

WILD WOMAN OF THE WYE

For more than 30 years, Angela Jones has swum almost daily in one of Britain's most beautiful rivers. She tells **Abi Whyte** why she fell in love with the once-sparkling waters of the Wye, and what must be done to protect it

“When I’m in a healthy river, I spend a lot of time below the surface, brushing past blankets of water crowfoot, seeing larvae among its tangles. I love to cling on to the rocks and watch a salmon or an eel go past. It’s a beautiful place to be.”

As we walk along the banks of the River Wye in Monmouth, Angela Jones’ gaze constantly flits to the water. She will stop our conversation mid-flow to point out a cormorant or a pied wagtail, then continue with her ode to the river – her lithe, athletic figure striding confidently along the muddy path while I totter behind.

She is taking me to one of her favourite swimming spots, a mile or so south of the market town’s centre, by Monmouth Viaduct. Here, the river widens and forms an eddy on its left bank – the perfect ‘pool’ for a quick dip when the river is flowing too high and fast to swim in.

Angela has been swimming in the Wye for 30 years, and has been a guide on the river for a decade. Known as the ‘Wild Woman of the Wye’, she is a familiar face on the water, either leading groups of swimmers, kayaking or sleeping on the riverbank in a bivvy bag with her beloved Jack Russell terrier by her side.

“Jack and I have had 14 years of adventuring together,” she tells me. “We kayaked from the Atlantic to the North Sea, and he walked the 97 miles back over the Scottish Highlands with me to my van, my kayak on my back. He has had quite a life.”

And so has she, so far, it seems – travelling solo around the Middle East in her teens and (unintentionally, she tells me) becoming an international athlete in her 30s, competing in triathlons and mountain races. It was upon

returning from her travels that she discovered the allure of the Wye Valley, and chose to make it her home.

“The beauty of this river is so diverse,” she tells me as we set down our backpacks. “We have 200-foot red sandstone cliffs, rapids, salmon pools and slow, meandering stretches. The wildlife is incredible – there are stretches where I know I will see otters, or adders in the banks, or a place where a lone white goose returns every year.”

SWIMMING WITH A LEGEND

“When we come out, the most important thing is to get warm and dry as quickly as possible, so place your towel on top,” she tells me. We change into swimsuits and Angela

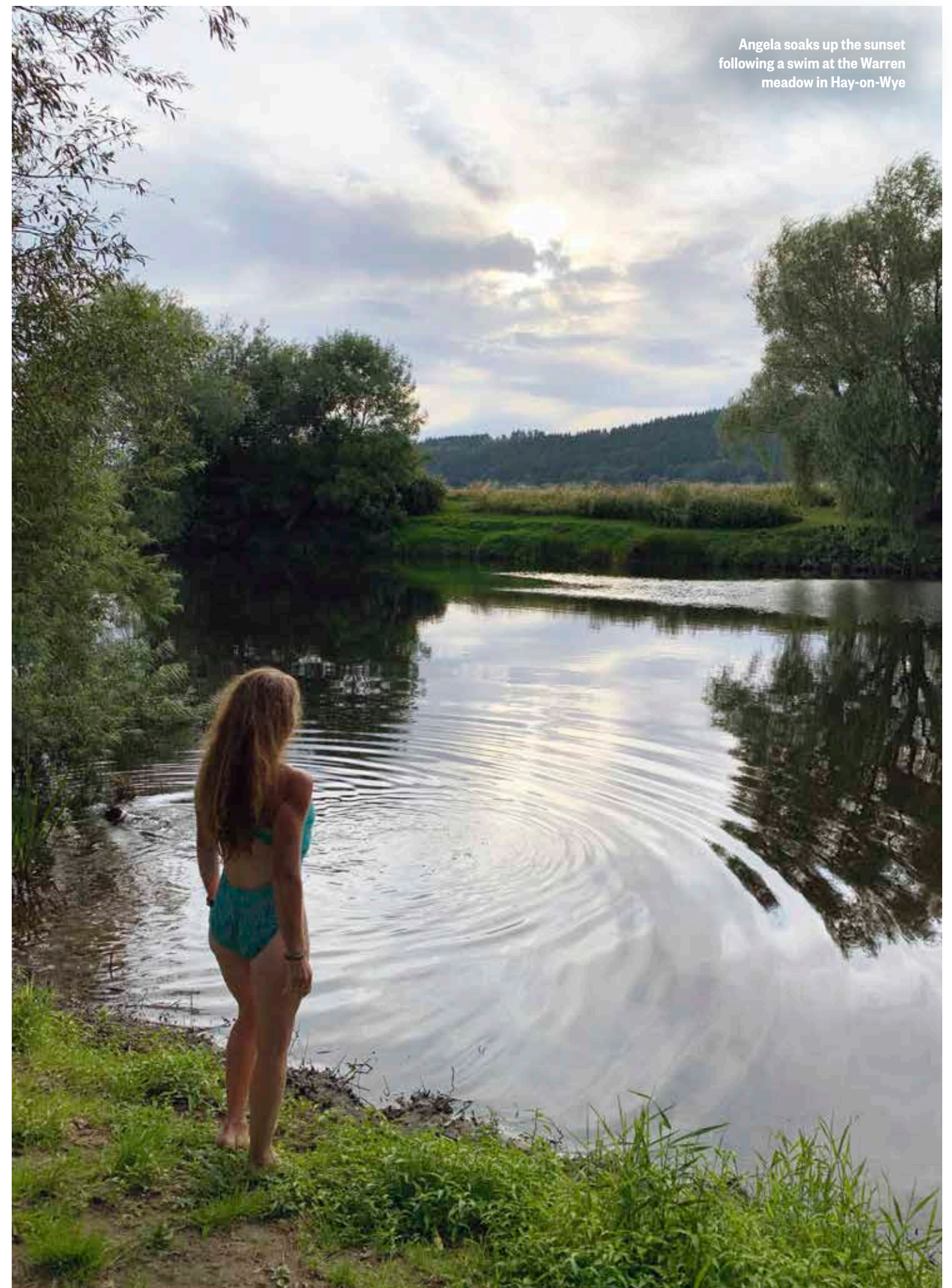
talks me through a breathing technique that she demonstrates to all her swimming clients, relaxing them and slowing down their heart rate before immersion in the water. I ask her what it’s like to introduce new people to cold-water swimming.

“It’s wonderful because everyone’s personality is so different,” she explains. “Many want to find something within themselves – they are not sure what it is or how to go about it. I strip them bare, get them dirty, get them in the water and they begin to find out who they really are.”

My feet are certainly dirty, toes squelching in the wet, sucking mud. “Isn’t it glorious?” she laughs, taking me by the hand.

Our immersion in the water is brief and full of laughter. The water temperature is only 4°C, so Angela suggests we stay in for only a couple of minutes. “Coldness is a mindset,” she advises as we paddle back to the bank. “Use the word ‘invigorating’ instead!”

Angela soaks up the sunset following a swim at the Warren meadow in Hay-on-Wye





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Angela Jones stands on a boulder at the source of the Wye on Pumlumon (Plynlimon), Ceredigion; bathers enjoy a dip in the Wye at Bredwardine, Herefordshire; Angela leading a one-kilometre swim near Monmouth to raise awareness about the Wye's ecological decay

I am certainly invigorated as I emerge stiffly from the water, my skin red, hands reaching for my towel. Soon I am warm and dry once more, and there is no hiding the smile on my face as endorphins race around my body and I feel an overwhelming desire to dance about. I pull out my Thermos instead.

PROTECTING THE WYE

We settle down for hot tea and biscuits on the riverbank and the exuberant mood takes a more serious turn, as we chat about Angela's activism in recent years, campaigning against pollution in the Wye. The river made headlines in 2020 when photos showed a stretch of the water looking a luminous green, overcome by algal blooms that starve the river of oxygen. Campaigners claim these algae, caused by high phosphate levels, are a direct result of the increase in intensive chicken farms along the Wye's upper catchment.

"It was about five years ago I started noticing a change," Angela says. "I remember swimming in certain sections and thinking to myself 'This doesn't taste right'. I'd become used to the sweetness and gorgeous clarity of the water, but this was drastically different. The river had become murky, the stones covered in brown slime."

Horried by the worsening condition of the Wye, last summer she led several protests down the river, towing a cardboard coffin with the words 'Death of the Wye' printed on the side. A tireless campaigner, she plans to tow a

five-foot-by-four-foot egg box for her next demonstration: "People want cheap eggs and cheap chickens. Perhaps when they see my floating egg box on the nation's favourite river, it will make them rethink."

Is she hopeful for the river's future? "Yes, but action needs to be taken now," she says. "We have two agencies looking after the Wye on either side of the English-Welsh border: the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales. They need to stop table-talking and work together to sort out this problem. We need legislation to stop sewage being released into the water, and we need to stop giving planning permission to these chicken sheds. And the supermarkets buying eggs from farms in the Wye catchment – they need to put a clause in their contract demanding stricter farming methods that don't cause such appalling damage to the environment. If supermarkets can be seen to be doing something positive like that, and farmers are seen to be farming responsibly, then change will come." **CF**

FIND OUT MORE: Angela Jones hosts wild swimming adventures on the Wye, teaching water safety. She always tests the water quality beforehand and only takes small groups to minimise impact on the river and wildlife. swimwildwye.co.uk



Abi Whyte is a writer and editor who loves to write about the outdoors, history, travel, science, wild food and people with passion. She lives in Hereford and is the deputy editor of *Ernest Journal*.

Photos: S. Pearce, Alamy