

The Leamington Omnibus

Newsletter of the Leamington History Group

Winter 2013

Strictly come skating

I admit to never having owned or even to have put on a pair of ice skates and you will be pleased to hear that I have no immediate plans to take up skating. It does however say much about our indomitable ancestors that many of

Royal family were exiled in Holland and while there they learned to skate. When the monarchy was restored in 1660 they returned to England by which time they were very proficient skaters. The diarists Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn both record skating displays in London given by the Duke of York (Later King James II). Interestingly,

Opportunities for skating during most British winters are few indeed but whenever the conditions were favourable, the Leamingtonians have turned out *en masse* to take to the ice which made good copy for the local newspaper the *Leamington Spa Courier* throughout the Victorian era. As Prince Albert discovered, venturing onto the ice sometimes had unforeseen consequences.

By chance, I was looking at headstones in Leamington Cemetery recently and came across a marble memorial to two young sisters Ada (aged 15) and Emmie Place (aged



JANUARY.

Printed, Published & Sold by W. Beeth, Stoverton Row, Nottingham, Eng. London.

An English lithograph from 1820 showing skaters on a pond

them looked upon ice skates as essential items. I have several old engravings and lithographs that show large groups of people skating and sledging on frozen lakes and rivers under leaden skies. Paintings of winter landscapes by great artists of the past like Peter Bruegel and Hendrik Avercamp which are frequently reproduced on Christmas Cards show people having a high old time in the icy conditions.

The origins of skating go back at least four thousand years. The oldest pair of skates known were found at the bottom of a lake in Switzerland. The skates were made from the leg bones of large animals and had holes bored at each end of the bone for leather straps with which the skates could be tied on. An old Dutch word for skate is "schenkel" which means "leg bone".

During the Commonwealth period in England (1649 - 1660) the British

Pepys also records skating with King Charles II's mistress Nell Gwyn at 'The Great Frost Fair' held on the ice when the river Thames froze over for several weeks in 1683.

Prince Albert was a keen skater and in Queen Victoria's diary she recorded that on February 9th 1841 he was skating on the lake at Buckingham Palace when, in her own words "The ice cracked and Albert was in the water up to his head, even for a moment below. In my agony of fright and despair I screamed and stretched out my arm. My dearest Albert managed to catch my arm and reached the ground in safety". Since at that date the Royal couple had no male heirs, the monarchical succession would have been very different had 'dearest Albert' not been safely hauled out of what could easily have been a cold, watery grave.



The Place sisters memorial in Leamington Cemetery

19) who 'were both drowned at the same moment whilst skating on the river in this town January 14th 1867'. The report of their drowning in the *Courier* makes for harrowing reading. They were part of a group with their other sister Katie and several young men who ventured onto the ice near the Adelaide Road bridge. Observing the strict courtesies of the time, the men allowed the ladies onto the ice first and as the girls skated away from the bank hand-in-hand the ice gave way and they were plunged into the icy water. Valiant rescue attempts were made by a number of skaters

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and onlookers, some narrowly escaped drowning in the process. Only Katie Place survived the disaster. Ellie Place, her mother, had already been widowed, her husband Frederick having died in the East Indies only a few months earlier. Her only son Reginald died of Cholera in the East Indies in May 1878 while serving with the Royal Horse Artillery. Skating on the river Leam continued



January 1908 with the contest for the Warwickshire Cup.

What also becomes abundantly clear from reading the contemporary *Courier* reports of the skating in those years are the very real hardships that ordinary Leamington working folk had to endure in the unremitting cold weather while the well-to-do disported themselves on the ice. Such comments as are made about them amount to little more than a few words in very lengthy articles which I guess reflects the level of importance attached to the lives of the working poor in Victorian England. In 1902/1903 the Mayoress Mrs Davis opened a soup kitchen at the Coffee Tavern in Regent Street on several days each week which in the words of the *Courier* columnist were 'for the supply of soup to poor and needy persons'. The fact that this soup kitchen had in excess of two

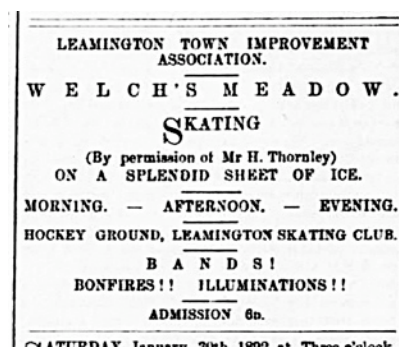
hundred customers each day underlines the impoverished conditions in which many of the town's population still lived at the turn of the twentieth century.

A hundred years on, people still risk life and limb by venturing on to frozen lakes and ponds in winter but I suspect that for the majority of us negotiating ice-bound pavements presents a far more serious hazard to our well-being. Oh yes! and in 2013 the Victorian soup kitchens have been replaced by Food Banks. The words of French novelist Alphonse Karr spring to mind when he observed that 'the more things change, the more they are the same.'

May be I should get the ice skates after all. Let me know if you see a pair of size 10's advertised in *The Courier*.

Alan Griffin

Skating advert from the Courier Boxing Day edition 1891



sporadically through the 19th century and towards the turn of the century a number of hard winters saw skaters and sliders return in force to any available area of frozen water. The first decade of the twentieth century saw a succession of hard winters and a more commercial approach to the provision of skating facilities locally. The tenant of Welch's Meadow Mr Thornley came to an agreement with the General Purposes Committee of the Borough Council for the flooding of the meadow for skating. In return the Council would receive a percentage of Thornley's income from charging his skaters. In 1903 there was skating on the Leam and also on the lake in the Jephson Gardens and on the meadow in Mill Gardens which had recently been laid out as part of the Mill Improvement Scheme. All of these venues made a charge for skating. In subsequent years, competitive curling matches were held on the Leamington ice, culminating in

A postcard showing skaters probably on Mill Meadows circa 1905

