

The British Olympics

Britain's Olympic heritage 1612–2012

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The British Olympics
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ENGLISH HERITAGE



Chapter Four

Wenlock Olympian Games



Cast in zinc alloy and coloured bronze, this is one of the medals awarded at the annual games of the Wenlock Olympian Society. The medal incorporates the Society's traditional logo, consisting of the letters WEN and a padlock – a visual witticism of the kind much beloved by the Victorians.

If Robert Dover's Cotswold Olimpicks were redolent of Merrie England, the next British Olympics to become established, in the Shropshire town of Much Wenlock, from 1850 onwards, were a Victorian attempt to rationalise the Olympian ethos and make it a force for the physical, educational and moral improvement of the working classes.

The instigator of these Wenlock Olympian Games was William Penny Brookes, a local doctor and magistrate.

To begin with, Brookes' Games were little more than a well organised sports day for local inhabitants. However, their reach soon extended to other parts of Shropshire, before gradually gaining a national influence during the 1860s (as following chapters will relate).

Most crucially of all, the Wenlock Olympian Games were to have a direct and lasting impact on the values and goals of Pierre de Coubertin. As we stated in the Introduction, throughout the 1880s Coubertin's main concern had been the study and teaching of physical education in other countries, with a view to improving matters in his native France. Only after his visit to Much Wenlock in 1890 did he turn to campaigning for a modern revival of the Olympic Games.

Initially Coubertin acknowledged the influence that the Wenlock Games had had upon his thinking (see opposite), only for him to later omit all references from 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, Juan Antonio Samaranch, visited Brookes' grave and paid tribute to the doctor for his role as 'the founder of the Modern Olympic Games'.

'In truth, Wenlock is a happy place. I do not know whether there is any other town that is so well provisioned with everything that a progressive and generous municipality can make available to its citizens. The moment one sets foot there, one senses the privileged nature of the place.'

Pierre de Coubertin
La Revue Athlétique December 25 1890

So when the Shropshire Tourist Board claims that Much Wenlock is 'the home of the modern Olympics', it is no idle boast.

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 1977, and today could be said to be as strong as ever. Partly this is owing to the strenuous efforts of local volunteers, to whom we are grateful for much of the material in this chapter.

But also it is owing to increased interest arising from London's successful bid to stage the 2012 Games, and from the decision, in May 2010, to name one of the two 2012 mascots 'Wenlock' – the other being 'Mandeville', named after Stoke Mandeville (see Chapter Eleven).

Much Wenlock

With a current population of around 2,600, Much Wenlock – or Wenlock for short – lies 35 miles north west of Birmingham and five miles south of Ironbridge, the heartland of Britain's industrial revolution.

Ironbridge may be a bigger magnet for tourists, but in other respects Much Wenlock meets all the criteria one would wish for in a small market town. Local butchers, bookshops, tearooms and delicatessens line the High Street, and there is plenty of historical interest, including the ruins of Wenlock Priory, which date back to the seventh century and are now managed by English Heritage, a Tudor Guildhall and a town museum (below).



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 constricted 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 a result of this growing regulation, sport – which in the 18th century had become so tainted by its association with gambling, hunting, animal baiting and passive spectatorship – regained at least some of the nobler characteristics that had been handed down from the Greeks, and subsequently celebrated by the scholars and poets of the 16th and 17th centuries.

'Rational' recreation, as this emerging form of sporting culture became known, had no truck with the kind of alcohol-fuelled, rough play that characterised the Cotswold Olimpicks. Rather, the new puritans of the Victorian era invested in sport a whole range of improving qualities. From sport a boy, or man, though not yet many a girl or woman, could learn discipline, loyalty, team spirit and fair play, all qualities that would stand them in good stead in their adult lives, not least should they be called to arms in the service of the Empire.

For these individuals, many of whom equally embraced the precepts of 'muscular Christianity', the added virtue of amateurism, of sport for sport's sake, was also of paramount importance.

So it was that although certain forms of traditional sport and play would survive this period and endure well into the 20th century, it was largely the morally driven, 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.

William Penny Brookes

Born in Much Wenlock in 1809, William Penny Brookes is remembered as the town's most eminent Victorian.

After going to London as a young man to undergo his medical training, Brookes spent further spells in Paris and Padua. But once he returned to his home town in 1831 he would live there for the rest of his life.

In addition to his work as a doctor and as a Justice of the Peace, Brookes threw himself into a succession of



In his later writings on the origins of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin failed to mention William Penny Brookes by name. Yet in December 1890, in *La Revue Athlétique*, he wrote, 'The fact that the Olympic Games, which modern Greece has been unable to restore, are being revived today is due not to a Hellene, but to Dr WP Brookes.'

This portrait was taken when Brookes was aged 67 and still lobbying on behalf of the National Olympian Association. Brookes' biographer, Catherine Beale (see *Links*), has noted how his commitment to public works started when, aged 15, he accompanied his father, also a doctor, on his rounds, and saw the conditions in which rural workers lived.

improvement schemes: the surfacing of local roads, the construction of a new Corn Exchange, the provision of a gas supply and, crucially, the construction of a railway line linking Much Wenlock to the neighbouring towns of Wellington and Coalbrookdale, thereby opening up routes to major centres such as Birmingham and Oxford.

As an archetypal Victorian gentleman with interests in history, geology, botany, and education, Brookes was also firmly committed to the improvement of people. At first, this philanthropic work focused on education. Thus in 1841 he established in Much Wenlock the Agricultural Reading Society, in effect a lending library, out of which grew classes in music, fine art, and natural history. For the town's children, Brookes helped to set up a National School in 1847.

But improving minds was only one part of his agenda, for as a doctor he grew equally aware of how physical recreation could offer benefits too. In this, Brookes was arguably ahead of many of his contemporaries, seeing in the public school attitude towards sport a philosophy that could equally help other sectors of society. >>



▲ 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.

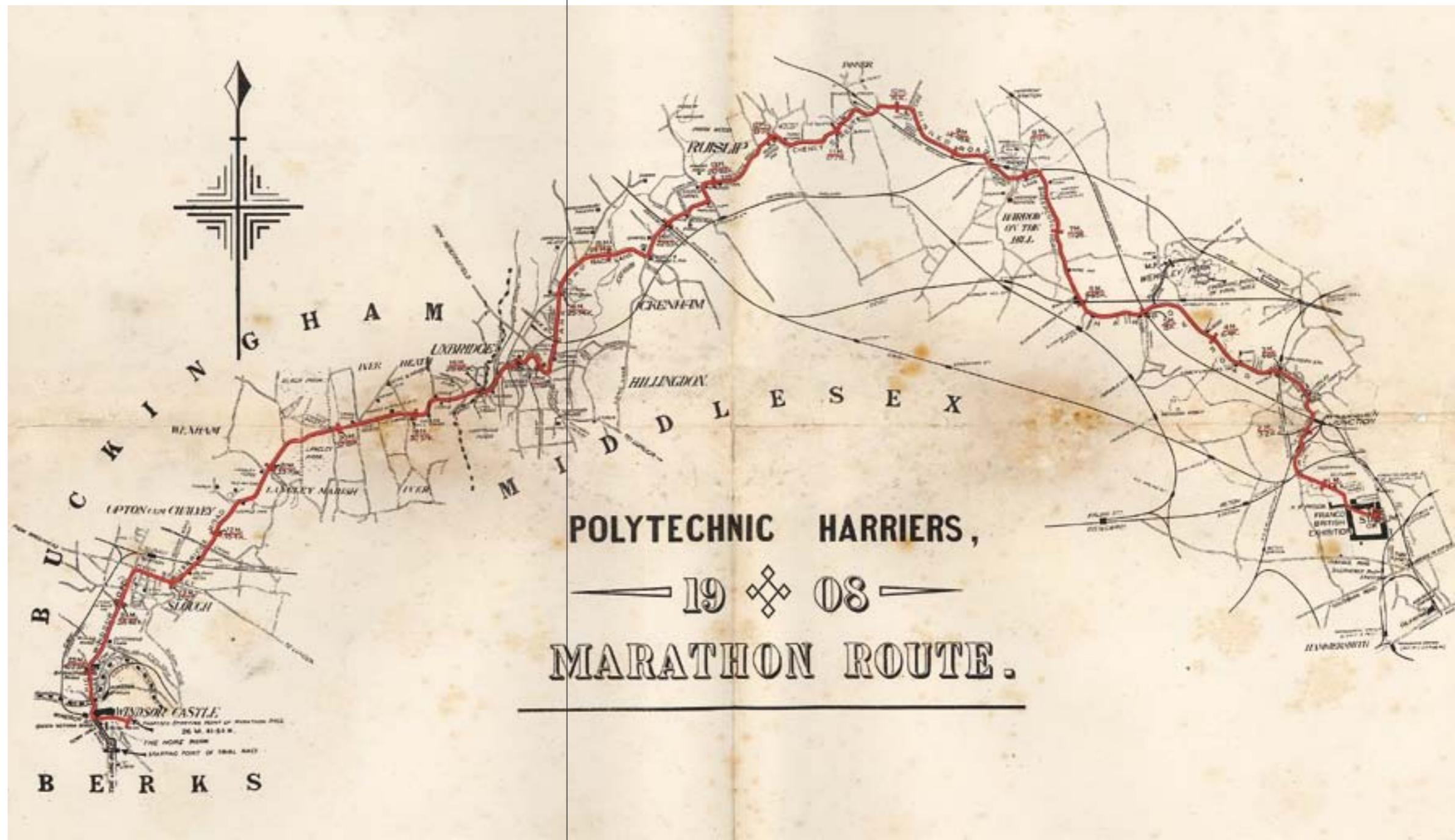
Alas not one of the other 24 distance markers has survived, either in situ or, seemingly, in any collection.

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.



British Olympians



Olympian hopefuls riding at the National Cycling Centre in Manchester can hardly miss this bronze statue created by James Butler, or fail to be inspired by its subject. Reg Harris (1920–92) was expected to win three gold medals at the 1948 Olympics. But the Bury-born racer suffered a serious road accident three months beforehand, then broke his elbow. Yet still he managed two silvers. Then in 1974 Harris reclaimed the British title... at the age of 54.

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-related buildings 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 sportsmen and women.

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 Metro 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 Bernabeu 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 once unusual, the Grace Gates at Lord’s cricket ground, named after WG Grace in 1922, being an early 20th century exception. Even Lord’s – which takes its name from the leaseholder of the original site, Thomas Lord – was named for business reasons rather than as a tribute.

That said, since the latter years of the 20th century this reluctance to name stadiums, grandstands and sports centres after individuals has receded. During the same period we have also witnessed a rise in the number of streets, plaques, statues and memorials commemorating popular heroes from the sporting world.

Partly this trend can be attributed to the growing democratisation of heritage, a trend that has seen not

only sportsmen 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 viewed as a sign of how sport itself has become increasingly aware of its heritage and more confident of its role in our national story.

Nor can we 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, it must be stated, no official body responsible for overseeing these dedications. As with other aspects of Britain’s Olympic heritage the approach has been piecemeal, with bodies such as English Heritage (in its blue plaque scheme for London), local authorities, sports clubs, educational institutions and voluntary groups all proceeding on a case-by-case basis.

Inevitably some choices have prompted debate. Is it appropriate to name a building after someone who is still alive? Do certain types of commemoration amount to tokenism? Yet these caveats notwithstanding, the commemoration of Britain’s Olympians does matter, if mainly for what it tells us about ourselves and our times.

For unlike, say, high-earning professional footballers or tennis aces, whom we follow all year round but who often appear remote, an Olympian may come to the fore meaningfully only once every four years. The rest of the time they could be our neighbours or fellow members of our local sports club. There is also a sense that those picked out for commemoration have been chosen not merely for their medals, but for their wider contribution 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.

The individuals featured in this chapter are of all ages, colours and creeds. They include a lawyer and a railwayman, a politician and a salesman, a missionary and a swimming pool attendant.

But whoever they are, or were, the consequences of them being commemorated are real enough. They become, 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.



▲ 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.

Held by the National Archives, the collage was put together after the **1908 Games by Gamage’s**, a store on London’s Holborn which branded itself as the ‘People’s Popular Emporium’ and was well known for its range of sporting goods. Gold medallists from all nations are represented and numbered – a key to their identity featured underneath – with the British athletes given no particular prominence. This, and the portrayal of the Irish ‘harp’ flag may have owed less to Gamage’s sense of fairness than to their hopes for healthy international sales, mail order being a large part of their business.

Also represented are some of the public’s favourite characters from the 1908 Games, such as William Knightsmith, the London toastmaster, and the female Danish gymnasts, whose displays had formed such a talking point (amongst male spectators at least).

The Stadium itself is represented rather less accurately, with the far stand bearing the slogan ‘Gamage For Sport Outfits’, a slogan that of course did not appear in reality.

We need to look elsewhere for commemorations of those 1908 Olympians who competed away from the Stadium. One such was **Dorothea Lambert Chambers**, who won a gold in the women’s lawn tennis singles, but who was rather better known for winning the Wimbledon title on seven occasions. This English Heritage blue plaque (*right*) was unveiled at her former home at **7 North Common Road, Ealing**, in west London, in July 2005.





The son of a Lithuanian migrant and the younger brother of Olympic athlete Solly Abrahams, Harold Abrahams won the 100m at Paris in 1924, before pursuing a career in the law, as a broadcaster and in athletics administration. The blue plaque at 2 Hodford Road, Golders Green, in London, was unveiled in 2007.



▲ 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 being 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 Weihsien Camp, in July 1945.

In addition to *Chariots of Fire*, Liddell's memory has been honoured by the naming of a sports centre after him 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. Also in Edinburgh is the Eric Liddell Centre, run by a Christian charity whose website features numerous photographs and artefacts from his short, but inspirational life.



▲ **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 (right) and appropriately too, given his chosen event.



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 1968 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.