



SURREY COUNTY ASA

1891-2019

Jeni Colbourne – Honorary Life Vice-President

When Jeni Colbourne became chair of the unitary body following the merger of Surrey County Water Polo & Swimming Association (SCWP&SA) and Surrey Swimming in 2010, it ushered in a new chapter in county history and politics.

Asked how she ended up in the role, she smiles and says: “I was the only person who both sides would speak to.”

Reflecting on the early post-regionalisation years in the run-up to the consolidation, Jeni says the conflicts, upsets and quarrels were ultimately unsustainable for the county’s long-term good. “I thought it was daft at the time,” she says. “Surrey could not support two organisations. You cannot fight a national governing body. ‘Just get on with it’ was my attitude.”

Nine years later, two treasurers, four secretaries and seven presidents down the line she continues to chair the association. For an amateur county body whose disciplines revolve around water, it is ironic that its chair at one time was one of the country’s foremost water experts, well known in central government and laboured on a number of its committees.

Jeni was introduced to Wey Valley, her long-standing affiliated club, through a friend in the late 1980s. She had been looking for a swimming teacher for her then six-year-old daughter, Kate. “She started off swimming at three and then stopped,” she says. “Something had put her off. I was recommended a swimming teacher there. I got into it through that.”

But Jeni rapidly discovered that swimming was not a spectator sport. “If you don’t dump your kid and go away, it’s a bit boring – so you get involved when you’re asked,” she says. “I didn’t know anything about the club structure before then. I didn’t realise it was a membership thing. Either it’s clubs don’t tell people, people don’t read things or take any notice, or it’s about our modern-day culture.”

As her involvement grew at Wey Valley she trained as a swimming teacher, a coach and an official. “I was asked to run the club champs and I hadn’t a clue,” she says. “I was given a carrier bag and told, ‘That’s what the person did last year’. I had to devise everything. We always tried to go for a culture of making it social – keeping people swimming – as much as the competitive side.”

When the club came close to folding after the previous chairperson stepped down, Jeni and a friend, Debbie Wanstall, were persuaded to take it on. They became chair and secretary respectively, working tirelessly doing every job under the sun, gradually building the club back up. Wey Valley were the first Surrey club to attain swim21 accreditation [now SwimMark], the national governing body’s quality standard for clubs.

After 15 years, Jeni and Debbie decided it was time to move on and give others an opportunity to run the club. Trevor Marshall, a former Surrey Swimming secretary and South East Region board member, took over the running of officials, while Debbie went on to teach swimming at Boxgrove Primary School in Guildford, where she still is.

Jeni says finding top-notch volunteers was often one of the biggest challenges, citing the likes of Diane Gamble, Julie Burvill and Christina Victor. “How do you find people like that?” she says. “A bit like me. I’ll do something. I am not going to sit and watch my child swim – it’s boring.” Parents of the kids who took the sport more seriously were more inclined to volunteer because they were more likely to be there, she says.

The impression she got originally was that counties were run by officials. “It was the officials’ forum, the officials’ power base. It was there to run competitions,” Jeni says. “I



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guess what's changed is that competitions aren't all around counties anymore because of open meets, licensing and clubs running competitions for financing. That power base of counties has diminished to some extent."

When Jeni first became involved, she observed that the only relationship between the clubs and the county was through competitions. "There was no grassroots link," she says. "At that time there were no bursaries, no grants, no nothing. The only thing that money was spent on was the next event, expenses, dinners, medals or bling. The only reason I was anti-bling was because that is what the money was being spent on."

However, she says the tide has turned and improvements have been made to try to redress the balance. "The main thing was getting the development side going. That's the key thing," she says. "I feel we are doing that now. I know we don't have all of the clubs linking to us, but it's basically there and established now. I like to see that all that money sloshing around is doing development. We spend about 13-15K annually [on development]."

Jeni says she learnt most of her management techniques as a student union rebel. "A good chair is someone who does not get attached to a particular outcome, rather wanting to facilitate that the people decide collectively what the outcome is," she says. "Impartiality, that sort of thing. Somebody who has a focus on governance – in other words, what we are really here to do."

For the time being, she says a measure of how well the county was performing was that people were not rushing out in their droves to complain. Most of the issues that have cropped up more recently were individual cases, welfare or competition related.

Originally from Buckinghamshire, Jeni went to school in High Wycombe. In the late 1960s she moved to study at the University of Surrey, where she was part of the early intake of students at its then relatively new campus in Guildford. Apart from a few years in London and stints in Australia, New Zealand, Chile and South Africa, she has lived in Surrey ever since.

Although not a competitive swimmer in her youth, one title she claimed as a senior school student was Bucks five-mile champion. "It was a bizarre race which was in a school swimming pool and it took all day," she says. "I was naturally a breastroker. I was slow compared to the frontcrawlers but I had resilience."

Even more bizarre was learning to swim in rural Buckinghamshire back then. The only public swimming pool, built in the early Sixties, was circular in shape, shallow around the edges and deep in the middle. "Learning to swim, you had to swim across it. And if you didn't make it, you drowned," says Jeni.

A wild child, hippy and free spirit at university, she admits she was not the brightest spark in the classroom. "I didn't do much studying," Jeni says. "I somehow managed to get a degree. God knows how I got it. It wasn't a very good one but it didn't really matter." A modest comment from someone who went on to complete a PhD.

As secretary of the student union's entertainment, one of her highlights was putting on a concert of The Who at the university. "We sold more tickets than we were legally allowed, we went over the noise limit and we got prosecuted by the environmental health officers," she says. "I had £2,000 stuffed down my bra in cash notes to pay for the band."

After graduating as a medical microbiologist she went to work in the pharmaceutical industry. But she soon discovered that she did not like the ethics and moved into the water industry, working at Thames Water for 28 years. Much of her PhD and career revolved around the public health service and water industry.



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In the summer of 1999, when a violent earthquake ravaged Turkey – the worst in its history, killing thousands – Jeni was dispatched to the disaster-stricken area. As public health operations senior manager for Thames Water, which had been privatised and was operating globally by that time, her job was to inspect the infrastructure.

“Thames Water was the water and sewage operator in that region. I got a call and was flown in,” she says. “Turkey had built the water works and dam to British standards, so it survived the earthquake. We were fairly sure our infrastructure was OK, despite the devastation everywhere.

“Normally, they [the aid agencies] would start digging holes to find water, which they did not need to do. For one reason or another, it is the only earthquake that has happened of any magnitude in the world where there has not been subsequent waterborne disease outbreaks”.

In the 2000 New Year honours, Jeni was awarded an MBE for services to public health and the water industry. A few years later she was appointed chief inspector of the Drinking Water Inspectorate, the government regulator for all the water companies in England and Wales.

Upon her appointment the water industry told her: “You always were the enemy within – now you can be the enemy without.” As regulator, Jeni would tell people what they ought to do, not necessarily what they wanted to do. “It’s a bit like what I do now, running committees,” she says.

Now retired, life is marginally calmer. Well, almost. Her No 1 priority these days is as a grandmother, which in itself occupies a lot of her time. “I still do lecture, occasionally,” she says. “When I was with Thames Water they gave me a visiting professorship. They were setting up a master’s course [at Surrey uni]. I still do that. I help them with their research programmes.”

As well as chairing the management committee, she is county welfare officer and constitution checker. She has also been a South East Region SwimMark panel member for the last three years, a committee chaired by Jane Davies, a prominent swimming official.

Jeni is also treasurer for the Hampshire & South Coast Swimming Leagues. She enjoys officiating and regularly supports club, school, county and a variety of other galas.

County treasurer and masters organiser Jim Boucher says she has maintained great control over the various factions and opinions.

He said: “When I first met Jeni, there were two different counties called Surrey. It seems such a long time ago now. But the fact that we have somehow managed to bring it together, it all worked out nicely and we have been friends ever since.”

Jeni the water expert, the doctor, the professor, MBE and grandmother – a chairwoman with impeccable credentials – congratulations on this your county award.

