



SURREY COUNTY ASA

1891-2019

Michael Holden – County President

When Michael Holden was installed as county president and presented with the chain of office amid all the pomp and ceremony at the annual council meeting in June, he vowed to undertake the mostly representational and ceremonial role as well as he could over the next year.

“Thank you very much for the honour,” he said in awe. “I would not have ever expected to have been asked to undertake this role. I will do my very best to get round to all the other disciplines – diving, water polo, synchro, open water – as well as the things I normally rock up at.”

They were reassuring words from someone with a busy life, who holds similar positions with three other voluntary organisations. He also has a daytime job and yet still manages to set aside time to volunteer as a swimming official at club, school and county meets, fitting in holidays between.

Michael’s involvement started around 18 years ago when his two daughters, Natasha and Jasmine, swam as youngsters at Woking, one of them as an associate club member. Although they never went on to compete beyond county level they enjoyed it, and they did it for a long time.

“I used to sit in the spectator gallery, as you do with the kids at that age, and the teacher asked for someone to come and put the backstroke flags up. They were too tall for her to reach,” he recalls. “From there it was a slippery slope – a vortex that sucks you in.”

Shortly after his first encounter on poolside, playing the Good Samaritan, he was invited to come along and hold a stopwatch. He then trained as a club timekeeper before becoming a judge. Michael later joined the club committee and in no time at all was responsible for organising the club’s officials.

A Mancunian by birth, he was raised in St Albans in Hertfordshire. He lived in Farnham for a few years during his teens. He later read business studies at the University of Portsmouth. The family have lived in Woking off and on for about 20–25 years.

Even though Surrey has a large number of swimmers in it and engagement is as high as it ever has been, Michael said that swimming in its current state was in “pretty rude health”, costly and appealed mostly to the middle class.

He said: “I occasionally worry that swimming is by nature a fairly expensive thing to do and therefore the people who are drawn into it can afford to do it. Therefore it tends to be middle class.

“It would be nice to draw more widely in the community and make it more representative of the people in the county. But you have to pay for the pool hire and you have to pay for the coaching – and it’s not cheap.





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“It does tend to be a bit of a middle-class thing and it would be nice to make it more representational. It’s not easy to see a way of doing that. One of my girls did athletics and that was very much cheaper to participate in.”

Swimming seems to run in the family, though. Michael’s wife, Irene, has been involved equally as long as him. She first got involved by running the shop for Woking Swimming Club. Then she organised the primary team for the local borough swimming gala before getting involved in the Surrey Youth Games.

“She ran the Woking borough team in the Surrey Youth Games for eight years and won that for eight years. It proves it’s about team selection to win that,” he said. “Then she got involved with what we call ‘red T-shirts’ in Woking: poolside management.



“She has also become involved with Surrey Schools’ Swimming Association and she helps at the county events. So she is well committed to the club and to the county and to the schools.”

Asked about his baronet – ‘Sir’ – he explained that the hereditary form of address stemmed from his great-great grandfather, a serial entrepreneur and philanthropist who built up a rag-trade empire in the Victorian era.

“He had a big factory in Bradford making clothing,” said Michael. “He was one of those pioneers of modern industrial concepts at the time. Like Titus Salt. They created a model village outside of the factory for the workers to live in complete with school, hospital and church.

“He was a Methodist, teetotal and liberal. He believed in looking after the workers as people – not just seeing them as units of labour, which is how capitalists traditionally worked in those days.”

Although Michael has never had a reason to attend any of the other disciplines previously, he was looking forward to it during his presidential year. “To actually have the opportunity to come along and watch a diving competition, for example, or open water or synchronised swimming is something that I will be interested in,” he said. “And I have got to make sure I make the time for it”.