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# In The Bath

Tim FitzHigham

IN THE BATH  
CONQUERING THE CHANNEL IN  
A PIECE OF PLUMBING

BY

TIM  
FITZHIGHAM



The FitzHigham Papers: Volume V

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*For my family, here and gone.*

**PRAISE FOR THE STAGE SHOW, *IN THE BATH:*  
*UNPLUGGED:***

‘One of the most moving and compelling tales you’ll hear anywhere.’

*Scotsman*

‘The audience barely stops laughing as FitzHigham narrates jokes at an intense pace.’

*Metro*

‘Take a delightfully daft idea and add a delightfully posh performer and what do you have? A delightfully nice hour.’

*Evening Standard* (Critic’s Choice)

‘A must see.’

*Independent*

**CONCERN FOR TIM FITZHIGAM:**

‘By his own admission Tim is bonkers, which says it all really. But I respect him very much for being who he is, and not at all afraid of it! Tim and I go back a long way, we were pals at junior school, and as he so rightly remembered for a short period of time we had the same shoes. Tim is the kind of person who you would never dream of saying “keep smiling” to... he already is!’

ELLEN MACARTHUR

‘Many people have foolish adventures, few make them so consistently hilarious, all in all the perfect British Eccentric.’

DARA O’BRIAIN

‘When I first met Tim I thought, “OH my God.” Then I got to know him and thought, “Oh MY God.” Then I heard he was writing a book and I thought, “OH MY GOD!” BUY THIS BOOK!’

NEIL MORRISSEY

‘The most heroic achievement since the invention of the “Crapper”. Buy this book! Then read it in the bath.’

SIMON KIRBY, MD of Thomas Crapper & Co

‘There are few people in this life with the drive and the old-fashioned British pluck to achieve something like this. There are fewer still with the wit and charisma to tell their story with such gleeful hilarity. Tim is a rare talent indeed, brave, determined and the very embodiment of the great English eccentric. He is a true adventurer in the Giles Wemembley-Hogg spirit. May God bless him and all who sail in him.’

MARCUS BRIGSTOCKE

‘This book reveals a hitherto unknown light on the consequences of youthful COLD BATHS... I have read the book which I commend you to do also, preferably in the bathroom!!’

SIR CHRISTOPHER BENSON, Master of the Company of Watermen and Lightermen of the River Thames 2004-2005

‘The fragile spirit of British eccentricity lies in the horned hands of this idiot. God help us!’

SUGGS

‘It’s journeys like the bath trip that put the Great in Great Britain. This is what we do best. When I first heard about Tim’s bath I laughed so hard I nearly fell overboard.’

PAUL LUDWIG, Bargemaster to Her Majesty the Queen  
‘A barkingly mad, noble adventure – a brilliantly told tale.’

PETER BENNETT-JONES, Chairperson of Comic Relief

‘There’s a fine line between madness and genius – Tim has well and truly crossed it ... Now none of the rest of us ever have to [make this journey]. Ever.’

RICHARD HAMMOND

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VOLUME IV: Paper Boat

VOLUME VII: The Man Who Discovered the Kama Sutra

VOLUME VIII: My Cufflinks Box: Its Vital Importance

GENERAL

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Willetts and the Dark Tunnel

Poetry: A Word of Guidance

Keeping Pig Keepers

Pennyquick and the Fallen Men

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Mistakes in Medieval Wool Gathering

The Conker: A Failed Experiment in Diet

My Top One Hundred Conker Recipes

The Decline in Domestic Manners Since 1270

OTHER PUBLISHED BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

...

A blank page.

Every manual should have one.

# FOREWORD

This is the true story of how out of hand things can become from a very simple starting point. It covers the two summers when I tried to become the first person in history to successfully row the English Channel in a bath. I pursued this aim with the innocence and drive of a five-year-old and the mess this created is contained in the following volume.

I've tried to remember the events of those two summers and the intervening winter as well as I can. I may have mixed up a sandbank here or a tide or date there but I've tried to decipher my notes of the time (written with very badly damaged hands) to the best of my abilities to capture the story as truthfully as possible. I apologise in advance for any mistakes I've made, but the truth of the bath remains, like the trip itself, eccentric. I do hope you enjoy reading it.

There are a few people to thank, in no order and leaving most of the more important ones out: my friends and other animals. PBJ, Janette, Mary and all at PBJ. Charlie Viney and all at Mulcahy & Viney. Patient Trevor and all at Preface. Jeremy, Karon and Joe. The theatres, kind reviewers and audiences that have kept me out of gaol all these years. The clowns who make it such a joy to make people laugh and have guided me endlessly. The Clan. St Chad's College. LFH. The team of hardened drinkers who inspire me. The bar staff who inspire them. And, the bath team - this is our story.

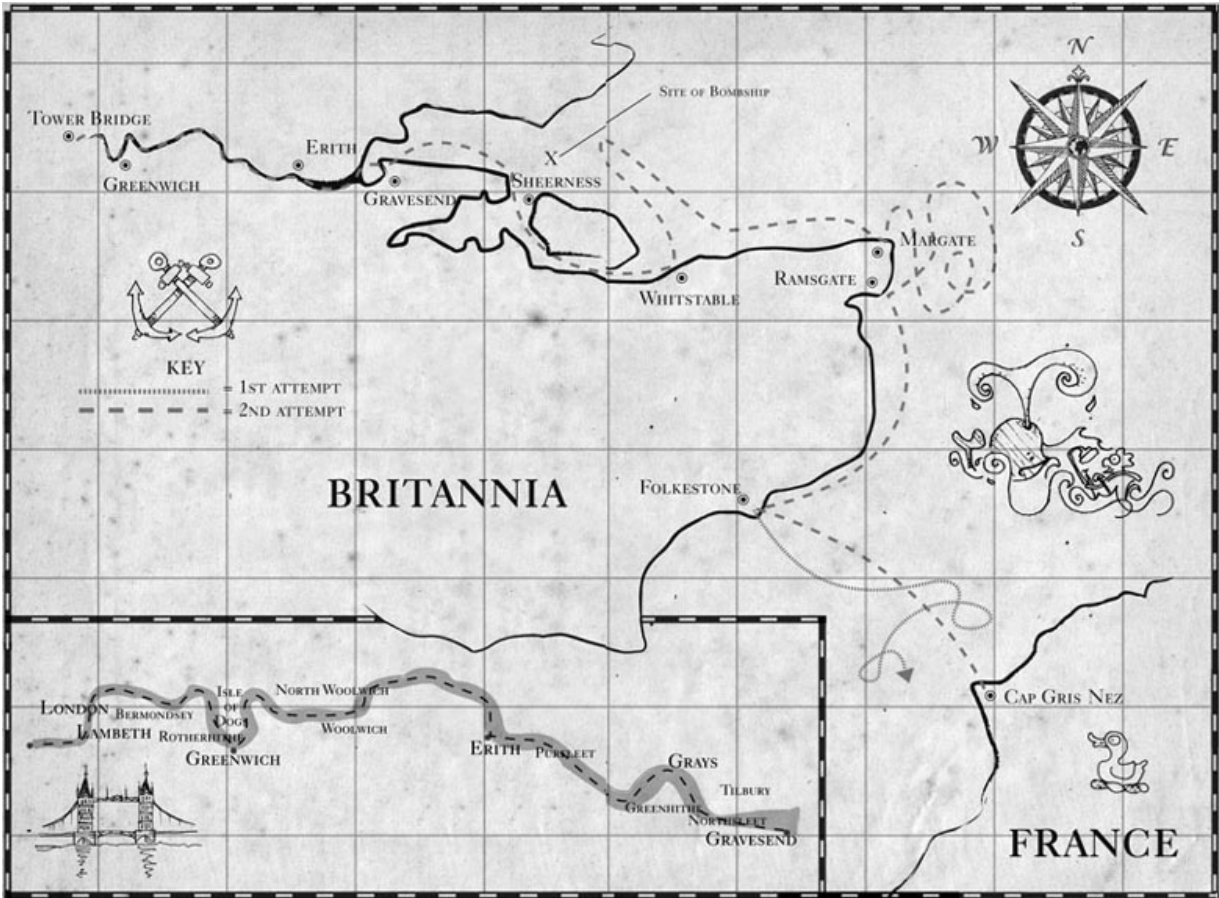
Finally, I'd like to thank the skippers of all the massive tankers and container ships in the English Channel that narrowly missed me.

Signed under the moon with the ice rapidly melting in the glass.

Tim FitzHigham  
Tangiers, 1843  
(on 26 February 2008)



# 2004-2005 - CAP GRIS NEZ TO TOWER BRIDGE





## INTRODUCTION

# MUCH SIMPLE PLEASURE

There are few things in life as good as the warm embrace of a well-drawn bath. Steam swirled soporifically around my nostrils, rising up to form complex weather systems round the dead hanging plant above me.

I lay back, waves gently lapping the islands of my knees, thinking of the most luxurious bath time I'd been involved in. Easy: a huge bath I'd shared with three beautiful women, playing hunt the soap.

I was three and they were four, two and one respectively.

I'd been bathing for many years semi-professionally. It started in Norfolk. I was born in what is now the lunatic asylum in King's Lynn. There seems to be some confusion about the exact date it changed but at the time I arrived there, I'm told people are fairly sure it was the maternity unit. I was taken back to a large bath in the fen. The fens of Norfolk are a flat land with big sunsets. They were claimed out of the sea by Dutch engineers in the 1600s using clever dikes and are now a slightly tamed version of a swamp. In the 1970s, when I was born, not many people lived there and socially it was still run like medieval England. There was a Lord, who lived a long way away, a Sir, who might live closer or even run things locally and, failing both of these, there'd be a Squire who would run, and probably own, your village. Where we lived wasn't even a village, it was much smaller and more chaotic. Places too tiny and eccentric to be villages in Norfolk are called droves. Being a really little one of those, it didn't even have a squire. In the absence of sane alternatives, our happy drove made do with my dad.

I loved bath time in Norfolk. I was normally found in, what I remember as, a permanently sunlit orchard. I'd be playing, well, more sitting or bouncing, before being taken up for my bath. My mum and I had songs for everything and there was a bathing one, too.

The Norfolk house we were living in had been gradually slipping into the fen for years. Normally they build houses in the fens on large oak rafts but somehow someone had forgotten this. Many of the walls leaned quite badly and there were rooms that were shut off from us as they'd gone under. Our house was miles inland but sinking fast. When I was two, my sister arrived and joined me in bouncing and baths. I gave her my favourite bouncing chair and Dad converted an old wooden beer barrel into a castle for me. In line with my designs (I was three at the time so they may

not have passed an architectural course) he even cut gothic windows into it. I moved in with a large ginger stray – a cat I loved called Oscar.

By the time my barrel got gothic windows, the main house was faring less well. The wall near the main staircase was leaning nine feet to the perpendicular. Dad finally accepted this might be a bit unsafe. Accompanied by much booing and hissing from me we left the bath in Norfolk to sink gently into the fen, along with the house that surrounded it, and moved to Derbyshire. Dad took the large oak gateposts from Norfolk with us and made the dining-room table from them. The bath in Derbyshire was much smaller, more awkward and much, much colder. The countryside was also considerably higher with numerous humps and mountains. At first I didn't like it and registered my protest by painting violently on walls all over the house when no one was looking. I found hills very frightening as in Norfolk I'd never met them.

However, over many baths, snow-laden mornings in winter, gorgeous mists hanging over stone walls in spring, warm, sunny summers and golden-leafed autumns I came to love Derbyshire. It was a very happy place. My grandparents on my dad's side lived there and my granny was one of the funniest, most beautiful things in the world to me. She and her oldest friend Elsie had me in non-stop tears of laughter with stories, songs and jokes. One was all about how they'd been drilled in the war to defend Derbyshire with an antique Gatling gun, no instructions and some rather soggy ammunition. Somehow it went off and the ensuing chaos of the story made me laugh till I hurt. The memory of Granny telling how she and Elsie flailed around behind the butt of this mighty weapon trying to work out how to stop it as it spewed ammunition all over the Derbyshire countryside still makes me smile, even now.

Derbyshire became too much of a distraction from my baths, so we moved to Hertfordshire as Mum got a post there. She's a priest and her career has given my dad some great moments. Striding up to people at parties who didn't know what Mum did, he'd open with, 'as I said to the vicar in bed last night ...' before looking on at the total bafflement that met him. Now she's been made a canon it's led him to a rich seam including anything ending with 'you're fired', many lines involving short or long fuses as required and several others which, if you ever meet him, will not be more than a few seconds away.

In the holidays I'd go on bathing tours, great plumbing progresses of the country, staying with eccentric relatives who only had outdoor wells, godparents who taught me to surf and debonair great-uncles and -aunts who would take me out for lunch and let me read books. Hot steam wrapped about my ears.

Throughout all these holidays and various baths, I'd always come back to the one in Hertfordshire. My parents' Hertfordshire bath is the finest I've ever found. It's huge and wide and really comfy. Not so big that it's impossible to keep hot, but not so small that you need a degree in yoga to use it. It has no complicated or ostentatious plumbing; it's just a really solid, decent bath - rather like my parents. This was the bath in which I now found myself.

Coming round from dozing lazily I attempted the most complicated of bath-based manoeuvres: letting some water out of the plug while simultaneously topping up the bath with new, hotter water. It didn't work very well. It never does for me. I lay back into the hot, watery arms and turned my mind to my current problem - a problem that was dogging me with cat-like stealth.

In 2003 I'd broken the world's oldest maritime record kayaking down the River Thames in a boat entirely made of paper. I'd discovered the original record in a footnote while

reading a book on poets in the reign of James I (or VI, I'm not going to take sides on the issue here). The record had been set in 1619 when the Thames Water Poet, John Taylor, made it 40 miles down the river in a paper boat using two large dried fish for the oars. This record had slightly obsessed me for years. So, during a very wet March, in the worst weather seen on the Thames in 40 years, I'd set out to go 41 miles and raise £500 for a charity called Comic Relief. When I stepped off my 100% recycled paper boat, 384 years after John Taylor, I'd gone 160 miles in what was rapidly becoming a soggy mass of papier mâché held together with gaffer tape and luck. The paper boat finish was televised on four continents and raised in excess of £10,000 for the charity. This was way beyond anything I'd thought remotely possible and ignited in me a passion for boats, water and adventure that I didn't know I had. Admittedly, I'd always done things slightly differently from those around me, but a succession of teachers, friends and relations had tried to keep this tendency in check. I'd been more embarrassed that I seemed to see the world sideways than proud of it. The triumph of the paper boat was that I normally kept my imagination under wraps. This time I'd let it fly and the results were great.

Bath water nibbled seductively at my earlobes as the problem raged round my head. I was reflecting, with all the brilliance of a cracked mirror, on how to follow up the adventure in the paper boat. The problem was: what could I do next? Anything seemed possible but I just couldn't decide what. If the world was my oyster, I was having difficulty opening the shell.

The paper-boat adventure had been a hugely successful, joyous trip into the absurd. It had combined the three things I loved most: outdoor adventure, raising some cash for a cause and making people laugh. It had challenged me and taught me something new. Before the paper boat, I'd

never been in a kayak and certainly never dreamt I'd get to take one the whole length of the mighty River Thames. However, when the journey finished, it had left a hole.

To that point, I'd spent my life wandering around bumping into experiences, feeling a bit lost and trying to find something useful to do. I'd made a career out of temporary jobs, while I tried to escape towards doing something in comedy or acting. I'd been lucky; I'd loved it all (with the possible exception of a very brief, dyspeptic spell cleaning drains with no proper equipment).

Trying to find something to do in life had in itself been a great life. However, in the wake of the paper-boat trip it now felt something was missing. Being out on the water in the middle of challenge had made me smile and, desperate as a frisky bullock demanding entry to a pasture of cows nine months before breeding season, I wanted more.

Legend records a graveyard where elderly elephants instinctively go to lie down and die. Similarly, whenever I need to think really hard, I always head to my parents' Hertfordshire bath, draw it and lie down. Many of my best and worst plans had come to me in the bath that now cosseted me. I looked up at the dead plant in the hanging basket for inspiration: none came. And the bath water had got cold again. With only mildly less success than before, I attempted to top up the bath again.

What could I do?

I took a sip from the now warm glass of gin left on the table next to me. As I reached over to put it back, it knocked against the bath. There was a muffled thud. It was as though the bath had spoken. I tapped it again. There was a cast-iron work of genius nestling beneath my buttocks. I'd do something with a bath. People always seem to be sitting in bathfuls of beans for charity: no challenge there.

Then in a flash it hit me. I could row it. A Noël Coward song about a man rowing an India Rubber bath across Lake Windermere ripped into my head.

Like Archimedes before me, in that instant, I discovered something that I wanted to do. I would take a bath, put oars on it and row it across the English Channel. I felt called, driven, motivated. I would become to sanitaryware what the Wright Brothers were to aviation. I would be the Captain Webb of baths. Synapses in my brain snapped and whirred into life. Fireworks of ideas shot out of the bath and bounced off the walls in the tiny bathroom. I was hooked.

I've become aware over many years and countless projects that I have the potential to become a little obsessive about things. It's something I've always tried hard to control, so now, when an idea comes to me I normally give it ten minutes' thought to try and talk myself out of it. Within ten short minutes, the bath plan had totally taken hold. This idea was not only a goer, it was a belter.

I burst into the drawing room to see my parents not even sketching; they looked up, shocked. I left the drawing room and returned to the bathroom. Putting on a dressing gown to cover my nudity I left the bathroom again and re-burst into the drawing room.

'I'm going to row the English Channel in a bath for Sport Relief.' Mum sat looking a bit stunned. Dad responded first, 'Well, your great-grandmother was the first lady to swim from Folkestone to Dover, or was it Dover to Folkestone ... or perhaps it was Ramsgate?'

'Really, Dad?'

'Yes she was called Lilius; although in the draconian times when she did it, swimming costumes were so big she probably floated most of the way on an enormous pair of



bloomers. Still if you make it, it'll be another first for the family.'

Dad smiled, Mum still looked a bit shocked. I closed the door and triumphantly dripped back to the bathroom, leaving my parents feeling much, I suspected, like a less mathematical version of Mr and Mrs Archimedes.

A litter of questions popped up. I had no money to fund the project and above all, didn't have a spare bath. My first attempt to get one was not a resounding success.

'Dad, you know I need a bath to row the Channel ...'

'Yes ...'

'Can I borrow the one in the bathroom?'

'No.'



## CHAPTER ONE

# VIBRATING PIPES

*'I climbed Mount Everest - from the inside.'*

Spike Milligan

Back at my desk, problems and questions carpet-bombed me. I didn't know anything about the sea, would that be important? Would it be possible to make a bath really float? What was the procedure for rowing the Channel? Was there anything legal that had to be done? These and many more questions entered the fray until the dogfight of problems diving and weaving above me had developed into a real scrap.

At the time I was working off and on in a temp job for the civil service. After work one night, I met up with an old friend called Jack. I'd been trying to keep the bath idea a secret, as I didn't really have much of a clue how to proceed at that stage, but seeing Jack I suddenly blurted out, 'I'm going to row the English Channel in a bath for Sport Relief.'

Jack looked on wide-eyed, similar, I imagine, to a frog that's swallowed a wasp. He rallied and in a voice pitched much higher than his normal one responded, 'Off you go then ...'

Sipping his beer, his eyes relaxed and the incisive brain I've always rated him for hummed and revved into a higher gear.

'How are you going to pay for it?'

'Erm ... I hadn't really thought about that in huge detail.'

'I'll get you a list of bathroom companies. One of them might sponsor it.'

With Jack-like efficiency the list arrived the next day. I started at the top and began phoning bathroom companies. No one was interested. A third thought I was mad, another third that I wasn't serious and the third third thought both.

My phone rang, it was Jack: 'Have you got the list?'

'Yes. I've been phoning them all day. It's not going very well ...'

'Have you got to the last page yet?'

'No, why?'

'Have a look at the "T" section.'

'Oh my ... are they still in business?'

'It seems so - I think they might be the ones for you.'

'I'll give them a ring ...'

I put down the phone and picked it up again immediately. The ring tone on the other end seemed to take longer than a BT engineer but finally a female voice answered, 'Good afternoon, Thomas Crapper and Company, how may I help you?'

Stifling a giggle, I put on the stentorian voice I'd been perfecting in tests for the civil service, 'I'd like to speak to someone in charge ...'

'I'll put you through. May I ask what it's about?'

'I'd like a bath.'

After some holding music, rather pleasingly Flanders and Swann, a soft midland accent rolled into my ear, 'Good afternoon, Warwick Knott, General Manager, how can I help?'

'I'd like one of your baths please.'

'Certainly, what sort of bath would you like?'

'A strong one; I need it to withstand the English Channel.'

'What?'

'I'd like to row the Channel in it.'

'Oh good ... I'll put you through to the Managing Director.'

After more Flanders and Swann, a clipped officer's voice arrived with martial precision at the end of the line, 'May I help you?'

'I'd like one of your baths please.'

'Certainly, what sort of bath would you like?'

'A strong one; I need it to withstand the English Channel.'

'What?'

'I'd like to row the Channel in it.'

'Very funny, Ronnie, I've really got to go, I've got quite a lot to get done this afternoon. Goodbye.'

The line went dead. I paused. Who was Ronnie? I picked up the phone and dialled again. The same female voice answered.

'Good afternoon, Thomas Crapper and Company, how may I help you?'

'It's me again, I seem to have got cut off, please can you put me through to the Managing Director again?'

'Certainly.'

'And tell him I don't know who Ronnie is ...'

The officer's voice came back on the line.

'I'm sorry, I thought you were a friend of mine. Now what can I do for you?'

'I want one of your baths to row across the English Channel to raise money for a charity called Sport Relief.'

'That was what I thought you said the first time ...'

I waited for another rebuttal.

'If you're really serious about this, I think you'd better come and see me.'

'Perfect. How about the day after tomorrow? Where are you?'

'Just outside Stratford upon Avon.'

Two days later I drove up to Stratford, looked at the instructions I'd been given, then left Stratford and headed south. Somewhere on the way I missed the turning. Somewhere on the way back I missed it again but on the third time found the understated gateway I was looking for. I drove up the track. On the left was a cricket pavilion and in front of that, following the original designs laid down by God, a pitch. To one side of it were cricketing nets and a tree: so far, so perfectly English. On the right of the track were fields with a stream running through them and various sheep masticating nonchalantly and discussing the effects of unexpected car arrivals on ovine digestion.

Pulling into the car park I was unable to park. Baths overran all the parking spaces. There must have been 200 parked there in all. I'd reached the bath version of the Promised Land. Over the other side of the baths, ahead of me and slightly to the left, was a double gate to some sort of stabling. To the right of the gate, another smaller drive and a large rhododendron bush, was another smaller building. A plum-coloured sign announced to the world that this was the head office of the world's greatest bathroom company: Thomas Crapper & Company. Crapper's Head Office was as eccentric and beautiful as you might expect. Beneath the sign was the main entrance. Either side of the door, where other lesser companies would have stone lions,