

**Eric Wilkinson, from Darlington was  
a swimming coach and  
administrator**



**ERIC Wilkinson, who went from the shallow end at Gladstone Street baths in Darlington to become a key figure in British swimming coaching and administration for more than half a century, has died. He was 92.**

Dozens of national champions benefitted from his coaching.

“He was brilliant” said his daughter, Emma, herself a former international “It wasn’t as if it was an Olympic-size pool, it was just the local baths. Darlington’s name was known everywhere.”

He was elected president of the Amateur Swimming Association, the ASA’s highest honour, in 1991.



Eric Wilkinson is presented with the chain of office of the President of the Amateur Swimming Association by outgoing president Ed Dean

Interrupted by RAF National Service from 1951-53, Eric spent a 45-year working life as a telegraphist with The Northern Echo and its sister papers – never once taking a day off sick – and also wrote swimming columns under the pseudonym Otter.

On one occasion, Emma recalled, he'd suffered serious facial burns after trying to coax a garden bonfire into life with petrol. "He went to hospital, had some treatment, then got on his bike and reported for the night shift."

Eric began competing in swimming and water polo events for the Darlington club in 1948, winning national honours while in the RAF.

After demobilisation, he was asked to take over as Darlington's chief coach, building the club into one of the country's most successful. His proteges included Kim Whickham, a double Commonwealth Games medallist, and Karen Toole, who on a wild night swam the Channel in just over nine hours.



Eric Wilkinson pictured in 1961 when he was Darlington's swimming coach

“I think he saw sport, especially swimming, as a force for good” said Emma. “He was very competitive, a perfectionist and a zealot, but with the simply philosophy of quality over quantity.

“A lot of coaches just flogged their swimmers, dad had a different approach. He loved swimming and he wanted them to love it, too.”



Eric was also Darlington's secretary, competition secretary, chairman and president, was elected to the Northumberland and Durham ASA executive in 1958 and to the North-East executive soon afterwards – serving both for 50 years. He became Northumberland and Durham president in 1966, North-East president in 1969 and then a life president of both.

In 1974 he was asked to form and manage the England national youth squad and to take charge of the Great Britain junior team. He was the GB swimming official at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, for the world championships in 1986, 1990 and 1994, for three Commonwealth Games and other European and national championships. He also managed the GB open water team and chaired the ASA and GB swimming and selection committees.



Eric Wilkinson pictured in 1973 wearing his Great Britain swimming blazer

All his involvement was voluntary and unpaid. “He did it because he just loved swimming” said Emma, director of communications for football’s Premier League.

After a lifetime in Darlington, Eric and his wife Moyra moved 22 years ago to Middleton-in-Teesdale, though he resisted the temptation to take a dip in the Tees which followed behind his home.

He also became a passionate Chelsea FC fan while Emma worked for the club – a passion which endured – and also enthusiastically followed cricket and F1 racing.

He leaves Moyra, son Mark and daughter Emma, and grandchildren Daniel and Jack. His funeral will be in Middleton-in-Teesdale on a date to be confirmed.