

Roller skating in Cheltenham 1873-1888

Roller skating, or *rinking* as it was also called, was part of a worldwide craze known as *rinkomania* which began in the early 1860s. The earliest recorded use of roller skates was in 1743, but the design of these in-line skates did not allow the user to turn or stop efficiently. In January 1863 James Leonard Plimpton of Massachusetts, USA patented a revolutionary four-wheel skate which enabled the skater to turn corners safely. Plimpton began selling his patented roller skates across the USA and then the world, and he also licenced his concept of a skating 'rink' with a special 'asphalte' surface. He is widely credited with developing roller skating as a recreational sport.

In 1873 James Lillywhite and Capt. G.E. Hodgson proposed that Cheltenham Town Hall in Regent Street should be converted into a roller skating rink. Lillywhite, a member of the famous cricketing family, ran a sports shop in Cheltenham from 1862-82. He was also an entrepreneur, and at the heart of many sporting activities and several entertainment venues in the town. Many considered the costs - £250 for the Plimpton concession and £250 for 250 pairs of skates – to be ill-advised. Despite the objections, the rink was officially opened in *a tumbledown room [with a] primitive wooden floor* in the Town Hall on 5 December 1873, with James Lillywhite as manager. The venture, described as *the most healthful and fashionable amusement of the Age*, was a great success.



Cheltenham Examiner 3rd December 1873

In April 1876 it was announced that Imperial Square, covering 34 acres and described as the *finest and most central open space of ground in the Town of Cheltenham*, had been acquired by the newly-formed Cheltenham Imperial Winter Garden & Skating Rink Company. The plan was for an imposing and impressive building, purpose-built for entertainment in the town, which would be surrounded by ornamental grounds laid out in terraces and lawns. The Statement of Accounts revealed that The Plimpton Roller Skate Concession and purchase of skates alone cost an astonishing £3,000.

A temporary covered skating rink was opened in Imperial Square in November 1876, with an asphalt skating floor which measured over 7,000 square feet. It proved very popular. The cruciform Winter Garden itself was enormous. The building, with its huge arching cast iron and glass roof much like that of the Crystal Palace in London, stretched from the back of where the Town Hall stands today as far as the Queen's Hotel. Unfortunately, its construction was beset with problems and the building was not completed until mid-1877. Once the Winter Garden was opened, however, it was advertised that the *magnificent skating rink had been extended to 15,000 square feet*. James Lillywhite acted as manager of the new rink, which again proved a popular attraction.

In November 1876 a private roller skating club was founded at the new skating rink for the *Upper class of Society in the Town and County*. New members had to be proposed and seconded by two of the lady committee members in order to keep the list of members *as select as possible*. Tuesday afternoons were strictly reserved for the use of the Skating Club, and Tuesday and Thursday mornings were reserved for ladies. Annual subscriptions were still beyond the reach of many in Cheltenham; £2 2s for *Gentlemen* and £1 11s 6d for *Ladies*. Visitors to the town could pay 10s 6d for a month's subscription, while a day's skating cost 2s 6d.



For several years roller skating remained a popular pastime at Cheltenham Winter Garden, but by the early 1880s rinking was on the wane, both in the town and across the country, and lawn tennis, croquet, and archery became the fashionable amusements of the day. There are no references to roller skating at the Winter Garden in local newspapers after May 1888.

Despite its attractions, the Winter Garden itself was always far from ideal for many forms of entertainment. The cast iron and glass construction of the roof made it difficult and expensive to maintain. It was cold in winter, and hot in summer, and Imperial Square residents could often hear concerts as clearly as those who had bought tickets. The building was finally demolished between 1940-3, supposedly because it was an easy target for German bombers. A more likely explanation was that the council were glad of an excuse to be rid of it. Remnants of the Winter Garden are still visible in Imperial Gardens, including the chequered brickwork base of one of the towers.

I would be interested to know whether CLHS members have any more information about roller skating in Cheltenham. Did your grandparents tell you about it? Do you know of any photographs of this popular activity? All help appreciated.

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