Much Wenlock

Chapter Four

Wenlock Olympian Games

Robert Dover's Cotswold Olympians were redolent of Merrie England, the next British Olympics to Played in London

...in the 1820s, the Wenlock Olympian Society was founded by a local doctor and magistrate, William Penny Brookes. To begin with, Brookes' Games were little more than a well-organised sporting event for local inhabitants. However, their reach soon extended to other parts of Shropshire, before gradually gaining a national influence during the 1880s (see following chapters for more details).

So much of all, the Wenlock Olympian Games were to have a direct and lasting impact on the values and principles of the modern Olympic Games. In 1890, just one year after the first Olympic Games were held in Athens, the Wenlock Olympian Games were one of the key influences on the revival of the Olympic Games.

Initially, Coubertin acknowledged the influence that the Wenlock Olympian Games had had on his thinking (see opposite), only for him later to renege on all references to the official IOC narrative. Fortunately, however, after lobbying by British historians this omission was finally rectified when, in 1994, one of Coubertin's successors as President of the IOC, Jan Antoon Samaranche, visited Much Wenlock and paid tribute to the doctor for his role as 'the founder of the Modern Olympic Games'.

By the mid 19th century Much Wenlock was an established trading and administrative centre serving the needs of the surrounding agricultural community. British sport was in the midst of great change at this time. While the majority of working people were becoming urbanised and their spare time increasingly structured by the unrelenting demands of the industrial timetable, for the sons of the social elite, public schools such as Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Winchester and Shrewsbury (twelve miles north west of Wenlock), were starting to codify sports such as football, rugby and athletics as part of the public school ethos that set the agenda and established a benchmark in British sport during the second half of the 19th century. Here was a cult that cut across social classes – there would be many 'amateurs' amongst working men too – and one that was soon to be exported around the Empire and beyond.

Nor are the Wenlock Olympian Games of historic interest only. Following periods during the 20th century when they went into abeyance, they have enjoyed an unbroken sequence since 1850, and could today be as strong as ever. Partly this is owing to the syndrome of local colour that charact...
Barely noticed on the wall of a house called Old Rowlands, on the east side of High Street, Eton, by Barnes Pool Bridge, this distance marker – the first of 25 as shown on the route map – is the only tangible reminder of the route taken on Friday July 24 by the 1908 marathon, one of the most celebrated Olympic races of all time.

Alas not one of the other 24 distance markers has survived, either in situ or, seemingly, in any collection. As can be seen, on both the distance marker and on the route map there appears a diamond-shaped emblem. This was the symbol of the Polytechnic Harriers, an athletics club established in 1883 by students at the Royal Polytechnic Institute on Regent Street.

Under the leadership of Jack Andrew, the Harriers were asked by the BOC to organise the marathon because of their experience of staging long distance events, such as the London to Brighton race. The IOC’s only requirement was that the race should be approximately 40 kilometres long (24.8 miles). Everything else was up to the Harriers.

Andrew chose Windsor as the starting point to give the race a historical flavour, ending up with a 26 mile route through the countryside, various towns and suburbs and ending at the stadium. Part of this route was then tested in April when the Harriers staged the British Olympic trial from Windsor to Wembley Park, a distance of 21 miles.

This map shows Andrew’s original route. However, as will be explained, the final route was slightly different from this published version, both at its start and finish.
In the midst of clothes rationing, Selfridges of Oxford Street did its best to raise spirits with this Olympian window display during the summer of 1948, centred around the now familiar figure of Discobolus.

No doubt on sale inside the store was a selection of brightly coloured Jacqmar scarves, including the one seen opposite, designed by the London company’s head designer, Arnold Lever. Having imported large quantities of silk just before the war, Jacqmar decided to market such scarves, each one yard square, in order to use up offcuts. Apart from their spirited designs, many of which during the war featured unabashed propaganda messages, they had the advantage of costing only half a clothing coupon. This scarf is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, but there is another Lever design of note – featured in Nicky Albrechtsen and Fola Solanke’s book Scarves (see Links) – on which all the medallists at the 1948 Games are listed. Because Jacqmar’s largest market was in the USA, and so many of the medallists were American, Lever designed the scarf on the day of the closing ceremony. It was then printed the following day, and flown out across the Atlantic the day after.
As this book has sought to demonstrate, over the last four centuries Britain has contributed to the wider Olympic story in a number of ways and from an assortment of locations. Our Olympic heritage is rich, and unique. But it is also fragmented.

We have shown how artefacts and documents from various Olympic Games have been scattered amongst a range of archives and collections. We have seen how few Olympic landmarks survive from 1908, and how several of those that survive from 1948 display no evidence at all of their Olympic connections. There is, however, one area in which the British have, at least in recent years, shown demonstrable enthusiasm for celebrating our Olympic heritage, and that is in the commemoration of individual sportswomen and sportmen.

Compared with other nations, the British have traditionally shown a marked reluctance to name places, buildings, parks or streets after individuals, at least other than senior members of the military, aristocracy and royalty. Whereas the Paris Métro has numerous stations named after individuals, such as Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas and Pablo Picasso, the London Underground has just one, Victoria, and only then because it serves the mainline railway terminus of the same name.

Similarly in sport. Whereas stadiums named after individuals are common overseas – Madrid’s Bernabéu Stadium being one of the best known – in Britain they remained rare throughout most of the 20th century, and confined mostly to smaller club grounds, such as The Stoop (named after Harlequins player Adrian Stoop). Naming sections of grounds after individuals was also rare. Even Lord’s – which takes its name from the leaseholder of the original site, Thomas Lord – remained largely confined to smaller club grounds, such as The Stoop (named after Harlequins player Adrian Stoop). Naming sections of grounds after individuals was also rare. Even Lord’s – which takes its name from the leaseholder of the original site, Thomas Lord – remained largely confined to smaller club grounds, such as The Stoop (named after Harlequins player Adrian Stoop).

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Partly this trend can be attributed to the growing democratisation of heritage, a trend that has seen not only sportswomen and women but also actors, comedians and musicians commemorated in various forms, for example, the John Lennon Airport in Liverpool, dedicated in 2001. (The trend may also be evident as a sign of how sport itself has become increasingly aware of its heritage and more confident of its role in our national story.)

We can overlook the potential of sporting commemorations to act as magnets for tourism. But whatever the cause or effect, we are certainly witnessing an increase, and one that has been particularly evident in relation to the celebration of British Olympians. There is, in order to be acknowledged, for their personalities. Modesty and to society, for their impact as role models, and even, it has to be acknowledged, for their personalities. Modesty and affability are great assets in a British Olympian. For unlike, say, high-earning professional footballers time they could be our neighbours or fellow members of our local sports club. There is also a sense that those who were, or were, the consequences of them being commemorated are real enough. They became, in the process, part of our national heritage, of that centuries old link we referred to at the start of this book, between Britannia and Olympia. A. This endearing if somewhat crude example of Edwardian cut-and-paste is one of the earliest known celebrations of Olympians to have been issued in Britain. It is also an early example of a British company seeking to exploit the Olympics for commercial gain.

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Tommy Green (1894–1975) was an unlikely Olympic champion. As a child he suffered from rickets. During the First World War he was gassed once and wounded three times. After the war he worked at the Eastleigh Railway Works in Hampshire, and did not take up sport until the age of 32. But he soon made up for it.

Competing for the south London club Belgrave Harriers as a long distance race walker, Green chalked up triumphs in various inter-city races, including the London-to-Brighton and the Nottingham-to-Birmingham. But chiefly he is remembered for becoming the oldest individual ever to win an Olympic gold in race walking when, in the unrelenting heat of a Californian summer, he came from behind to win the 50km race at Los Angeles in 1932. He was then 38 years old.

After that Green became a publican back in Eastleigh, but remained active in race walking and other sports. After his death a road in Eastleigh was named after him and appropriately too, given his chosen event.

Two of Britain’s most celebrated Olympians of the inter-war years were the runners Harold Abrahams (above left) and Eric Liddell. Seen here being feted at his graduation ceremony at Edinburgh University in July 1924, shortly after his return from the Paris Olympics. Both Abrahams’ and Liddell’s triumphs at those Games were famously celebrated in Hugh Hudson’s 1981 Oscar-winning film Chariots of Fire. Although the film exercised considerable artistic licence in its portrayal of certain events and characters, it did at least serve to stimulate interest in Olympic history and in the careers of these two remarkable men, Abrahams, who was Jewish, and Liddell, a devout Christian.

Born in China into a family of missionaries in 1902, Liddell’s athletic prowess had first been spotted as a schoolboy at Eltham College in Mottingham, London. He continued to develop at Edinburgh University, whilst also playing rugby for Scotland and preaching in his spare time. At the 1924 Olympics he won a bronze in the 200m, but more impressively took the gold in the 400m, an event he chose to enter only because the heats for his preferred distance, 100m, were held on a Sunday.

Liddell gave up competitive athletics in 1925 to concentrate on missionary work. This took him back to China, where he was interned by the Japanese in 1943 and where he died, in Weihaiwei Camp, in July 1945.

In addition to Chariots of Fire, Liddell’s memory has been honoured by the naming of a sports centre at Eltham College, where there is a bronze sculpture by Emma Power (right). The University of Edinburgh has an identical bronze, together with a display of his Olympic medals, including the one seen above right.

Street names on housing estates are often themed, but it is rare to find a sporting theme, as at the Wood End estate, built in the 1980s on part of the Sudbury Hill sports ground of J Lyons & Co, where nine hockey ties were staged in the 1948 Games. Running through the estate is Lilian Board Way. Brought up in nearby Ealing, Board died tragically of cancer only two years after winning a silver medal in the 400m at the 1960 Olympics. Other athletes named at Wood End are Chris Brasher (a gold medallist in 1956 and founder of the London Marathon), Roger Bannister (of four minute mile fame), David Hemery (a medallist in 1968 and 1972) and Mary Peters (who won gold in 1972).

Also commemorated are footballers Stanley Matthews, Alf Ramsey and Eddie Hapgood, cricketers Harold Larwood and Alec Bedser, and broadcaster Peter Dimmock; an eclectic if somewhat random mix, given that, Board apart, none had any links with the area.