

Jean Perraton:- an obituary



Jean, one of Cam Valley Forum's very first members and a long serving Chair and committee member, died in her local care home on 28th November 2025 age 88, after a short illness. Her guiding hand was strongly formative of what Cam Valley Forum has come to achieve, and we all owe her a debt of gratitude. She was also a champion of 'wild swimming', an author, musician, sculptor, artist and more much more besides.



Cam Valley Forum are grateful to Katy Astley, katy_astley_celebrant@outlook.com whose excellent funeral address text we have drawn upon considerably in pulling together this obituary. We also want to thank her family, especially her daughter Claire, her friends and several Cam Valley Forum colleagues and others acquainted with her long, productive and pioneering life who have also contributed their memories to this tribute.

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Jean Perraton was born in Eastbourne on 14 January 1937, the first daughter of George and Jane Warner. Her father, who was musical, was serving away for much of the war. Her parents were not well off, and money was tight for their family who would supplement their sparse income by letting out parts of their own house to tourists as lodgings over the summer. However, in Eastbourne, the seeds of her passion for the outdoors and the sea were planted early. One of her earliest memories was sneaking under the wire that had been placed around the beach during wartime to go swimming with her father. She had a free-range childhood, and Jean made the most of this freedom. Another of Jean's lifelong passions, her musical ability, similarly took root very early on. Jean loved her time at school, and her intelligent and conscientious nature ensured that, in learning, she really excelled. She was encouraged by a teacher at school to aim high, and she gained a place to read Geography at Girton College in the mid-1950s, no mean feat for a young woman of her generation and social background.

This passion for learning and her determination to better the world was very much in harmony with what many of us who knew of Jean in recent years. From her elfin stature, she always magically radiated a bright and very determined nature! Her determined look at anyone speaking to her was powerful. She also had the intellect and strength of character to match. Her daughter Claire relates that Jean always felt somewhat constrained by her gender and was frustrated by the limitations of being a woman in what, as she was growing up, and indeed, into adulthood, was still very much a man's world. Jean was determined to avoid a life of domestic drudgery and wanted most of all to forge a career and to make a difference - and she absolutely did that.

Jean first met Hilary Perraton when he was also a fellow student at Cambridge. He was then an historian and a gifted scholar, and later became a committed and distinguished educationalist who pioneered extension-learning both in Britain and overseas. Jean, on graduating, had decided not to settle down immediately, but went off to Ohio, as a teaching assistant, before being persuaded to return to the UK where she and Hilary were happily married in 1960.

Jean and Hilary settled initially in London, where their first child Jonathan was born in 1964. Their daughter Claire completed the family in 1967. Jean worked in local government and planning, initially in London before transferring to Cambridgeshire County Council when Hilary came back to work in Cambridge. When Hilary was offered a posting to Botswana to establish the Botswana Extension College, she agreed to go on condition that she could also work out there. And indeed, her work in Botswana, in housing and planning, proved to be the most fulfilling of her career. She really felt that she was able to make a difference, less constrained by the social norms of the British workplace and freed from domestic duties by the fact that the family were able to employ domestic staff to care for the home – and even dig a tiny pool in the garden so that Jean could continue to swim in land-locked Botswana! As well as those special years in Botswana, Jean and Hilary also spent some time in Barbados in the 1990s with Hilary's work in international education.

The freedom of that time in Botswana, and the adventure and ease with which Jean could spend time outdoors, would stay with her long after the family returned to the UK, a move undertaken so that the children could continue their education here. Education was of course a key value, and one which infused all aspects of family life. Culture, nature and the outdoors were also values shared deeply by Hilary and Jean and their children. Claire remembers annual holidays in the Lake District where even as very small children she and Jonathan, her brother, enjoyed long and challenging walks. The Lake District also offered the opportunity for wild swimming – or just 'swimming' as Jean would call it! – and Claire has many wonderful memories of swimming with her mum in rivers, lakes and of course the sea over the years.

Jean's love of nature also fed her creativity, and appreciation of culture. She both painted and sculpted, and had great personal pleasure from playing the piano. There was a grand piano in the house and Jean would never tire of spending hours at her beloved keyboard. She didn't perform in public herself, but she enjoyed attending concerts, and Radio 3 was a permanent soundtrack in the house.

Jean was also an environmental activist, long before awareness of such issues became widespread. She joined Friends of the Earth in the 1970s. At the millennium, in 2001, she was one of the first members of the Cam Valley Forum. Jean's work with Cam Valley Forum was astonishing. She not only had a fine grasp of the planning process - that in Cambridgeshire often gave too little attention to the welfare of the river and its heritage - but she was the one who quietly gathered many people's diverse expertise and enthusiasm in support of the Cam.

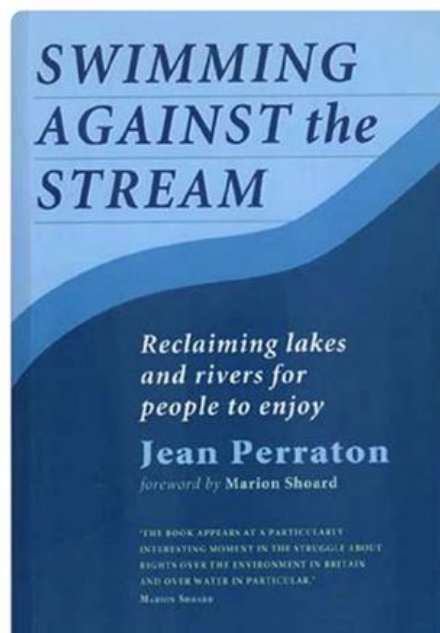
Jean, as a river swimmer, was President of the Rivers and Lakes Swimming Association (RALSA). In 2020 she was inspired by the success of the people of Ilkley on the River Wharf in getting Bathing Water Designation for the first UK river and suggested that CVF should do the same for the River Cam. CVF therefore started consulting locally about it, and after a lengthy campaign, achieved Bathing Water Designation for the Cam at Sheep's Green in 2024. She was absolutely delighted.

In 2005 Jean authored a book, "Swimming Against The Stream", whose subtitle 'reclaiming lakes and rivers for people to enjoy' sums up one of her key priorities in life. It had a second edition in 2013. It is a book which is both insightful about the history of swimming, and a practical guide to wild swimming itself. Although copies are now scarce, it is much treasured by those that have one.

She subsequently wrote a second book. When her mother died in 2004, Jean had found a case containing all her father's wartime letters - he was a motorcycle despatch rider with the Eighth Army in North Africa and later Italy, but first and foremost a musician who did not let a war interfere with playing and sharing his music. Jean being the person she was, decided to write a book. The result was "One Musician's War", published by Amberley in 2011, with a forward by Denis Healey.

She had dealt with her own share of health problems over the years. Having chaired and kept minutes for Cam Valley Forum for many years, she stepped down as Chair for health reasons in 2018 but remained involved. Perhaps thanks in part to her lifestyle, together with her sharp mind, formidable intellect, and curious nature, she was able to remain resilient and active well into her 80s. Her husband, Hilary, sadly died in 2021. Jean continued to remain active, swimming, walking and cycling, and playing table tennis twice a week. But her son Jonathan's sudden death in 2023 was a colossal blow to Jean, as she was quite a restrained person emotionally, and she found it difficult then to share how deeply this loss also affected her. The last two years of her life, with Hilary and Jonathan gone were undoubtedly sad and lonely, but Jean continued to find pleasure in the small details of her life: her piano, her garden, the sun on her face and time spent outdoors.

For Cam Valley Forum, and the River Cam that she loved, Jean left her mark – and some big boots to fill!



<https://www.wildswimming.co.uk/swimming-against-the-stream/>