

COUBERTIN, BRITAIN AND THE BRITISH A CHRONOLOGY

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Pierre de Coubertin was born in 1853 and died in 1937.

1875

Coubertin read *Tom Brown's Schooldays* by Thomas Hughes and became enchanted by the educational theories of Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby School. He began to realise the potential of physical education in general education and the seeds of his future 'Olympian' philosophy were sown i.e. "a wedding of sport and art" - "a marriage of muscle and mind" - the principle of "muscular Christianity".

1881

It is thought that his first visit to England was in 1883 but the report of his speech in 1890 suggests it could have been 1881. The report in "The Wellington Journal and Shrewsbury News" of October 25th, 1890 says: "When he first came to England, which was nine years ago"

1883

Coubertin journeyed to England "to visit some Polish friends near Windsor" (at the Jesuit Beaumont College). He spent several weeks in the country calling at public schools in Rugby, Harrow and Eton and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

1884/1885

It is thought that he "crossed the channel more than once" but evidence is unclear.

1886

He made his longest sojourn to England. It was this year the National Physical Recreation Society was formed. Leading officers, such as Herbert Gladstone and Lord Kinnaird, were members of the welcoming party for the IOC's first outing to London in 1904. Dr. William Penny Brookes was also a member of the NPRS Executive Committee.

1887

By this year, Coubertin "knew" also the public schools at

Winchester, Wellington, Marlborough, Charterhouse, Coopers Hill, Westminster and Christ's Hospital. He also visited 'several catholic schools in England and Ireland'. In London he stayed at the University Mission, Toynbee Hall. It was here that Charles Ashbee maintained his Arts Workshop which advocated links between sport and art. Later he moved his workshop "lock, stock and barrel", to Chipping Campden. Emphasising excellence in sporting trophies he designed, among others, the Cheltenham Gold Cup. Chipping Campden is the home of the "Jacobean Olympics" which started in 1612. These Games, mentioned in Robert Strutt's 1801 "Sport and Pastimes of the peoples of England", strongly influenced Dr. William Penny Brookes of Much Wenlock, Shropshire, who initiated the Wenlock Olympian Society in 1850 - a body which grew out of the Agricultural Reading Society of 1841, in that town, set up with the collaboration of the Society of Arts (later Royal Society of Arts -RSA).

Coubertin, and fellow IOC member Viktor Balck, both spoke at the RSA in 1904, during their excursion to the capital for the IOC session. The RSA was engaged in afforestation programmes and it is thought that the tradition of "named" trees at Wenlock was associated with these programmes.

1888

Coubertin, a keen rower, visited Henley. He was impressed by the Henley Royal Regatta organisation which he described as "three concentric circles" - the nucleus, the nursery and the facade. Those who were deeply committed - those who could be educated to the cause - and those whose position and influence could be useful. This model was used as the basis of the IOC constitution.

1889

The French Government charged Coubertin to investigate physical education. He travelled to the USA and organised a congress in Paris as part of the Universal Exposition that year. He conducted a postal survey in the English-speaking

countries and received a pamphlet from William Brookes. This was a copy of the speech made by Brookes at the 1st National Olympian Games held at London's Crystal Palace in 1866. It illustrated the importance of the Olympian idea in education. Coubertin was immensely impressed by these ideas and the beginning of their friendship was forged. Coubertin paid lavish written tribute to Brookes.

The first National Olympian Games were organised by Brookes, John Hulley of Liverpool, and Ernest Ravenstein of the German Gymnastics Society in London. Ravenstein managed the Games and many of the nationals belonging to the GGS, took part in the Games. So did W.G. Grace who was playing cricket at the Oval but found a substitute fielder so that he could go up the hill to Sydenham and win the 440 yard hurdles. Grace was another member of the welcoming party for the IOC in London in 1904.

1890

After some correspondence Coubertin took off for Much Wenlock. A special 'Games' was organised in his honour. He stayed at "The Raven Hotel" - wined and dined there - and speeches were given and heard. Coubertin, on his return to France, wrote an article in his "Revue" that the revival of the Olympic Games was due more to Brookes than any other person. Coubertin planted an oak tree which still thrives.

1891

Coubertin was made Honorary Member of the Much Wenlock Olympian Society. Two others were elected to this status at the same time - the Earl of Meath (Lord Brabazon) who, with Brookes, was prominent in petitioning Parliament on the question of physical education in schools, and Lord Charles Beresford. Both were leading members of the National Physical Recreation Society. Beresford was also a leading influence among those who established the British Olympic Association some years later (e.g. Lord Desborough - W.G. Grenfell M.P.) This group of aristocratic intellectuals was known as 'The Souls'.

Coubertin presented a medal to the Wenlock Olympian Society. This was given to the winner of the tilting event (an equestrian skill involving ring-spearing).

1892

Coubertin made his first speech at the Sorbonne, University of Paris, calling for the revival of the International Olympic Games. Such sports exchanges, he said, would be the "new free trade" of Europe. In April 1892, he was instrumental in bringing Rosslyn Park R.F.C. to Paris, to play Stade Francais. This was the first time an English Club had played in continental Europe.

1893

First French teams competed at Henley.

1894

Coubertin, en route USA to France, hosted at London Sports Club by Sir John Astley in February. Discussion mainly on amateurism. On May 24th the Much Wenlock Olympian Society met to pronounce on the International Congress planned for June in Paris - at which the IOC was established. The MWOS welcomed the Congress and wished it well. They suggested that there should be a 'motto' in Greek or Latin - favouring the latter. Later Coubertin adopted 'Citius, Altius, Fortius' (Faster, Higher, Stronger) as invented by his Jesuit mentor Father Didon.

Brookes and Coubertin corresponded through this pre-Congress time. Brookes said he had always wanted to revive the Olympic Games internationally - but always in Greece. He also said, graciously, that Coubertin's idea to send them round capitals of the associated nations was a much better idea!

For the Paris Congress the following Britons were named Honorary Members: The Prince of Wales; Sir John Astley; Lord Aberdare, first Vice Chancellor, University of Wales; Lord Dufferin, Ambassador in Paris and organiser of the first soccer games between English and French clubs; A.J. Balfour (to be Prime Minister); Charles Waldstein, Cambridge University archaeologist and Director of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens; Hodgson Pratt, peacemaker via 'arbitration' and promoter of the idea of international festivals for students which included both sport and poetry; Dr. William Penny Brookes.

Perhaps by design, or fortuitous chance, Coubertin had included in the group a Scot (Balfour), an Irishman (Dufferin) and a Welshman (Aberdare)! On his first International Olympic Committee he included Lord Amthill and Charles Herbert among the thirteen.

Among the delegates to the Congress were representatives from the International Cycling Association (headquarters in London), the National Cycling Union, the Irish Amateur Athletics Association, the National Skating Association, the London Rowing Club, the Scottish AAA, the London Polytechnic Club and the AAA (Herbert).

The Much Wenlock Olympian Society was also listed. However, Brookes had broken his leg, was unwell, and unable to travel to Paris.

The IOC was formally established on June 23rd 1894.

1895

Brookes died.

Coubertin wrote a majestic obituary in the New York "Review of Reviews," paying fulsome tribute to his 'oldest friend'. When they met, Coubertin was in his 30's, Brookes 50 years his senior.

1896

A small group of Britons participated in the first Olympic

Games of Athens. Among them were George Robertson (a hammer thrower and classics scholar from Oxford University, who threw the discus because there was no hammer event!); Jack Boland of Ireland who won the gold medal in the tennis singles and - partnered with a German - the tennis doubles. There was Lawrence Levy from Birmingham who went to take part in the weightlifting but, through local difficulties of organisation, stayed only to officiate and write for the Birmingham Post. Robertson and Levy were early members of the British Olympic Association and on the Organising Committee of the 1908 London Olympic Games. The Greek assistant manager of the Games was Mannos (sometimes spelt Manno), who spent some time at Oxford and was a friend of Boland. Robertson presented his Greek Ode to the King of Greece and found time to send daily reports on the Games to "The Field". Thomas Cook, travel organiser, gained the franchise for tourism at these first Games.

Also in Athens were Charles Perry, the London Athletics Club groundsman, who designed the track and acted as starter. G. Goulding from Gloucester took part in the 110 m hurdles; L. Elliot won the gold medal in weightlifting and took part in wrestling, the 100 m, and rope climbing (he was a 'pupil' of Eugene Sandow, a famous 'strong man' of his time and also recorded as the person who gave the greatest personal donation (1500 pounds sterling) to the 1908 London Games Appeal).

There was E. Flack, an Australian but British born and based in London who ran in the middle distances and in the marathon. A Mr. Gmeling from Keble College, Oxford is listed in the 400 m. There were two British Embassy employees Messers F. Battell and F. Keeping who took part in the cycling and a marksman S. Merlin. A Greek resident, but British citizen George Marshall ran the 800 m. The coach to some of the USA team, especially those from Boston University, was a Mr. Graham, also British born. Charles Perry's brother, Harry, trained the ten Hungarian athletes.

Charles Waldstein, US born but naturalised British in 1889, and an archaeologist attached to both the Universities of Cambridge and the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, was a prominent mover and shaker (he was a friend of the Greek Royal Family); later, as Sir Charles Walston, he attended meetings of the BOA.

Lastly, the crew of the HMS Howe, who were in port in Piraeus, attended as spectators.

1897

The IOC held its first working Session in Le Havre. A leading spokesperson, representing the Headmasters Conference, was the Rev. R. Courcy de Laffan. Then Headmaster of Cheltenham College, Laffan made a splendid speech on sport in education - in French - and totally captivated the audience. He was made an IOC member and

served the Olympic cause for 31 years. Laffan helped to set up the British Olympic Association in 1905 and was its Secretary from the very beginning until his death. After the Congress, an "excursion" was organised to the Isle of Wight, coincidentally the birthplace of Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby School.

1901

Sir Howard Vincent MP (Member of Parliament for Sheffield Central) and first head of Scotland Yard, appointed to the IOC.

1904

The IOC had its "first outing" in London. Dinners at Mansion House and Fishmongers Hall; visits to Windsor and Lord's. At Lord's, they "helped in a match against South Africa". Coubertin gave a speech on the role of the Olympics in international goodwill - at the Society of Arts.

1905

Coubertin welcomed the formation of the British Olympic Association in the House of Commons, May 24th 1905. Presided over by Howard Vincent, the meeting elected Lord Desborough as 1st Chairman and de Laffan as Secretary.

Coubertin made special mention of the BOA's experience and role in education. Olympic Diploma of Merit awarded to Lord Desborough "for his great love of sporting achievement and his work in favour of sports development.

1906

British team visited the 'Athenian Games' in Athens. Theodore Cook and Desborough both participants. Desborough made the acquaintance of Coubertin in Athens and the first discussions on holding the 1908 Games in London took place. Desborough organised these Games. Cook wrote the report. Both became IOC Members.

1907

Olympic Cup given to Henley Royal Regatta; "in recognition of its outstanding role in nautical sports since 1839".

1908

Olympic Games held in London. Coubertin attended sermon by Bishop Ethelbert Talbot of the USA. Talbot, the Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, spoke on St. Paul and the matter of many being willing but only a few are chosen. From this Coubertin developed his famous dictum: 'The honour is not only the winning but also in taking part'.

Coubertin presented a special medal to the Fishmongers company who had helped the IOC with its sessions in both 1904 and 1908.

1915

Olympic Cup given to Rugby School; “for its immeasurable contribution to sports pedagogy”.

1931

Olympic Cup given to the National Playing Fields Association “for its contribution to the development of sport in Britain - responsible for laying no less than 25 square miles of playing fields”.

After his death in 1937, Coubertin’s ‘view’ of the importance of the British attitudes to sport was reflected by a constant series of ‘recognitions’ viz.:

1938 Olympic Cup

The Central Council of Physical Recreation, “for the development of sport throughout the country and for its organisation of several sports centres, as well as providing a forum for discussion by all national sports federations and recreational organisations”.

Olympic Diplomas of Merit awarded to:

- Jack Beresford (born Beresford Wisniewski) in 1949, for “having participated in five Olympic Games (1920 to 36) and finishing 1st or 2nd in rowing events on each occasion”.
- Jeanette Altwegg in 1953, Olympic Figure Skating Champion, “for having refused many professional offers in order to devote herself to underprivileged children”.
- Vernon Morgan in 1968, “for his talent as a journalist placed at the service of sport”.
- Philip Noel-Baker, in 1974, Nobel Laureate for Peace, “for his work as a sports humanist”.
- Sir Stanley Rous, in 1974, President of FIFA from 1961 to 1974, “for his activity as a sports leader over more than forty years”.

Throughout the history of the modern Olympic Movement, Britons have also figured highly in another series of ceremonies for the award of Olympic Orders - in gold, silver and bronze categories. IOC sessions have been held in London (1904, 1908, 1939, 1948) and Birmingham (1991). Also two Olympic Games have been held in Britain, 1908 and 1948, both in London. In recent years the Coubertin - Wenlock link has been rejuvenated. A number of tree-planting ceremonies have been held at Wenlock viz.

1986

Geoffroy de Navacelle, the grand nephew of Pierre de Coubertin to honour the Birmingham Olympic Bid and to celebrate the 100th Wenlock Olympian Games.

1990

HRH the Princess Royal, IOC Member, to honour Coubertin’s visit one hundred years earlier, together with Dame Mary Glen-Haig, IOC Member and Sir Arthur Gold, then chairman of the BOA. A dinner was also held to re-

enact the visit of Coubertin in 1890 at which Jean Durry ‘played’ the part of Coubertin. M. Durry is the Director of the French museum of sport in Paris. Members of the BOA/NOC and of the Manchester Olympic Bid were also there in force.

1994

Juan Antonio Samaranch, IOC President, to “pay homage” to Dr. William Penny Brookes in the centenary year of the IOC. Also, a meeting of the BOA General Purposes Committee to ‘cement’ MWOS/BOA relationships.

1995

The visit, by the Secretary of the Much Wenlock Olympian Society, Norman Wood, the Headteacher, and Head of PE, together with 16 children of the William Brookes School, Wenlock, with Don Anthony representing the BOA Education Trust, to the IOC and its new Museum and Study Centre in Lausanne. The school presented an oil painting of Brookes’s house. The Society sent a replica of the medal sent to them in 1891 (see 1891 notes). The original was discovered 24 hours before the IOC President’s visit in July 1994, by the 91 year old daughter of the winner.

The Opening of ‘The Olympian Suite’ at The Raven Hotel, Much Wenlock with its three rooms named ‘The President’s Salon’ (dedicated to the IOC), the ‘Brookes Salon’ and the ‘Coubertin Salon’. A collection of appropriate photographs adorns the walls.

The first Annual General Meeting of the “Olympians” (Britain’s ex- Olympic competitors) at Much Wenlock to celebrate the International Olympic Day, 23 June. Held at the William Brookes School.

Craig Reddie, IOC Member and Chairman of the BOA attended the 1995 Wenlock Olympian Games, July 8th.

The European Youth Olympic Days held in Bath, England. The torch relay for this event started in Athens, traversed the length and breadth of the country, passing through Much Wenlock and the Cotswolds.

In Wenlock, a lighting was taken from the torch to ignite a separate one, which would then burn during the Olympian Games organised by the Much Wenlock Olympian Society July 8-10. Coubertin would have loved this symbolism. The whole EYOD event was held officially “in honour of Brookes” and this fact was noted in the publicity material and speeches at the Opening Ceremony.

Reading References:

1. OLYMPIC MEMOIRS, P. de Coubertin. IOC 1979
2. THIS GREAT SYMBOL, John MacAloon. University of Chicago Press. 1981
