

Four Candles in the Fens

By Mike Trippitt

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IMAGINE IT. Ronnie Barker walking into Bluntisham village shop one bitterly cold winter's day about 40 years ago.

"Fen skates."

Too parochial perhaps for inclusion in one of the greatest comedy sketches of all time, but the humble fen skate has secured a place in history.

Curiously, among the notable, great, good and memorable of Huntingdonshire's past a sport still recognised by the International Olympic Committee is up with the best of them.

Bandy is a team sport played on ice. Though players wear skates (known locally as 'fen runners'), it is similar to field hockey. A ball is used rather than a puck, and a Bandy stick resembles a field hockey stick not an ice hockey stick. Each game has 45-minute halves.

Matches take place throughout the northern hemisphere, pretty much wherever water turns to ice in winter. Though its governing body, The Federation of International Bandy, is based in Sweden, Bandy's rules, used throughout the world to this day, were formulated just down the road.

Bandy was played on Bury Fen for hundreds of years, and by Victorian times Bury Fen Bandy Club was renowned. Members Charles Tebbutt, a Bluntisham landowner and farmer, and local man Neville Goodman played the game well, and were prominent in promoting the sport in the fens and beyond. Charles' son Arnold produced the first known written rules of the sport in the late eighteen-eighties.

Legend has it that the Bury Fen club were unbeaten for over 100 years. But no matter when its winning streak started, it came to an end on a trip to Virginia Waters Bandy Club in London, in 1891.

The home side played in a different way to the Bluntisham team (the match is thought to have been played with a bung not a ball), and whilst the result may have been important only to the clubs

involved, it was the clash of contrasting styles that soon changed history.

Within weeks of the match The National Bandy Association was formed. Neville Goodman was a founding member. From these beginnings the common rules of Bandy were drawn based on those used by the local club. Eventually they were adopted internationally.

To think that the rules of an Olympic sport can be traced back to Bluntisham, and to the skaters of Bury Fen. How great is that.

So back to the village shop.

"What sort of fen skates do want?" the irritated Corbett says. "Children's fen skates? Adult fen skates? New fen skates? Secondhand fen skates?"

"No," retorts the blockish Barker. "Fence gates. Gates for putting in fences."



A pair of Fen Runners