swimming history here](#).

Returning to the modern-day Cambridge, those who prefer to swim indoor have a good choice, including the eight-lane [Parkside Pool](#) opposite Parker's Piece in the city centre. Originally opened in 1963, the pool complex has undergone several refurbishments and offers everything from flumes, diving facilities

and a children's pool, to a fitness studio and gym. Find out more about Cambridge's [public swimming facilities here](#).

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