

Chris Bond's Channel Swim 25 September 2021 – The full story in his own words

In 2015, I sat on the beach outside a friend's house in Southampton and stared across the cold dark sea to the Isle of Wight. I was on leave from working in Jordan training Syrians; I had been sponsoring the food bill of a Syrian family in Jordan who'd escaped the Syrian Civil War for a couple of years and wanted to raise a final amount for them to keep them going after I left Jordan for good. Some months later, I swam across that stretch of busy sea, having trained in the Olympic pool in Vienna, and now wanted to take on a bigger challenge.

When I was a small boy, I remember watching black and white television; wide eyed at the figures of men and women in swimming attire getting greased up and preparing to swim the English Channel; like hardened adventurers disappearing off in to the freezing cold waves at night, in the dark and the vast expanse of ocean; their challenge excited my imagination. In early 2016, a dear friend I'd known for over two decades, died after a long struggle with breast cancer. I wanted to do 'something' both for her memory and to bring attention to a disease that my mother had survived but which was still destroying human beings and those relations left to mourn. So I researched the Channel Swimming Association, read up on the Channel a little bit (!) and booked the only available swimming slot left on the Channel Swimming calendar in 2016 with the skipper of The Viking Princess and hoped for the best.

Living in Vienna, I began my regular trips to the Stadthallenbad Olympic pool. I would run up onto the ring road, head to the pool, complete a swim and run home. Gradually the swims went from an hour up to three hours and then five and six hours. I became extremely fit and strong. The Austrians wouldn't allow energy supplements or food on the poolside and I didn't want to waste time getting out and racing to the changing rooms to refuel, only to then cool down then return to the poolside and find that I'd lost my lane place to another swimmer. So I forced myself to swim for up to five hours at 3km an hour, without food or water. Finally, I completed six hours and eighteen kilometres without refuelling. I would head back, dazed and light headed along the ring road; drinking my energy drinks, and meet my fiancée in a cafe in the city and fall asleep sitting upright, but she never complained, just gently encouraged me to keep going.

As the months passed by, and the date for the swim approached, I felt strong and reasonably confident, but I hadn't been in an ocean. I had completed one swim in a freezing cold lake in February in North Yorkshire where the water temperature was 10 degrees and had had to be lifted out of the water by a friend paddling alongside, then thrown into a shower, numb with cold. But this was hardly preparation. After many months, my swim approached - and was delayed for a further five weeks due to inclement weather and an Australian swimmer determined to break a record.

My moment eventually came, but due to the conditions there were no other Channel Swimming Association Boats out that day. I boarded the Viking Princess in Dover Marina on October 11th , 2016 at about 0330hrs, my parents there for support. There was ice on the car windows in the car park. Skipper piloted us round to Samphire Hoe and I greased up and mentally prepared myself. Finally, I jumped into the water and began my swim. There are no words to describe that swim really; I've forgotten large chunks of it. I was freezing cold for thirteen and a half hours, my parents were desperately holding on to a heavily rocking boat, the waves forced sea water down my throat meaning my mouth and throat were so ulcerated that I couldn't swallow any food or liquid after about three hours. My arms and shoulders were numb; nothing worked. How I made it over to France I have no idea. I wanted to quit over and over again, but somehow I made it over to France and was a few kilometres away when what little energy I had left vanished and I literally could not move any more and became hypothermic. Getting out of the water was possibly the hardest experience I've ever gone through, not because I'd personally completed the swim, but that I'd not completed it for someone else - and for the cancer sufferers and everyone else willing me on to complete it. I was so violently sick with sea water my body just shut down. My extremely supportive family and friends no doubt as frustrated as I was with the outcome.

Two days later, an ambulance took me into York hospital. I had swallowed so much salt water that my kidneys were failing and I had 2000% more salt in them than the 'recommended amount'. The following morning I woke up, inexplicably in a cancer ward with four other individuals. The irony of having woken up in a cancer ward and 'almost' swum the Channel for a lady who had died of breast

Chris Bond's Channel Swim 25 September 2021 – The full story in his own words

cancer wasn't lost on me. The fact that that lady's family were serious horse trainers and that one of her sons had won the Cheltenham Gold Cup in 2015 was made all the more remarkable by the fact that, somehow, in that cancer ward with the four cancer patients, I found myself engaged in a conversation with a prolific ex flat-racing jockey, Edward Hide, whose son I was at school with in 1976. Life is curious with its coincidences sometimes.

A couple of days later, I resolved to return and complete the Channel swim. Had I known it would be a five year odyssey I might not have considered it, but I booked another swim, paid my deposit and flew to Croatia in May 2017 for a 'cold swim camp' organised by Red Top Swim. Tim Denyer and his colleague were incredibly motivated and keen to help me get across the Channel. There, a group of about twenty of us swam in a pool and in the sea for hours every day and some nights. The Croatian sea was literally freezing cold due to the rain water running off the nearby high mountains and straight into the coastal waters we were swimming in. I also realised that in order to endure those conditions, I need to drink virtually boiling fluids. It was a fantastic experience and much needed for morale. So, as I prepared in 2017, I also had to manage work expectations. That year I had to postpone my swim to 2018, due to a work project in the Arctic. In 2018 I had to postpone again due to spending three and a half months at the very top of Greenland, amidst the ice bergs and Inuit, living in a hunter's cabin - but I DID manage to swim in the Arctic Ocean, if only for a couple of minutes. In 2019, I had to postpone AGAIN due to work in South America and again in the Arctic. I did manage to get the first swim slot for September 25th 2021, and the first slot was infinitely better than the last one because it meant that you didn't need to wait for all the previous swimmers to complete their swims before you. There are several 'tidal sequences' which swimmers load on to during the year, with up to five or more 'slots' on each - weather dependent. Slot one was usually booked at least two to three years in advance; slot five meant that you had to sweat it out waiting for the other swimmers to complete their swims, in the knowledge that the weather might change and your swim might not go ahead. Finally, in January 2020, having realised where Covid was headed, I delayed yet again to 2021.

All during this time, I'd barely swum, and during Covid, most exercise was off limits. So it's fair to say, in early 2021, I wasn't sure I could still drag my body through this torture. Regardless, I entered the pool in York in early April 2021 and swam a few lengths to see how I'd cope. Severe food poisoning in Africa and the Middle East had made me so lactose intolerant that my bones were starting to hurt. I couldn't hold my weight on even one press-up nor hang from a bar for the pain in my hands and arms. I was expecting to find that swimming was not going to work either but, miraculously, it seemed to be fine and so I continued. I completed outdoor swimming at a lake but was forced to swim in 28 degree heat in a wet suit due to their 'Covid regulations'. My parents supported me the entire time, driving back and forth for hours and sitting patiently, feeding me every hour as I completed another six laps of that frustrating lake, complete with weeds, fish and swans. A wonderful friend on the Isle of Wight lent me her property so that I could spend three weeks swimming in the sea on the south of the island. I motorcycled down to Freshwater Bay in my shorts and t-shirt in the sunshine or grey clouds and swam along the coast whilst Sandra paddled alongside and Andy watched from the cliff top. Other days I'd get into the water on my own with my orange buoyancy bag and swim back and forth across Freshwater bay getting absolutely battered by the waves - and I loved it. One afternoon, I swam along the south coast alone, bashed onto the rocks by a very rough sea, my hands and body bleeding. Climbing out after over an hour and walking back along the cliff path in my bare feet, exhausted but alive, it all added to the picture.

With Tim Denyer's advice, I loaded onto a Dover Port swim camp in July in truly FREEZING water, and returned to my Premier Inn room each night completely knackered and ready for the next day. Also at Tim's suggestion, I joined a Relay Channel Swim Team in August and reacquainted myself with the Channel and the boat both at night time and during the day. I'd given up work to concentrate on my swim. Fortunately, I started and finished that particular relay swim, which was the perfect preparation. Finally, I returned to North Yorks and another friend paddled next to me across Cayton Bay for four and a half hours in 13 degree water, amongst seals and surfers alike - my last long swim - September was upon me.

The call came that September the 25th was ON, so I drove down to Dover and met my sister, who had agreed to come and join me for morale. I lay on my bed that night, unsure what to expect but

Chris Bond's Channel Swim 25 September 2021 – The full story in his own words

keen to get on with it. The weather forecast was good - little wind, air temperature and sea temperature very similar. It's impossible to 'sleep' before this sort of swim, so you're entering the water already knackered. We arrived at Dover Marina at 0100hrs and boarded the now new Viking Princess 2, with Reg and Ray who had skippered me previously, and set off for Samphire Hoe. I changed, greased up, adjusted my goggles and prepared to get into the tiny dinghy which would take me the hundred metres towards the pebbled beach through the darkness. I had a light attached to the back of my goggles and another behind my swim trunks. It was surreal being there all these years later, 'finally' on the start line again. This swim was for a number of charities, but particularly for two churches in ALNE and York. All their prayers mattered and always have. Everyone on the boat wished me luck. Ray steered us through the dark to about twenty metres from the beach and I dropped into the water and swam in - other Channel swimmers had already set off along the coastline.

I dived into the water - the forecast couldn't have been more opposite to reality. Ray's dinghy, barely a few meters in front of me, soon disappeared in the waves. I followed his bright torch and made it out to the Viking Princess 2, getting hammered by the sea, ready to start my swim. I just remember wanting to get on with it. There was little ceremony; Phil started the stop watch and yelled "Off you go Chris " and that was that. The sea was already rough and I just could not get into a rhythm; every stroke a frustration; the mind trying to refocus, knowing there are hours and hours of this ahead - difficult to describe. You're swimming under a huge boat spotlight and every so often I would drift away into the blackness and the crew or Tim motioned me back to the side of the boat which, due to the 'rules', you're not physically allowed to touch until your swim is completed. The cold constantly biting the surface area of your body, after two hours I was already physically exhausted. I was fed up, didn't feel I was getting anywhere and convinced that this was going to be another failure. The guys on the boat didn't seem to convey anything to me and I took my feeds every half hour, but I was in a very dark place for the first five hours and came close to quitting. Seven other Channel swimming boats set off that night. Unknown to me, two swimmers quit after half way and two other skippers returned to port to delay their swims until the sea calmed down. Three of us kept on going. Tim's morale and enthusiasm and the appearance of my sister periodically gesturing a thumbs up were my life savers. My only solace was that I'd done this all before and so I resolved to swim into the daylight and see how I felt then. In truth, I was also far too terrified of failing.

As if I needed any further distractions, I began to be sick every half hour. Without realising it, and through no fault of Tim's, I was being fed hot carbohydrate drinks, one of which had lactose in it, so I was throwing up in the water and had to keep swimming. In order to block out the cold, you need to keep your arms and body moving constantly at a certain rate, in the knowledge that you WILL feel colder and colder but that you have to keep going. You constantly have the taste and smell of the boat's diesel engines around you and, at times, the smell of bacon sandwiches which the crew are eating onboard. I realised that after eight hours and my second pain killer feed, I only had to do two more hours of swimming and I would most likely be inside French waters. That was my psychology; it spurred me on. As you swim, the Channel is split up into five different 'lanes' including shipping lanes. It's best not to look for France at any point because you're never swimming in a straight line anyway, and it can feel cruelly both close and unreachable most of the time. Additionally, your swim distance will most likely be close to around or OVER 50km in total with tides and currents, so I kept my head down. I thought of all the guys on our Channel Swim what's app group who I'd watched start and finish (or not) their swims - in different conditions over the months. Tim kept giving me the thumbs up 👍 and from somewhere, I gained strength to motor on, despite a rough sea and little chance to get into any sort of swimming rhythm. Eventually, over on the French side, the sun came out, made me feel warm again and gave me renewed energy. I then started to enjoy the moment; I'd always loved the sea and our parents had always been big into sea swimming and surfing so the sea was a favourite place to be.

I'd thought about 'finishing the Channel swim' many, many times over five years. I'd even dreamed it, but nothing prepares you for that moment. The years of training and travelling to and from swims; the waking up at the start of a week and working out how many swims you need to complete and where; the family support and encouragement; the well-wishing from friends and messages from all over the world. But during the swim I just kept my head down and my arms moving. I'd have my feed for no

Chris Bond's Channel Swim 25 September 2021 – The full story in his own words

more than ten seconds, throw the bottle back to Tim and start swimming again, hour after hour. So, after thirteen hours, Tim jumped into the water and Ray led us towards Wissant Beach. Fifteen minutes later, I put my feet down on French sand, stopped swimming and staggered out onto the dry beach to the sound of the Viking Princess's boat horn indicating I'd completed my swim. A small group of French locals applauded and we had some photos. My mind was a blur. Was this really the end? It didn't quite feel real, but there we were, in that beautiful sunlight and a warm sunny French afternoon, it was over. Tim quickly dragged me back to Ray's dinghy and we returned to the Viking Princess 2; smiles all round. The guys got me dried and changed. I threw up many times on the way home, obviously. However, I'd completed the swim for my friend and all like her who suffered and I was now, finally, a Solo Channel Swimmer, and had raised money for some wonderful causes - especially the local village Church, St. Mary The Virgin.

It's called a 'solo' swim, but it's a huge team effort. To my family, friends, and all of you who supported, helped, donated, prayed and offered advice, I thank you sincerely and send you a huge hug and prayers back. They work . Chris