

# Tales from the riverbank

*A regular series of stories from the Great Ouse Valley Trust*

## The Amazing Fen-skaters of Bluntisham

As we all know today, we have to be extremely cautious to venture out onto any stretch of local ice, no matter how tempting it might look. But in the 1870s the weather conditions were extremely different to our twenty-first century winters. The frosts were hard and lasted for weeks and this enabled local skaters to enjoy safe conditions. In his diary, now in the Norris Museum, Neville Goodman from Bluntisham describes one long-distance trip on the Fen waterways that he made with his brothers Albert and Henry on 13th January 1871.

*Hard Frost. Started at Overcote at 8 and then skated by Earith, Welney to Denver at about 8 miles per hour. Could not get off the Hundred Foot because of the tide breaking the sides. At length got off and went by a drain to Hilgay and so by Southery, Littleport to Ely and on. Met friends near the Five Miles from Anywhere [pub] and skated back to Ely, dined at Refreshment Room, then skated to Cambridge. Back at 6.45 having skated 66 miles.*

What an epic journey that was and one that is unlikely to be repeated today. Neville and Albert Goodman wrote *A Handbook of Fen Skating* in 1882. Their nephew, Charles Goodman Tebbutt, organised the rules of Bandy (a form of hockey on ice) and captained the Bury Fen Bandy Club at Bluntisham. The Tebbutts and the Bury Club promoted the sport widely in England and Northern Europe. Today Bandy is a major winter sport, particularly in Sweden and Russia where there are professional and amateur leagues.

Bury (sometimes Berry) Fen now rarely sees hard ice on its flooded meadow. But in the centre of Bluntisham there is the little

wooden shelter with a tiled roof, a weathervane on top and inside is a barograph. It is dedicated to the memory of Charles and Mary Tebbutt and was given to the village in 1911 by their son Louis. The whole Tebbutt family were stalwarts of the Bury Fen Bandy Club, and so Louis chose not a clock, a tree or a seat for the village, but a weather station. When the winter wind swings to the north-east and the needle of the barograph traces rising atmospheric pressure, the freezing polar air is coming. And then Bluntisham knows – it's time to get your skates on.



*Bobble hats and caps but few gloves! Those fen skaters back then were hardy souls. This is Bury Fen Bandy Club in the Netherlands in Jan 1891. Copyright the Norris Museum.*

*This is a shortened version of an article by Bridget Flanagan that first appeared in the Hunts Post in December 2022. If you are interested in learning more about the Great Ouse Valley Trust, and perhaps becoming a Supporter, please visit [www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk](http://www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk) and follow us on Facebook*



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