

Amazing Fen-skating tales from Bluntisham

In bitterly cold winters 150 years ago keen local amateur skaters from a Fenland village founded what is now an international winter sport. Bridget Flanagan from the Great Ouse Valley Trust has the story.

The Norris Museum has an excellent collection of items, photos, films and books relating to Fen skating. Last year the Museum was delighted to receive two diaries of a family who were at the centre of nineteenth-century Fen skating. One diarist is Neville Goodman, the eldest son of Joseph Goodman – Potto Brown's milling partner. The other is his nephew, Neville Tebbutt of Bluntisham. Within both diaries are descriptions of Bandy matches (a form of hockey on ice), skating races and skating expeditions. Needless to say, the weather conditions then were completely different to our twenty first-century winters. The frosts were hard and lasted for weeks. Neville Goodman 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.

Neville and Albert Goodman wrote 'A Handbook of Fen Skating' in 1882. Another of their nephews, Charles Goodman Tebbutt, organised the rules of Bandy 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 (now 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.

See photograph shown on page 2.



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 and by kind permission of the Norris Museum.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk

