

The story behind a successful North Channel Swim 2

Thousands raised for Cancer Research.
Oldest swimmer (50) to complete the North Channel
Fourth fastest at 12 hours and 21 minutes.
Sixth fastest time overall
Earliest date the North Channel has ever been swum. Nobody else has swam it in June.
Coldest temperature the North Channel has ever been swam.

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Kicking Off

At 6:00pm on Saturday 15 June the phone rang to change my life. Quinton Nelson, North Channel Pilot was on the other end. The weather forecasts had been checked, rechecked and checked again for certainty. My second North Channel Swim attempt would start the following morning at 5:00am.

The following few hours were frantic. Some of the kit and kiboodle was in boxes in the garage since last July and these were brought into the house. My energy drinks (600ml of High Five every 45 minutes, bananas and mini Mars bars) were first packed. Couldn't do a swim like this without them. With the important stuff out of the way the chicken and ham sandwiches made, flasks prepared, sausages cooked, chicken breasts roasted and pasta prepared. Fruit, biscuits and Mags' famous Muesli bars were added. The boxes were packed and put into the car. I began to feel that I would prefer to be on the boat. I got to bed at 10:30pm; turned on my MP3 player to listen to Pink Floyd, Gorecki and Tom Waits; good company when you can't sleep or do these galoots keep you awake? Can't remember, too much trouble to start working that out.

I had the alarm set for 1:15am. I woke and rose at 1:03. First job to apply copious amounts of jellyfish resistant sunscreen – at 1:20am. I then got a permanent marker and replicated what the great Stephen Redmond did on his swims. I wrote 'E' on my left palm and 'C' on my right palm. On the back of both wrists I drew a single arrow pointing out toward my fingertips to remind which way to go. I then got Mags to draw a large playing card on my chest – the three of hearts – representing Mags, Eoin and Conor. Tom Healy arrived at 1:25 in his Bermuda Shorts and Russian Bearskins hat; typical fireman, prepared for anything I thought; anything but the weather we were going to get.

Tom is a fantastic swimmer; did the English Channel in 2012 in 9 hours and 51 minutes. Here he is in my gaffe giving up his first father's day with his new twins Lex and Bruce.

We collected John Daly at 1:45 and took him away from father's and grandfather's day. John is a legend in the Irish swimming community; having learned to swim at the age of 39 he swam the English Channel at 48. He has been beside me in all my swims and together we organised the International Ice Swim Mile in Lough Dan in February.

We travelled to Donaghadee and arrived at 4:00am. There was no wind and the sky was brightening. We kicked stones off the pier and watched for others approaching. The door of the Pier 36 B&B opened and Eric Bleakley appeared. He strolled briskly to meet us. Eric was scheduled to attempt the North Channel as soon as the boat returned. I was chuffed he came along to wish us luck and we had a brief chat. Among other swims Eric has completed the English Channel and swam around the island of Jersey. Next to arrive was Quinton and he confirmed we were good to go. My second attempt is just minutes away and I'm determined to finish this time; having been disappointed by bad weather the previous July. Quinton went to the marina to get the boat. Next in was Martin Cullen, arriving from Cavan for his umpteenth North Channel Swim. Martin has been part of support teams and observer on several North Channel attempts.

Last to arrive was Gerry Meehan, this swim's official observer. We'd never met Gerry before but immediately recognised a kindred spirit. Gerry is an English Channel aspirant and will take on the English Channel in August of this year. He was in the best of company with Quinton, Martin, John and Tom. As we were losing ourselves in Channel conversation Quinton pulled into the harbour with the boat. His crew included the inimitable Ross Morrow; another North Channel boatman and new to the experience, Scott Gardiner. The business end of things was about to start. Equipment and crew were loaded on to the boat.

As the ropes were being released from the pier I was in my togs, hat and goggles and being greased by Tom and John. A mix of half lanolin and half Vaseline for under the oxters, between the thighs and across the shoulders. This is the majority of the greasing and it prevents chafing. The grease is going on as the boat arches away from the wall toward the winking lighthouse at the harbour entrance. All crew are on board; everyone with their own defined tasks in support of the swim and swimmer and everyone wincing through differing permutations of what might happen in the coming hours. The boat goes toward the marina; approximately one kilometre south of Donaghadee Lighthouse. Pilot Quinton instructs that the swim starts when the swimmer reaches the rocks at the water edge and signals his readiness to start.

Best wishes are offered, Tom tells me to enjoy myself and Mags provides the essential good luck kiss. I jumped from the bow of the boat, blessing myself as I entered the water and resurfaced swimming towards the rocks. The water is cold but I can manage. I have trained to cope with cold water and I know it will be cold for most of the swim. In a matter of minutes I am standing on a submerged rock and waving to the observer. It is 5:10am. He waves back and I click my stopwatch to start the record of the swim. I'm off, swimming along to join the boat and then swimming alongside.

As previously arranged with Quinton I am swimming alongside the middle of the boat. I am making good progress. I can feel it. Each individual on the boat takes time to catch my glance and offer me a big smile and a thumbs up. Mags gets a kiss blown to her and then, for good measure, I stick my

tongue out at her. On the English Channel swim I was so delighted that she came on the boat, even though I had received copious advice not to bring 'the wife' as I would be upscuttled seeing her upset.

I'm at the start of the swim and I am lining up my 'to do' list. This consists of conversations with long passed relations, parents, eldest brother, grandparents (especially my paternal grandmother), aunts, uncles and friends. On the English Channel these were engaged in extensive conversations about the swim and significant shared events, like making the granny tea, cutting her grass and other such stuff. It's a long day; you can't get through all those conversations in the initial kilometre. You don't have to be dead to participate in one of these conversations. Vivid recollections of incidents and conversations back to primary school age permeate the chilly water. Goals missed in matches are replayed until they go into the net.

I knew the early start meant prolonged cold for a number of hours. I had practiced and swam in cold water as often as I could; even completing an International Ice Mile in February in 3.5C Lough Dan. A 5:10am start meant swimming for a number of unlit hours, possibly 4½ or more. It would be 9:30am at the earliest before the sun would start to replenish the warmth spent by the body in the early hours. That can be a long time in water that is less than 10C. I would have to work hard at an accelerated rate to generate enough body heat to stave off hypothermia.

I stopped for my first feed after one hour. John said I was flying and that Gabor Molnar had sent a text wishing me well. Good man Gabor, a Hungarian Corkman and terrific all round athlete. I knew he'd been keeping an eye on the tracker as the North Channel is a distinct goal of his, in the not too distant future. The tracker was provided by the Great Outdoors. It is a fantastic device. It broadcasts my position to satellites on the way to a webpage linked to my blog. Swimming enthusiasts and beloved aunts will spend the day watching the screen waiting endlessly for the ten minute update. The tracker shows the trail from the start of the swim. It is actually located on the boat and not the swimmer.

I stop on the first hour, second hour and every 45 minutes thereafter. I took an energy drink each time; High 5 Citrus drink made up of 4 parts carbohydrate and 1 part protein. The carbohydrate provides energy and the protein repairs damaged muscle. This is the food supplement I use on all my swims. On the North Channel I had the drinks made up with warm water as a treat for me. I normally just use cold water. Also, because there was a bit of a chop in the water I tired more easily than usual and requested a banana or half-banana. Bananas are a great source of potassium and help stave off cramp. They float in seawater, are easy to get down and, if needed, easy to get back up. I also had the odd mini-chocolate bar. Eating and drinking enough is vitally important. The swimmer needs to stay nourished, but not bloated.

Time is of the essence on channel swims. In the English Channel I averaged 20 seconds per stop; drink 600mls in one go, chomp on the odd half banana and go. With 18 stops that was stopping for a total of six minutes at scheduled feeds.

The stops are even more important than that. Each time you stop one of the crew (usually John or Tom) will give you clear and distinct advice. This comes in the form of 'you're doing great', 'keep

going', 'you're an animal' and also they will relay messages from the audience watching in on the tracker; 'Ronan Joyce says you're great', 'Eoin is watching in DC'. The best two messages I got were (at about 12:00pm) 'Gabor and the guys in Cork are having a 'Go-Fergal' swim around Sandycove this morning' and (at about 4:00pm) 'Maggie Kidd is up on the cliffs watching you finish'. It is hard to relate how such short and succinct messages can lift you and spur you on to even greater effort; especially when you feel you've no energy left. At three hours I was destroyed, but would not consider stopping. At about six hours I was feeling the constant push of the Scottish tide which thought I'd be happier back in Ireland. I would, but only if I got to Scotland first. At about nine hours I wanted to get in to the boat. I was asked, at the feed stop, if there was anything special I wanted. I asked for a pillow and sleeping bag. At 12 hours I had nothing left, but that was matched by the remaining distance; almost nothing. That is a happy exhaustion.

At 1:00am I had used a permanent marker to write 'E' on one palm and 'C' on the other. When I needed to pick up the pace (or to just stop feeling sorry for myself) I would drive on at an increased pace. With an effective swimming stroke you pull your arm up along the body with the thumb gently brushing along the hip and ribs right up to the oxters. This gives a good high elbow which pushes out the hand, cocked at an angle back towards the body. The outstretched limb kisses the water first with the middle finger. As the hand enters the water, the elbow braces for the shoulder to leverage the whole limb through the water until the stroke is completed and the arm begins its relentless loop on another circuit. As the left hand entered the water I would strain 'Eoin' and pull all the way through to the hip. As the right hand took its turn I would strain 'Conor' and again pull through to the hip. A good swimming stroke is like a golf swing. It is controlled. It is deliberate; the arm bent at the elbow but pulling throughout the stroke. It's not about speed. It's about using the hand, wrist and forearm as an oar.

The team counts the stroke rate on regular basis. My stroke rate started off at approximately 71 strokes per minute. By the final few minutes the rate had fallen to 61 strokes per minute. That's impressive says you; an average of 65 strokes per minute, or over 50,000 strokes for the day. To prepare for this I swam over 1,000 km in each of the last three years; 1,000,000 metres or 40,000 lengths of your local pool. You get the picture; that distance swimmers have too much time on their hands.

Hypothermia

One of the biggest dangers on my second North Channel attempt was hypothermia. I nominated June as my month for a number of reasons. In 2012 I swam in July (for an hour and a half) and then had several false dawns in the hope of getting back to swim. None of them came through. This year, I picked the earliest date in the knowledge that I might get subsequent opportunity. Another alleged advantage in this strategy is that there will be fewer jellyfish.

I was also aware of Quinton's expertise and a number of quality swimmers lining up to take on the North Channel this year. I was hoping to be the first and even (for whatever madness exists) to be

the fastest; a feat that would be very hard for me to achieve and one that the others would, I expect, cruise past.

Hypothermia is the cooling of the body. In low temperatures the body will act to save itself from perishing by moving all the cold blood to the extremities of the body; the hands, feet, nose etc. It will retain as much warm blood as it can to protect the core the main organs.

About two hours into the swim I started to feel two pressure points in my back; each about the size of an egg. I knew immediately that this was my kidneys getting cold. It is bad news when you can feel your kidneys getting cold. It means that the cold is getting a grip on you. And cold rarely lets go.

I had, to this point, ignored the fact that my arms and legs were very cold. I could ignore it no longer. My kidneys were starting to re-temperature, if not freeze. It was time to do something drastic or the deterioration would only continue for thirty or so minutes till my shivering carcass would be pulled from the water; just frozen and not dead. I knew the crew would react before it was too late. Time to bring out the big guns. I started to take large breaths and increase my stroke rate. I chanted my mantra 'Eoin, Conor, Eoin, Conor, Eoin, Conor, Eoin Conor'. Each stroke lifting me in the water and driving harder and harder each time. I did this for approximately half an hour. My kidneys stopped hurting about ten minutes into this routine, but you cannot stop there even though you want to. I had to push on. I had to regenerate heat. The sun was reluctant to come out this early. If I hadn't done this I would have been back in the boat before the sun got clear of the Scottish cliffs. I wasn't having that. I wasn't going home. I wasn't giving up and even though probably wouldn't be my decision I could influence by hammering along at an accelerated pace. Good man Redmond, thanks for the secret. It worked wonders. At the next feed I slurped on warm High 5 and got going again at my normal channel pace.

At nearly seven hours into the swim I was exhausted. I was so tired. All I wanted to do was sleep. The tide had turned against me hours before and the battle was relentless. I felt if I could only get some sleep. I was swimming along; that wouldn't stop. But I needed to close the eyes. In fact, I couldn't keep them open. I had the boat on my right hand side. I closed my eyes and reopened them every six or so strokes; just to make sure I was keeping on line. After a few minutes of this I decided 'to hell with that, I can sleep on the way home'. Time to bring back out the two sons and the mantra started again, along with a quickening pace; 'Eoin, Conor, Eoin, Conor, Eoin, Conor.....'. Each stroke deliberate, determined and full of Dublin indignation. Sleep later, get on with it.

I didn't realise until recalling the swim a few days later that I wasn't falling asleep. You don't fall asleep in 9.1 degrees of water and that was the temperature in the Beaufort Dyke; the UK submarine fleet training ground and the deepest water in between Ireland and the UK. Re-reading material on hypothermia I realised that I was actually passing out at that time. I didn't because I increased my physical effort and increased the heartbeat and bloodflow. (Don't tell Mags).

In the run in to the Scottish coast I knew I was becoming less coherent with the team. I sensed no anxiety from them, but I felt I was slower than usual to respond to some of their comments. Luckily, for me, I was a grumpy bastard at this stage and they (God Bless Them) were very tolerant.

The weather for the last part of the swim promised rain and lots of it. I like to think that the Scottish weather decided that I wasn't going to give up. At about 4:30pm the clouds parted and the sun came out to shine on Maggie on the cliffs and us minions on the water. Heat at last. I'd almost forgotten about warmth.

Jellyfish

The North Channel can be poisoned with jellyfish; they congregate in blooms; virtually fields of jellyfish like the daisies in your back garden a week after mowing; only these galoots are nasty. There is no way of avoiding them. When they are not packed together for several kilometres you have to swim through them. When there are relatively sparse you cannot move to avoid them; you don't have the traction and it takes too much effort to attempt to change course. If you meet jellyfish in the North Channel (and you will) you are going to get stung. The great Colm O'Neill in his Irish record setting swim in 2004 was stung so badly that his goggles were raised up off his eyes by the swelling and his vision was badly impaired for a substantial component of his swim to the Irish coast.

Shark

At about 9:15am I had an interesting experience for which I was ill-prepared. Years and years in training and so much time in the water on a daily basis and I still wasn't ready for the shock. As I battled along in the bright, but forever overcast, sea I saw a shark swimming below me; about 2½ metres below me. The great blue elegant beast was about 8 to 10 feet long; it's amazing how we step back to our comfort zone of imperial measures and abandon the metric. I thought he looked very regal; there was no doubt which of the two of us was in charge. I wondered if I was going to start flailing my arms and screaming to be taken into the boat before I was devoured. But I hadn't changed my stroke or pace. In a flash I decided the swim was too important and I kept going. I didn't signal to the boat, although I looked across to see if they were aware of the shark I saw or possibly others. Nothing; no reaction from them at all. I kept going; the shark passed under me another three times; deeper than on our first meeting.

I wondered was he checking me out; would I taste like chicken; he could have my left leg, it was cursed with cramp. I wanted to keep the rest of me. I last saw him on his fourth pass and I wondered had he decided that I was too much for him on his own and he was gone off to collect the family for a Sunday Brunch. That's it I thought. I'm going to end up as a shark carvery. Ah well, push on. He might not be back. He wasn't.

Even at subsequent feeds I wouldn't mention Sharky. I didn't have time. Every second counts on a feed and on a swim. I did, however, recall that Quinton had a US relay team the previous August and they wanted a rifleman on the boat in the event that sharks were 'an issue'. I'm against this as I think the sharks themselves will start carrying guns and where does this leave the relatively defenceless swimmer in his channel swimwear. I was also conscious that this ego swim is not covered by ordinary life insurance; in fact its not even covered by extraordinary life insurance; the rationale being 'if you're stupid enough to do something like this you can't be consider for insurance'; companies only cover risks, and charge exorbitant rates for certainties.

Two Way Attempt

Not sure when I was going to tell you but this swim was originally planned as a two-way attempt. I told Mags about it first. Her reaction was 'What, I'm the fourth to know?' I said 'No, you're the first'. This was absolutely the truth and she was absolutely wrong. I explained that I had asked John Daly if he thought I could do a double. He said he did. I then asked my mentor, Martin Cullen, if he thought I could do a double. He said he did. Then I asked Quinton if he thought a double could be done and if he thought I could do that double. He said he did to both. Then Maggie Kidd emailed me to wish me well on the double. That means Mags wasn't fourth to know. No way; she was fifth. But that's not the point. The point is I told Mags first when I decided I was going to attempt the double. That makes her first to know. She's always first in my book.

Two hours into the swim I thought to myself; 'To hell with this; its freezing now (at 7:15am) and I am going to get to Scotland, turn around and swim back. It was the swim back that was daunting. It was going to be pitch dark, very cold and everyone would be exhausted; even though the team were to work out a sleeping rota and Quinton had brought the extra boatman. Nah!, I'm not doing a double. I decided I'd tell them later.

But later in the day I was having one of my (repeat) chats with Ireland's only English Channel Two way swimmer, Lisa Cummins. She said to me when you get in the water you know you are going to turn at the far side and swim back, immediately. This is exactly the advice Ali Streeter, Queen of the English Channel and three times North Channel Swimmer said. Ali also holds the record for the North Channel at 9 hours 53 minutes. Her other two crossings were 10 hours and two minutes and 10 hours and four minutes. You have to admire that sort of consistency.

The double rambled in and out of my mind throughout the day. I had told the crew that if I felt up to it at the Scottish coast that we would go for it. Feeling up to it, for me, meant that I honestly felt capable of hopping onto the outgoing tide and being carried back into the middle of the North Channel to hop onto the tide flowing towards the Irish coast and trying to hold onto that tide. In total the double would take a minimum of 24 hours. But I knew after the initial burst over the first 3½ hours that I was swimming into a tide that I was hoping would carry me back out from the Scottish Coast. And as it was against me for the last nine hours of the swim it would be against me for as many hours on the way back. The double was waving me goodbye; I just didn't accept it.

At 11 hours into the swim I was on my way to meet one of my North Channel heroes; the great Maggie Kidd. There she was up on the heathered cliff top waving and willing me in to the base of the cliffs. I was utterly knackered; never so tired in all my life. I decided to put the team out of their misery about the two-way. Tom handed me my drink and as I finished it and threw the bottle back to the boat I said out loud, quite reluctantly; 'Tom, I'm not doing the double'. He said; 'Ferg, we were on that page at 9 o'clock this morning'. I laughed and took off in good spirits towards the lighthouse on the cliff.

I felt breaking the news as I did to Tom would be like a teenager getting the elbow from his bird after two weeks and him then telling his mates 'I was going to break it off with her meself anyway'.

Last leg

On the previous feed Tom asked me if I wanted him to join me. I didn't really understand. In my English Channel Swim John Daly got in and joined me for the last and triumphant 100 metres. We were about three kilometres from the Scottish coast and I thought it was a bit early to join me for the finish. He told me he had the observer's permission. I told him it was a big sea. I swam on. Five minutes later a swimmer is approaching me from my right; coming up between me and the boat. I am stunned. I didn't know there was another swimmer attempting the North Channel on the same day. Not only that, but this galoot was about to overtake me. I was disgusted. All that effort and this guy is swimming effortlessly. I looked behind to see his support boat. No sign. Weird, I thought. The then swimmer said, 'Come on Ferg, keep going'. It was Tom. I couldn't believe it. He was in. He was swimming. I didn't care. I was busy. Busy and tired. Everytime I looked over I could see him swimming. But Tom Healy is a champion swimmer. He is a fish. Here, he was like driftwood. The realisation started to dawn on me. Tom is in as a buddy swimmer. He is here to help me keep going; as is allowed in Channel swims; one hour max as a buddy swimmer and then not again for at least another three hours. If he was in this early (if you consider 11 hours into a swim early) I was in trouble. They were thinking I needed help or possibly wasn't going to make it. I looked at the cliffs. They were still so far away. My progress was very slow. I would later learn that my early pace of nine miles in 3½ hours was long behind me. Fighting against the tide I had, at one check, covered ½ mile in just over one hour. (Quinton is from non-metric Donaghadee; so therefore distances were reported in miles).

Only one thing for it. Get the big guns out again. 'Eoin, Conor, Eoin, Conor, Eoin, Conor.....'. Not the same impetus as earlier; but better than when Tom had gotten it and I was keeping that pace going. I felt sorry for Tom. He wasn't doing his normal swim, which leaves me for dead after only a few yards. He was wiggling his fingers; powerlessly stroking through the water and doing his best not to let me see his struggle to go as slow as I was going. He won't swim as slow again until he is giving Lex and Bruce their first few swimming lessons. Almost as soon as he got in he announced that he was getting out. I wasn't finished. I still had a fair bit to go. Why would he get out now? The reason was that his hour was up. He swam to the far side of the boat where he was manhandled onto the deck. He went off to the cabin dried, dressed and returned to the deck. On his way back to his monitoring point he said to Mags 'Fair play to your husband. He's just saved me thousands of Euros. I am never going to attempt the North Channel'. But I think he might.

With Tom back on the boat I looked forward to the cliffs. Wow!. They got an awful lot closer in the time Tom was in with me and I hadn't noticed till then. Time to push on. I swam forward. I was getting there. The final part of the swim was happening quite fast. One more feed. Then another final feed. I was on my way in to the coast. It was warm. The rocks and lighthouse were clear as day. I was going to make. I didn't bother thinking about a tumble turn and doing a two-way; well not for more than half a second.

I was on the last kilometre; we were looking at twenty, maybe thirty minutes. But I was tired. I was swimming freely now. I was making good progress in the warm afternoon. I could tell the team were getting excited. They were cheering and cheering. Mags doesn't cheer, but she was smiling I was so proud of myself. I was going to make it. I was just about to become swimmer number 14 in the world's most elite swimming fraternity. God, I'm great I thought to myself.

I suppose if Mags was to write the last paragraph she might have a slightly different interpretation. She would say something like ' You gobshite, they were roaring and shouting at you to keep going and you kept stopping and telling them to F*&K Off. You wouldn't swim. You wouldn't do what you were told'.

I suspected something was awry as I looked across at the boat. The whole team, except Mags, were shouting. But John Daly wasn't animated at all. But he was doing something different to the rest of them. He was stretching his arms out wide and bring them to point at bow of the boat. No noise, no shouting. I knew this was important. I realised he wanted me to come towards the bow of the boat. I looked at my own course. I was still heading towards the lighthouse, but I was going to pass the lighthouse. I could see the land fell back behind the lighthouse. I looked back at the boat. All the team were still shouting. Mags looked worried. John, gently still bringing his arms to point at the bow. I looked at the boat and the cliffs behind. I suddenly realised that the boat was being pushed sideways up along the coast. If that was the case then so was I. I looked forward again. I was going to pass the lighthouse if I kept on my course.

A final look at the boat and a decision in an instant. Get the boys back out or you're not going to make it. The mantra started immediately. Eoin, Conor, Eoin Conor, Eoin, Conor.....'. A few hundred more metres, but this time I'm sprinting towards the right of lighthouse. Sprint, sprint, sprint. I can't get this close and not succeed. I couldn't cope with that. I'm not going to let that happen. John is still waving towards the bow and as he sees I have copped on to the message he puts the thumbs up and smiles. I am going to make it. I have the boys going full belt now. I am getting there. I am inside the line of the lighthouse. The rocks are getting nearer. Yes, this is the first time today the Scottish coast is getting nearer to me. I am nearly there. Time to start dishing out the thanks to the Ma, Da, Nana and everyone else (alive and dead) I've been chatting to during the course of the day.

I'm in touching distance. I hear them all shouting and cheering. I am just about there. I look behind. The whole team, including John and Mags, are cheering and waving. I look forward. 'Eoin, Conor, Eoin, Conor, Cliff'.

Aftermath.

Two hands on the Scottish coast. I've done it. I'm definitely there. I here Gerry Mehan call me. 'That'll do you Fergal'. I went to stand on one of the rocks sticking out. A wave, running along the side of the cliff knocked me over and I had the good sense to throw my head to the right as the left side of my body was thrown onto the rock. Imagine cracking your skull at that point. Ah no! Forget the anti-climax and get back on the boat. They're still cheering. I'm blubbing. It's been a long day. I wonder will the lads be interested in the double. We've ten minutes to make up our minds.

Two minutes later I'm on the ladder. It takes about two minutes to empty the eejit. The last mile has been a huge struggle. We came within five minutes of being washed past the lighthouse by the tide, which would then have taken us away from the Scottish coast altogether. Obviously there is a God. Not that there would n't be if I had been washed passed the lighthouse, but there would have been a lot more questions about his existence, let alone his divinity. I'm sure Quinton thinks there is a God. Otherwise, he would still be being pestered by a Dub looking to make his third attempt. Mags,

Tom, John, Martin, Ross, Scott and Gerry know there is a God. Otherwise where would they have gotten the patience to put up with a prima donna for over 12 hours.

Once God's existence and omnipotence had been acknowledged by myself it was time to head to Portpatrick. The sun was out. It's early evening. The Irish sun is shining heavenly into Portpatrick Harbort and drenching the Scottish cliffs in golden sunshine. We pulled into the harbour and there to meet me is the wonderful Maggie Kidd and her family. I got off the boat and climbed the steps to hug her. She presented me with a bottle of Scotch whisky. Hugs, kisses and handshakes all round we are walking down the harbour and going into a pub for sangers. I had a lovely conversation with Maggie. She hasn't been well for a quite a few years, struggling with a cursed condition, but she has never waived in the support she has given me. It has been fantastic to learn so much from her and to have been able to share her confidence on issues not just North Channel related. She is a very gentle lady and a real superstar.

An hour or so later we are walked back to the boat and waved off into the golden sunset. The day is nearly over. I get some fitful sleep in a very small cabin. Three hours later we are back at Donaghadee Pier to be met by none other than Eric Bleakley. Eric is effusive in his congratulations and looking forward to his similar challenge in a day or so.

After taking a few photos we part company with Quinton, Ross, Scott, Gerry and Martin. Mags, John, Tom and myself are off to Dublin. Home by 1:30, in bed by 3:30 and up again at 6:50.

I turned on my PC and was amazed by the number of messages on Facebook and email. Hundreds of people all over the world followed the swim.

I reviewed the data. I missed Ali Streeter's record of 9:53, Kevin Murphy's men's record of 11:21 and Colm O'Neill's Irish record of 11:24. Some will think I had a nerve to consider myself in their category. They can f*&k Off. I can't be disappointed. I am elated. I always knew that doing the North Channel is an enormous achievement. It took months to realise that I had actually swam the English Channel in 2011. I'm up today and can't believe what I have achieved; and only with the help of a fantastic team, pilot, crew, observer and, most of all, Mags who I love with all my heart. And the boys helped too.

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- Sixth fastest time overall
- Earliest date the North Channel has ever been swum. Nobody else has swam it in June.
- Coldest temperature the North Channel has ever been swam.
- Few thousand raised for Cancer Research.