

# Robert Dover's Olimpick Games\*

By Peter Radford



Dover's Hill was described in *The Mirror* on 1 June 1826: "... on the top of the hill is a beautiful level turf about a mile and a half from north to south, and half a mile from east to west. In walking across the hill towards the west, you seem to be going over an interminable space bounded only by the horizon, when on a sudden you come to the brink of a very steep precipice, and one of the finest views in the world bursts upon the sight; nearly the whole of the counties of Gloucester, Warwick and Hereford lie spread before you like a carpet ..."

Photo: Leopold Florescu

In 1851 a poster appeared around Chipping Camden in Gloucestershire, England, advertising the forthcoming annual Olimpick Games. It contained the following words, "It is now Two Hundred and Thirty-nine years since that noble generous and heroic Gentleman, MR. ROBERT DOVER, instituted the highly celebrated and renowned Olimpick Games".<sup>1</sup>

The poster for the same Games two years earlier, declared that they were 238 years old,<sup>2</sup> and the poster for the 1820 Games announced that they were 210 years old,<sup>3</sup> so setting their starting date at 1611, 1612 and 1610 respectively. As Dover seems not to have arrived in the area until 1611,<sup>4</sup> 1612 is the most likely date for the start of the Dover's Olimpick Games, the first Games to go by that name (although there were various spellings) for over a thousand years. They were held annually, but with a break, or without Dover being present, between 1622 and 1625, until 1643 when the Civil War caused them to stop.<sup>5</sup>

They were started again, possibly as early as 1660, by Captain John Dover (Robert Dover's son), who died in 1696.<sup>6</sup> One of his sons, Dr. Thomas Dover, took a great interest in his grandfather's Games, and may have attended them in an honorary presidential capacity, but he moved away from the area,<sup>7</sup> and so most of the organisation must have been delegated to others.

After Dr. Dover's death in 1742 the Games continued under a variety of promoters, right through the 18<sup>th</sup> and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century until they ceased in 1852. Although Robert Dover described them as *Olimpick Games*, his fame for putting them on led to them also being known

as *Dover's Games*, and latterly as the *Cotswold Games*. These Games were held more than 220 times over a period of 240 or so years and made a significant impact at several levels.

In England in the early 1600s puritanically minded clergy and a new breed of uncompromising Sabbatarians began to exert pressure to end many activities that the ordinary people had enjoyed for generations. The obvious targets were drinking, and immoral behaviour; but was not God also dishonoured by rituals that harked back to pagan times, and those activities that were supposedly associated with drinking, etc, such as sports, dancing, and the theatre? Even music, singing and poetry, came under their attack. In communities all over the country clergy, politicians and individuals were stopping traditional Ales, Wakes, Revels, Feasts and Festivals in the name of God;<sup>8</sup> it caused great resentment among the ordinary people, and it was at this time that Robert Dover, a young attorney, decided to put on his *Olimpick Games* on Kingcomb Plain just outside Chipping Camden.

He chose the name for his Games carefully. In confronting the puritanically minded he needed an idea that could stand up against Holy Scripture, something that in its way was just as well respected and had ancient authority to support it. That idea was Ancient Greece, the source of so much of every educated man's learning. Looking back some 25 years later, to explain his actions he wrote in verse that –

*Whilst Greece frequented active Sports and Playes,  
From other men they bore away the prayse;  
Their Common-Wealths did flourish; and their Men  
Vnmatch'd were for worth and honour then:*<sup>9</sup>

But if Ancient Greece was the *example* of a great nation made greater by its sport and recreation, the *model* was Ancient Britain; namely, that Britain, and its people had been made great, indeed, were the people that they were, because they had been shaped by the nation's ancient traditions, games and sports. Robert Dover's intention was to preserve and honour England's traditional games and festivals, so his *Olimpick Games* were never intended as a re-enactment or imitation of the Greek games, instead they were typical English sports, similar to hundreds of others, though bigger and better organised perhaps.

The people's sports had a long tradition, and had given mirth and recreation to local people going back to the very origins of the nation itself. Dover's *Olympick Games* were held on the Thursday and Friday of Whitsun week. Whit Sunday is the seventh Sunday after Easter, and so is a moveable feast, but the first day of Dover's *Olympick Games* never occurred any earlier than 15 May or later than 19 June; they were, therefore, always early summer Games. They were organised to provide entertainment for all classes, and for women too: a mock two-dimensional castle was built that fired cannon balls, races were run, men and women danced, men wrestled, threw the sledge and played at backwords; there was tumbling and jumping; there was music, eating and drinking; hares were coursed and hunted, horses were raced, chess and other card games were played, and much more; good prizes were given, hundreds of yellow ribbons were given out; tents were provided in case of inclement weather, and a harpist played to invoke the spirit of the ancient Olympic Games.<sup>10</sup>

At the time of these *Olympick Games*, just twelve miles away, Michael Drayton was finishing *Poly-Olbion*, a vast poem that surveyed England by visiting in verse every part of it.<sup>11</sup> It is the story of England, its rivers, hills and plains. The rivers marry, they feed the land; they condition everything that happens there. On the land between the defining rivers we see the age-old games being played: "barley breake", "tick", "hood-winke", and "prison base"; we see "wrestling" and dancing, balls thrown and driven to the "gole", but not always by people, but often by "wood-nymphs" and "light-footed fawns". The old games and recreations are not merely played there they seem to live in the meadows and under the shade-giving trees. These traditional games are England, the poem says.

This is a very strong anti-Puritanical message. *Poly-Olbion* is almost 15,000 lines long, divided into 30 songs, but as early as line 22 in *The First Song* the reader is taken to the top of Mount Olympus. Greek history and myth seem to hang in the air over *Poly-Olbion* from the beginning. Even before line 22 the reader has met Titan and Neptune, and within as many more lines the reader is taken back to a time before the Flood, before the Romans came, to the "Druides" who kept the 'British rites', but also to visitors fleeing from Greece. Later, Drayton uses the word "Olympian" to describe sacrifices within the context of Elis, and so specifically refers to sacrifices at Olympia itself.

Both Drayton and Dover knew about the Olympic Games, and both of them addressed the notion of nationhood, and at the same time. What is England? What is important to it? What should be retained? What changes should be resisted? Although Drayton focused on the uniqueness of England, region by region, he did so, as did Dover, with the model of ancient Greece in

his mind. In both cases, Ancient Greece was "the model grandfather"<sup>12</sup> in the sense that in looking for a model and an inspiration from the past, the immediate past was passed over and a more distant model adopted.

It was, perhaps, not surprising that the model of Ancient Greece would come so easily to mind for Drayton. He was born in 1563, and Richard Helgerson has postulated that the men of the generation born in England between 1551 and 1564 adopted a "concerted generational project" to form an English nation that could rival Greece and Rome.<sup>13</sup> This included language, and "the whole cultural system". By language, this does not mean of course that they wanted English men and women to speak Greek, but rather that they had a language with a nobility, grandeur and subtlety, that was worthy of its people, and worthy to be compared with that of ancient Greek. William Camden, Edward Coke, Michael Drayton, Richard Hakluyt (the younger), Richard Hooker, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and John Speed were of that generation. Robert Dover was younger, but this was the generation above him, they were the generation who taught and inspired him. They would have been between in their late forties to early sixties when Dover began the *Olympick Games*. He was about 30.

The ordinary people were not concerned about Ancient Greece, of course, they wanted their old sports and pastimes back, and in 1617 in Lancashire, a man approached the King (James I of England) who was on his way to Scotland, and complained that the ordinary people were prevented from their recreations even after they had attended church on a Sunday.<sup>14</sup> Justices of the Peace in Lancashire had been particularly active and issued a number of orders to protect the Sabbath (and put down sports on that day), requiring these orders to be read from every pulpit every three months.<sup>15</sup> In response, the King declared that the people should not be so prevented, and in May 1618 followed this up by issuing *The King's Majesty's Declaration to his Subjects, Concerning lawful Sports to be used*, and so extended his Declaration to the whole of England. In it the King sided with the common people and against the Puritanical elements in the country. Now we know it as *The King's Book of Sports*. In it he declares that –

*Our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawfull recreation, Such as dancing, either men or women, Archery for men, leaping, or any such harmless Recreation, nor from*



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having of May games, Whitsun Ales, and Morris-dances, and the setting up of Maypoles, and other sports therewith used so as the same be had in due and convenient time, without impediment or neglect of Divine Service.<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted here that *The King's Book of Sports* gave his support for "lawfull recreations" rather than to all sports at all times, but the distinction is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, by including specific mention of Whitsun Ales, Dover's *Olympick Games*, conducted as they were in Whitsun week, were endorsed by the King. To make his endorsement absolutely specific, he allowed one of his hats with a feather, a ruff and some "old cloaths" to be given to Dover, for him to wear them at his *Olympick Games*.<sup>18</sup> Wilson<sup>19</sup> reports that *The King's Book of Sports* had been ordered to be published

in all the churches in England, i.e., read from the pulpit in every parish church in England, but not all the clergy complied. It was an issue that divided parishes, and indeed, Eng and.

By the summer of 1618, Dover's *Olympick Games*, therefore, could not be considered (if they ever were) as merely a sporting festival with an ancient name. From 1618, they were an overt political statement. They were part of the debate about nationhood. The message in Dover's *Olympick Games* was not that they were an imitation of the ancient Greek Games, but that the traditional games of the people of England were as important to them and to England itself, as were the Olympic Games to the ancient Greeks. This, then, was an issue of national identity.

Over the next fifteen years, the pressure from the Sabbatarian and Puritanical elements continued to

The wood-cut is the frontispiece of *Annalia Dubrensia* (1636) and illustrates many of the features of Robert Dover's Olympick Games, many of which are also mentioned in the poems that comprised *Annalia Dubrensia* (see each poet's name in brackets). Starting at the top-left and working across, and then down, roughly in rows, we see –

- A dancing competition for women, accompanied by a man playing a musical instrument, perhaps the bag-pipes. (Denny, Randolph, Jonson, J. Dover, Izod, Menese, Stratford, Marmyon).
- A two-dimensional wooden castle (top centre) with the flag of St George flying above it. It had cannons that were fired to introduce each new event; a very popular and dramatic feature. (J. Dover, Izod, Wallington, Ambrose, Basse, Rutter, Stratford, Griffin, Cole, Poole, Wells).
- Double cudgels (top right). This looks like a two-handed sword-and-dagger event, but the implements were probably made of ash. These sticks were called wasters, and the sport was similar to backsword and single-stick. Note that the men are hatless and so have no head-protection. The rules were almost certainly that to win, the cudgeller had to 'break' his opponent's head. To 'break' a man's head a competitor had to strike his opponent's head above the ears and eyes so as to break the skin, and for the blood to run an inch. (Randolph).
- Hunting the hare (second row down – left). Note that the dogs have their heads down and are hunting by scent. In the days before land enclosure there was plenty of room on Kingcombe Plain for this. (Denny, Jonson, J. Dover, Feltham, Wallington, Basse, Rutter, Stratford, Sanford, Cole, Durham, Poole, Marmyon).
- Jumping (second row – centre right). This seems to be jumping event down a slope – presumably for distance. The natural slope of the escarpment would provide several suitable sites for this (Denny, Randolph, Marmyon).
- Wrestling (second row – right). Note their hold – on the arms. This may well have been similar to what we might now call Cornish Wrestling. Other forms of wrestling, such as Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling, have a different hold on the upper body. In recent years some people have referred to this as a shinkicking event, presumably because the athlete on the right has his foot raised, but it is more likely that the wrestler on the right is



trying to sweep his opponent's legs from under him (Randolph, J. Dover, Marmyon).

- Four tents, one of higher status than the others (third row, left and centre). One of the reasons for the success of these Olympick Games seems to have been the inclusion of virtually everyone, regardless of class. The tents may have provided venues for chess, and card games, and a place for people to rest (it was a long two days and a venue was needed for the older, frailer people), and a refuge in wet weather. Might they also have been lavatories? (Denny).
- Tumbling (third row – centre right). This looks like a hand-stand or a man walking on his hands. (Not mentioned by any of the poets).

mount, despite *The King's Book of Sports*, and in October 1633 his son, Charles I, reissued it almost unchanged.<sup>20</sup> Dover's Olimpick Games continued defiantly; their overt political message as important as ever, and in 1636 Mathewe Walbancke published poems by thirty-two others, plus himself, to mark the success of their friend Robert Dover in establishing an *Olimpick Games* on Kingcomb Plain – it was entitled *Annalia Dubrensis. Vpon the yeerely celebration of Mr Robert Dover's Olimpick Games vpon Cotswold-Hills*.<sup>21</sup> This was a big year in the life of Robert Dover and the *Olimpick Games*, for in addition to the publication of *Annalia Dubrensis*, it is said that Prince Rupert attended the Games with Endymion Porter,<sup>22</sup> a good friend of Dover and also the late King James's attendant and confidante.

The poems that comprise *Annalia Dubrensis* were written at different times. When eventually they were

published, at least two of the contributors were dead. Two other poems were not to hand when the rest went off to the printers: one by William D'Avenant which was published in 1638,<sup>23</sup> and another by Peter Heylin which existed only in manuscript form until it was included in a centenary re-issue by Dover's grandson, and may have been written as early as 1625.<sup>24</sup> Eleven of these poems make specific mention of the ancient Greek Olympic Games, five also mention the Pythian and Isthmian Games, and four mention the Nemean Games. Drayton and William Denny tell the reader about the events at Olympia, and others tell us about their frequency, prizes given, how they were numbered, and how Hercules began them.

These writers had considerable knowledge of the ancient Olympic Games, its history and legends. For them the sport of Ancient Greece was clearly their modal

- There are labyrinths (third row – right). This is a symbol for a labyrinth or maze. There are labyrinths in the area still. Nothing is known about how they were used, except for amusement. (Denny, Wallington, Bellas)
- Wining, dining and conviviality (fourth row – left). Men wearing hats, eating and drinking. Note the man, 2<sup>nd</sup> from left with his back to us – he is wearing a rustic smock common with shepherds. This seems to show a mixture of social classes sitting down together. The man to his left has a fancy hat with a feather, and seems to be a higher class gent, and could even be Robert Dover himself (note the similarity of their hats – the King's hat – see image of Dover, below). (Wallington)
- Horse-racing (fifth row – left). Note that the jockeys are wearing hats, the only competitors to do so. (Denny, Izod, Basse, Stratford, Cole)
- Coursing hares (fifth row – right). Note, the dogs are watching the hare and so are hunting by sight (i.e. coursing). The dogs have collars so that their ownership would not be in doubt. (The dogs in the hare-hunting image, above, do not have collars). Coursing was done in a series of one-on-one competitions usually. One dog v. one dog, with a winner after each run; unlike hunting where the kill is all that matters and is, in sense, communal. (Denny, Randolph, J. Dover, Feltham, Izod, Basse, Rutter, Stratford, Sanford, Cole, Durham)
- Spurning (or Throwing) the Bar (sixth row – left), the implement was "a great long barre of iron ... or a heavey barre of wood".<sup>1</sup> Also known, in some places, as Pitching the Arm, in which the thrower held in the middle of the bar and threw it backwards over his shoulder. (Denny, J. Dover, Marmyon)
- Officials with staves (sixth row – right). Two men wearing hats, one man holding, and one carrying a staff; the second man seems to be returning with it. They may have been officials who measured out the various courses and marked them with staves, or marked where throws landed.
- Handling the pike (bottom row – left). The pike was a weapon of war that firearms made redundant. Pike-men had to learn drills, and had to publically display those drills. Not to have had those skills would have made them a liability in a group of other pike-men. Here it was transformed into a competitive sport.

- Robert Dover (bottom – centre). Here he is in King James's clothes, hat, feather and ruff. He carries a bag of money in his right hand, a sword at his side and what appears to be a stick denoting his status as organiser and manager of the Games. Robert Dover was not a wealthy man – did the bag of money come from James II/VI? Dover is riding a Baroque-type horse with a muscular, arched neck, powerful hindquarters, a slightly convex profile, and a very full and flowing, thick mane and tail. The horse is performing a Passage (or Piaffe), a manoeuvre in which the horse appears to trot in place but moves forward slowly; a very dramatic and stately movement. Everything about this movement conveys elegance and control, and has often been used as a parade ground movement with horses that would not have been used in the battlefield, and was popular with kings for riding gracefully and royally past their subjects.<sup>2</sup> "He [Robert Dover] appeared with more dignity in his carriage and deportment than was ever seen in James I".<sup>3</sup>
- Throwing the sledge [hammer] (bottom – right). A one-handed throwing event for distance. (Denny, Randolph, J. Dover)

These were not the only events though. The poets of the *Annalia Dubrensis* also mention running (Denny, Marmyon), bowls (Denny), and the games of Prison Bars and Barley Breaks (Randolph), Quintain (jousting), (Randolph, Trussell (t)<sup>4</sup>), Poole, and various other activities – singing, chess and various card games (Denny), theatricals, masques and puppet shows (Wallington).

\*There were two poems by John Trussell, or two poets of that name.

1 David Cran, Jeffrey L. Forgeng and Dorothy Johnston, Francis Willughby's Book of Games (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003), p. 171.  
 2 Juley McGourty, personal communications, January/April 2014.  
 3 James Caulfield, Portraits, Memoirs, and Characters of Remarkable Persons: From the Reign of Edward the Third, to the Revolution. Collected from the most Authentic Accounts Extant, (London: printed for J. Caulfield; and Isaac Herbert, 1794).

grandfather. Other themes were Dover himself and the esteem with which he was held; his Olimpick Games, the mirth they brought, and some details about the various events and the prizes; and comments on the joyless age that the Puritanical elements seemed to wish for. In addition, there was a sense of nostalgia for a world of old local traditions that had already gone or were slipping away:

*The countrie wakes and whirlings have appeared  
Of late like foraine pastimes. Carnivals,  
Palme and rush-bearing, harmless Whitson-ales  
Running at quintain, May-games, general playes,  
By some more nice than wise, of latter days,  
Have in their standings, lectures, exercises,  
Been so reprov'd, traduced, condemned for vices,  
Profane and heathenish, that now few dare  
Set them afoote. The hock-tide pastimes are  
Declined, if not deserted, so that now  
All publicke merriments, I know not how,  
Are questioned for their lawfulness;<sup>25</sup> ....*

Dover's *Olimpick Games* were so well known by that time that they even featured in a play. Richard Brome's *A Jovial Crew, or The Merry Beggars*,<sup>27</sup> was performed for the first time at The Cockpit Theatre on Drury Lane in 1641. It was a light comedy, and in Act II Vincent asks Oldrent's daughters –

*Will you up to the hill top of sports, then,  
and Merriments, Dovors Olimpicks or the Cotswold  
Games [?]*

This tells us that by 1641 Richard Brome believed that Dover's Olimpick Games were well enough known to a London theatre audience to allow him to safely use a reference to them. All that abruptly ceased, however, in September 1642 when the Puritanical forces closed all London theatres. King Charles had already raised his standard and gathered his forces, and dark days lay ahead. And as the nation slid closer and closer to civil war, the issue of what the nation was or should be became acutely important. The issue of sport as part of the debate about the nature of nationhood would not have been a major theme, but it was important enough to attract the direct attention of two kings, and it was one that affected the lives of the common people.

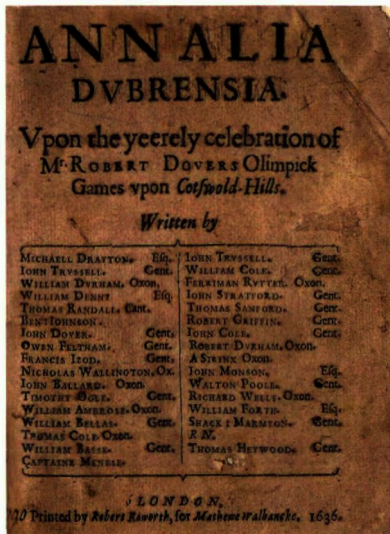
*The King's Book of Sports* was publicly burned by the hangman at Cheapside in 1643. Troops from both sides were now or the move, with military convoys from both sides passirg through Chipping Campden.<sup>28</sup> Dover's *Olimpick Games* inevitably ceased, and the nation slipped into Civil War. Charles I was executed in January 1649. Robert Dover was 60 when hostilities broke out and so, too old to fight, but his son, John Dover, fought alongside Prince Rupert becoming a Royalist Captain of Horse.<sup>29</sup>

Robert Dover died in 1652, but after the war and the Cromwell era was over, Charles II was invited back to England by Parliament in April 1660. It would have been a matter of great personal, family and national pride for John Dover to once again put on the Olimpick Games on Kingcomb Plain as soon as possible, both in memory of his father and as a celebration of the return of their old way of life. Would he have been able to do so by 20/21 May? If so, the resumed Olimpick Games would have been held just one week before Charles II returned in triumph and rode through the streets of London strewn with flowers, with bells ringing, a great crowd thronging to greet him, "shouting and unexpressable joy". If not, then the reinstated Olimpick Games would have been held in 1661.<sup>32</sup>

A history of Broadway, in a manuscript now lost, stated that the Games were carried out "with great spirit" after their resumption, but few details have survive.<sup>31</sup> John Dover's Games continually annually, but never reached the stature of his father's, and they were now more likely to be called *Dover's Games* or the *Cotswold Games* than the *Olimpick Games*. As the years went by, accounts

*Annalia Dubrensis* ("Annals of Dover"), printed in 1636, contains the first image of any Olympic Games since classical times. The poems are dedicated to Robert Dover (1582–1652) and were contributed by more than thirty poets, among whom were Michael Drayton, Ben Jonson, Thomas Randolph, and Thomas Heywood.

Photo: Peter Radford Archive



The Sabbatarian and Puritanical elements in the country, however, were becoming more and more confident and powerful. Nevertheless, these were the golden years for Dover and his *Olimpick Games*; looking back in 1691, Wood wrote:

*Dover was constantly there in person, well mounted and accoutred, and was the chief Director and manager of these games, frequented by the nobility and gentry (some of whom came 60 miles to see them) ...*<sup>36</sup>

and memories of John Dover's original Olimpicks Games glorified them and preserved their memory. In 1673, "The Works of Sir William D'Avenant Kt." were published, including his earlier poem "In celebration of the Yearly Preserver/ Of the Games at Cotswold".<sup>32</sup> His works were not likely to remain unread, as he had been granted the title "Poet Laureate" and was held in such high esteem he was later buried in Westminster Abbey.<sup>33</sup> Also, the London theatres were open again and audiences were able to see *The Jovial Crew* once more, and it proved to be one of London's favourite and most enduring shows. It was finally published in 1652<sup>34</sup> and two further quartos were published in 1661 and 1684. The play's happy mood, full of laughter and fun, seemed just the antidote to the dreariness of the Cromwell years, and it became a show that people took their children to, and remained one of the shows most popular with audiences for the next one hundred years or more. Many thousands of people saw it and so heard about "Dover's Olimpicks Games" whilst sitting in the theatre.

In 1691 Wood published his *Athenae Oxonienses*,<sup>35</sup> which also kept the memory of Robert Dover's *Olimpicks Games* alive. Under the heading of Clement Barksdale he wrote "I have a book in my study entit. – *Annalia Dubrensia. Upon the yearly celebration of Mr. Rob. Dover's Olympic Games upon Cotswold Hills, Etc. Lond. 1636*", and then went on to give a history of Robert Dover and his Games.

In 1708 William Somerville began to draft *Hobbinol, or The Rural Games*, a "mock-heroic poem in blank verse", based on Dover's Olimpicks Games. Somerville was thirty-three years old, but it would be another twenty-two years before the poem was published. He lived less than twenty miles away from Kingcomb Plain and his writing has the feel of an eyewitness account. He was writing of the Games overseen by Dr. Thomas Dover but organised by others; there was music and dancing, cudgel-playing, wrestling for a belt, back-sword play for gloves made by the local girls and lined with silk and fringed with gold, and a foot-race for the young women running for a decorated smock.<sup>36</sup>

To Somerville, however, these Games were not merely local Games; "nothing gives us a clearer Idea of the Genius of a Nation", he wrote, "than their Sports and Diversions,"<sup>37</sup> and describes "the *British* Free-holders, who, when dress'd in their Holiday Clothes, are by no Means Persons of a despicable Figure; but eat and drink as plentifully, and fight as heartily, as the greatest Hero in the *Iliad*." For Somerville, the ordinary people and their sports that he saw on Kingcomb Plain had a nobility about them, that made them typically British, and it was in this spirit that he dedicated the work to William Hogarth.

In 1773 Richard Graves, a minister from Mickleton in north Gloucestershire, near Dover's Hill, published a

"Comic Romance" under the title *The Spiritual Quixote*.<sup>38</sup> His fictional character, Geoffrey Wildgoose, was a Puritanical Methodist travelling around and "saving" those he meets, but the structure of the book is based around the supposed discovery of a lost manuscript of a somewhat mysterious age. Internal evidence suggests that it described events at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century or a little later, so would be set at around the time of Somerville's *The Rural Games*, or a little earlier. Wildgoose visited "Dover's-hill revel" and described wrestling and cudgelling competitions and a race for a Holland smock between six young women "in a dress hardly reconcilable to the rules of decency". He lectured the crowd on these "anti-christian recreations" in "Apostolic style", and for several pages, but was eventually silenced by the crowd who threw orange peel, horse-dung and clods of earth at him.

In May 1725 *The Gloucester Journal* carried an advertisement for *Dover's Meeting*, and the prizes, all free – a laced hat and six pairs of gloves for the back-sword competition, and one pair of men's shoes and a pair of women's laced shoes for those who danced the best jigs,<sup>38</sup> but, as Richard Graves was to show, the puritanical elements in the country had not disappeared with the Civil War. In 1736 the minister of nearby Stow-on-the-Wold published a sermon against "the evil and pernicious consequences of Whitsun Ales amongst us doth also obtain against Dover's Meeting".<sup>39</sup> Perhaps it was partly to counteract these descriptions and to reconnect with Robert Dover's original *Olimpicks Games* that in 1736 Dr. Thomas Dover published a centenary version of *Annalia Dubrensia*, including all the original poems plus the two additional ones.<sup>40</sup> The woodcut was replaced by a copperplate carefully reproducing the contents and mood of the original, but the differences between them are easily identified.<sup>41</sup>

Dr. Thomas Dover died in 1742, and the Games continued under a variety of organisers, but they were overshadowed by their fame in former years, and Robert Dover's original Olimpicks Games continued to be more famous than those that still continued. Not only was *The Jovial Crew* still very popular in London theatres, but in 1769 James Granger, a vicar from Shiplake in southern Oxfordshire, published *A Biographical History of England from Egbert the Great to the Revolution*<sup>42</sup> which included a short biography of Dover, *Annalia Dubrensia*, and a description of the events in his 'Olympic Games'.

In 1773 a renewed interest in Shakespeare's plays created a new focus of attention on Dover's original Olimpicks Games. In Act one, scene one of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Slender asks his cousin Shallow, "How does your fallow greyhound, Sir? I heard say he was outrun on Cotsall". That the play is set in Gloucestershire is made clear as early as the fifth line, and George Steevens in his *Plays of William Shakespeare (1773)*<sup>43</sup> and Thomas



The National Trust has owned and looked after Dover's Hill since 1929.

Photo: Karl Lennatz

Warton in his notes on the *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1774)<sup>44</sup> interpreted this as meaning that Shakespeare was referring to coursing on Cotswold Hills, and so knew of Robert Dover's *Olympick Games*. This is stretching interpretation to the limit, perhaps, but it did give rise to a mini-industry of hunting for hidden references to Dover's Games in Shakespeare's works.<sup>45</sup>

This interpretation of the greyhound "outrun on Cotsall" also featured in Edmund Malone's attempt (1778) to order Shakespeare's plays chronologically.<sup>46</sup> It is no part of this paper to pursue these topics, except to point out that through this interest Robert Dover's *Olympick Games* became known in the late eighteenth century to another group of scholars who might otherwise have had no interest in sport at all. Steevens's work was reprinted in 1778, 1785 and 1793; Malone's in 1790.

The antiquarians' interest in Dover's *Olympick Games* also continued, and Dover's *Olympick Games* were mentioned in Ralph Bigland's *Collections for a History of Gloucestershire* (1791),<sup>47</sup> James Caulfield's *Portraits, Memoirs, and Characters of Remarkable Persons from the Reign of Edward III to the Revolution* (1794),<sup>48</sup> and in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for October 1797.<sup>49</sup>

By this time the annual Games on Dover's Hill struggled with problems of finance, patronage and management. In 1775 John Gibson of the *Red Lion* advertised that he would give "greater encouragement to gamesters [at 'Dover's Meeting'] than heretofore". That year the Games started at 3 pm on the Thursday; and entries for the horse-race on Friday had to be made at the *Red Lion* before 12.30 on that day. Thomas Chamberlaine now ran the Games. In 1779, Samuel Rudder published a *New History of Gloucestershire*<sup>50</sup> in which he remarked that Dover's "diversions" have "much declined, for want of a good patron", but all the local inns seem to have competed or cooperated to support the annual Games, or merely capitalised on the extra business that they brought into the area.

In 1780 they were mentioned in *The Westminster Magazine*, but with a sense of amazement that they were still going.<sup>51</sup> In 1790 however, Richard Hands, John Darby and Robert Atkins, were the managers of the Games, and they placed an advertisement in *Jackson's Oxford Journal*,<sup>52</sup> headed, "Olympick Games, upon Cotswold Hills", and after describing the events, stated that there would be an ox-roast and a ball at the *George Inn* in Chipping Campden on the Thursday evening "as usual". Robert Dover was described as "renowned and heroic" even though by then he had been dead for 138 years. In 1797 the *Gentleman's Magazine* reported that were still attended by "a vast concourse of people" and the "athletic manœuvres, manly exercises, and rural diversions" still continued, but only as "a faint imitation" of those in the past.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, interest in Robert Dover and his original Games continued into the nineteenth century. In 1801 Joseph Strutt published *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, which was a broad survey of the history of British sports starting with the Romans, and in which he referred to the annual celebrated games upon Cotswold Hills' and to 'Robert Dover ... the chief director'.<sup>54</sup> But the ongoing Games still continued on the historic Whitsun dates as before, but it is clear that interest in them was largely because of their old association with Robert Dover. An advertisement for the 1802 Games begins

*The Olympic Games on the Cotswold Hills, instituted by the magnanimous and heroic Mr. ROBERT DOVER and patronized by King James the 1<sup>st</sup>, this being the third Century since the Origin of those celebrated Games ...*,<sup>55</sup>

and goes on to describe how the problem of financing the Games had been at least temporarily solved by a "Voluntary Subscription of the Gentlemen of the Town and Neighbourhood of Chipping Campden". The 1803 advertisement describes the Games as *Dover's Heroic Meeting* and announced that ordinaries (i.e. dinners) would be provided, "at the principal inns". Thomas Chamberlain was back in charge and described as their "Conductor".<sup>56</sup> In 1804, cock fighting at the *Green Dragon* was associated with the Games for the first time, presumably to attract more people, but there was confusion over the dates.<sup>57</sup>

The enthusiasm in celebrating Robert Dover as the originator of the Games seems to have led the organisers to stress him at the expense of his original title – *Olympick Games*, but in 1806 the poster for them began:

*Cotswold Games  
As the brave Grecians in their happy days, On  
Mount Olympus to their Hercules  
Ordain'd their Games Olympic, and so nam'd Of  
that Great Mountain; for those pastimes fam'd Now  
be it written, Lo! This was the man, DOVER,  
that first these Noble Sports began.*<sup>58</sup>

And so kept the idea of the link with ancient Olympia alive. Two years later, after describing it as a "Celebrated and unrivalled meeting", "an immense number of the Olympic games and Cotswold Sports", were advertised.<sup>59</sup> But trouble loomed, and in 1812 there were moves to enclose the land on which the Games were held<sup>60</sup> – 200 years after they were begun, but fortunately they came to nothing and the Games continued, but there must have been a mood that they were living on borrowed time.

In 1814 an advertisement for the Games was headed *Dover's Meeting* and so lost its Olympic tag, though the name of their originator was too valuable to discard. Now they were "directed" by Reginald Robert Dover Cotterell,<sup>61</sup> Robert Dover's great, great, great, great

grandson<sup>62</sup> even though he was in his late 60s. He died in 1824.<sup>63</sup> In retrospect, not highlighting the Olympic connection was deemed to be a mistake, and in 1816 they were advertised as “the highly renowned Olympic and Cotswold Games”, and “an immense and brilliant assemblage” of admirers was expected.<sup>64</sup> The following year it was “a celebrated and matchless Meeting” which had been “for centuries the admiration of the Sporting world”.<sup>65</sup>

The poster for the 1819 Games was again headed *Dover's Meeting*, but after listing many of its events, it concluded with the following: “together with a Multiplicity of the Noted Olympic Games and National Sports, peculiar to this ancient Festival, which cannot be detailed in a Bill”.<sup>66</sup> In 1820 an advertisement announced the “celebrated and renowned Olympic Games” instituted by “the heroic Gentleman MR ROBERT DOVER”. “This laudable and distinguished Festival claims the precedence over all others” it declared.<sup>67</sup> Thomas Chamberlain was back in charge.

Despite the extravagant praise of Robert Dover, the long history of his Games and the enthusiasm of the organisers about the forthcoming meeting, the Games faced difficult times. In the 1820s and 1830s the Games continued but they were not advertised as before; perhaps the newspaper proprietors became unwilling to carry them as their middle-class readership became increasingly concerned with the lack of industry and morality of the working classes who had become the main supporters of the Games.

This led some to wonder if the Games still continued.<sup>68</sup> The reply came back very quickly; “I assure you it is”,<sup>69</sup> wrote, a local man who, “with thousands more spent many a happy hour there”. It is still a great holiday, he said, and “attended by great numbers of gentry and people of respectability in the neighbourhood”, he wrote. “It may very properly be called a second Olympus”. There was wrestling, backsword, running, and “other sports of minor importance”, and a horse-race, all attracting a good number of competitors, and with good money-prizes or silver cups on offer. He thought that they were partly supported by subscription and partly by “a sum of money that was bequeathed for the purpose” – the first mention of how the Games were financed. Administrative difficulties continued, however. Some land that was used for the Games was purchased in the 1820s and so was not freely available and had to be rented annually at a cost of between £1 and £11 (£5 after 1840);<sup>70</sup> another layer of difficulty facing the organisers.

By the 1840s the pressure to enclose the land as a means of putting a stop to the activities that took place on it, began to grow again. In 1845 the Enclosure Commissioners reported that unenclosed lands were “a source of serious injury to the surrounding neighbourhoods, from their being the resort of idle and disorderly persons”.<sup>71</sup> In 1849 another Act of Enclosure was applied for to include the land on which Dover’s *Olimpick Games* had been held for the past 237 years. By then the Games had become mostly known for horseracing, but with other activities such as prize fighting, included to draw a crowd. In 1841 they were referred to as “races” and in 1842, “races & other sports”. By June 1850 an Enclosure Act to enclose the land had received Royal assent, and the end of the Games was in sight. It has usually been asserted that the last Games were held in 1851, but the organiser William Drury paid for the hire of the land in 1852, and it is even possible that there were Games as late as 1853.

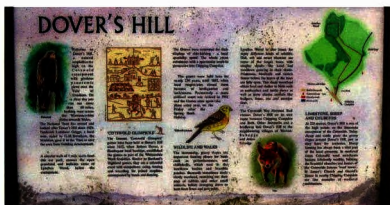
The key person in the move to enclose the land, and so close the Dover’s Olimpicks Games, was the Rev. G. D. Bourne, who had arrived in 1846 to become rector at the parish in which Dover’s Hill was situated, and he “determined if possible to stop this evil”.<sup>72</sup> Our understanding of what led to the necessity to enclose the land on which Robert Dover’s *Olimpick Games* were held, the reports of “lawlessness”, the “vagrants and criminals”, the “armed bands of Birmingham yahoos”, the “turmoil”, “disorder” and “disturbances”, all come from Bourne and those whom he informed and influenced,<sup>73</sup> but in the early 1990s C. J. Bearman set out to investigate this disorder and the crowds that produced it.<sup>74</sup> Unusually, they seem to have left no trace in either newspaper, or police records. Bearman concludes that “there is not a single piece of evidence to justify any

Robert Dover’s Olimpicks Games, often called the Cotswold Olimpicks Games, disappeared for over a century, with the exception of one reappearance in 1951, but were begun again on Dover’s Hill in 1966, and have continued there, annually to this day. The 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary was celebrated in 2012.

Photo: Peter Radford Archive

Dover's Hill is a mixture of grassland and woodland. This is also a home of many birds, insects and wild flowers.

Photo: Karl Lemnartz



of these allegations", and wonders about Bourne's motives. Was he

*suffering from moral panic: not the genuine alarm arising from injury or outrage but a fearful horror at any assembly of the lower orders, and was willing to repeat gross exaggerations amounting to deliberate lies to convince others of the dangers he felt [?]*<sup>5</sup>

If so, were Robert Dover's Olimpik Games eventually closed by a puritanically-minded clergyman and his supporters, rather like the "refined clergy" that originally inspired Robert Dover to create his Olimpik Games to confront? Bearman calculates that Bourne would have needed the support of no more than nine others to have driven through the decision to enclose the land.

Robert Dover's Olimpik Games disappeared for over a century, with the exception of one reappearance in 1951, but were began again on Dover's Hill in 1966, and have continued there, annually to this day. ■

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- 2 Christopher Whitfield, *Robert Dover and the Cotswold Games* (London: Henry Sotherton, 1962), p. 14.
- 3 *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 6 May 1820.
- 4 Whitfield, *Robert Dover and the Cotswold Games*, p. 5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.
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- 7 R. S. Morton, "Dr Thomas ("Quicksilver") Dover, 1660-1742", *Brit. J. Vener. Dis.*, 44 (1968), pp. 342-346.
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- 10 Christopher Whitfield, *A History of Chipping Campden and Captain Dover's Olimpik Games* (Eton: Shakespeare Head Press, 1958), 14-29; Celia Haddon, *The First Ever English Olimpik Games* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004).
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- 18 Anthony à Wood, *Athenæ Oxoniensis* [London, 1691]].
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- 45 See Burns, *Robert Dover's Cotswold Olimpik Games*, vi, and Williams, *The Curious Mystery*, 151-2.

- 46 Whitfield, Robert Dover and the Cotswold Games, 71–2.
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- 57 *Ibid.*, 19 May 1804.
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- 61 *The Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Advertiser*, 16 June 1814.
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