

Cornwall County ASA
Report to CCASA Management Board 23.04.2019
From Geoff Swallow, St. Ives, Cornwall

Cornwall County ASA centenary May 2024 – project proposal

The first meeting of the Cornwall County ASA was held at the Red Lion Hotel in Truro on 17 May 1924. Its centenary is coming up in May 2024.

In Feb 2017 I approached CCASA secretary Celia Webb with the suggestion of a centenary project. With the permission of the Management Board, Celia loaned me the minute books, and these have been (safely!) in my possession since May 2017.

Context

I am currently doing a PhD (part-time) at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) on the history of the swimming match circuit in Devon and Cornwall, which were held annually on consecutive or near-consecutive days during August from 1863 to 1913. Although forgotten now, in its time the circuit was a huge annual event, attracting 10,000 to 20,000 spectators in St Ives and Penzance, and as many as 30,000 in Plymouth, with Exeter, Dawlish and Teignmouth also forming part of the circuit. The biggest attraction was the travelling professionals, the 'cracks' from up-country who came from as far away as Lancashire, Yorkshire and London to tour the circuit, competing against each other and the best local swimmers for money prizes – money being the incentive for them to travel such distances. The West of England circuit, as it was known, was unique as a touring circuit.

A big part of my research has related to the development of the regulation of swimming during that period, and how the formation of the ASA in 1886, the Southern Counties ASA in 1891 and the Western Counties ASA in 1901 impacted on the swimming match circuit.

The experience of Cornwall was very different to that of Devon. From the formation of the Southern Counties ASA in 1891 Exeter became the ASA's regional centre of power in its efforts to eradicate professionalism from swimming, and to impose and enforce its amateur laws. The Devon clubs conceded to the ASA's jurisdiction with only limited protest, but the Cornish associations refused to discontinue their money prizes, which made all who competed in their matches *de facto* professionals. In Devon, the creation of water polo leagues in the 1890s led to the proliferation of clubs and formation of a Devon County ASA, whilst after the formation of the Western Counties ASA in 1901, Cornwall found itself increasingly isolated, marginalised and excluded, its swimmers barred, or effectively prevented by ASA rules from competing outside the county. The circuit disintegrated as Cornwall effectively became the last outpost of professional swimming in the country. As my research shows, by 1912 attitudes were changing, and had the war not intervened in 1914-18 it's possible that the Cornwall County ASA might have been set up earlier. But it is significant that even after the war ended, it took until 1924 before its formation.

Proposal

A lot of what I have been researching for my PhD is relevant background to the formation of the Cornwall ASA, and complements what I have been finding in the minute books.

One of the things I'd like to do when my PhD is finished (2021) is a centenary history of the Cornwall ASA, for publication in May 2024. There are a number of ways of doing this at no cost to CCASA.

The minute books are obviously a great resource for compiling this history, but I would like to involve past and present members of the Exec, affiliated clubs, and swimmers past and present in the process as far as possible. As well as involving other people in the process, there are a number of ways in which the research can be shared, and reach (as well as create) a wider audience to build the profile of the project, leading up to the publication. In this way the publication itself becomes the culmination of the project, not just something parachuted in from out of the blue.

Progress and timeframe

This is obviously dictated to some extent by the timeframe of my PhD. I have started on the preliminary research using the minute books and the National Archives newspaper database, and from these I am compiling a timeline of key dates, issues and themes which will define the scope and provide the framework for further research.

Working backwards from the date of the centenary in May 2024, I would aim to have the publication complete by no later than December 2023. So, between finishing my PhD in July 2021 and December 2023 there is a project window of 2 and a half years leading up to the centenary itself. The lead-in time between now and 2021 may seem like a long time, but there will be a lot that can, and will need to be done in the meantime.

Next steps

None of this can happen unless it has support from the Exec and its affiliated clubs, so the next step is to present it to the AGM on 11 June. If I could have a ten minute slot to present the project and my ideas for taking it forward within the timeframe set out above, that would be a good way of getting the ball rolling. For clarification, this aim of this presentation would be for me to give a flavour of the scope of the project and to get some idea of the level of support and likely involvement it would attract, rather than a 'launch' event. I think we should work towards a proper launch event around the time of the 2020 AGM.

As I have said before, all I ask in return is the honorary position of official historian to CCASA, and access to archive material, minute books, photos etc.

About me

Originally from Sheffield, I have lived in West Cornwall for 22 years. My background is in education, cultural management and local government. I worked for the Arts Council, and as County Arts Officer for Humberside County Council before becoming a project consultant, specialising in culture-led regeneration projects, mainly writing feasibility studies, business plans and funding bids. Latterly much of my consultancy work has focused on organisational structures and governance. In 2016, to create time for my PhD research, I scaled back my consultancy work and took on part time roles as Clerk to two school Governing Bodies in West Cornwall. I am also a Director of SurfHouse St Ives CIC. I was a reasonable club swimmer in my time and played club water polo for Sheffield Dolphins, Salisbury and Lincoln, and at county level for Wiltshire and Lincolnshire.