

A Skating Accident at Gledhow

© By Neville Hurworth

Based on reports and letters in the *Leeds Mercury*.

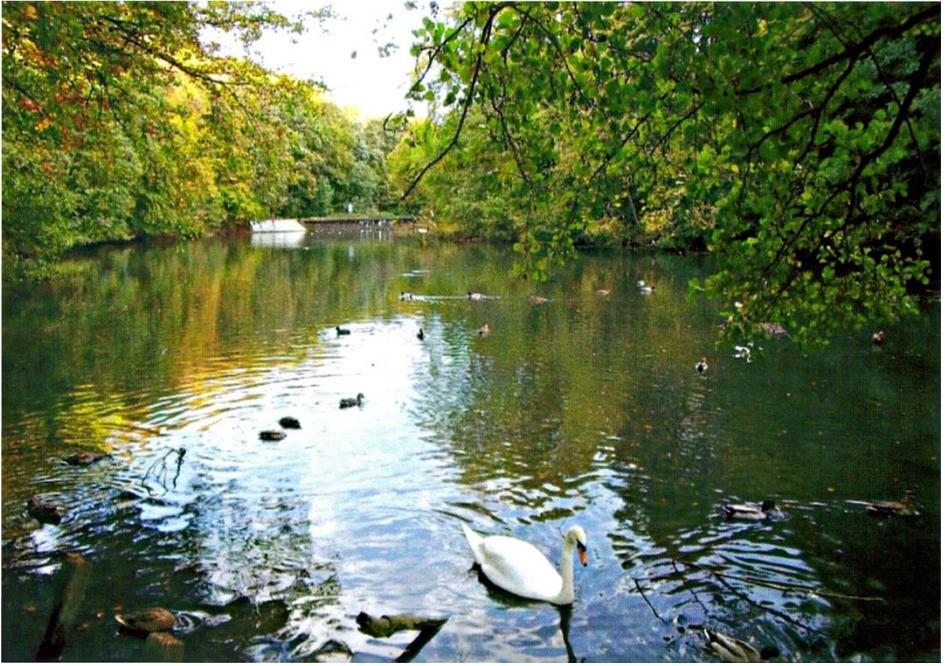
When my children were young and the winters were colder than in recent years, we used to sledge down the slopes from Gledhow Hall towards the lake in the bottom of Gledhow Valley Woods. I remember how some young dare-devils would sledge at speed right to the edge of the water, seeming almost certain to end up in it, but by their skill (and possibly some good luck), they always stopped short of sliding into the icy cold water. I did not know that over a century ago two people had drowned in this lake in a skating accident.

The year was 1865, and cold frosty winters were not uncommon in those days. At times there were cold spells of sufficient intensity and duration to freeze the ice on many inland ponds and lakes for days on end. Skating was a popular pastime.

A few years earlier, Thomas Benyon, a flax spinner, had lived at Gledhow Hall. He was a man of upright character and public service. He had been elected to be the first mayor of Leeds after the Corporation Act of 1835 but he refused and was fined £100 for rejecting the honour. Years later his business failed and he sold the Hall and the Estate to John Cooper, another textile magnate, and left the area with his family.

In those days the lake in the grounds of Gledhow Hall was known as 'Benyon's pond' and Thomas Benyon generously allowed members of the public free access for skating. John Cooper continued to allow the same amenity.

In hindsight, it is easy to say there was an accident waiting to happen as no special safety precautions were taken. It was left to each individual to assess the suitability of the conditions for the sport on a moment to moment basis.



**The Pond In Gledhow Valley Woods
Where the Accident Happened.**

On the 23rd January 1865, in the afternoon, about 100 to 150 people 'mostly from the middle and upper classes' were skating on Benyon's pond. George Broughton, a medical student, was skating along pushing a chair with a girl in it. Various girls accepted the young man's offer and took their turns in the chair. Towards the end of the day at about five o'clock, sixteen year old Mary Jane Bulmer, the eldest daughter of George Bulmer, a surgeon who lived in Park Square, left the bank from where she had been watching and she took her place in the chair which had just been vacated by her sister Elizabeth. Apparently they passed over the same places with the chair as on previous occasions but as they approached the north end this time, the ice broke and they sank into the cold water.

As Mary Jane disappeared under the water, her hat rose to the surface and several skaters rushed to the spot. Lyndon Smith quickly skated to the edge of the ice and he is believed to have caught hold of Mary Jane's dress before he too ended up in the water. Others tried gallantly to help, but mostly in vain. Sadly, Lyndon Smith and Mary Jane Bulmer drowned.

James Broughton saw a hand appear out of a hole in the ice and thrust out his stick. He did not know it then but it was his brother's hand that clutched the stick and at that moment the ice broke. James found himself fighting for his life too but amazingly both held on and somehow they managed to reach the bank and get out.

Police were sent for and arrived to find John Cooper waiting on the bank of the pond. A boat in the boathouse was freed from the ice and carried overland to the spot where the accident had happened. From the boat, they broke the ice bit by bit and reached Miss Bulmer's body. Shortly afterwards Lyndon Smith's body was also recovered.

A surgeon, Mr Hey, arrived. He was almost certainly, William Hey F.R.C.S., who lived at Gledhow Lodge nearby. He was the third generation of eminent surgeons with that name, but even with his skill and medical knowledge, he could do nothing for the victims. By this time their bodies had been in the icy water for nearly two hours. Miss Bulmer was taken to the Mexborough Arms and Lyndon Smith was taken to his grandfather, William Smith's house, at Allerton Hall (lately the BUPA hospital, but now part of the Spire Healthcare group). Lyndon Smith was a partner in the family firm of Wm. Smith, Son, and Co., woollen merchants of Cookridge Street in Leeds. He was 28 and a married man with three children.

There were a few letters to the *Leeds Mercury* that the condition of the ice was unfit for skating at the time. One even said that the ice rocked 'like a carpet with a draught' and referred to a gentleman who

was 'very active with a chair' and who had 'a large brown beer jug over his shoulder, with which he regaled himself and his friends' but this was not substantiated during the inquest.

The Coroner said that since Mr Cooper was kind enough to allow his pond to be used he could hardly be called upon to provide apparatus for saving life. A verdict of 'accidental death' was returned.

There were several letters written to the *Leeds Mercury* saying how similar accidents could be avoided in the future. An article in the *Leeds Mercury* concluded with the suggestion that if skating clubs were formed with members paying 'a comparatively small subscription', a safety service could be funded so that iced-over ponds with deep water could be guarded and equipped with whatever was necessary to maintain the safety of the skaters in future.

Less than a week after the accident, John Cooper wrote to the *Leeds Mercury*. He was mortified and sorry that two lives had been lost on his estate. He said that on several occasions his servants had warned that the ice was not safe to skate on but 'the admonition was disregarded.' He was withdrawing access to the public for the rest of the winter and whether the amenity would be allowed in the future would depend on what arrangements could be put in place to secure the skaters safety.

After John Cooper and his widow Louisa Connor Cooper died some years later, Gledhow Hall was bought by Samuel Croft, a builder and an Alderman of the Borough. It is interesting to read of a donation in January 1881 of £5 5s. to the Leeds Hospital. The source was a 'proportion of surplus [funds] from the 'Gledhow Skating Club, per S. Croft and Edwin Middleton, hon. treasurers.'

In the intervening years following the Corporation's acquisition of Roundhay Park, the Park manager and the Committee who were responsible for the Park, were increasingly concerned about the

safety of the Upper and Waterloo Lake during the hard winters, and measures were put in place to try to avoid fatal accidents on the ice. Samuel Croft had been a great supporter of John Barran in the purchase of the Park for the people and both Barran and Croft were members of this Committee in the early years of the Park under public ownership.