

LIFE CHALLENGES

It was wonderful to hold our first face-face meeting for over 18 months recently, especially as we heard an exceptionally good talk. Our speaker had travelled from London both for this event and to meet up with her friends in Penrith Ramblers. Jessica Hepburn was previously the successful Managing Director of the Lyric Theatre but her life has taken a new direction and she spoke of her 'Life Challenges.'

The first challenge she described was a very personal one: admitting her fertility problems. Many rounds of IVF treatment and several miscarriages had not led to the pregnancy she so longed for and Jessica began to realise she must look for fulfilment in a new direction. A successful theatre director, she found publicly admitting her difficulties in conceiving particularly difficult. No easier was deciding how she might find a new purpose. Her solution was quite a dramatic one: to take on the 'Pond to Peak' challenge. This involves swimming the English Channel and ascending Everest and if successful she would be the first woman to achieve each of these goals.

Not a keen or a skilled swimmer, the first stage of this challenge seemed a very unlikely one. However, she overcame her problems one by one, learning to use front crawl instead of her usual breast stroke to increase her speed and training in the sea at Dover under the critical regime of a practised lady channel swimmer. The swim was a terrible feat of endurance with heavy seas, huge swathes of jellyfish, bouts of sickness and facing up the many hours of swimming in very cold water without the comfort of a wetsuit or of any other aid. Jessica had her reward in the end, eventually arriving on Sangatte Beach in France, her challenge achieved. At this point Penrith Ramblers came in to her story.

Jessica felt she must increase her fitness to reach her next goal: the summit of Everest, for which the hills of London were an inadequate training ground. So, she joined the Ramblers' Association, finding that Penrith Ramblers were offering quite strenuous fell walks and met the group one Wednesday in 2019. Their first memories were of a pleasant, quiet, modest walker who was struggling a little with the pace but greatly enjoyed the scenery and asked if she might join the group again. This she did and the group became part of her training regime. Her lively outgoing character soon showed through on subsequent walks and she was welcomed warmly.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 thwarted Jessica's hopes of attempting Everest in 2020 but she applied to join a party in 2021. The beauty of the mountain, the friendliness of the local Sherpa guides and the whole experience of the expedition captivated Jessica though several major problems thwarted their attempts on the mountain: a cyclone, the chest infection Jessica suffered and finally the emergence of Covid-19 among several expedition members. Ultimately theirs and other groups' hopes of summiting Everest were dashed as the 'window of opportunity' for 2021 was over. Jessica aims to return to meet her challenge next year. We wish her every success and will be thrilled to welcome her back to tell us of her success. For further details, see www.jessicahepburn.com



Clockwise from top left: Jessica Hepburn, after swimming the channel, with Penrith Ramblers, and on Everest