

Way back when

The 1970s saw a revolution in British skiing, when all things went green...

WORDS **GABRIELLA LE BRETON**

It's 1975. Rod Stewart and David Essex are vying for the Number One; the French are launching futuristic ski resorts like Avoriaz – and right up there after Laax and Les Gets on the list of Europa Cup race meets is Hampshire's Butser Hill, the highest point of the South Downs.

No, I haven't overdone the Camparis – at 889ft, Butser Hill hosted both the 1973 and 1975 grass skiing Europa Cup competitions. And there's the crucial detail: grass.

Much like monoskiing, grass skiing exploded onto the scene in the '70s. Invented in 1963 by a German Alpine race trainer, Josef Kaiser, to keep up his athletes' training during the summer, the new sport took off across Europe and at home. Come 1970, the British Grass Ski Committee was launched as a semi-independent sub-committee of the Ski Club of Great Britain (SCGB) to 'stimulate new membership by organising Grass Ski activities in the London area and at a National level'. Renamed the British Grass Ski Association in 1978, SCGB minutes record its role was 'to represent the large body of grass ski clubs now established around Britain'.

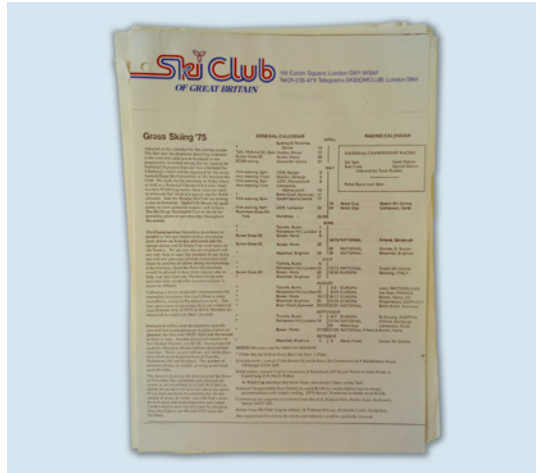
There is a collection of items within the Ski Club archive at De Montfort University that shed light on the grass skiing craze. One such item is the SCGB's 1975 newsletter, with a full page devoted to details of the grass skiing calendar. In addition to weekly Sunday meets, an annual long-distance 'trek' was organised, with members skiing their way from Beachy Head to Brighton and across the Pennines. As the newsletter says: 'Following a hectic weekend's reconnaissance by committee members, this year's trek is going trans-Wales, taking in Plynlimon en route. This may prove even more testing than our celebrated trans-Pennine trek of 1973.'

The BGSA (renamed the British Grass Skiing Congress in 1981) recognised how few Britons owned grass skis and ensured a range of adult and children's equipment was available to hire at every meet. In addition to sales summary sheets recording attendance numbers and total sales, the SCGB's archives have revealed booking-in sheets, which recorded details of equipment hire with signed liability statements. We can see an impressive 80 people attended a meet at Beddlestead, Surrey in June 1973; 24 of whom were SCGB Members.

To encourage Members to try the sport, they received preferential rental rates as well as free use of ski lifts. There was even a choice of skis – Rolkas or Grilsons – rented out at 40 and 60 pence per hour respectively.

Britain's love affair with grass skiing was, however, short. And it peaked early: splashed across the nation's broadsheets in the early '70s it nonetheless remained a niche recreation and had effectively been ditched by the public by the time the European Grass Skiing Championships were hosted on Butser in 1986.

✦ Read *S+B's* archive at skiclub.co.uk/skiandboard



◀ The club's calendar of events for 1975's grass skiing season

◀ The revolution hit the papers in the mid-'70s, as shown in this cutting from the *Guardian*

THE MYSTERY SALVER

This silver salver was found in the Archives without any supporting information, but we tracked down Nigel Fawkes, former captain of the British Grass Skiing Team, who shed some light on it: "Windermere hosted the first international downhill grass skiing competition in 1970. It was organised by Norman Whiteley, owner of the Troutbeck holiday park, who imported grass skis and paid for a number of grass ski racers to fly in from France, Switzerland and Austria to launch the sport in the UK," explains Nigel. "The hill was steep, with sheep grazing, and the skis were 'minis', so only just over a boot length long. There were, therefore, both spectacular performances and ditto crashes."

