



Skating on thin ice

Wordsworth resembled ‘a dancing cow’ and Prince Albert disappeared through the ice ‘up to his head’: for all its pleasures, natural skating was a risk to both life and reputation, discovers **Harry Pearson**

CELEBRATED for his verse, William Wordsworth is less acclaimed for another of his passions—ice skating. Perhaps that is just as well, for his friend Thomas de Quincey said that, on skates, the poet resembled ‘a dancing cow’. Wordsworth did not see himself like that, of course, fondly recalling his childhood near Hawkshead in Cumbria when ‘All shod with steel/we hiss’d along the polish’d ice in games’.

Before the days of mechanical refrigeration, all skating was done al fresco. There was a magic to the swish of blades cutting ice in the open air, a frosty sparkle, and it attracted artists and poets. Wordsworth’s friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge delighted in the way a skater on a frozen tarn ‘gives an impulse to the icy trees and the woods all around the lake tinkle’.

At about the same time that Wordsworth was skidding inelegantly across Windermere, Sir Henry Raeburn famously painted the austere Scots minister the Revd Robert Walker skating on Duddingston Loch, Edinburgh. Walker adopts the ‘genteel rolling’ pose of the Georgian gentleman, arms folded, pushing foot outstretched behind him. The clergyman looks much more stately than a jiggling heifer, but not everyone was impressed. Jerome K. Jerome thought this style of skating looked as if ‘it has been invented by someone with a wooden leg’.

Skating was first reported in Britain in 1190 by William Fitzstephens, subdeacon



*Facing page: Sir Henry Raeburn's **The Reverend Robert Walker skating on Duddingston Loch, 1795.** Above: Capt Hopkins and his wife are wary skaters on a London lake in 1910*

‘East Anglian skaters were celebrated and the big races drew crowds of thousands’

to Thomas Becket, who watched boys with bones tied to their feet sliding across a frozen pond ‘as quickly as a bird flyeth’. Skating as we know it today, on steel-bladed skates, however, arrived much later, brought back to England by the Stuarts, who had picked up the sport when exiled in The Netherlands. Championed by the Royal Family, skating quickly became fashionable.

In December 1662, Samuel Pepys walked by the Serpentine, where ‘it being a great frost, did see people sliding on their skeates which is a very pretty art’. On the same day, John Evelyn went to the canal in St James’s Park, where he watched men ‘with scheets [skating was such a new-fangled novelty, nobody seemed certain how to spell it] after the manner of the Hollanders’, marvelling at their speed. Later that month, Pepys accompanied the Duke of York to the same stretch of water. Here, the future King went skating despite the wet and broken ice, much to the great diarist’s alarm.

Pepys was right to be wary. For all its pleasures, natural skating was hazardous—dozens of people died each year on thin ice and, even when the ice was strong, it could still be dangerous. During the 1683 Thames →



Above: The iced-over courtyard offers a dramatic backdrop to skating at Somerset House, London WC2. *Below, from left:* Henry Howes glides to glory in the 1947 Amateur Skating Championships at Bury Fen, Cambridgeshire; a 1950s take on the Victorian sleigh-chair at Mare Fen, Cambridgeshire; the hotly contested 1933 British Quarter-mile Ice Skating Championships at Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire



Frost Fair, a party of skaters was caught by the wind and blown out to sea, 'arriving living,' noted Charles Mackay, '(although perished with cold and hunger) upon the coast of Essex'. Status offered no immunity. In February 1841, Prince Albert was skating on the lake at Buckingham Palace when, Queen Victoria recorded in her diary: 'The ice cracked and Albert was in the water up to his head.' Thankfully, 'my dearest Albert managed to catch my arm and reached the ground in safety'.

Queen Victoria herself had been taught to skate by a Mr Talbot of Eton College, although she far preferred to be pushed across the ice on a sleigh-chair by her husband. In the 19th

century, this was considered far more lady-like. However, in January 1810, the *Morning Post* recorded an incident in which the gentlemen skating on the frosted Serpentine were put to shame by 'a lady, who cut the letters O. P. with a precision and neatness truly astonishing'. Generally for women, as Jerome noted acerbically, the 'proper skating attitude was thought to be that of clinging limpness to some male relative'.

Despite the dangers, skating became a British passion. The first club was founded in Edinburgh in 1742, with London following suit in 1830. Yet enthusiasts were often thwarted by winters that were not cold enough. A bold

attempt to overcome the elements was made by Henry Kirk of London's Blackheath in 1841, when he patented artificial ice and opened a rink filled with it near Tottenham Court Road. Mechanical refrigeration was still 30 years off, but Kirk had overcome that problem in a singular fashion—making 'ice' from a mixture of pork lard and salts. People could certainly skate on his surface, but the smell of it—particularly in the warmer months—seems to have driven off all but the most robust skaters. By 1844, the fatty rink had gone.

The first indoor rink with real ice was opened in 1876, by John Gamgee, a veterinarian and inventor. Initially housed in a tent in London's

Chelsea, the 'glaciarium' proved an instant hit and, when Gamgee's establishment moved to a permanent home on the King's Road, it was reported that 200 customers turned up to skate on the opening day. Shortly afterwards, other, larger glaciaria opened at Charing Cross and at Rusholme in Manchester.

This arrival of covered rinks reduced the importance of outdoor skating. As *The Graphic* reported in 1896: 'There was never enough frost to make skating a national pastime with us as it is in Canada.' However, the capital now had the New Niagara near St James's Park and Hengler's National

Ice Skating Palace in Regent Street, where 'creature comforts were readily to hand in cosily furnished restaurants'. Skating in British cities, once fresh and fraught with hazard, had been

tamed by science. Unwittingly, Gamgee had ushered in a world of booming music, synchronised clapping and sequins.

In the countryside, however, what we might now call 'wild skating' remained an obsession and nowhere was that truer than in the vast and watery fenlands north of Cambridge. Skating had been brought to East Anglia by Dutch drainage engineers in the 1660s and its place secured by a wave of Flemish immigrants, descendants perhaps of the skaters in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's winter landscapes. In London, skaters had traced elegant figures on the ice, their arms held as if drawing back an arrow with a bow; in the

Fens, they skated to get from place to place as quickly as possible—and that was very fast indeed. According to a correspondent of *Sporting Magazine* in 1838, he had, one icy December day, 'breakfasted at home, lunched at Wisbech, twenty-one miles away, dined at Whittlesey, fourteen more, and returned home to a rubber of whist'.

In the Fens, people learned to skate in infancy using old kitchen chairs fitted with runners for support. By the mid 18th century, races featuring skaters 'trained on to the acme of fleetness and endurance' (as *Sporting Magazine* noted) were

a feature of Fenland winters. Prizes were large and tempting, especially to farm labourers earning a few shillings per week.

In 1821, 100 guineas was offered for anyone

who could skate a mile in less than three minutes. The prize was claimed by John Gittam of Nordelph, with a time of 2min 53sec. The deeds of the East Anglian skaters were celebrated nationally and the big races drew crowds of thousands, as well as heavy betting. One incident encapsulated the legendary prowess of the Fen skaters: in 1875, Larman Register raced a steam train from Littleport to Ely and beat it by 30 seconds, despite railwaymen attempting to sabotage him by tossing hot coals onto the ice.

Nowadays, Fenland speed skaters such as Register, 'Turkey' Smart—whose brilliant career in the 1850s was, literally, cut short,

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Ice, ice, baby: the best skating rinks

Hampton Court Palace Ice Rink, East Molesey, Surrey

Henry VIII's 16th-century home forms a perfect backdrop for skating by the banks of the Thames (www.hamptoncourtpalaceicerink.co.uk)

Royal Pavilion Ice Rink, Brighton, East Sussex

The illuminated *Arabian Nights* domes and turrets of the Prince Regent's great folly are a romantic setting for a night on the ice (www.royalpavilionicerink.co.uk)

Bath on Ice, Royal Victoria Park, Bath, Somerset

This 1,000sq ft rink sits in the heart of Bath's best-loved park. If Jane Austen's Mr Darcy had skated, he would surely have done it here (www.bathonice.co.uk)

Winter at Warwick Castle, Warwickshire

The ice rink here is on the castle's East Front, beneath the great medieval walls, overlooked by the stately Guy's Tower (www.warwick-castle.com)

The Great Skate, Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, Oxfordshire

This year offers visitors the first chance to ice skate in the magnificent Great Court of Vanbrugh's Baroque masterpiece (www.blenheimpalace.com)



Every faith: Margaret Loxton's nuns are confident the ice will hold in *Winter at the Convent*

by an accident with a scythe—and Albert Tebbitt, a farmer's son from Waterbeach who competed at the 1924 Olympics, are part of sporting history. The last great race in the Fens was held in 1997. Since then, the locals have spoken of their abandoned skates 'whimpering in the closet for want of ice'. Climate change has brought milder winters and the authorities are more safety conscious than they once were (today, most UK councils allow skating on their lakes and ponds only when the ice is at least 4in thick—an event as unlikely as encountering a dancing cow).

Although there are still those who take to skates on frozen washes, tarns and water meadows on the rare occasions it is possible, they are a tiny minority, the rhythmic shushing of their blades an echo of those glimmering icy days when, as James Thomson wrote in 1726, our hardy ancestors swept 'on sounding skates, a thousand different ways/circling in poise, swift as the wind'. 🐉