

Around Dover Museum

Swimming the Channel with a Rolex

Vronni Ward – Dover Museum

“I passionately love the sea; nothing else moves me as it does. I love and understand its mood; and I sometimes fancy that the sea knows and understands me, too.”

Regular readers will know I really admire strong women and there is probably no one stronger than Mercedes Gleitze (1900-1981) the subject of this article. She was phenomenal: a long-distance swimmer of the first order, the original ‘pin -up’ sensation, celebrity endorser and philanthropist. Her life in and out of the water is fascinating.

Her parents moved to Brighton where there was a growing German immigrant community. Her father was a baker and her mother taught languages. It was in Brighton that Mercedes learnt to swim at a young age. She adored the English culture and was most comfortable here. Born in the UK, during her childhood she went back to Germany twice, first as an infant for nine years and second when WWII broke out. At the end of the war Mercedes wanted to return to the land of her birth. However, her family was traditional and felt Mercedes’ place should remain in the home. Her determination and fearlessness then manifested itself at the tender age of seventeen with her running away, sleeping in cornfields and eating bread and butter. However, she didn’t get far and was repatriated with her parents. They finally agreed that she could work and therefore she saved for her ticket back to England.

In London she worked as a secretary and stenographer and during that time she became more aware of poverty and homelessness. This prompted her interest

in helping people less fortunate than herself. She also practiced long distance swimming in the river Thames on her days off. In 1923 she broke the British Ladies’ Record for Thames Swimming (10hrs 45mins) and in 1927 she completed a 120-mile course from Westminster Bridge down the Thames and around the headland to Folkestone.

When on holiday she would come down to Folkestone and practice sea swimming. On 7th October, 1927, after eight attempts, she became the first British woman to swim the English Channel. During the days that followed, her record was in doubt as another woman, Mona McLennan, claimed to have swum it faster. Subsequently, this was proved to be a fabrication, but it marred Mercedes’ victory. Under pressure from the media, she undertook a ‘vindication swim’ even though the conditions were bad, and she had to abandon it. Nevertheless this convinced the judges that her record should stand. During that swim she wore a



Mercedes Gleitze

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Rolex Oyster watch which withstood the low temperatures. This launched her advertising partnership with the company, and she is still used in their publicity to this day. She was the Keira Knightly of her time! She went on to endorse Paddy Whiskey, Lipton's Tea, Be-ze-be Honey and she appeared at a corset demonstration for Kellett's. Mercedes fever was in full force, her fame was widespread, and men adored her for her beauty and bravery.

Mercedes went on to swim in Ireland, the Isle of Man, Gibraltar, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. She was sponsored for these attempts and with the proceeds she opened the first Mercedes Gleitze Home in 1933. This was a large house in Leicester that was converted into flats for homeless families. She also worked with schemes to help unemployed workers find employment.

Mercedes married engineer Patrick Carey in Dover in 1930 with the American swimming twins Bernice and Phyllis Zittenfeld as bridesmaids. In 1932 she retired from swimming and became a

mother and homemaker. With Patrick they had three children together. Due to chronic ill health (some of which was brought on by the extremes of swimming in such harsh environments) Mercedes withdrew from public life. She never really talked about her achievements and lived quietly with her family until her death in 1981.

Mercedes is the subject of a new book written by her daughter Doloranda Pember entitled 'In the Wake of Mercedes Gleitze Open Water Swimming Pioneer' Published by The History Press the royalties from the book go to the Mercedes Trust Fund. Copies of the book can be found in our museum shop.

Our current temporary exhibition 'Channel Crossings' runs until May 2024. Come see how we crossed the channel by air, sea and tunnel. Accompanying the exhibition is a FREE passport trail for youngsters to complete. We open: Monday to Saturday 9.30am to 5.00pm. Open Sundays in the summer 10.00am to 3.00pm. Admission is FREE. Tel: 01304 201066 www.dover.gov.uk/museum

Dover Society Christmas Lunch 2023

Denise Lee – Raffle Co-ordinator

This will be my last occasion that I organise the raffle. I am stepping down so that I can concentrate on looking after my newborn son John. I will still attend the open meetings to listen to the talks whenever I can. James Benjafield and Ben Elsey have kindly agreed to take over, so you will be seeing them at our meetings.

The lunch back in December was, yet again, a resounding success with over eighty-five people present. The entertainment on the day was supplied by John and Ellie, a popular local Country Blues duo.

On the day, the raffle raised a magnificent £360. The proceeds this year have been donated to the Beehive, Dover. This is an organisation that provides support for those suffering from domestic abuse whilst providing a pleasant environment to meet and chat and purchase high-quality second-hand clothes.

Beehive has replaced the Roman Quay pub at Stembrook, as a shop, café and community space. The centre's opening times are 10am to 5pm Tuesday to Saturday.