

My country memories

I START EVERY DAY ON

our annual family break in Alderney with a swim before breakfast – the water's fantastically cold and the stretches of sandy beach, spectacular. I've been going to the island since I was born. And now my children, Tor and Will, have holidayed there every year of their lives, too.

We spend a month on Alderney each summer – it's great to have that continuity. I call it emotional equity – as soon as I arrive, I have a sense of security and contentment. At the same time, it can make you feel as if you're on the edge of the world. When a large wave breaks, the spray seems to cover the entire island – it's only 1 mile wide by 3 miles long. Dotted with Victorian and Napoleonic forts, it's thought to be one of the most fortified outcrops in the world.

Our association with Alderney goes back a long way. My mother met my father there; he was sailing around the coastline at the time and her parents owned a hotel where she was working for the summer. As a wedding present, my grandparents gave Mum and Dad a little house – actually, a pretty extraordinary cottage.

Built out of granite in the 1700s, it had one storey at the front and three at the back. It was called Mother Friday's House after the head of the family who owned it before us, who was a real matriarch. She would sit on her doorstep at the end of every week so that when her husband and sons approached on their return from work, she could hold out her hand and take their pay packets. From the top of the house, my brothers – Giles, Rupert, John and Neville – and I would look out of the window onto the harbour, which has a breakwater stretching out for three-quarters of a mile. It was often entirely submerged by a ferocious sea in winter. We could spot the magnificent Fort Albert on the right and there was a half-destroyed bridge over a gorge. As if that wasn't enough excitement for five boys, there were all the German bunkers to play in, too.

Home during my childhood was in Yapton, West Sussex. When I was five years old, my father dug up the tennis court and built a pool in its place. That's where my passion for swimming took hold and I remember everything about the first time we used it:



Long childhood summers spent on Alderney in the Channel Islands meant swimmer **Duncan Goodhew** developed a love of the great outdoors from an early age

the sparkling light on the surface, the feeling of cool water on my skin, the gravity-defying sensation and the sound of laughter. I still think swimming is an experience like no other. It gives you plenty of time to think, too. I'm dyslexic, a condition that wasn't properly understood when I was a child, so swimming was the only thing I was any good at, and I really loved it. It was at school that I learned breaststroke, which later became my winning style. Then, during a PE class, I had the accident that

resulted in the loss of all my hair at the age of ten. In the middle of an assault course, I fell 18 feet landing on all fours and catching my lip on a protruding tree root. Apart from a swollen mouth and black eyes, I seemed to be fine. But after a few months, I developed a bald patch, and a year after the accident, my hair disappeared completely and permanently. But it certainly didn't hold me back on the swimming front.

I'm hoping to create a natural swimming pond in the fields towards

the river by the Georgian farmhouse in Somerset where I live with my wife Anne and the children. I've loved the area since school. I remember waiting for the bus and watching banks of fog change colour as the sun set, with Glastonbury Tor peeping over the top. First there would be pinks and rusty reds and, finally, shades of lavender. Even as a teenager, I appreciated how beautiful the landscape was. I really enjoy the countryside around us and still do plenty of sport. My grandmother was a great example – she lived to just short of 102 years old, cycled up to the age of 86 and walked at least five miles a day until she was 93. I'm not really much of a jogger, but enjoy some wonderful wintry runs through woods and often go cycling. I walk with Nordic poles, too – marvellous as stabilisers on the way home from our excellent local pub. 🍷



Duncan Goodhew is an Olympic gold medallist swimmer and supports Swimathon 2011 in aid of Marie Curie Cancer Care and The Swimathon Foundation. For information about how to take part, visit www.swimathon.org or call 0845 367 0036.

INTERVIEW BY RUTH CHANDLER. LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAMY