

GEORGE FRENCH CHALLENGE SHIELD

First raced for: 1924

Last raced for: Current trophy

1924-1926	Women's Half Mile Championship (unofficial)
1927-1970	Women's Half Mile Championship (not held 1940-1945, 1970)
1971-1973	Women's 800m Championship (not held 1972)
1974	Women's 1000m Championship
1975-2003	Women's 3000m Championship (not held 1993)
2004-2021	Women's 3000m Elimination Championship (not held 2020 – Covid 19)
2022-Current	Women's 5000m Elimination Championship

George French was a well-known Anglo-Scottish comedian of the late 1890's and early 1900's. One newspaper of the time amusingly reports French as being "of limited inches but unlimited resources".

French was popular amongst the theatres and music halls up and down the country and his repertoire included amusing songs about his roller skating and footballing exploits. These songs were most popular in the roller skating boom years between 1910 and 1912.

The shield was donated by French to the Holland Park Rink, London, in 1923 to be used in a ladies only event. Ladies roller skating was very much on the up, however, despite the first event being billed as a 'championship' in the daily newspapers the Roller Committee and the National Skating Association did not recognise ladies skating at that time, as detailed in the minutes of the Roller Committee meeting of 11th January 1924:

"Ladies Racing – The Hon. Sec. reported that a ladies half mile race was being held at Holland Park Rink for a challenge shield and requested to be informed of the news of the Roller Committee with regard to this race in case the Roller Committee were approached for assistance.

It was unanimously decided that as the Roller Committee did not recognise 'ladies racing' they had no jurisdiction over the race or control over the entrants".

The first event was held on 22nd February 1924 where local lady, Betty Meakin, skated home as the eventual winner. The event was run annually from that point and by 1926 the Roller Committee realised that they needed to embrace ladies competitions. In 1927 the event was finally recorded as a bona-fide British Championship, fittingly won by three times previous winner, Betty Meakin. It has remained a recognised British Championship award ever since.

SOME PREVIOUS RECIPIENTS



BETTY MEAKIN
1924



VI KIRBY
1948



YVONNE BROD
1949



MAUREEN STEWART
1952



IRENE TURNER
1953



PAULINE HOYLE
1954



SHEILA GARDINER
1955



PAT EASON
1960



CHLOE RONALDSON
1974



ALISON HARTLEY
1994



TIFFANY JAMES
2015



MAYA BATHGATE
2019



BETTY MEAKIN – RECEIVING THE SHIELD FROM MR. GEORGE FRENCH IN 1926

SOME INTERESTING FACTS

- The highest number of recorded entries for a single event was 45 during its first competition (early reports suggested over 50). The highest number recorded for a bona-fide championship was 36 in 1951.
- Betty Meakin was the first winner of the shield in 1924, winning it a further three consecutive times. She is the only skater to have won it when it was both an unofficial and official British Championship.
- Chloe Ronaldson holds the record for the most number of wins with FIFTEEN.
- Ronaldson also holds the record for the most number of consecutive wins with TWELVE between 1965 and 1978.

- In 1991 Kathy Smith (North London) was the only entrant and won the shield by default. After that race it was declared that if only a single entry was received then there would be no contest as the shield was deemed a “challenge” shield and there were, effectively, no challengers. In 1993 that rule was applied when Alison Hartley (Birmingham Wheels) was the only entrant and the race was not held. By 2014 when Pammie Murray (Birmingham Wheels) was the only entrant the rule had been changed that the shield would be awarded if a pre-determined time was achieved, which she did.
- World medallist Barabara Woodley only ever won the event once, in 1962, sharing it with Chloe Ronaldson in the only dead-heated final to have ever been declared.
- George French the comedian/actor who donated the shield should not be confused with other ‘famous’ George French’s of that time – namely George French of the George French Troupe which consisted of acrobatic and trick cyclists and roller skaters at the turn of the 20th century; George French the footballer; or George French the American actor.
- Errors and omissions:
 - Betty (Elizabeth) Meakin is referred to as “H.J.Meakin” on the shield. We know that her initials were definitely E.A.MEAKIN. The most likely suggestion is that her name was engraved retrospectively from newspaper reports. The Daily Mirror reported on Betty Meakin’s first victory but in doing so referred to her as “H.J.Meakin”



- Vi Kirby’s victory showing 1945 should actually be 1946.
- The shield states –
 - 1970 – C.Ronaldson
 - 1971 – No Competition
 - 1972 – C.Ronaldson

Whereas it should read

 - 1970 – No Competition
 - 1971 – C.Ronaldson
 - 1972 – No Competition
- It also states Chloe Ronaldson won the shield in 1979 – but this was in fact won by Lynn Coles
- Omissions
 - 2009 – Alexandra Geen
 - 2014 – Pammie Murray
 - 2015 – Tiffany James
 - 2016 – No winner (single entry)

- 2019 – Maya Bathgate
 - 2020 – No Competition
 - 2022 – Sara Erviti
- In 1922 French presented a shield to the White Cinema Club in Belfast to be awarded to the winners of a football match where proceeds would go to various charities. The first match was held in September 1923 between Antrim and 'The Rest of the League'. This football shield is in fact a “younger sister” shield to own George French Shield in so far as it is almost identical barring the centre relief. The shield pictured below depicts a football match in the centre of the relief whereas our own, of course, depicts a roller skating event.



Bohemians FC - The 1960 winners of the **'football'** George French Shield

CHARACTERISTICS

- Engraved with:

THE GEORGE FRENCH
LADIES ROLLER SKATING CHALLENGE SHIELD
HELD AT
HOLLAND PARK

- Height = 785mm
- Width = 610mm
- The engraving of winners between 1992 and 1999, whilst accurate, do not run sequentially as one would expect.