

Amersham swimmers (l-r)
May McKenny, Roisin Hynes,
Lauren Cliffe and Jenna-Lee
Campbell enjoy the Arena
League atmosphere



BRIGHT FUTURE

When Amersham Swimming Club was formed, the market town did not even have a public swimming pool – but it had a strong ethos which is still visible 50 years on, says **Keely Downend**

Amersham Swimming Club was built with solid foundations. Not many clubs were formed before their town even had a pool. Such was the commitment of the multi-talented Doreen Wright, British Empire Games gold medallist and chairman of works on the council. She became the driving force behind the club and the town's pool and it was perhaps her devotion, determination and dedication to this plight that carved out the right path.

Having recruited four swimming enthusiasts from the local area, the club and initial committee first met in November 1966, with the Amersham Pool opening the following April. The committee met in a room above what was once the Griffin pub in old Amersham – with the griffin soon to feature in the club's logo. The primary aim was to be a family club for all ages and abilities, always embracing a sense of fun and enjoyment.

And half-a-century after its inception, over 250 people attended the club's 50th

anniversary celebrations. Former and current members were brought together to swap stories and take a trip down memory lane, perhaps proving that the club's original aspirations had been met.

Early schedule

With the groundwork firmly set and the final pool tile laid in 1967, the club's early schedule included swimming, water polo, lifesaving and, as an extension to the swimming section, diving. It was not until 1974 that the first

formal diving squad was created and led by one of the original committee members, Shirley Williams. And the following year Amersham had their first national champion, 13-year-old David Kay, who won the ESSA junior boys springboard diving title.

Pivotal era

While the club's early success was among the divers and lifesavers, the next decade brought a significant period of change for the swimmers. Charles Bagot, honorary member, masters swimmer and swimming parent, recalls: 'While my father was chairman, the club employed its first professional coach, Joe Dixon. It is hard to describe quite how controversial this was at the time. There were many who were implacably opposed to the idea of professionalism in what was still, like most sports, a resolutely amateur swimming world, even if it meant a paid coach rather than professional swimmers. There was also opposition to the increase in fees. Founder member, Shirley Williams, was a firm voice supporting my father and the committee's proposal and ultimately the argument was won and ASC had its first professional swimming coach by 1982, supported by an excellent team of volunteer coaches.'

The club was now on track with a renewed competitive focus and Charles explains how. 'Joe Dixon's impact was immediate. He brought much greater rigour, discipline and science to the technical aspects of training, in and out of the pool, and competing. He was charismatic, no nonsense and had a great sense of humour.'

'I have no doubt that it was thanks to Joe's skill that I qualified for the nationals for the first time, aged 11, in 1984. By the mid-1980s, rather than it being a one-off, the club was

getting regular groups of swimmers into the nationals each year as well as relay teams.'

The latter part of this decade, however, saw the commitment and resilience of the club tested when the Amersham Pool was closed for redevelopment and to convert it from the old imperial 27.5 yards to a standard 25m facility. This resulted in almost two years of maintaining the club's unity despite having to spread training across a number of different pools. But the renamed Chiltern Pools eventually opened and the club's ever-growing bond remained in tact.

Valued asset

Past-president Joan Norris, looking back on her many years with the club, recalls: 'One of my strongest memories is the commitment of everyone in the club, both with the primary purpose of swimming and also socially. Professional coaches came and went but many volunteer coaches, helpers and families remained loyal for years so that the club continued as a valued asset for the members and the local community.'

Many of those early swimmers still swim for Amersham as part of the masters group today and are introducing their children to club swimming. Charles Bagot describes how his own entry into the club was as a result of 'several years of getting hot, and bored, sitting in the viewing gallery watching my three sisters competing'.

He explains: 'Aged six, in January 1980, I had struggled to complete two lengths of the (then) Amersham pool in the charity 'Swim Along with David Wilkie', the 1976 Olympic gold medallist. I have a certificate and embarrassing photo with David complete with my 1970s long collar to prove it. But joining the club clearly helped. By August 1980 I had

my 1,000m badge, as badges were important in those days, and I won a Berks and South Bucks county silver medal for backstroke in March 1981, aged seven and competing in the under 9s. I went on to win over 75 county medals over the next 20 years or so.'

Charles' story, like so many others, illustrates the impact a club can have on its members. 'ASC was integral to our lives from a young age, throughout our childhoods and beyond. I have no doubt it brought me, my sisters and our peers enormous benefits and life skills going well beyond swimming and keeping fit,' says Charles. 'Dedication, perseverance, competition, self-esteem and team spirit became life skills we learned at the pool and took with us into adulthood and our careers.'

'I'm convinced that the experience of >



Above: The club logo featuring the griffin; below: celebrations after securing their place in the Arena League South Premier Division for another year



◀ standing in front of the blocks innumerable times just before a race, needing to channel those nerves in a positive way into a performance, has been invaluable in dealing with the pressure and stress of a busy career. I often talk at careers fairs and I always encourage young people to keep up their extra-curricular activities, whether it is sport, music, drama, volunteering. The benefits I took and still take from swimming are incalculable, and it all stems from ASC.'

Charles has even more reason to be grateful to the club as he reveals: 'My oldest swimming friend, Alex Todd, introduced me to my future wife, Nina, as they were at university together in Cardiff. Alex and I were also best men for each other at our respective weddings and we were joint best men for another former ASC contemporary, Mark Baker. Swimming friendships have turned into lifelong ones as our families still get together regularly. We are now passing on the values and skills learned through the club to our own children.'

Amersham SC has come a long way since Doreen Wright's enthusiasm for sport and swimming led to its establishment, but the dedication of members to ensure it remains embedded in the community is still visible. 'No matter if it's 6am training on a Monday morning or 7pm training on a Sunday evening, you'll always see a friendly face at the club,' says current chairman, Simon Dolan, who is convinced the inclusive, friendly nature of the club has been fundamental in its longevity.



Head coach Jason Keeler gathers the club's Arena League squad for a team talk

Particular mention must go to volunteer coach Maureen Tomlinson who, after 34 years on poolside, has decided to retire. 'Maureen has been an integral part of ASC,' says Simon. 'Her commitment and passion for the sport have impacted thousands of swimmers over the years. We will miss her coaching, but she

will continue to inspire us all by swimming and competing for the masters section.'

New era

Nowadays, the club, with its 300 members, is entering a new era, although its vision remains the same: to provide the opportunity and environment to enable and encourage swimmers and divers of all abilities to achieve their full potential.

'Despite being a relatively small club compared to our 'city' rivals, we have always managed to hold our own. In the last seven years we have made it to both A and B National Arena League finals, under the leadership of former coach Malcolm Staight,' says Simon. The club has also won the Thames Valley Junior League six times in nine years and never been out of the top three.

Jason Keeler joined last September as head swimming coach and is directly responsible for the top two squads, assisting with most squads within the club. Gemma Jones is the full-time assistant head coach looking after the age group swimmers and leading the competitive development squads and the learn-to-swim programme. There are also a number of part time assistant coaches who work with the junior development and academy squads.

Jason's coaching career began at Basingstoke Bluefins before going to university in Swansea. 'I volunteered for three years at Swim Swansea, including assisting Hayley and Adam Baker, and learnt a lot from them,' says Jason. 'When I returned to Basingstoke in 2010 I became the youth and masters coach and increased the number of regional swimmers from the youth squad fourfold before becoming head coach at Box Hill Swim Club in 2013 and then in 2014 joining Rushmoor Royals as the assistant

Volunteer coach
Maureen Tomlinson
at the club's
50th anniversary
celebrations





Club members with their commemorative caps at the 50th anniversary celebrations - back row, l-r: Grace Cloke-Bingham, Steph Roycroft, Ella Peters, Ellie Lock, Amber Restall; (front): Lucy West, Amelie Brown, Katie Thompson, May McKenny

'No matter if it's 6am training on a Monday morning or 7pm training on a Sunday evening, you'll always see a friendly face at the club'

head coach.' There he increased the number of national swims from one to seven including ASA finalists in both his years as coach.

More regional and national swimmers are prominent goals for Jason and the club as he starts his tenure. 'The reason I got involved in coaching was to help every swimmer fulfil their potential and this is something that I'm aiming for everyone at Amersham,' says Jason. 'I'm aiming for more regional and national swimmers over the next couple of years with the ambition of national medallists and at least a return to the regional final of the Arena League.'

Jason's coaching philosophy reflects his belief that 'whoever you're coaching - an elite swimmer or just a beginner - helping athletes achieve success in swimming is down to an equal combination of technique, work ethic and mindset'. Mastering technique comes with the understanding that 'water is nearly 800 times more dense than air so it's essential to

continuously work to improve body position and stroke efficiency', says Jason. Work ethic relates to swimming 'every workout, set and stroke with purpose' and focusing on mindset means ensuring swimmers 'not only know what their specific goals are, but focus on them throughout their training'.

Diving

As for the diving section, it is on a steady growth with around 70 divers who take part in competitions at regional, schools and national level. The club also participates in novice competitions with a number of clubs in and around North and North West London and they're currently in top form, with Amersham recently winning the Bill Johnston Cup at these Grand Prix events.

The coaching structure for the diving section comprises Robert Metcalfe, who is the lead technical Level 2 coach; Shiraz Shamshudin, also a Level 2 coach and team

manager; Level 1 coach John McCullough, who has dived at Amersham for over 20 years; and Bridget Gibson, the parents' representative and organiser of competitions for the club.

With Shiraz having won a gold and a bronze medal at last year's European masters diving championships in London, there could also be a bright future ahead for this diving squad.

Continued success

And what does the next half-century hold for the club as a whole? Whether it is continued success with the swimming and diving sections, the addition and development of a water polo team or simply resurrecting the 1980s water-based Christmas pantomime, it'll no doubt be underpinned by those strong foundations firmly cemented back in 1966 - devoted and dedicated individuals working together to create a fun and fulfilling environment for all the community to enjoy for the next 50 years and beyond. 