

LETTERS

PIERRE DE COUBERTIN - WILLIAM PENNY BROOKES



by Don Anthony

"Much Wenlock is a town in Shropshire, a country on the border of Wales, and if the Olympic Games that modern Greece has not yet been able to revive still survives today, it is due not to a Greek but to Dr. W. P. Brookes. It is he who inaugurated them forty years ago, and it is still he, now 82 years old but still alert and vigorous, who continues to organize and inspire them."

Thus wrote Pierre de COUBERTIN¹ after his visit to Wenlock in 1890. In this article, written a month after his visit, the 27 year old Frenchman, expressed the deep effect the *Wenlock Olympian Society* and their Olympian Games, had on him. He summarised the history of sporting Britons. The result was, he said:

"The object of the Olympic Society (est 1850) is to contribute to the physical, moral, and intellectual powers of the inhabitants of Wenlock by encouraging open-air exercises, and by making available every year prizes and medals to reward the best literary and artistic productions as well as the most outstanding feats of strength and skill."

COUBERTIN continued:

"But on certain points antiquity was not enough. It ignored chivalry. So he took from the middle ages some of its chivalric customs, and wished the winner of the tournament to bend the knee and receive his symbolic laurel from the hands of a lady."

He then makes the prophetic statement:

"When people come to research the origins of a powerful movement of such magnitude it will not be enough to tack back the main line. At certain times, certain ideas run through the world, spreading like epidemics. It is very difficult to attribute them to any one individual, and one usually discovers without meeting of agreement several men worked simultaneously in the same cause in different places."

Describing the spread of "athleticism" which had spread throughout England and had "conquered

Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, South America etc." he then states that:

"Nowhere has it surpassed the form which Dr. Brookes has given it at Wenlock. He rests on the principles of the past which are just as true and noble today as they were in ancient times in the gymnasium of Athens, but their form is modern".

His text describes the National Olympian Games which started in London in 1866 and then took place in Birmingham and Shrewsbury, and comes to the "even bolder attempt" to take them to Greece. He "wrote to the King if the Hellenes" and with such success that the King gave a magnificent cup for the Wenlock Games. The patronage of the King was not enough however said Coubertin. "The Greeks took part in one competition and left it at that" said Pierre and then "In the Wenlock records I have seen the results of that competition and the names of the winners [the 1859 Zappas Games]. Since then" raged COUBERTIN, "nobody has heard another word about the Olympic Games in Athens."

COUBERTIN first came across the name BROOKES in 1889. Preparing for his Congress on Physical Exercises in Paris, as part of the Universal Exposition of that year, he sent out some 6000 letters to english-speaking schools in the world, asking their opinions about sport in education. So great was the response he was forced to start "a new library". He reports on this in his speech in November 1889 at the Boston Conference on Physical Training². Coincidentally he shared a platform with the Earl of Meath. Both were to be made Honorary Members of the *Wenlock Olympian Society* in 1891. In his obituary for BROOKES³ COUBERTIN wrote about a "package" which arrived from Wenlock. It contained "a pamphlet, a number of paper cuttings, photographs, and printed matter"⁴. So enriching and exciting were these contents that COUBERTIN determined to meet BROOKES.

From 1890 onwards COUBERTIN kept up a regular correspondence with BROOKES. I have managed to trace eight letters; I imagine there

¹ *La Revue Athletique* (25th December 1890)12

² Report on the Boston Conference on Physical Training Boston 1889

³ "A typical Englishman- Dr. W. P. Brookes of Wenlock in Shropshire" *New York Review of Reviews* - 1905. Reprinted in "Minds Bodies and Souls-Anthology-1998 British Olympic Association.

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Note: One wonders what happened to this "library" and hopes that French colleagues will dig deeper in their archives.

were others which have been lost or buried in some personal family records. However the "Dear Baron-Dear Dr. Brookes" saga, from 1890 to 1895 is revealing. I suggest that it displays the friendship they shared, the admiration for each other that they felt, and the twins "Olympism" and "Physical Education", which they nurtured.

In August 1890 COUBERTIN wrote BROOKES a letter about physical education in schools. This was *"of great importance to the whole nation"*. He looked forward to this visit in October during which he also wanted to visit Birmingham and Rugby. He reminded BROOKES that he had sent his book on American Universities by post, and ends *"Ever yours most truly."*

In April 1891 COUBERTIN writes again; This time *"My dear Dr. Brookes"*. He remarks on a letter he had received from BROOKES inviting him to the 1891 Annual Festival at Wenlock. He says that he is sending a gold medal for presentation at the Olympian Games via the French Embassy in London. It was by happy coincidence that this medal, long lost, was discovered only hours before the visit of IOC President Juan SAMARANCH to Wenlock in 1994.

July 1892 sees another letter from COUBERTIN apologising for not answering BROOKES. He waxes enthusiastically about a planned race by *"eights"* on the Seine, describes the progress of his French sports body, and says how delighted he is to know that *"the golden oak"* he planted in 1890 at Wenlock was growing well.

BROOKES'S letters to COUBERTIN of which I have copies, start in 1893. Two of them I found in the IOC files when preparations for the 1894 Centennial Congress were underway purely by accident when browsing through a file (not marked confidential I must add!).

"Dear Baron Coubertin" says BROOKES on May 30th 1893. He explains he was not able to be present at the 43th Annual Olympian Festival in his home town because of an injured ankle and a fractured leg. He was thus reduced he writes to the status of *"a limping instead of an Olympian member"* of the society. Again there is a report from BROOKES'S gardener on the oak tree; it is of *"lovely appearance"* and in *"flourishing condition"*. A few leaves from the tree were enclosed. BROOKES invited COUBERTIN to visit in the summer. He said he looked upon him *"as one of my valued friends"*, and took *"a deep interest in the cause you are ably advocating and so successfully carrying out."*

There are nostalgic comments on the happy days he spent in Paris as a student and the wish that future contests between England and France would be only athletic in nature! He was

continuing his efforts to get physical education into compulsory national school programmes in England but *"we are still the 'unready saxon' difficult to move unless tempted by mercenary considerations. He concludes with the note that I shall shortly enter my 85th year and am beginning to think that my zealous but ineffectual labours for the good of my country are fast drawing to a close. Ever yours sincerely."*

In spring of 1894 BROOKES received the circular from COUBERTIN announcing the intention to organize the Sorbonne Congress at which the I.O.C. was to be born. The reply from BROOKES deserves full treatment. It reads:

"Dear Baron Coubertin, I have called a meeting of the Wenlock Olympian Society to be held Thursday next, May 24th. To consider the various propositions contained in the circular you sent me, many of which they will be satisfied to leave to the decision of the Congress. In me however you will, I feel assured, have their cordial concurrence, viz, the establishment of an international Olympian Association and the arrangement that such gatherings shall be held in rotation in or near the capitals of all nations joining in the Movement. This has long been a cherished idea of mine as far making Greece the centre, but the plan of your Congress, embracing as it does all nations, is a really superb one, and deserving of liberal support because, as my experience convinces me, success is most likely to be secured by prompt and energetic action during the period of enthusiasm. You will not regret acting on my advice and may rely on my warm advocacy of your movement in all quarters where I have influence. I have sent you three papers containing reports of our 44th annual festival, and will, as soon after Thursday as I can, forward to you an account of the views of the Wenlock Olympian Society with regard to international Olympian festivals. I wish I were younger and able to have the pleasure of being present at your Congress, for the success of which you have warmest wishes of myself and the Wenlock Olympian Society."

Two weeks before the Paris Congress Brookes wrote a letter to S. TRICOUP, Greek Prime Minister. In this wrote:

"My friend Baron Pierre de Coubertin of Paris, and a another advocates of physical education, myself among their number, are exerting ourselves to promote international Olympian festivals and I earnestly hope they will be successful, and be honoured by the patronage of His Majesty the King of the Hellenes."

BROOKES enclosed an extract from the *W.O.S Minute Book* "giving an account of the dedication, on May 22th 1888, of an oak tree to his Majesty the King of Greece [...] The oak tree is growing fast and is in flourishing condition."

Two days later on June 13th 1894 he wrote again to COUBERTIN:

"I cannot express how much interested I am in your forthcoming international Congress on the subject of the encouragement and regulation of athletic sports, and trust that it will lead to an expression of opinion on the importance of the bodily training of the young in elementary schools. I feel very anxious for the success of a movement so essential to the welfare and happiness of mankind. The object is so noble, generous, and philanthropic, that I regard its inception and promotion by France as a great honour to your country, and a great benefit to other nations – one which I hope they will recognize and gratefully accept. I wish I were younger and stronger so that I might have the happiness of being a spectator of the enthusiasm of your Congress, and a listener to the eloquent advocacy of its objects. So you may be surprised that the members of the Wenlock Olympian Society, at their recent meeting, when the subject of amateurism was discussed, merely expressed their opinion that 'amateurs only should be allowed to compete', I wish to explain that they did not consider themselves justified in entering into details on the subject which required to be discussed fairly and without prejudice before arriving at a decision, which they felt assured would be the case at the Congress. I may mention however one fact that the Wenlock Olympian Society does not allow open betting at their festivals, which is such a disgrace at the English race meetings that it prevents many being present who would otherwise be gratified in witnessing a good horse race. To the question No. 5 'Gate Money' I would suggest, merely as my private opinion, that any surplus funds, after defraying the expenses of the particular festival in the capital or large town of any associated nation, should be divided between all the other associated nations, to be invested in Trustees for certain definite purposes connected with athletic sports as may seem best to the Congress about to meet in Paris, I hope the Congress will not omit the crowning of the victor in a Pentathlon, or in a greater number of contests, with the olive wreath. I shall be highly pleased to receive any information of your proceedings by newspaper or otherwise, and should a report appear in an English

newspaper, I shall feel obliged if you will send me the name of the paper in order that I may procure copies. The enclosed newspaper extract may interest you. With kind regards in which my daughter unites. Yours sincerely."

We come now to the last letter sent by BROOKES to COUBERTIN. It is dated as December 14th 1895. Since he died on December 10th 1895, even I do not believe him capable of such a feat! The content of the letter suggests that he was one year out and that the actual year was 1894. Again this testament deserves full treatment. It says:

"Dear Baron Coubertin, The pleasure which I always derive from your letters was greatly enhanced by the information contained in your last that you were about to married. My daughter and myself earnestly hope that you and your intended will be blessed with long lives of unallayed happiness, and that you will be successful in all your noble efforts for the promotion of the welfare of your country and the benefit of other nations, efforts which cannot fail to promote a friendly feeling and a desire for peace among civilised nations of earth. I must ask a favour of you, viz., that you will write a week before your marriage and tell me on what day it will take place, as I wish to invite a few friends to dine with me, and to drink to the health and happiness of yourself and your bride. Should you both propose to come to England this year, my daughter and self hope that you will pay us a visit, but you must come during the warm weather, and were I to name a time, I should say before Whit Monday June 4th in order that you may be present at our 45th annual Olympian festival and that your lady may honour our champion tilter by placing the olive crown upon his brow. I shall be much pleased however, as will my daughter, to receive you at any other time which may be convenient to you. I am looking forward with much pleasure to the receipt of the next bulletin respecting the international Olympian association and the arrangements for the first festivals in Athens. The Greek government should, I think, gladly acquiesce in the honour France wishes to confer upon Greece by holding the first festival at Athens, which will also be a mark of respect and good feeling towards Greece, of all nations which have joined in the movement. It is, however, a great gratification to me to know that in yourself France has not only gained a warm advocate of physical education and athletic competition, but one whose talent, energy, and perseverance has enabled him to organize a splendid international Institution which will

reflect great honour on his own country, and be a source of incalculable benefit and of great pleasure to other nations. I wish I were 20 years younger i.e. only 65 instead of 85, and how pleased and proud I should have felt to have been one of your Lieutenants. I hope however that I shall live long enough to rejoice in the success of your patriotic and philanthropic undertaking. Would it not be well for you to write to Baron Courcel, your Ambassador to London, and ask him [...] to ask Athos Romanos to use his influence with the wealthy Greeks in England and solicit their pecuniary support of the international Olympian festival to be held next year in Athens, and of which the Prince of Greece is one of the Honorary Members? My daughter unites with me in kind regards to yourself and Madame Rothan and I remain Yours sincerely."

In Wenlock today the *Olympian Society* is still active. Based on volunteerism as ever it provides weekly classes in sport and organizes the Annual Olympian Games. It has nice relationship to the British Olympian Association. In recent years more oaks have been planted and dedicated e.g. to J. A. SAMARANCH, HRH, Princess ANNE (IOC Member), and Geoffroy de NAVACELLE Hon. President of the CIPC (*Pierre de Coubertin International Committee*). The *Williams Brookes School* takes part in CIPC's Youth Forums biannually, and in 1999 at their Wenlock grounds an oak was dedicated to P. VELISARIOS, winner of the foot race in the 1859 Zappas Games and first

Honorary Member of the *Wenlock Olympian Society* shortly afterwards. Leaves were presented to visiting schools at this Forum and again this year in Genoa the 4th Forum. The 5th is planned for 2005 in Austria. Both BROOKES and COUBERTIN would have loved this involvement by schools engaged in sport, the arts, and community service. The IOC makes a generous donation to support these initiatives.

The symbolic significance of this revival is in tune with the modern IOC interest in environmentalism. It also reminds us in a simple way that oaks grow from small acorns and that the influence of small groups can result in giant waves. It also energises us to remember that we have, in sport and in life, to try to get better, even to stay where we are; in other words we have always to look our laurels !

Symbolists will be pleased to know that efforts are being made to grow saplings from the original Coubertin oak at Wenlock so that the hands – on link with COUBERTIN may be perpetuated.

The Olympic Games returns to Athens in 2004. It is consumed with security, with commerce, with records, with the media, with drug abuse. I make one plea to the IOC. Please remember your roots. At least reward the Wenlock Olympian Society with a seat at the High Table in Athens to honour the unique impact made by Dr. Williams Penny Brookes on Pierre de Coubertin - particularly since the Games will be in Athens. Future generations will find it hard to forgive you if you miss this one!

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