

FENLAND ICE SKATING



"This is the only place one could skate to to preach. One Sunday in 1891 Brother Garwood skated down and got in. The next Sunday I went, and got home safely."

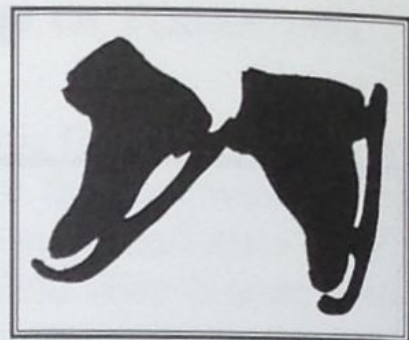
H. A. Sneath

Ice skating in the fens dates back to pre-Roman times. During the winter months, when dykes and rivers froze over, it was easier to skate than walk the roads and tracks. Before modern road surfaces were developed winter roads became muddy, rutted and difficult to travel along.

Wintertime use of the frozen waterways meant families could keep in touch over greater distances than could be achieved by road. Labourers were able to

get to work more easily – and people living in remote fenland areas could attend local markets.

The earliest skates were made from animal bone and they had a smooth flat base. For many centuries ice-skates were made from bone and leather, but by the 17th century they had a metal blade and were made by the village blacksmith and carpenter.



By the end of the 18th century there was even “a sledge for icy conditions”. It had four horse bones as skates, and the driver used a pitchfork to push himself forward.

In January 1908, the Stamford Mercury reported: *“The keen weather at the close of last week provided ample sport for skaters on Saturday and Sunday...Many persons disported themselves on the river at Bourne. Below the railway bridge and right down to Tongue End there was a splendid sheet of ice – a rapid thaw set in on Monday.”*

Thurlby villagers continued to use the frozen river and dykes for both work and pleasure during the 20th century.

H. A. Sneath wrote of skating down the River Glen one Sunday – to preach at Tongue End Chapel, and as soon as the ice was thick enough George Griffin would regularly skate along local dykes and drains. He too skated the River Glen, as did Len Wade. Len skated the Glen as far as Cowbit Washes, and many local dykes and drains, including the Gravel Drain in Thurlby Fen.

One winter when the conditions were ideal for skating, Len, Rose Courton and Jack Sandall set off on their bikes, heading for Grimsthorpe. They called in at Pulford’s Garage and told Harry Pulford where they were going. Harry closed the garage, everyone piled into his car and they all had a wonderful afternoon skating on Grimsthorpe Lake.

Tom Courton, his sister Eva and Eleanor Griffin all loved to skate, and at every opportunity they would be on the ice in the fens. They even skated at night-time. Tom borrowed his father’s car and off they would go down the Fen where they skated by the beam from the car’s headlights.

One Sunday when there was thick ice everywhere, Eleanor Griffin wanted very much to go skating. However, her mother had very strict ideas about what was allowed on a Sunday – and ice-skating was not included! She told Eleanor she could skate the following day. Tom Courton was allowed to go off that day and enjoy some skating – on the Monday a thaw set in, much to Eleanor’s disappointment.

Speed skating in fenland was always popular, and the first Lincolnshire Speed Skating Championships took place in 1879, on Vernatts Drain, which runs from Pode Hole to the River Welland.

Since that time, in years when there has been sufficient ice, there have been County Championships in the fens. Cowbit Washes were an ideal site until 1950, when new drainage schemes were implemented.

Eleanor Griffin and her friends had skated at Cowbit Washes and they attended the Championships on the lake at Grimsthorpe Park.

Between Christmas and New Year in 1962, the so-called "forgotten village" of Tongue End, hit the national sporting headlines. Not only the Fenland Skating Championships, but the Amateur Skating Championships of Great Britain were held on a 50-acre site, near Windmill Farm.

The Welland River Board flooded the site, to a depth of two feet, with water from the River Glen - something they have continued to do from December 1st to March 31st every winter. After three days of hard frost there was a three-inch thickness of ice. Farmer Arthur Ward provided an unploughed field for car parking, and supplied electricity for the floodlights.

Enthusiasts came from far and wide. Tom and Kathleen Courton, as members of the Lincolnshire Skating Association Committee, attended the event - their daughter Judy later won the Championship three times between 1965 and 1970.

Eleanor Griffin was there and found the skating excellent. Edwynna Kemp was among the spectators; and John Jaworskyj crossed the Jubilee Bridge to be there. Tony Hallam remembers the BBC Outside Broadcast cameramen were filming the speed skating races.

Conditions were perfect for the first event - 'The Fenland Trophy Race'. There were 18 entries for the 1½ mile course. The race was won by a 22-year-old from Bressingham, near Diss, Norfolk - Adrian Bloom! A person better known today for his horticultural expertise, rather than his speed-skating skills.