

# Gertrude Ederle

Gertrude Ederle was a famous American swimmer. She set many world records and won three Olympic medals. Her first attempt to swim the English Channel in 1925 failed, but in 1926 she tried again. This time she succeeded, becoming the first woman to swim across the Channel.

## The American Swimmer who Waved Away Doubts about Female Athletes

At 7am on 6th August 1926, a 20-year-old American woman stood on the shore of Cap Gris-Nez in France. She was wearing nothing but a bathing suit, motorcycle goggles and a generous slathering of lard\*. In front of her, the steely English Channel rolled out towards the horizon.

- 5 The woman's name was Gertrude Ederle, and she was about to make history. Ederle became the first woman to successfully swim across the English Channel. The gruelling 35-mile journey took her just 14 hours and 39 minutes — almost two hours faster than the existing record, which was set by an Italian man, Enrico Tiraboschi, in 1923.

- 10 Ederle's achievement is even more impressive given the stormy weather she encountered along the way. By the end of her swim, she had swum an extra 14 miles as a result of strong winds that blew her off course. The waves became so large that even some ferry crossings were suspended. Ederle was advised to abort her attempt, but she ignored the warnings and carried on.

Around 21:40, Ederle stepped onto a beach around six miles from Dover. Crowds flocked to greet her, cheering and screaming, as she walked unaided onto the shore.

- 15 **"People said women couldn't swim the Channel. I proved they could."**

- The crossing was an amazing feat of athleticism, which challenged widely-held beliefs about women's physical abilities. Only five people had managed to swim across the Channel before her, and all of them were men. Before Ederle's successful swim, many people believed that women weren't physically capable of swimming across the Channel, despite several previous close attempts. In fact, days before
- 20 Ederle's record was set, another American woman called Clarabelle Barrett had battled the Channel crossing for a whopping 21 hours and 45 minutes before abandoning her swim. In 1924, Danish swimmer Clemington Carson had come within just two miles of land before having to give up.

- Ederle's success proved that women weren't just capable of completing the swim — at that time, they could be better at it. Her record remained unbroken until 1950. At a time when women were
- 25 often considered to be less suited to sports than men, Ederle's achievement forced people to reassess their attitudes towards female athletes. Today, thousands of swimmers (both male and female) have followed in her footsteps.

### Glossary

lard — a solid fat used for cooking

Written by Louise McEvoy.

- 1 Why do you think the author uses the phrase "Waved Away" in the title (line 1)?

2 marks

- 2 The author describes the English Channel as "steely" (line 4). What impression does this description give of the sea?

1 mark

- 3 Why do you think the author has made line 15 stand out from the rest of the text?

2 marks

- 4 What do you think the word "feat" (line 16) means?

1 mark

- 5 Explain how Gertrude's achievement affected people's attitudes towards women.

2 marks

- 6 Explain what this extract tells you about Gertrude's personality.

2 marks

Total  
out of 10