

150 Years of Olympism

By Dr. Don W. Anthony, Life Member Wenlock Olympian Society.

The year 2000 means much to many. In the Olympic family it should mean 150 years of Olympism - stemming from the Wenlock Olympian Society formed in 1850, by Dr. William Penny Brookes.

The documents in the Brookes archives are constantly enriching and fascinating. I have been going over them again recently to try to discern the international nature of his Olympian initiatives.

In his writings on Olympism and physical education Brookes showed an awareness of French, German and Scandinavian theories and practices. The classical Olympic Games is a theme which runs through his life's work. The Olympian Society sprang from his Reading Society, itself established with the help of the Society of Arts. His Games had ceremony, parades: something more than 'just sport'. Coubertin himself paid tribute to all this in his memorable saying:

"If the Olympic Games that modern Greece has not yet been able to revive survive today, it is not due to a Greek but to Dr.W.P.Brookes . . ."

At the foundation meeting of the National Olympian Association, in Liverpool in 1865, there were three major figures - Brookes, Hulley (Director of the Liverpool Gymnasium) and Ravenstein (Director of the German Gymnasium in London). At this time the German Gymnastic Society had 557 English members, 250 German, 30 Scottish, 10 French, 7 from both Russia and Ireland, 5 Rumanian and 5 Dutch, 3 each from Italy, Spain, Hungary, Peru and Brazil, 2 from Belgium and one each from Norway, Denmark, Poland, Cuba, Canada, Greece and the Channel

Islands. There was also a M. Durbec from France in attendance. Durbec was the '*maître d'armes*', who taught fencing at the Liverpool Gymnasium.

At the first National Olympian Games, held at London's Crystal Palace, there were other symbolic and actual manifestations of Olympism. The 'Penny Illustrated Paper' of August 11th, 1866, remarks on 'A turbaned gentleman', in the stadium, 'attired in the garb of a Turk, supposing to represent the East at this Olympian Festival'. It turned out to be Hulley himself being true to form; from the start of his tenure at the Liverpool Gymnasium he insisted on the Greek title 'Gymnasiarch' (teacher of PE). At the grand lecture given in the evening Brookes waxed enthusiastic about the ancient Olympic Games. In the multi-activity events a Briton, H.W.Brooke (a well known competitor at the annual Wenlock Games) and Hugo Landsberger, a German member of the German Gymnastic Society, fought for first place - Landsberger narrowly winning. Another German, J.C.Rathgel, came 10th.

The Liverpool Olympics were also more than just local Games. The 6th and last Games of 1867 was reported in the 'Liverpool Mercury'. Here it is stated that 'there were competitors from Paris and Marseilles...' but no foreigners were listed amongst the winners. The Liverpool Gymnasium was one of three sites where 300 participants had signed up for 28 disciplines. Gold, silver and bronze medals were the order of the day. In 1894 the Liverpool Gymnasium was still engaged in internationalism. Then the YMCA

under the direction of Alexander Alexander, it hosted a 'Greek Games' with competitors wearing Greek dress. The Greek Consul was in attendance and awarded Alexander a valuable coin from the period of his famous Greek predecessor.

The British/Greek liaison in Olympic matters was significant in 1859 when Petros Vellisarios, winner of the foot race in the Zappas Games, was made an Honorary Member of the Wenlock Olympian Society. Later Brookes corresponded with Gennadius (the Greek Consul in London), on the possibility of reviving an international Olympian festival in Athens. Prizes were exchanged between Brookes and the Ring of Greece.

These must have been some of the factors which came out of the papers which Brookes sent to Coubertin subsequent to Coubertin's appeal for information vis a vis his International Congress on Physical Education in 1889. There followed Coubertin's visit to Wenlock in 1890, the correspondence between Brookes and Coubertin and finally, the Sorbonne Congress of 1894.

At Wenlock in 1890, it was announced that Brookes had been made an Honorary Member of the Athletic Society of France. In 1891 Coubertin became an Honorary Member of the Wenlock Olympian Society. In the same year he donated a special medal for presentation at the annual Wenlock Games. It was given to the winner of the tilting event - and rediscovered in 1994 for President Samaranch's visit of that year. The President of the Wenlock Olympian Society, R. Benson, paid tribute to Coubertin, at the famous Raven Hotel dinner. He 'hoped that the result of his visit might be that on some future occasion they would see some Frenchmen contesting in their tilting or other equestrian sports, not for the championship of England only but for the championship of the world . . . and do as Alicante had done that day - take

the prize over the channel'. (This mysterious reference to Alicante has not yet been solved, D.A.).

The evening ended with speeches by both Brookes and Coubertin. Brookes reinforced his long-held view that 'the national Games of Ancient Greece contributed not only to the bodily, but also the mental vigour of that noble race and gave a great impulse to literature and the fine arts'. He went on to emphasize the basic links between Olympism and physical education for all. Coubertin concurred - planted his tree and returned home, his spirit fortified.

Probably the best obituary of Brookes, on his death in 1895 (December 10th), was written by Coubertin for the 'Review of reviews' (USA). In it he said that 'the Wenlock people alone have preserved and followed the true Olympian traditions'. He noted that 'Dr. Brookes even endeavoured to promote a festival in Athens', and concluded that 'a festival of this kind could hardly be planned as long as the Paris Congress had not met to re-organize and revive the Olympian Games on a permanent and broader scale'.

The modern 'Fundamental Principles' of the 'Olympic Charter' commence with the statement 'Modern Olympism was conceived by Pierre de Coubertin'. It is true that Coubertin's organisational skill

and conceptual planning enabled the modern Olympic Movement to take off. Coubertin's idea to make the Games peripatetic was brilliant; Brookes wrote to Coubertin saying that the plan to take the festival from continent to continent was 'really superb'. However 'Olympism' was not an idea which arose in one man's mind almost overnight.

I hope Brookes and Wenlock will be remembered properly by the international Olympic family in 2000.

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