

# A gippy tum, irate swans and my day with the man trying to smash the Thames barrier

by Jill Foster

**D**AVID Walliams is craving a cheese and pickle sandwich. Thick doorstops of bread, lashings of butter, a wedge of Cheddar and tangy relish. Delicious.

'I'd love a sandwich right now,' he tells the crowd of supporters who have assembled on the jetty at Reading Bridge on the Thames to watch him splash past.

Sadly, in the words of one of the Little Britain star's more famous comedy creations, 'computer says no'. The snack will have to wait.

This is day four of Walliams vs The Thames, the 40-year-old comedian's remarkable endurance feat that will see him, hopefully, complete a 140-mile swim down the river Thames in just eight days, in aid of Sport Relief.

Walliams, dressed in skintight black wetsuit, silver swimming cap and goggles, is heading back into the water after a short break to complete another leg of his marathon swim.

It's 6.30pm, the sun is lowering in the clear September sky and, despite ploughing through the chilly water since 7am and being only yards away from the comfort of his hotel bed, he's determined to get as far down the route as possible.

Not only will it mean he can make up for lost time — at one stage he was half a day behind — but he will avoid disappointing the hundreds of fans waiting at today's appointed finish line downstream.

The 6ft 3in comic started the epic journey near the river's source in Lechlade, Gloucestershire, on Monday. He is swimming for up to eight hours a day through strong currents and busy river traffic all the way to Big Ben in London.

Unfortunately, on day two, disaster struck. Having fought off an attack by a group of territorial swans, he came down with Thames Tummy after swallowing the untreated river water which carries a legion of bacteria.

Yet Walliams has vowed to continue, come what may.

At the start of the day, he was still up bright and early to set off from Wallingford Bridge in Oxfordshire at 7am, despite having eaten only a piece of toast, a flat cola and a few glucose tablets — a sparse repast designed to curb vomiting. Hardly the carbohydrate overload his body needs.

'David is burning upwards of 8,000 calories a day, but with his stomach problems he can't get the fuel in him he needs,' explains his trainer, Greg Whyte, a former Olympic swimmer. 'But he's ploughing on.'

Indeed he is. Stripping off at the waterfront to reveal a tanned but toned torso, David jokes to the crowd. 'Ah yes, feast your eyes ...'

The previous night, his wife, model Lara Stone, met him at the finish point to give him a welcome hug. That must have perked him up? 'Yeah, it was

lovely,' he jokes. 'Especially as I'd never met her before.'

He looks in rude health but appearances are deceptive. Asked whether, in his own mind, he's going to complete it, he says: 'Maybe not by Monday (the scheduled end). But yeah, sometime this decade.'

'Anyway, can't stop here chatting, I'm the nation's sweetheart and I've got to swim to Reading.'

**A**ND with that, he's off, accompanied on the river by trainer Greg in a support boat, two lifeguards in canoes, as well as a Sport Relief camera crew.

Walliams is no stranger to endurance feats. Quietly and unobtrusively, he trains for months on end, then launches himself into his high profile fund-raisers.

In 2006, he swam the Channel for Sport Relief. Two years later, he swam the Strait of Gibraltar, between Europe and

Africa. Then, in 2010, he led a team of celebrity friends in a cycle relay from John o'Groats to Land's End.

But this Thames challenge is the toughest — the equivalent of swimming the English Channel seven times. So far, he has raised more than £350,000.

Today, he must head down through the villages of Goring, Whitchurch and Purley before finishing the day at Caversham Locks in Reading and as word spreads, the crowds on the riverbank are growing.

When we first join him at 3pm at Mapledurham locks in Purley-on-Thames, in West Berkshire, he is taking a break. It's one of several scheduled stops, but to help make up time he has been refuelling mid-swim, taking on energy bars and liquid while still in the water.

As well as the back-up team and Press who are following him on the riverbank, the public are turning out to cheer him on.

Two determined little chaps from the Goring and Streatley Scout Group, Trinity O'Connor and Freddie Barter, both nine, barge through the crowd to give

the star a handmade 'Well Done Walliams!' banner as he emerges from the tea shop where he's been refuelling.

The back of his neck is covered with a sticking plaster to prevent the wetsuit chaffing, and his goggles are pulled so tightly over his eyes that they give him an alien appearance.

Also among the well-wishers is pensioner Ann Higgs, who has jumped off the number 16 bus to sprint up the riverside to catch a glimpse of the star.

'This is the most exciting thing to happen in Purley for years,' she says. 'No wonder the poor boy has been ill. Years ago, when people jumped into the Thames to save others from suicide, they used to end up dying themselves from all kinds of nasty diseases.'

Yikes. I hope David can't hear this as he heads to the riverbank.

Part of the draw of this event has been Walliams's charm with the public. The last thing he must feel like doing as he emerges from the river is signing autographs or posing for pictures. But he does so with good grace.

**T**HE towpath ends 800 yards later and it's two-and-a-half hours before we see him again.

At early evening, outside Reading's Crowne Plaza hotel, a helicopter swoops low overhead. The crowd of around 1,000 people cheer. He must be near.

Among those waiting to greet the star are newlyweds Patrice and Ian Burnside, who interrupt their reception at the hotel opposite to scamper down to the jetty as he emerges from the water.

Wet, no doubt exhausted and hungry, we expect him to be ushered up the gangway to the comfort of the hotel. But he spends a few minutes chatting to the bride and groom and having his picture taken with them.

Then, to the roar of the crowd, he gets back in the water and sets off for a last half-mile. Bride Patrice throws some of her bouquet towards him, he gallantly swims back and places a rose between his teeth.

By the time he arrives at Caversham Locks half an hour later he has swum 69 miles of his challenge, made 58,676 strokes and burned 36,115 calories.

Taking hold of the loudspeaker he greets the crowd. 'People of Reading. This is David Walliams off the telly. Thank you so much for coming to support me. I have seen how your money helps those living in poverty in the UK and around the world. Me swimming is really quite boring. Helping people in poverty is exciting.'

Then, he's wrapped in a white towelling robe, given a bottle of water and escorted back to the hotel. I really hope there's a cheese and pickle sandwich waiting for him.



by Steve Bird

**D**R OLIVER COCKERELL is, by his own admission, an unlikely champion for a popular cause. But for nearly two weeks, the Harley Street doctor has fought a very public battle to evict 14 squatters who broke into, and took occupation of, his £1 million dream home.

It has been a struggle that has put him on a collision course with the Government, as the 49-year-old neurologist argued for a 'common-sense' change to the law which governs squatting. Above all, he believes the gangs of anarchists and Eastern Europeans who are increasingly taking over people's homes so shamelessly must be treated as criminals, rather than dealt with in civil courts.

Although he has taken the crusade on reluctantly, he is well aware that his case will inspire other victims to fight back.

His story started when squatters took over the five-bedroom Edwardian home he and his heavily pregnant wife planned to move into in time for the birth of their first child.

The raggle-taggle group of foreigners and drop-outs ignored his repeated pleas to leave the West London property despite telling them that his 35-year-old wife Kaltun was being put under emotional strain and the ordeal was placing their unborn baby at risk.

He said: 'These people think that because I'm a Harley Street doctor I've got lots of money, and so this doesn't matter. But I'm not very rich. Like so many people, I have a 90 per cent mortgage and I have to work more than 60 hours a week to pay that off.'

His anger is, in part, borne out of his own struggles to succeed.

The son of a Hammersmith businessman, he was sent to private school courtesy of a bursary for gifted children. Next, he funded his studies at King's College Medical School in Camberwell by taking two jobs — one as a security guard and another at McDonald's — while living in a council flat. Speaking at his desk at The London Clinic, he asks: 'Do these squatters' families know what they are doing and the effect they are having on people?'

Across London and other cities around the country, gangs of squatters have been occupying

## 'This cannot be allowed to happen to other people'

people's homes, sometimes forcing their way in after the owner has gone out for only a few hours.

Quickly, the squatters barricade themselves in by changing the locks, nailing windows shut and then putting up posters which state that the property is 'vacant' and is being squatted in. Alternatively, they create bogus tenancy agreements which they give to police when questioned in order to try to prove they are legally renting the place.

An estimated 20,000 squatters in the UK are exploiting lax laws. Although it is illegal for squatters to stay if the property owner demands they leave, police will usually intervene only after the despairing householder has spent thousands of pounds obtaining a court eviction order.

The squatters' ultimate goal — which, thankfully, is rarely realised — is to squat in a property for ten years, at which point they become the new legal owner.

In one area of East London, squatting is so rife that residents have set up a local 'home guard' to monitor the activities of gangs of Eastern Europeans who have seized — and gone on to ransack — a number of homes in the area.

The problem was highlighted last month when Julia High, a 55-year-old immigration officer, returned from a concert at The Proms to discover that a group of Romanian gypsies had broken into her home in Leytonstone, East London, and barricaded themselves inside.

To add insult to injury, the Romanian women put on Miss High's clothes. When challenged by neighbours, they said she was dead, before uncorking some of her wine.

Miss High spent two weeks cleaning up the mess after finally managing to get them evicted.

Similarly, this week, sisters Amelita and Lilia Olasa (both retired nurses) fell victim to another family of Romanian squatters.

They wept as they surveyed the damage done to the £500,000 North London home where they have lived for 27 years. Furniture, kitchen appliances and personal possessions were taken, and makeshift ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts were littered throughout the three-bedroom house.

The gang had struck when the sisters went away on holiday. After breaking in, the squatters produced a bogus six-month 'contract' claiming they were paying a 'landlord' £1,200 rent.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Lilia asked: 'How are people allowed to do this?'

It is that very same question to which Dr Cockerell and the ever-increasing number of other vic-



Go with the flow: David Walliams is taking on the Thames