

# FENLAND SKATING

by Enid Porter

**The early history of skating and skating contests is inseparately connected with the Fens. In severe periods of prolonged frost the dykes and drains formed excellent thoroughfares along which the fenman sped to visit distant friends and relations. It was often the easiest and fastest method of moving from one village to another.**

**I**n hard winters the frozen waters of the undrained Fens provided a means of communication between scattered fenland communities that was impossible at other times of the year. When drainage had been undertaken the dykes, drains and artificial cuts which criss-crossed the region formed excellent "roads" in prolonged periods of severe frost. Small wonder, therefore, that fenmen took to the ice whenever they could, not only to visit distant friends but for the sheer joy of speed and, as time went on, to indulge in athletic contest.

Early fenmen, as their contemporaries in other parts of England, would have travelled over the ice with the help of sheep's leg bones attached by leather straps to their ankles. We know, from contemporary record, that 12th century Londoners used this means of sliding on the frozen Thames, and several bones, obviously used as skates, have been found in the Fens although it is probable that some of these bones were once attached to sledges.

It is to Holland that we owe the introduction into England, in the 17th century, of "real skating" on bladed skates. Followers of the Stuarts, when exiled in the Netherlands, must have learned the sport for they displayed their skill in it on their return to this country. Thus, in December 1662, Samuel Pepys recorded in his Diary that he had watched, for the first time in his life, gentlemen in St. James' Park "sliding with their skates which is a very pretty art." In the same month John Evelyn wrote in his diary of "the wonderful dexterity of the skaters on the canal at St. James performed by divers gentlemen with skates, after the manner of the Hollanders."

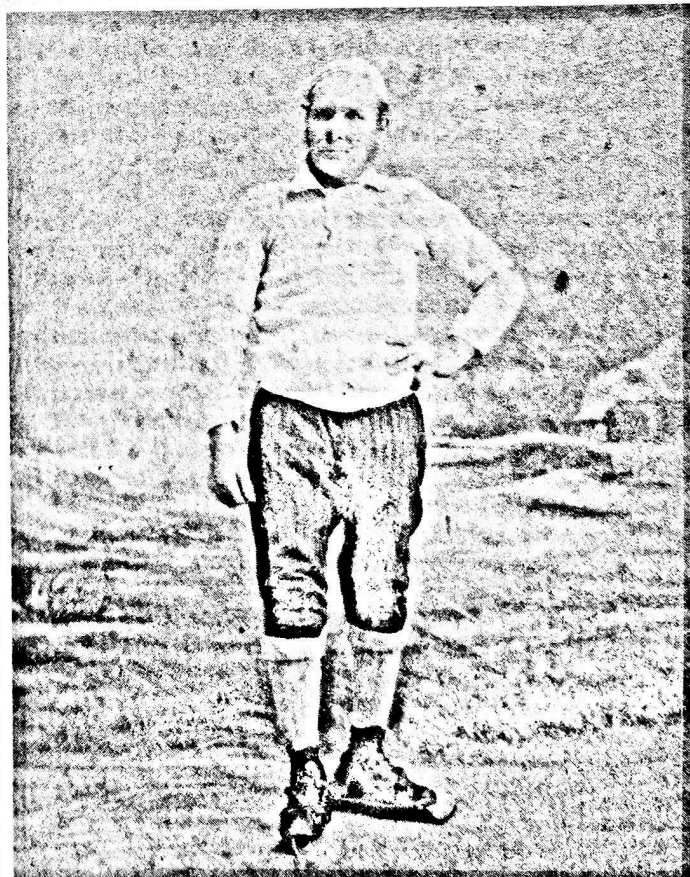
It is possible that the people of the Fens came to know of bladed skates from the Dutchmen who came with Vermuyden to drain the Fens and, in many instances, to settle in the region. The Huguenot refugees, too, who came to live here, especially in the area round Thorney, would also have known and used true skates. Indeed, it is significant that the French word *patin*, meaning a skate, came to be adopted, with the spelling *patten*, by many fenmen although, especially around Whittlesey where there were several locally famous skate-makers in the 18th century, the name *runner* or *Whittlesey runner* was also in common use. The straight courses of the fenland dykes and drains certainly allowed fenmen to "run on the ice", a term they often applied to skating.

It is not possible to say exactly when fenmen began to compete against each other in skating contests because, until the National Skating Association was founded in 1879 by Mr. Drake Digby of Cambridge and others, records were seldom kept. It is possible, however, that in quite early times skaters raced for wagers, or one village competed against another. Certainly by the 18th century, an age of great athletic feats and contests of all kinds, skating contests became a matter of public interest and were inseparately connected with the Fens. When long spells of frost made work on the land and most country sports impossible, prosperous fen farmers willingly offered such useful prizes as legs of mutton, sides of bacon, fat pigs, new hats or purses of guineas to be competed for on the ice. For the women there was the chance to win red flannel petticoats or material for a new dress, for fenland village women were excellent skaters long before the sport was considered "genteel" by the middle class.

All over the Fens local races came to be organised; then larger district meetings were held, the victors travelling further and further afield until, if the ice held long enough, a champion of the Fens emerged. Enthusiastic crowds skated for miles to attend the meetings and to cheer their local champions on to victory, much as football supporters travel to watch their teams today. Bands played, sellers of gin and hot chestnuts shouted their wares to the jostling crowds and the races became scenes of great gaiety and excitement.

Soon these fenland contests came to be reported in newspapers and skating journals. In the *British Magazine* of 4

to next page →



William "Turkey" Smart. The Champion Skater of England from 1854 to 1859. For power and true Fen Stroke he had no equal. He was Uncle to "Fish" and James Smart who became the Ten miles Champion.

CHPL 2 (20) Feb. 1969

February, 1763, for example, readers learned that Mr. John Lamb and Mr. George Fawn of Wisbech raced to Whittlesey for a prize of 10 guineas which was won by Mr. Lamb "who skaited it in 46 minutes, being 15 measured miles."

In the early 1820's there was a series of hard winters and many skating contests were reported in local newspapers and many famous champions made a name for themselves. In the Norris Museum at St. Ives is a silver cup inscribed on one side: "JAMES MAY. A prize won for skating at Upwell, January 5, 1821". On the reverse side is a picture of May and the words: "Gently, Drake", I have cut one wing, and will soon cut the other." May's competitor was John Drake and the rivalry between the two men continued for some years, May not always being the victor.

The Norris Museum possesses another reminder of these years in the form of a wooden board which once hung in the Lamb and Flag at Welney. It records a race in about 1825 between William Ayres (whose daughter kept the Lamb and Flag) and the famous skater John Gittam. One side of the board has an outline portrait of Ayres inscribed: "Born March 7, 1798, at Earith, Hunts." The other side tells us that "William Ayres of Earith skated and beat John Gittam of Nordelph, Norfolk, a measured half-mile in one minute by a stop watch starting at the word of five at Mepal, Cambs. 1820. A feat without precedent. Height 5 feet 9 in. Weight 9 stone. (See Bell's Life)".

The year 1823 saw a famous skating race at Chatteris, on the Forty Foot River at Carter's Bridge. Mr. Croft of St. Ives made a sketch of one of the heats and his drawing was reproduced in colour in *Sporting Annals*. It shows the then famous skater Young beating the equally famous Gittam watched by a crowd of spectators which included passengers in the Wisbech Day Coach which stopped on the bridge for a view of the race.

The organisation of this race was typical of most of the important skating events arranged in the early 19th century. A committee, who were trustees of the prize money — usually £10 or £16 — selected 16 men whom they considered worthy to compete in the race. These competitors were paired off by the drawing of lots and then skated against each other in eight races in the first heats. The eight winners were then paired off for the second heats and so on until the final was run between two men. Usually a race was run over two miles on a half-mile long course marked at each end by a barrel and divided into two tracks by a line of heaped-up snow or earth. The contestants started, one from each side of the starting barrel and skated twice round the course, each keeping to his side of the line of snow, sweeping round the barrel at the end and returning down the other side of the course.

It is remarkable how, in the last century, certain fenland villages and, in some cases, families, produced in turn notable skating champions. Nordelph, for example, could boast of Young (who won the Chatteris race) and Gittam; Chatteris of the two Drakes; Ramsey of John Berry, a waterman who won a number of first-class races. In the 1830's Needham of March rose to fame until he was beaten by Few of Sutton in a race at Chatteris having previously, in 1841, confidently challenged the world. In 1848 Southery in Norfolk came to the fore, Larman Register of that village, ably supported by members of the Butcher and Porter families, remaining unbeaten for four years until in 1854 his reign was ended by a defeat by William Smart of Welney. This event was significant because Welney was destined to produce more first class skaters in the latter half of the last century than any other fenland village.

William Smart, always known as Turkey Smart, was a remarkable man. A typical fen skater, speeding along with his body bent so low that his head was almost between his knees, he maintained his superiority for nearly 10 years and it was only a deep gash in his leg from a scythe that prevented him from continuing longer as supreme fen champion. Even so, it was not until 1867 that he was forced to give way to younger rivals and even then he went on entering for races although he knew that he had no chance of winning them. So it was that he raced at Thorney on December 8th, 1879 at the first championship meeting of the National Skating Association and received a tremendous ovation as he appeared on the course. His last race was an exhibition one at Wisbech in 1897; he died in 1919 at the age of 89.

Turkey had an able second, and occasionally a vanquisher, in another Welney man, "Gutta Percha" See, so named because he was so tough. See beat Turkey at Mepal in the second heat of a race run in 1878. In the third heat See was drawn against his own 16-year-old son George, and only managed to defeat him by a very narrow margin. Meanwhile Turkey's nephew, George, always known as "Fish" Smart had won all his heats and so came up against Gutta Percha in the final race. Fish won and so began a career which was to carry on the fame of Welney for another 10 years. In two successive winters, 1879-81, he ran in 55 races and was not defeated in any of them.

## National Skating Association formed in Cambridge.

On February 1st, 1879 the first meeting of the newly-formed National Skating Association was held in the Guildhall in Cambridge. It was resolved that, in future, the title of champion should be settled by a competent authority; that there should be a standard length of course for all championship races and that records should be officially kept. Rules were later drawn up and the first race was held at Thorney on December 8th. In that same winter fenmen raced at Swavesey against a party of skaters from Lancashire and were victorious.

The National Skating Association then began to explore the possibility of arranging international matches in Holland, but a series of mild winters from 1881 to 1884 made the holding of any such events impossible. Then, in 1885, the chance came and on January 28th Fish Smart, Charles Tebbutt of Bluntisham and S. Burlingham of King's Lynn travelled to Holland but, alas, were beaten. However, in 1887, at Slikheveer, the fenmen had their revenge for Tebbutt won the Dutch championship, the first time that the Dutch had been defeated by an Englishman. In the following month Gutta Perch's son won the One Mile and Fish Smart's brother, James, the 3,500 metres. In succeeding years more victories fell to the Welney skaters in Holland while, in England, James Smart became English Professional Champion in 1888/9.

Up to that time the representatives of each country in international races had worn their own type of skates, but it soon became clear that the long, thin-bladed Norwegian skates were far superior to the fen ones with their blades upturned back over the wearer's toes. In 1891 James Smart began to learn to use Norwegian skates and quickly showed that he could be as successful with these as he had been with those to which he was accustomed.

This century has seen the supremacy of the fen skaters challenged by those who are able to practise all the year