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SELKIE NEW RANGE 2018

First swim across The Wash since 1976

By Simon Griffiths • Publisher • 24th July 2018 [@outdoor_swimmer](#)



On 22 July 2018, Robert Howlett and Steve Riches became the first two soloists under traditional rules to swim across The Wash since 1976.

Look on a map of England's east coast and The Wash is the rectangular shaped indent to the south of Skegness. It is, in fact, one of the UK's broadest estuaries, and measures 19.15km between Gibraltar Point in Skegness and Old Huntstanton, which was the route for this swim.

The swim has some history having been completed by swimming legends Mercedes Gleitze (1929), Kevin Murphy (1973), Tina Spry (1974) and Michael Read (three times, 1974, 75 and 76). Those documented swims from the 1970s were part of the Butlins Challenge Trophy, but since then there has been little interest in the swim.

Robert Howlett's first challenge therefore was to find a pilot for the swim, which he knew would be technically challenging due to tides, shifting sandbanks and other boat traffic. However, the local fishing crews, the people who knew the water best, wanted to keep their boats for fishing rather than supporting swimmers.

A different approach was needed.

"I enrolled on the RYA-shore based chart training course, starting with the RYA Essential Navigation and Seamanship and worked through, over a two-year period, to Coastal Yachtmaster, while also carrying out the practical training to support the shore-based courses," says Robert. "This journey allowed me to meet several extremely experienced sailors and instructors who all offered years of experience and advice. This also gave me ability to plot numerous courses on different tide ranges at different times until I discovered what I believed to be the most suitable route, tide and start time."



But while doing this, Rob had a spinal fusion operation which took him out of the water for several months and convinced him the swim was never going to happen. It was only the encouragement of his training partner Steve Riches (who had undergone a hernia operation) that persuaded Rob to keep going.

The next challenge was to find a boat and Rob's eventual solution was to buy a Class B Offshore Rib. He also managed to find suitably qualified people to pilot the boat.

"At this point we now had a boat, a plan, two skippers and the training was going well," says Rob. "However, before the swim could proceed we then had to register the swim with a governing body and ensure that it was observed and documented correctly in line with Channel swimming rules which consist of no wetsuits, no buoyancy aids, no touching the boat or any assistance other than being passed feeds on a feed line. We asked for the help of two experienced open water swimmers, Stuart Munday and Max Cumming, who were registered as observers with the Marathon Swimming Federation (MSF), who happily agreed to assist."

With all that planning and work, the swim should have gone like clockwork, and mostly it did. Conditions were calm for much of the swim apart from a stretch in the middle where it became windy and choppy, and there were lots of jellyfish, but luckily mostly below the surface. The swim was completed in a time of 6hrs 19mins, beating the previous record in the Skegness to Hunstanton direction by more than an hour and 40 minutes.