

Noble Challenge Shield
 Open to all **BOW-FIDE ARCHERS**
Resident in Great Britain
 DISTANCE: ONE MILE under NSA Laws
Presented by the British A.C.

(OR AS MY WIFE CALLS IT – “ONE MAN’S SAD OBSESSION”)

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PART ONE: ORIGINS

So what is the Noble Shield (or the Noble Challenge Shield to give it its correct name)? Well, in the simplest of terms it was a shield or trophy presented to the winner of a one mile open scratch race for roller speed skating at the turn of the 20th century. "So, what is so special about that?" you might ask. "There were lots of trophies back then for all sorts of races, some of them even British Championships. What makes this shield different?" Ah, now then, this is where it gets interesting if you like this sort of thing that is.

To understand what we are talking about here we need to go right back to the turn of the 19th century. 1801 in fact and October 17th to be even more precise. On that day a certain George Richards Elkington was born in Birmingham, England, the son of a spectacle manufacturer.



George Richards Elkington (1801 - 1865)

George's uncle owned a silver plating business and in 1815 he became an apprentice there. When his uncle died George became the sole proprietor but later took his cousin, Henry Elkington, into partnership. The science of electrometallurgy was very much in its infancy but the Elkingtons were quick to recognise its possibilities. They took out various patents and became pioneers in the process of electroplating. In 1841 they opened a new electroplating works in Newhall Street in the Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham. In 1842 the pen manufacturer, Josiah Mason, joined the firm and encouraged the Elkingtons to diversify their output, which they did. The partnership, however, dissolved in 1861 and the company took on the name Elkington & Co.



Elkington Works – Newhall Street, Birmingham

Later to become the Birmingham Museum of Science and Industry

Meanwhile, across the English Channel a young Frenchman by the name of Leonard Morel-Ladeuil was making his name as a goldsmith and sculptor. Born in 1820 he was first apprenticed to Morel, a manufacturer of bronzes, becoming one of the most expert chasers in France. Later, whilst working for Antoine Vecht he acquired the art of repousse (a metalworking technique in which a malleable metal is shaped by hammering from the *reverse* side to create a design), an art in which he was to excel.

He soon attracted the notice of the Count d'Orsay and the Duke de Morny. Both recommended him to the French government who commissioned him to produce the Empire Shield. Napoleon III was a great fan but Leonard's contemporaries were not impressed that a craftsman could gain personal commissions and so boycotted his work. Despite this he was encouraged by a foreign dealer in Paris, Marche, who employed him on statuettes, mostly of a religious theme. Then in 1859 the worlds of Elkington and Morel-Ladeuil came together.

The Elkingtons were readying themselves for the Great Exhibition of 1862. Greatly aware of Morel-Ladeuil's skills they requested that the Frenchman work in Birmingham for three years with a free hand to design and craft a number of artworks. He produced the silver "Night and Day" followed by the "Inventions" vase. This placed him at the top of his profession and his subsequent beautiful plateau, "Dreams", was given by the city of Birmingham to the then Prince and Princess of Wales as a wedding gift. Once his three years were up Elkington renewed his contract for a further five years. He stayed for twenty-three!



Leonard Morel-Ladeuil (1820-1888)

His first proper work following the renewal of his contract was to be a masterpiece, the "Milton Shield: Paradise Lost". Started in 1864 it was a repousse artwork in steel and silver and would become the sensation of the Paris Exhibition of 1867. The elaborate and skilful workmanship on such a large scale was expected to raise the prestige and public awareness of Elkington & Co. and it did not disappoint.

In 1865 George Elkington died having not witnessed the exhibiting of one of the most glorious pieces of repousse artwork to have ever been produced. He left the running of the business to his four sons, Frederick, James, Alfred and Howard.



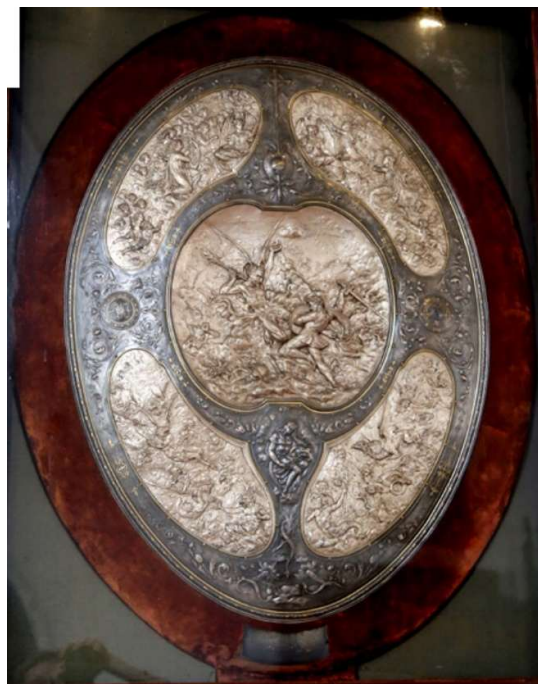
The Milton Shield: Paradise Lost (1867)

The shield received an enormously enthusiastic response and won a gold medal at the exhibition for Morel-Ladeuil. So struck on the intricacy of the piece the Victoria & Albert Museum purchased the shield for what was then a huge sum of £2,000 where it is still exhibited to this day.

The shield was designed to celebrate the work of the great Englishman, the poet John Milton. It marked the 200th anniversary of the publication of Milton's famous work 'Paradise Lost' (1667) and depicts the Archangel Raphael narrating to Adam and Eve the story of the 'war in Heaven' and Archangel Lucifer's rebellion against God and his subsequent expulsion from Heaven by the Archangel Michael.

Morel-Ladeuil continued to produce wonderful works of art under contract with Elkington & Co. Such pieces included the Helicon Vase which would eventually be presented to Queen Victoria by the ladies and gentlemen of the royal house on her first jubilee.

In 1878 Morel-Ladeuil produced a companion to the Milton Shield, the 'Bunyan Shield: Pilgrim's Progress'. Again, the shield marked another religious anniversary, this one being 200 years since the publication of John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' and was also recognised as a masterpiece.



The Bunyan Shield: The Pilgrim's Progress (1878)

The centrepiece of the shield shows Christian's battle with the lord and god of the City of Destruction, the dragon-like Apollyon in the Valley of Humiliation. The story tells how clothed in the Armour of God Christian battles the demon for half a day eventually

overcoming him and stabbing him so that Apollyon spreads his wings and speeds away.



Christian's combat with Apollyon – The Pilgrim's Progress (1678)

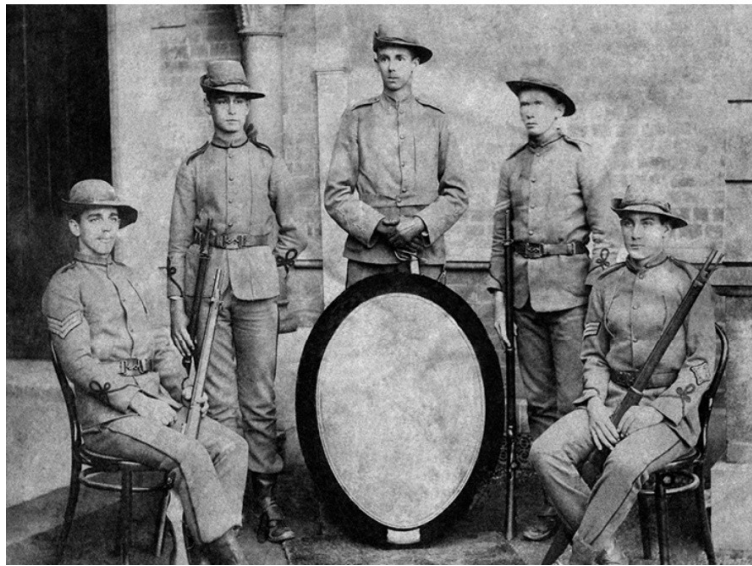
Elkington & Co. were now world renowned for their products and the Bunyan Shield was just another example of the symbiotic excellence produced between the collaboration of the excellent French artist and the Birmingham electroplaters.

By 1880 the Newhall Street works employed 1,000 people and the company had opened another six factories. By 1882, however, Morel-Ladeuil decided that after 23 years of working for Elkington & Co. it was time to move on. Through failing ill health, he moved back to France and set up residence in Boulogne. On 15th March 1888 he passed away, his legacy being his creation of 35 pieces of artwork, many of which were to be considered masterpieces.

We know what happened to the Milton Shield, but what about the Bunyan Shield? Well, it somehow came into the possession of a certain Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Thomas Sargood (later Sir Frederick Thomas Sargood KCMG). Quite how that came about is not clear. What we do know is that Sargood was born in London in 1834 but when just 16 years old moved to Australia with his family. It was here that he started a cadet movement in Victoria in 1884.

Sargood put the shield up as a trophy for the victors in the Intercolonial Rifle Competition, renaming the shield the 'Sargood Shield'. He stipulated that the shield's permanent ownership required three wins, two of them consecutive. In 1888, 1889

and 1890 the Brisbane Grammar School satisfied this criteria and so it came that they won the shield outright, where the shield now remains on permanent display.



Brisbane Grammar School

Outright winners of the Sargood (Bunyan) Shield – 1890

PART TWO: INFAMY

So, what about the Noble Shield? Well, now you have some background, let's begin to have a look at "our" shield. To be clear, the Noble Shield is not the Bunyan Shield. Well, not exactly, although it is exactly. Confused? Then read on.

The process of electroplating allows for original low relief items to be copied with detailed accuracy and in short, the Noble Challenge Shield is exactly that. It is a Victorian electroplate model, an exact replica one might say, of the Bunyan Shield. A number of these were made in the intervening years after the original was made (as was the case with the Milton Shield). As the original Bunyan Shield has the date 1878 engraved into it, replicas with the same date were produced for a few years afterwards. Therefore, the date inscribed on the Noble Shield still says 1878, but as this is an exact replica we can only really date it to around 1878-1882. This still makes it the oldest (known) trophy competed for in a recognised British roller speed skating event – although its inauguration for such was not until 1910.

The shield was donated by and named after a well-known Leicester man, Joe Noble. But who was he exactly? Well, Joe Noble was born in Leicester on 7th May 1856 to Isaac and Mary Noble. By the age of 24 Joe was married with three children and the landlord of the Sir Robert Peel public house in Beaufort Street, Leicester. Over time he became a locally well-known and well respected licenced victualler (one licenced to sell alcohol) and property owner. In 1887 he was granted the licence to run Leicester's oldest pub, The Globe (Hotel) on Silver Street, which he did for 20 years. (Incidentally, The Globe is still around today as a bar and restaurant).



The Globe Hotel c.1900 when Joe Noble was the landlord

As well as victualling his other interests and pastimes were numerous – he owned one of the very first motor cars to be seen on the streets of Leicester; he was Vice-President of the Western Golf Club; he was a Life Governor of Leicester Royal Infirmary; President of the Licenced Victuallers Association; member of the Fernie Hunt (fox hunting) as well as being an accomplished equestrian; a member of the Leicester Conservative Club; and Vice-Chairman of the Leicester Boulevard Roller Skating Club.

How Joe became interested and involved in roller skating isn't known but we do know he was a keen sportsman and well known for putting up trophies for various sporting competitions, whether it be golf, bowls or of course, roller skating. The shield would have obviously been acquired by Joe at some point between 1880 and 1910, but quite how it came to be in his possession is a mystery and likely to remain so as Joe no longer has any direct living descendants.

In the early 1900's there were three roller rinks and subsequently three clubs aligned to Leicester, the Boulevard (on Western Boulevard), the Empress (later to become part of the Granby Halls) and the Belgrave. In 1909, the Boulevard rink was occasionally turned into a cinema for short periods. Such was its success that in July 1910 a dedicated building was erected adjacent to the rink, the Boulevard Electric & Variety Theatre. Joe Noble was the first proprietor of this cinema/theatre which would have been handy for his frequent visits to the roller rink next door and to watch skaters try and win his now 'famous' shield.

Joe Noble passed away peacefully at his home on 10th March 1934 aged 77. There was much made of his passing and his funeral was attended by his close friend and Lord Mayor of Leicester, William Key Billings. His shield would only be raced for a handful of times in his lifetime but it would leave an indelible mark on the history of British roller speed skating.



Joe Noble (1856-1934)

The Noble Challenge Shield was introduced to the skating world in the March 24th 1910 edition of "Rinking" magazine and the following day in "The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News" magazine.



The "Noble" Challenge Shield

The "Noble" Challenge Shield, value £30, open to British amateurs, will be competed for at the Boulevard Rink, Leicester, in the first week in April. Heats will be run on April 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th, and the final on Saturday 9th.

["Rinking" magazine – March 24, 1910]

Weighing in at some 20kg, standing over a metre high and almost a metre wide, the shield had to be one of, if not the heaviest and largest speed skating trophy of the day, possibly ever.

This is how the race report of that very first competition was published:

RACE FOR THE "NOBLE" SHIELD, D. M. SWAIN WINS COMFORTABLY.

Considerable interest has been centred in the competition for the "Noble" Shield, the heats and finals for which were decided at the Boulevard Rink, Leicester, during last week, the trophy being eventually carried off by D. M. Swain, the famous Lava Club crack and holder of the mile record. Upwards of two thousand enthusiastic onlookers witnessed the final, a fact that should not be overlooked by those who allege that rinking is on the wane. The Shield is put up for competition between bona fide amateurs of Great Britain and any competitor who is successful in winning the same three times (not necessarily in succession) becomes the owner. For the convenience

of visitors outside the Leicester area, their heats were decided on Saturday afternoon. J. T. Cooper, of Birmingham, walked over, whilst Swain was successful by a good margin, bringing home Meredith as the fastest loser. The final resulted as follows: -

D. M. Swain (Lava, London), 1; L. Meredith (Goy's, London), 2; J. T. Cooper (Birmingham), 3; T. Dunn (Leicester), 4; P. Robinson (Leicester); L. Willson (Leicester); C. Burdett (Leicester).

Meredith was first off and led at the first corner, when Swain got by and went away. At the third lap the latter was leading by 15 yards and looked a certain winner. In lap 8 Cooper sprinted by Meredith, and Dunn, coming up endeavoured to follow without success. By the 11th lap Swain was a good 30 yards ahead and was still going in excellent style. Lap 12 saw Meredith second in command, which position he maintained to the finish. Won by 35 yards. Time, 3 min. 20 sec.



[*'The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News' magazine – April 16, 1910*]

And so, the Noble Challenge Shield had its first winner, Duncan Malcolm Swain (or Mike to his friends for some unknown reason) from the Lava club based in Denmark Hill, London. Quite how Swain managed to travel with the shield to and from London is unclear, especially with it being so big and heavy, but somehow, he managed it as the photograph below shows. Taken at the Lava rink his victory is featured on the front cover of 'The Rinking World & Picture Theatre News' in May 1910. Swain can be seen standing proudly behind the shield that was rapidly becoming a most prestigious event.



In those days the running of recognised open events was not always done so on an annual basis, in fact sometimes there would only be a few months before the same trophy was raced for again. Despite being originally scheduled as heats on 21st and final on 26th November 1910 the second running of the Noble Challenge Shield actually took place on Friday November 18th (heats) and Saturday November 19th (final).

Runners in this event were as follows:

Heat 1

- T. A. Dunn (Boulevard)
- S. Briggs (Boulevard)
- R. Stroud (Boulevard)
- T. Botfish (Boulevard)

Heat 2

- P. Robinson (Boulevard)
- E. Johnson (Boulevard)
- F. Bott (Boulevard)
- E. J. Little (Lava)

Heat 3

C. Burdett (Boulevard)
A. Rainbott (Lava)
C. Wigginton (Lava)
W. Hammond (Boulevard)

Heat 4

E. W. Bussey (Brixton)
S. F. Casey (Brixton)
D. M. Swain (Lava)
L. Willson (Boulevard)

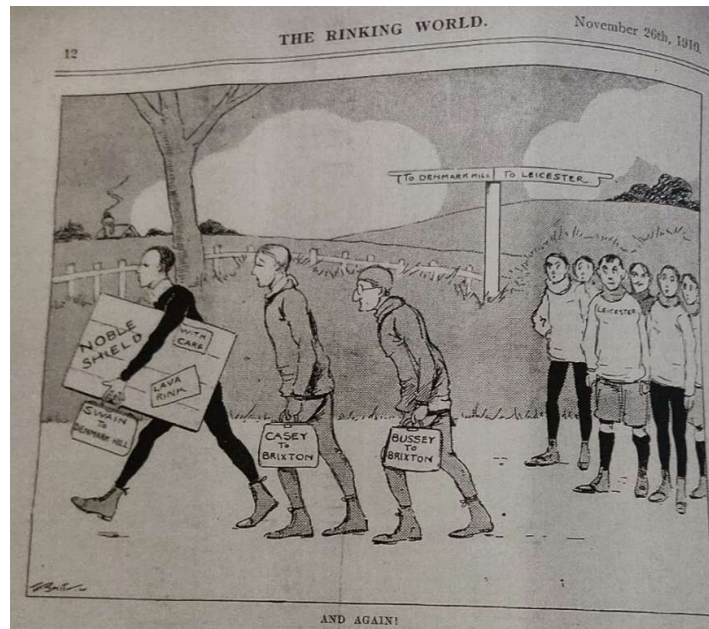
Here is how the race was reported:

THE NOBLE SHIELD

D. M. SWAIN AGAIN WINS

The one mile amateur race for the Noble Shield and Medals was competed for at the Boulevard Rink, Leicester, last week and as several of the best known amateurs in the country put in an appearance some fine racing was witnessed. The final which took place on Saturday evening was the means of drawing a crowd estimated at over 2,000 and excitement reigned supreme. D. M. Swain (the present holder) and who won his heat in such an easy manner the previous evening was much fancied from the outset. The race, although disappointing from a local standpoint, was keenly watched and the winner was accorded a flattering ovation on his victory. The officials were: Judges, Messrs. F. Snow (N.S.A.) and G. Preston starter, Mr. W. Jesson; timekeeper, Mr. Chas. Knight (London).

THE FINAL – The draw for positions was as follows: T. A. Dunn, 1; C. Burdett, 2; P. Robinson, 3; E. W. Bussey, 4 (fastest loser); and D. M. Swain, 5. After a false start Bussey set the pace with Swain second, Burdett third, Robinson fourth and Dunn last. In the next round Swain took the lead and Robinson sprinted into third place, but Swain and Bussey were going for all they were worth. In the sixth lap Dunn changed places with Robinson and immediately afterwards Burdett, who seemed to be going well, dropped out. Robinson in the ninth lap followed suit and three only remained to fight out the issue. At the tenth bend Swain commanded a ten yards lead from Bussey and Dunn, who going strong was well up. Swain with victory in sight increased the pace and won by twelve yards in 3 min. 22 secs., E. W. Bussey 2nd, 3 min. 23 3-5 secs., and T. A. Dunn 3rd, 3 min. 24 secs.



[*'The Rinking World' magazine – November 26, 1910*]

So, despite such a huge turnout of representatives from the local Leicester Boulevard club, the second running of the event also went to Swain and the Noble Shield once more made its way back to London. The shield was presented to Swain by Joe Noble himself who congratulated the Londoner on winning it for a second time.

Even after just two races the Noble Shield race was beginning to be recognised as a blue ribband event. Its popularity can probably be attributed to the sheer presence of the trophy itself. Not only was it larger than life but also a wonderful masterpiece of fine artwork. It was certainly a trophy that one wanted to be associated with as proven by the participation of elite skaters from other towns and cities, most notably, of course, London and Birmingham.

By the time the third event was due to take place there was a definite buzz around the skating circuit. Much publicised by the roller skating (or 'rinking' as it was known back then) magazines of the time, the question on everyone's lips was "can Swain win it for a third consecutive time and become the outright owner of the Noble Shield?"

On 11th March 1911 the scene was set for another showdown between the top speed skaters of the country at that time. A month earlier Swain had won his first (and only) British Championship title, the One Mile Championship at the Maida Vale rink, beating 50 other entrants to do so. Now the holder of the infamous Benetfink Challenge Cup, Swain was in fine form and a favourite to retain and win outright the Noble Shield, but few could have predicted the ensuing result.

Starters for the event were as follows:

Heat 1

F. Bott (Boulevard)
H. N. Stroud (Boulevard)
L. Keites (Boulevard)

Heat 2

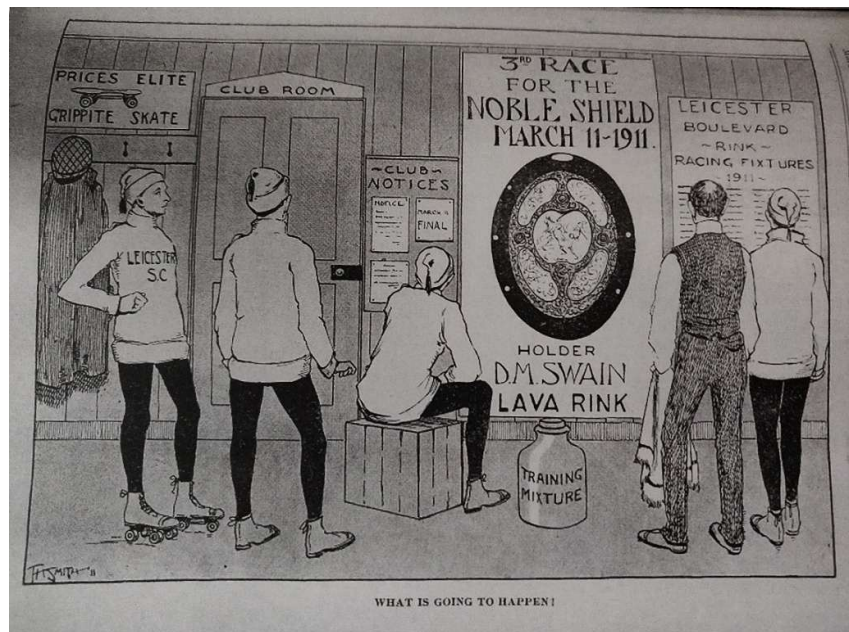
D. M. Swain (Lava)
F. E. Barker (Lava)
C. Burdett (Belgrave)
L. Willson (Boulevard)

Heat 3

C. E. Johnson (Boulevard)
S. C. Percy (Empress)
S. F. Casey (Lava)

Heat 4

A. R. Eglington (Lava)
E. W. Bussey (Brixton)
J. T. Cooper (Birmingham)



This is how the race was reported:

RACE FOR THE NOBLE SHIELD

A FIASCO

Two thousand spectators lined the barriers of the Boulevard rink on March 11th, to witness the final of the Noble Shield, the preliminary heats having been competed for the previous evening. With Swain having only to win this occasion for the trophy to become his own, one was prepared to see the other Lava man (Eglington) hold a watching brief on his club-mate's behalf. The latter in no way belied the expectation, for after the 12th lap he apparently impeded the remaining competitors in such a way that all three protested against his running, and the judges upholding the protest declared the race void. The officials were: Judges, Messrs. F. Snow, N.S.A., F. Peach and Dr. Moss-Blundell; timekeeper, P. Robinson; starter, W. Jesson; lap scorer, T. P. Blakesley.

FINAL – The draw for positions were as follows; E. W. Bussey (Brixton), H. N. Stroud (Boulevard), A. R. Eglington (Lava), C. E. Johnson (Boulevard) and D. M. Swain (Lava). Stroud went off at a good pace, followed by Swain, Bussey, Johnson and Eglington. Five laps were traversed before a change turned up, then Johnson gave place to Eglington. Stroud continued to make the running, which proved decidedly hot, and it was a moot point who was likely to win. At the ninth bend Bussey went third, but in the next Eglington sprinted past Swain, Johnson and Bussey going into second place, with Stroud leading. In the eleventh Swain again came into the picture and commanded the lead, Stroud going third. The remaining distance was evenly fought out, and it was hereabouts that the alleged impeding by Eglington happened, for all skated in a bunch, Johnson and Bussey vainly trying to get through. At the last bend for home Johnson, by a splendid sprint, ran into second place. The positions as the competition passed the post were: Swain 1st, Johnson 2nd, Eglington 3rd, with the other men well up. A yard divided the first, whilst a foot separated the second and third. Time, 3 min. 23 sec. As mentioned above, the race was declared void, and left in the hands of the N.S.A. to decide.

[‘The Rinking World’ magazine – March 18, 1911]

For several weeks the decision was pending and much speculation was had around what was going to happen. The result of the race was totally in the hands of the National Skating Association, under whose rules the race had been run. Undoubtedly there would be much speculation as to whether there was a conspiracy to prevent Swain becoming the owner, but the truth was that the N.S.A. had acted upon the observations of judges and protests of others and in the immediate aftermath declared the race void, for now.

Two weeks after the event a report from the Lava Skating Club Annual Dinner noted the following:

“Noble” Shield” – D. M. Swain was successful at Leicester, on 9th April, 1910, and again on 22nd November, 1910, in winning this much coveted trophy, against the pick of the London and Provincial amateurs. He was again the winner on 11th March, 1911, but the action taken by the judges on that occasion, when through a cause for which Swain was in no way considered responsible, the race was declared “no decision”, is under consideration by the N.S.A. Executive. Should the N.S.A. decide that the competitors be placed as they finished, the Shield will become the absolute property of D. M. Swain.

The result was that the N.S.A. did not reverse their decision and so it came to be that race number three for the Noble Challenge Shield was declared a non-event.

Just six weeks after the March 11th ‘fiasco’ a fourth competition for the Noble Shield was held. Newspaper reports suggested that this was a re-run of event number three with a field that fell way short of the class seen just six weeks prior. With only eight entrants and only one of those from outside of Leicester, there were just two heats. In fact, the non-local skater was Cyril Stokes (Brook Green Rink, London), a youngster yet to reach his 14th birthday, as indeed was young Freddie Randle. Even in the build-up there was some doubt as to the size of the entry:

LEICESTER

RACE FOR THE NOBLE SHIELD

Tonight (Saturday, April 29th) the heats and final for the Noble Shield takes place, and it is hoped that in this instance it will not result in the fiasco as it did on the last occasion. At the time of writing I believe none of the Londoners have sent in their names, but no doubt several well-known Midlanders will compete.

[‘The Rinking World’ magazine – May 6th, 1911]

We shall never know if the event was boycotted or whether the London amateurs were otherwise indisposed, but we do know that the racing went off without a hitch and a new name was added to the Noble Shield.

The starters for this event were as follows:

Heat 1

C. Burdett (Leicester)

F. Randle (Leicester)

F. Bott (Leicester)

R. Stroud (Leicester)

Heat 2

C. E. Johnson (Leicester)

T. A. Dunn (Leicester)

L. Keites (Leicester)

C. Stokes (London)

The race report was as follows:

RACING AT LEICESTER

FINAL FOR THE NOBLE SHIELD

The much talked about race for the Noble Shield took place at the Boulevard Rink, before a large crowd. Although none of the Londoners with the exception of Master Stokes put in an appearance, a really good race resulted.

Final – Those entitled to compete in the final were: T. A. Dunn, C. Johnson, F. Randle and C. Burdett. Johnson set a warm pace for the first three laps, with Burdett, Dunn and Randle in rotation. Dunn from this point took the lead, and Burdett went second. The race continued to be fought out evenly, and Burdett in warding off a gallant attempt on Johnson's part, won by 2 yards, with Dunn 3rd, 5 yards behind, Randle being well up for fourth place. The time was distinctly good the distance being covered in 3 min. 18 secs.

[‘The Rinking World’ magazine – May 13th, 1911]

The fifth race for the Noble Shield was run on Saturday 25th November 1911. Charles William Burdett of Leicester took his second victory in this event. It was a pretty uneventful affair with the heats having been run on the evening before. We are unclear as to how many entrants there were but this is how the race was reported:

FINAL FOR THE NOBLE SHIELD

Well over 2000 spectators assembled at the Boulevard Rink on Saturday night to witness the final race for the Noble Shield, the preliminary heats of which were contested on the night previous. The distance was one mile each starting from scratch. The following qualified: C.Burdett, C.E.Johnson, L.Keites and F.Randle.

Keites was first away to a good start followed by Johnson, Randle and Burdett. But for the fact that Burdett changed places with Randle, no alteration occurred until the sixth lap was entered upon, when Johnson went ahead of Keites. From this point the pace became particularly hot, and all skated well in a bunch. One lap from home Burdett sprinted finely on the inside, and at the bend was ahead of Johnson. Johnson

tried to overtake him but the pace proved too much for him and Burdett won a good race by a yard, Johnson being second and Keites third. Time 3 min. 20 secs.

A word of praise is due to the youngster Randle, who throughout skated well, and, although finishing last, was but three yards behind the winner.

The officials for the occasion were Judges. Messrs. H.N.Stroud (N.S.A.), Leeson, and T.Edwards-Hewitt; starter, T.P.Blakesley; time-keeper, T.P.Blakesley, jun.

[Leicester Daily Mercury – November 27th, 1911]

The sixth and final running of the Noble Shield took place on Friday 9th February 1912. Again, a disappointing turnout with just nine starters competing in two heats:

Heat 1

C. Burdett (holder)

F. Randle

W. James

G. Tow

Heat 2

L. Keites

R. Stroud

J. Botfisch

H. Onions

L. Smith

This is how the race was reported in the Sporting Life newspaper:

ROLLER SKATING

HOLDER EASILY BEATEN IN NOBLE SHIELD FINAL

(Note: the headline suggests something different to the actual result)

The final of the valuable trophy known as the Noble Shield open to all amateurs, over a distance of one mile, was skated at the Boulevard Rink, Leicester on Saturday night. Four competitors had qualified overnight for the final – C. Burdett (holder), L. Keites, R. Stroud, and F. Randall [sic.]

On the signal being given Stroud dashed off with the lead, followed at some little distance by Randall, Keites and Burdett, in that order. They closed up in the third round, but the order was not changed until the fifth lap, when Keites dashed to the front, closely followed by Randall, Burdett still lying fourth. Stroud, who was far from well, hereupon retired. In the eleventh round Burdett made his effort, and, although Randall sprinted after him, won by ten yards. Keites was some forty yards behind Randall. Time, 3 min 28 3/5 sec.

Mr. Frank Snow, N.S.A., was judge, and Mr. Edwardes-Hewitt timekeeper.

['The Sporting Life' newspaper – February 12th, 1912]

And that is the last known report of a race for the Noble Challenge Shield. Six races, two winners. One a Londoner, Duncan 'Mike' Swain (twice) and another a local lad from Leicester, Charles Burdett (three times). Burdett's third victory in the event, incidentally on his 40th birthday, meant that under the conditions of contest he became the outright owner of the Noble Shield, hence the likely reason that it was never raced for again and disappeared into obscurity.

In summary, then:

Event 1	9 th April 1910	Winner: D. M. Swain
Event 2	19 th November 1910	Winner: D. M. Swain
Event 3	11 th March 1911	Race void (D. M. Swain crossed line first)
Event 4	29 th April 1911	Winner: C. Burdett
Event 5	25 th November 1911	Winner: C. Burdett
Event 6	10 th February 1912	Winner: C. Burdett – becoming owner

Not many trophies got the coverage that the Noble Shield got in such a short space of time. The shield was already 30 years old when it was inaugurated as a trophy for roller speed skating, but in the two years of noted competition it became a "must have" trophy and like all good trophies it came with some good stories.

With the outbreak of the First World War many roller speed skating competitions were put on hold. Many of those who had competed against each other were now on the same team fighting for survival and a different kind of victory.

Any thoughts of resurrecting the Noble Shield were put aside as men took up arms against a common foe and the once coveted trophy disappeared from public gaze. The likelihood of it ever resurfacing, especially in roller speed skating circles, were now remote in the extreme.

We know from a local Leicester newspaper report that the Noble Shield was still in the possession of Charles Burdett in 1937:

Among the many trophies and cups that Mr. Burditt won in his early days, the most cherished possession is the Noble Shield a Leicester award, and a handsome trophy which became the property of Mr. Burditt after his third successive victory in the event gained, incidentally, on his 40th birthday in 1911.

[Leicester Evening Mail – 3rd February 1937]

As you can see, the report states Burdett won the Noble Shield for the third time in 1911, but of course it would have been 1912.



c.1912 – Charles Burdett with the Noble Shield having won it outright

Another point of note is the spelling of Charles's surname. Earlier newspaper reports show him to be known as Burdett and in actual fact the "winners" tags on the shield also depict this spelling. It would appear, however, that by 1937 the spelling of his surname has migrated to Burditt. What first appears as a misspelling of his surname is soon countered by a trophy that Charles donates to the sport of roller speed skating in 1935 known as the Burditt Cup. Why the change? I doubt we will ever know.

In later life Charles wrote a letter with details about his skating career. It is not certain who the letter was addressed to or the date, but it is believed to have been written at some point in the 1930's. The letter ended with him writing about his Noble Shield victories and what follows is a verbatim excerpt from that letter:

“On Apr 25/11 I won the Bunyan shield & gold medal & again on Nov 25/11 & gold medal & on Feb 9 1912 I won the shield & medal for the third time running & it became my own. It is the finest prize ever given for any sport to be won outright.”

Charles William Burdett/Burditt passed away in the summer of 1961. We can safely assume that up until the time of his death the Noble Shield was still very much part of his furniture. After his passing the whereabouts of the shield remained a mystery, until now.

PART THREE: OBSESSION

It is commonly known in some circles that I have an interest in all things roller speed skating, particularly historical things. One could call it an obsession. Certainly, my wife Claire does. She doesn't share my passion but endures it, albeit with some rolling of the eyes and the occasional "talk to me about skating...I'm struggling to sleep".

Wind the clock forward to 21st July 2018, more than a century on since the Noble Shield was last seen in public and I can be found in the British Library. I am excited that I have joined and in so doing am able to research old periodicals from the early 20th century. Periodicals that were dedicated to roller skating, or rinking as it was then known.

Whilst flicking through some of these magazines and taking hundreds of photos of pages with results, I come across a photo of Duncan Swain, standing proudly in front of a large shield, the Noble Shield. It dwarfs all other trophies in the picture and I am captivated by it. Throughout the numerous magazines there are regular references to it and it soon becomes apparent that this trophy, one that I have never heard of, is a much sought after trophy amongst the skating elite of that time.



I spent the whole day in the library, from opening time until closing time, painstakingly researching races and skaters and rinks, but of the hundreds of pages I turn and photos I take it is this picture that continues to captivate me the most.

Over the coming weeks I would search either on my phone or on my iPad phrases such as “noble shield roller skating” or “big shield speed skating” or “roller speed skating noble challenge shield”. Nothing. Not a dicky bird. Now, don’t ask me what phrase I put in but suddenly during one of my ‘let’s have another go at searching’ moments a picture appeared on my phone of what was most definitely a recent picture of the Noble Shield. I was so excited it is difficult to describe. I can even tell you exactly where I was when this eureka moment happened. (For those inquisitive enough to ask where exactly, I imagine you will soon wish you hadn’t. I was sat on the downstairs loo which is where most of my random searches take place). There was no mistaking it, I had found the Noble Challenge Shield. Well, sort of.



Lot number 291 – Tennants Auctioneers

The web page I had found was actually a page from Tennants, the auctioneers and it said that the shield had been sold...in 2010!

This is how the catalogue described it:

A Victorian Electroplate Model of the Bunyan Shield, composed of five panels moulded in relief depicting scenes from Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress with elaborate scrolling decoration between, the central panel inscribed Elkington & Co and Morel Ladeuil inv. & fecit 1878, mounted in a frame with silver presentation plaques including The Noble Challenge Shield for Roller Skating and 1 Mile Amateur Championship of Great Britain, easel back, the shield 86cm by 62cm, the frame 107cm

by 80cm; together with a postcard of Mr C Burdett, former winner, standing alongside the trophy and a copy of a handwritten note from him.

Condition report:

The velvet frame is worn (heavily) – some peeling off. One or two applied plaques are loose and oxidised. Apart from a rivet/nail blemish on the centre (knight) figure the shield itself is good, as is the glass. 220310

Determined to find out more I contacted Tennants and asked if they could tell me who bought it, albeit nearly 9 years earlier. They said they would contact the buyer and see if he/she wished to contact me. Shortly afterwards I got a call from a wonderful gentleman called Duncan Hugh McLaren (how apt that he should be called Duncan!), an art dealer with premises in Piccadilly, London. Duncan informed me that he did indeed buy the shield, simply because he liked it, and that he still owned it and would I like to see it? “Absolutely!”

It was at this point that he told me that it was at his ‘other house’ in Gisburn, Lancashire. He had had the shield refurbished and in place of the green velvet it was now covered in red velvet as green was not available to him. I sent him some literature on the shield as a trophy to ‘educate him’ on what it meant to the skating world and myself. It was at this point that he said “well, if it means a lot to you I am quite prepared to sell it to you if you want it?”

So, here’s the thing. In my heart I knew I wanted it, but just how badly? It wasn’t cheap and I wasn’t sure I could justify buying it. Just knowing that I had found it was enough. Or was it really? I politely declined but over the next few months I couldn’t stop thinking about it. “What if he sells it and doesn’t tell me?” I even called my mother and told her the story. I asked her what I should do? She asked me “Son, why do you want it?” “Because it was lost and now I’ve found it and I don’t want to lose it again”. “Yes, but when you go it *will be* lost again because Claire and the kids don’t care about it”. Well, that bought me back with a jolt. She was right of course and bought me back to reality, as she so often does.

A month or so later I’m a passenger in a car. Driving is a work colleague, Tony Barry. We are on our way to see some laser cutters in Kidderminster (I know, interesting, right?) and I’m telling him the story of the Noble Shield. I’m even showing him photos on my phone and telling him I’m still torn. He looks at me and says “there’s only one thing to do. Buy it.” He says it with such conviction (or so I tell myself) that in that instant I know it is the only possible outcome for me.

It has been six months or more since I last spoke to Duncan McLaren but I come home and drop him an email. I tell him that I am planning a trip to Lancashire with my wife for a weekend away and would love to see the shield if he still has it. I have told Claire that I will only buy it if I think it is worth it when I see it. Her response is “whatever!”. How well she knows me.

We arrange a date and time to meet up (Sunday 18th August 2019 at 12:30pm). On the Saturday Claire and I make our way up to Coniston Cold where we spend a lovely

evening at the Coniston Hotel, just a 20-minute drive from Gisburn. In the hotel bar I get chatting to a semi-retired milkman, Richard, (with his own cows I might add!) and his wife Jean (Claire is still in the bedroom). I tell them the story of the Noble Shield. Jean is very hard of hearing and after every sentence he repeats my story to her, exaggerating the words with his mouth. It's a somewhat strange scenario I find myself in but the old couple are making all the right noises with oohs and ahhs about the photos I am showing them. Suddenly in walks Claire. I introduce her to the couple and good as gold Richard the milkman says to Claire "it's a fantastic shield, I think you should buy it". More eye rolling from Claire, but me, I go to bed smiling.

After a cooked breakfast and a drive to Gisburn we arrive early so stop at a nice tearoom. I'm so excited I keep looking at my watch. Eventually it is time to meet Duncan. We make our way to his house, across a cattle grid, down a tree lined avenue, past the sheep and cows to his electric gate. He is walking towards us talking to someone on his phone and opens the gate for us. As we drive in I hear him say "I have to go I have someone here who has come to look at some odd artefact". A little amused I'm not quite sure what to make of his comment but proceed to drive around the gravel driveway to the rear of Coppy House, Duncan's residence which overlooks stunning gardens, or as I call it, Lancashire!

Claire and I are taken into a small drawing room and there on the table in all its glory is the Noble Challenge Shield. Duncan tells me how he loves all things Victorian. On his wall is an original canvas of Highgate Cemetery. He then produces another shield, a copy of the Milton Shield, no less. This one is without any wooden mount and is just the metal shield. Bought on a whim during a trip to Rome many years ago he tells me that it shows Adam and Eve, neither of us, I suspect, knowing the significance of this 'other' shield, until I carry out my own research.

After more than 100 years hidden away in someone's house, attic, garage, who knows where...here it is. Claire and I both know deep down that I am not leaving Gisburn without the Noble Shield. We agree a price and before I know it the shield is in the boot of the car and we are winging our way back to Northampton.

During refurbishment Duncan removed the engraved metal tags that adorned the frame. There were originally six discs, (although only five are seen on the cover of the May 1910 "Rinking World & Picture Theatre News" magazine), presumably each of them engraved with the names of the winners as well as two other engraved tags with the name of the shield, the donator and the event for which it was being contested. Duncan assures me that the tags are not lost, just misplaced and that they will eventually turn up, but I resign myself to the fact that this may never happen. After all, they are not very big and his drawing room (and house) is full of trinkets and artefacts. Despite this, the shield is absolutely still a thing of beauty.

Wind forward to 11th June 2022, almost 3 years since the shield made its journey from Gisburn to Northampton, and I receive a voicemail from Duncan McLaren no less. He informs me that during a bit of a clear out he has found "my tags" in a rusty old sweet tin. I can't contain my excitement and call him back immediately to learn more and arrange plans for me to collect them. After some deliberation and toing and froing on dates we finally agree on Sunday 11th July, some time between 09:30 and 10:00. The

tags, in fact, are at his London residence, a little mews just behind Fortnum & Mason on Piccadilly. That weekend is already a special weekend as Claire and I are enjoying the company of a great friend and mentor, Jon Harrison, and his wonderful wife Jennifer. The trip has been 3 years in the making but due to coronavirus has continually been pushed back. This weekend it finally all comes together as we meet up in London.

Sunday 11th July arrives and we start the day with breakfast at The Wolsley on Piccadilly. We are joined by a young couple, Grayson and Emily, who are friends of Jon and Jen's, and we enjoy an hour of fun and swapping stories before I pick up my small rucksack and make my excuses. I make the 6 minute journey on foot from The Wolsley to Ormands Yard and push the buzzer to Duncan's apartment. I push open the iron gate and make my way up the stairs of Butler House to the first floor landing. There is a click and the apartment door opens to reveal Duncan. He hasn't changed a bit in the 3 years since our last meeting and he warmly greets me and invites me in.

Once inside his apartment he produces the little sweet tin marked "Grether's Pastilles". He opens it and carefully unwraps the contents from the tissue paper that covers them. Suddenly, there on his sideboard are the hallmarked silver tags that once adorned the Noble Shield. I am thrilled to know that very soon these small pieces of metal will be reunited with the shield and affixed once more to their rightful place.



The metal tags are finally found

Duncan tells me he still has to find the photograph of Charles Burdett and his handwritten letter, but again, he assures me they will turn up. Whether they do or not, I have no doubt that he will make every effort to find them.

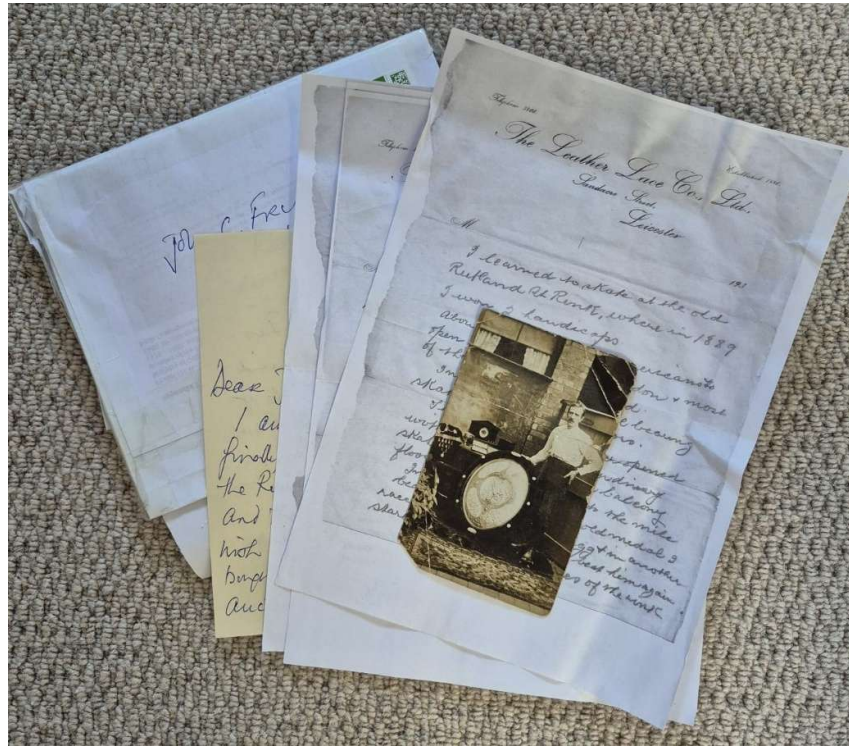
Before we part Duncan asks that in the unlikely event I should wish to sell the Noble Shield that I give him first refusal. I assure him that I will of course do that and make the point that he has paid a very large part in this story. We say our goodbyes and off I go with the sweet tin and its priceless (to me) contents in my rucksack, literally skipping with joy for the 6 minutes it takes me to return to The Wolsley.

I have been gone little more than twenty minutes and as I arrive back, I find Claire and my friends still laughing and swapping stories. As I sit back down Jon looks at me across the table and says, "so what's this about a shield?" Claire does her now customary eye rolling as I once again start to tell my story.

It is now 30th June 2026 and almost 4 years since the shield and its tags were reunited. My mobile phone rings and I don't recognise the number so as is typical of me, I ignore it. With so many spam calls my mantra these days is always "if it's important, they will leave me a message". Some time goes by and I see that I do indeed have a voicemail. I listen to it and this very sweet voice introduces herself as Bridget Bell, secretary to Duncan McLaren and would I be kind enough to give him a call about the shield. Well, I can't tell you just how quickly I pick up the phone and dial Duncan's number. Frustratingly, the call goes through to his voicemail which basically says "leave your name and I'll decide if I want to call you back" which I find rather amusing. I leave my message but being impatient I decide to also call Bridget. Bridget answers and tells me that Duncan is actually with her right now. He comes to the phone and after exchanging pleasantries he proceeds to tell me that he has found the photograph/postcard of Charles Burdett with the Noble Shield and the copies of his letter. I am euphoric! This is the final piece of memorabilia that will complete the story and one that I have been waiting patiently for since August 2019. Now beaming from ear to ear I get passed back to Bridget and proceed to give her my address where she informs me that the 'file' will be posted in a few days' time. I explain to her that Duncan and this news has made my day and she very charmingly tells me that it has made Duncan's day too.

By Thursday 9th July the package still hasn't arrived and I start to get a little concerned. I decide to call Bridget once again who informs me that the package was sent as promised. I'm not now sure whether to feel relieved that it has been sent or concerned that it hasn't yet arrived. Either way, I thank Bridget and am left to ponder what might have become of my prized package.

Two days later and my fears are allayed. I am just about to leave the house with Claire to visit a friend who I haven't seen in 25 years when the postman arrives. I am already running late but decide that I simply must open the envelope immediately. I do so and there it is, Charles Burdett's letter and the photograph of him with the Noble Shield and a wonderful handwritten note from Duncan himself. Only later does it dawn on me the significance of not only the date, but the time. It is 4 years not only to the day but also to the very hour since I received the tags/discs from Duncan.



Photograph of Charles Burdett with the Noble Shield plus a copy of his letter

I won't lie, my expectations of ever receiving the photograph and letter were diminishing by each passing year. After all, it has now been almost 7 years since I made the trip to Gisburn and purchased the shield. In fact, I had already considered myself very fortunate to have received the discs and plates back in 2022, but it has to be said that I have done Duncan a huge disservice. It is now apparent to me more than ever that he is indeed a man true to his word and that he neither forgot me or, indeed, what these items might mean to me. The story is now complete and a sincere "thank you" to Duncan Hugh McLaren.

So, there we have it. Designed and created by a French artist, manufactured by a Brummie industrialist, bought by a Leicestershire hotel owner, won by a London speed skater and later a Leicester speed skater, acquired by a Yorkshire auctioneers, bought by a London art dealer (with Irish and Scottish heritage) and kept in his Lancashire house, persuaded by a Welshman (and paid for by a Welsh woman) it is eventually bought by an obsessed Brummie ex-speed skater...who lives in Northampton.

Ladies and gentlemen...I give you The Noble Challenge Shield!



The Noble Challenge Shield - 2022

John C. Fry

July 2026