

FOUNTAIN RESOURCE GROUP

“Don’t drink the water”. 100 years of the Liffey Swim

by Ross Murray on Oct 24th, 2019



(The first group of swimmers to start)

“Don’t drink the water”. 100 years of the Liffey Swim – *In this article, Ross Murray relates the history of the Liffey Swim, one of Dublin’s great traditions!*

Saturday 3rd of August marked 100 years of the Liffey Swim, an annual event which attracts the most hardy of competitors. More than 600 men and women took part this year despite worries over water quality. There were some minor delays before the men’s event started, but spirits were kept high with the Compère and Dublin’s Lord Mayor slugging, then leading the participants and the crowd in a rendition of Molly Malone.



(The first group to dive off the pontoon. Other participants line the quay)

The 2.2 km race began at Victoria Quay and finished at the Custom House. It is considered an open sea race as the swimmers are in seawater and working against the incoming high tide. It was conceived by Bernard Fagan, a Dublin Corporation Engineer, to show the citizens the good quality of the water in the Liffey (how times have changed!). The first Liffey Swim took place on 22 July 1920. The race originally started at Victoria Quay, from a Guinness Barge and finished at Burgh Quay. It had an entry of 27 male swimmers and was won by J.J. Kennedy with Bernard Fagan himself coming in third. The swim is a family event with all ages welcome and is the final event in the Leinster Open Sea Calendar of over 35 Open Sea Races. This year's winners were 15 year old Mark Hanley in the men's, and 38 year old Sinead Delaney in the women's event. For more information on the swim and other events please visit to <http://www.leinsteropensea.ie/>



(The men's race passing the Four Courts)

The race was famously captured by W.B. Yeats's brother, and renowned Irish artist Jack B. Yeats in a painting, which now hangs in our national gallery in Dublin.



The painting was finished just three years after the inaugural race and represents a return to sporting themes that made up so much of Yeats' earlier work. Interestingly, the work invites the viewer to see the race as an observer and does not take the point of view of the swimmer. The emphasis is on the quay rather than the Liffey.



(A close call for the men's race)

The Annual Liffey Swim was opened to women competitors in 1991 (though there had been two one off events in the 1970's) which was somewhat late in the day considering that a letter to the Irish Independent in 1922 criticised the race for not allowing female competitors. While many would say it was simply the way of the times, this is not factually corrected as women could compete in both the Belfast Lagan race and the London Thames race in the 1920's. A spokesperson for Leinster I.A.S.A. responded to the letter informally that *"such a contest was not possible, as very few of our ladies were fit for the ordeal"*. This view was sadly not uncommon, later on in the 1940's then Archbishop Mc Quaid also voiced his opposition to women participating in sporting life and specifically, the Liffey Swim. Perhaps the photo below proves otherwise!



(...and the next group to follow her on the opposite side)



(The Lord Mayor waiting to meet the winner of the Ladies race.)

The Fire Brigade are good enough to shower those at the end of the swim to prevent against infection. Hopefully, they don't use the full hose! Fair play to all who competed this year and indeed, throughout the years!