

the great outdoors: wild swimming



swimmers, we've had parties, prize-givings (Loudest Scream When Getting In, Most Improved at Doggy Paddle) and outings. Each spring, we count our blessings and hope that the city council continues to cherish its most bracing asset.

Swimming makes you hungry: I need a cup of tea and something to eat. "Follow me," says Janet, and we drive past the Tollesbury butcher, baker and squat-towered church to her house on the edge of the village. With a decorative blue and white gable and quarry-tiled floor, it was once an oyster depot. Trains, long gone, rumbled along a branch line taking a cargo of molluscs to eateries in Colchester and London.

Two cups of tea and a bar of chocolate later, I've said goodbye and I'm heading home again, my hair sticky with sea salt. The tap-tapping of yacht halyards, and the rippling calls of the curlew, echo in my head as I join the motorway.

Another swim to remember, new swimming friends to treasure, another watery place explored.

'The sea is my life,' Muriel Oatley, 86

I learnt to swim in the tidal pool at Devil's Point in Plymouth when I was four; my grandfather would walk along the edge of the pool holding a stick down to the water and if I started to sink I'd grab it.

I swam every day in the tidal pool or sea, nearly everyone I knew did; we were brought up with cold water so it didn't matter. Bad weather doesn't put me off. I swim when it's snowy. Right now the water is 14C, but it gets down to 6C — that stinks, but it feels so good once you're in. I always go right in, I never hesitate.

I swim off the terraced steps on Tinside Beach. A group of us swim here every day and have known each other for 40 years; we used to sit down by the rocks but now we've got beach huts on the cliffs. There used to be lifeguards here, a raft to swim to and a guy in a rowing boat netting seaweed and rubbish.

The sea is my life: I like the

exercise and I like the outdoors.

When I was younger, in my 60s, I'd get in when it was rough, but I'm more careful now; if there's a big swell I'll swim in a tidal pool. As I get older, I keep thinking that this year I won't make it through winter, but I do.

I used to swim on Dartmoor, in rivers, but I prefer the sea — it's more buoyant and gives you a better swim: you're stronger in the sea, in a swimming pool it seems harder work. I go about half a mile, out around the yellow swimming buoys that mark the area off from tankers and fishing trawlers. August and September are the best times, it's warm and we often go for three swims a day.

Interview by Kate Rew

Muriel Oatley has swum in the sea off Plymouth every day of the year since she was four.



Muriel at Tinside Beach

36 The Tunnels Beaches Ilfracombe, north Devon,

tunnelsbeaches.co.uk

Zoe McLintock and her husband Jamie bought a decrepit sea-water spa five years ago and restored it. The Tunnels Beaches is now a charming reconstruction of a Victorian resort complete with beaches, historical displays, café, play area and prize-winning loos. Entrance fee; lifeguards.

Dorset

37 Dancing Ledge Langton Matravers, Swanage

It's a half-hour walk from the car park at Langton Matravers to Dancing Ledge, a former quarry where a small pool



Dancing Ledge

was blasted out of the rock by a prep school. A cliff climb for the final few yards: not recommended for children or the nervous. No facilities.

Co Down

38 The Rock Pool Newcastle, County Down,

028 437 25034, therockpool.co.uk

This simple seawater pool is open

in July and August only, and run by the local Leisure Centre. There is an entry charge and lifeguards and events are organised throughout the summer. Opening hours are weather dependent.

Essex

39 Woodup Pool Tollesbury, Essex

Filled by the tide and controlled by a sluice gate, Woodup Pool is flushed out and replenished every 10 days or so. It's been recently renovated, which is largely thanks to the efforts of local volunteers led by Fay Heard, a retired teacher, who has an archive of pool history. Refreshments are available at Tollesbury Cruising Club nearby. There are no lifeguards, and no charge.



Woodup Pool

Kent

40 Tidal paddling pool Broadstairs, Kent

Broadstairs is quintessentially conservative, with deckchairs, teasops galore, and scrumptious fish and chips. Set amid rocks on the wide sandy beach, between Viking Bay and Louisa Bay, is a tidal children's paddling pool, perfect for fun with a shrinking net.