

# Passing the Torch: Romanticism and the Modern Olympic Revival\*

By Taylor McKee and Brittany Reid

In *The British Olympics: Britain's Olympic Heritage 1612–2012*, Martin Polley culturally contextualizes the 2012 London Olympics by chronicling the games' significant British antecedents. This history includes the Wenlock Olympian Games, which were first held in 1850 in the Shropshire town of Much Wenlock. In contrast with the more rural and festive nature of the Cotswold Olympics that originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Polley characterizes the Wenlock Olympian Games as "a Victorian attempt to rationalise the Olympian ethos"<sup>1</sup> and re-contextualize the Ancient Greek tradition within a modern, and distinctly British, setting. But although the Wenlock Olympian Games took place well into the Victorian period, it can be argued that they are, in many ways, a uniquely *Romantic* production. In the nearly 200 years since the Romantic age, the movement and its associated writers have been generally linked with ethereality, poetry, beauty and imagination. This modern rendering of Romanticism, as concerned with issues of the mind and the heart rather than the body, puts the movement at apparent odds with sport and physical culture. However, as this article demonstrates, the Romantic paradigm helped shape 19<sup>th</sup>-century English sporting culture, including William Penny Brookes and the Wenlock Olympian Games.

While the first Wenlock Olympian Games were held 12 years after the coronation of Queen Victoria and following the death of many of Romanticism's key figures, they were a direct reflection of the Romantic-period ethos across Britain, especially its idealisation of Ancient Greek culture. Far from a question of semantics, the decision to re-read the Wenlock Olympian Games in Romantic terms draws attention to the dialogical relationship between the Ancient Greeks and the English that underpins the modern Olympic Movement. By acknowledging how a fascination with the Greeks in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain led to Romantic Hellenism, which

would ultimately contribute to greater cultural interest in the Ancient Olympics, we can better understand the unique role the Wenlock Olympian Games play in Olympic history.

This article works to trace the salient connection between Romanticism and the Wenlock Olympian Games to draw attention to the unacknowledged cross-cultural ties that bind these games to the Olympics of antiquity and would later contribute to the continued exchange of influence that helped to inform the modern Olympic Movement. While Much Wenlock were not the only English Olympic-style games held prior to the 1896 Olympics in Athens, they maintain a unique position as both a throwback to the Ancient Olympic emphasis on physical and intellectual strength and a crucial forerunner of the Olympic Movement. Furthermore, the salient characteristics of Romanticism, especially their championing of the Ancient Greeks, nature, individual achievement, and the co-development of the mind and body, are key components of the Wenlock Olympian Games that further distinguish them from other Olympic-style games or festivals. Considered in this way, the Wenlock Olympian Games can then be reconceived as the culmination of a collective cultural interest in Ancient Greek society that began during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and exploded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century through the writings of the "second-generation" Romantics.

In order to explore this dialectical influence between the Ancient Olympics, the Wenlock Olympian Games, and the Olympic Movement, we begin by looking at Romantic Hellenism in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain and the widespread celebration of the Greeks as paragons of culture and lifestyle. From there, we investigate how conceptions of the "Romantic Hero" emerged in response to these Ancient Greek exemplars and, in turn, how the collection of key characteristics associated with this Romantic-era paradigm would subsequently inform the notion of the "athlete hero" that was lauded later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the Wenlock Olympian Games. To show these similarities at play, we are specifically considering how the Romantics' emphasis on the Ancient Greeks, individual achievement, and the holistic education of the mind and body all carry forward into Much Wenlock, thus distinguishing these games from other earlier British iterations. Ultimately



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then, we are seeking to show that although the Wenlock Olympian Games were a Victorian cultural production due to their setting in 1850, they can, and indeed should, be reconceived as a Romantic legacy project.

### A Callback to the Classics: Defining “Romanticism”

To begin, it is necessary to first establish our own use of the term “Romantic” in this context and to provide some contextual background on the Wenlock Olympian Games before forging a connection between the two. Firstly, the word “Romanticism” has been broadly and variously defined<sup>2</sup> throughout the more than two centuries since the writers we now identify as “Romantic” lived and wrote. As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literary and cultural critics, including Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom and Paul de Man, have grappled with how the term “Romantic” should be applied, both within its historical context and for contemporary readers.<sup>3</sup> Our own application of the term “Romanticism” in this article builds on this established critical tradition by referring to a period of intellectual, cultural, philosophical, artistic and socio-political revolution that spanned the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Romanticism, as a socio-cultural movement, first began during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France and Germany, with writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, respectively.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the movement spread to England, Ireland and Scotland, leading to the creation of the distinct, yet connected tradition of British Romanticism. Like its continental forbears, British Romanticism emerged in response to the rapid changes and developments in urbanisation, ideology, industrialisation, politics, social order and art taking place across Europe at the time. Born out of this new world order, and especially informed by the American, French and Industrial Revolutions, the so-termed “Romantic” philosophers, artists and writers emerged and, in the process, ushered in what Isaiah Berlin referred to as “the greatest transformation of Western consciousness”.<sup>4</sup> Unlike many artistic movements which rely on a strict adherence to rules or standards of execution, Romanticism, and its foundational emphasis on the individual, necessitate that its general traits and features may apply more to some Romantics than others. Consequently, contemporary critics have since



Lord Byron (1788–1824) was a Romantic writer and advocate for the Greek sovereignty. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1810 he crossed the Hellespont following the example of the mythological hero Leander. It was the inspiration for a poem. The exploit resulted in an enormous popularisation of the sport of swimming.

Image: coloured drawing

cautioned against broadly identifying “any essential or prescriptive characteristics”<sup>5</sup> of the movement, lest we “inevitably end up over-systematising and simplifying the phenomenon”.<sup>6</sup>

However, although much of the difficulty in defining Romanticism’s key characteristics derives from the term’s pervasiveness and broad application across various creative mediums, geographical locations, and nearly one hundred years of output, there are specific subsets of Romantics who exhibit shared features, influences, localities, and even personal relationships that do directly align them. Most especially, and of specific interest to our study, is the key sub-group known as the “second-generation Romantics” in England. While the Romantic Age in Britain is often critically situated between the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 and the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838, the second generation is associated with the latter half of the Romantic period in England, beginning in approximately 1810. Many of Romanticism’s most influential and enduring writers were part of this second generation, including John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley and Lord Byron.

Writers associated with Romanticism’s second generation were linked in life through their shared context of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century England and their bonds were further strengthened through friendships, creative collaborations, or even sexual relationships.<sup>7</sup> This sense of personal closeness similarly translated to their writing, since many of them adopted shared ideologies, composed using common tropes, and championed similar social causes. For example, like many other Romantic texts, the second generation’s writing frequently returned to Classical forms and ideals,



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privileged imagination and fancy, and celebrated nature as a source of divine revelation. But, in addition to these prototypical Romantic traits, the second generation was chiefly interested in three important characteristics that would prove to be of continued importance for the development of the Wenlock Olympic Games later that century: an emphasis on the Ancient Greeks, individual achievement, and holistic education comprised of intellectual and physical development. As we will explore in the following sections through a comparative reading of second-generation Romantic writing or culture and William Penny Brookes' formation of the Wenlock Olympic Games, these characteristics contribute to the traceable ideological connection between this predominantly artistic movement and this Victorian-era sporting festival.

### An Archetypical Romantic: William Penny Brookes and the Wenlock Olympic Games

William Penny Brookes, a physician trained in schools in Italy, France and England, became highly invested in the physical and intellectual well-being of the inhabitants of his small, south-eastern English town called Much Wenlock. Throughout his medical career, Brookes gained a reputation for "considering the individual nature of his patients' needs as well as placing public health high on his agenda".<sup>8</sup> Brookes' accomplishments in Much Wenlock can be characterised as a mixture of Classical education and a fierce passion for public recreation. These bifurcated intellectual guiding principles combined to eventually form the Much Wenlock

Olympian Games. In 1841, Brookes founded the Wenlock Agricultural Reading Society (WARS), which essentially functioned as a small-town library and hosted classes in art, music and natural history.<sup>9</sup> One of the classes formed by the WARS was the Wenlock Olympic Class, whose stated purpose was to promote the "moral, physical and intellectual improvement of the public, by the encouragement of out-door recreation, and the award of prizes, annually, for literary and fine-art achievements, and for skills and strength in athletic exercises and proficiency in industrial attainments".<sup>10</sup> Central to Brookes' desire to improve his town's health was his belief in the effectiveness of outdoor exercise, as demonstrated by the Wenlock Olympic Class' stated goals.

As articulated by Ashrafian, Brookes "was much inspired by the ideal and conviction of the Ancient Olympic Games initiated by his Classical schooling, he set about to revive a modern Olympic fellowship".<sup>11</sup> On 22<sup>nd</sup> October 185c, the Wenlock Olympic Class organised a meeting where several outdoor games would be played and cash prizes awarded to the victors. These events would constitute the first Wenlock Olympic Games, an event that would take place in some form for many decades following this initial meeting. Importantly, the Wenlock Games were a mixture of sporting competitions, such as cricket, football and athletics, and intellectual competitions, a hallmark of the style of education important to Brookes himself. Polley described Brookes as "the archetypical Victorian gentleman"<sup>12</sup>, due to his broad education and his interest in improving the lives of his town's citizens. However, as will be discussed, perhaps describing Brookes as the archetypical *Romantic* gentleman is more precise, given how much Brookes' endeavours in Much Wenlock echo Romantic sentiments. This distinction is not a trivial one; Brookes' desire for his citizens to learn from Classical sources, develop physical culture alongside intellectual improvement, and recognise individual greatness, makes plain the Romantic influence on Brookes' actions.

### "We Are All Greeks": Romanticism, Ancient Greece, and Much Wenlock

To begin situating the Romantics as a key cultural interlocutor between 19<sup>th</sup>-century England and the Olympic Movement, it is necessary to first situate the Romantic project in relation to the Ancient Greeks and to establish the second-generation Romantics as *philhellenes*, which literally means "ones who love Greece". As Stephen Hebron has argued, "in the Romantic period it was taken for granted that the intellectual and artistic achievement of ancient Greece and Rome was one of the foundations of Western culture".<sup>13</sup> Specifically, he notes that this return to Classical ideals led to an



Dr. William Penny Brookes in 1853 with two of his children: Isabella and John.

Photos: Wenlock Olympic Society

“increasing interest ... in ancient Greece, often referred to as Hellenism”.<sup>14</sup> Romantic Hellenism was a widespread cultural movement adopted throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in England that was marked by “an interest in Greece or the Grecian model and a desire to appropriate it for present purposes”.<sup>15</sup> Although other time periods or movements have similarly acknowledged modern civilization’s debts to Ancient Greece, Romantic Hellenism is uniquely defined through the fervent desire to return to this Classical paradigm and adopt it as a model for art, politics, and lifestyle. But while Romantic Hellenism, and its associated interest in the image of Ancient Greece, can be perceived throughout the whole of the Romantic period, it gained greater resonance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through both the lives and writing of the second-generation Romantics.

In early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century England, the second-generation Romantics ushered in a period of renewed interest in Ancient Greek culture that had not previously been seen and has never since been matched. One of these second-generation Romantics, Percy Bysshe Shelley, famously encapsulated this pervasive Hellenic sentiment in his introduction to his 1822 verse drama, *Hellas*, by stating: “We are all Greeks – our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece.”<sup>16</sup> This popular resurgence of Classicism in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England was bolstered in part through the translation of numerous Ancient Greek texts into English, including several by Romantic writers themselves. Furthermore, the acquisition of the famed Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon at Athens meant that as early as 1807, and in permanent installation after 1816, English citizens could directly experience major artifacts from Ancient Greece at their British Museum. Finally, the Greek War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire began in 1821 and served as a modern-day rallying cry to both liberate and honour Greece as an enduring pillar of 19<sup>th</sup>-century society. Famed second-generation Romantic writer, George Gordon, Lord Byron, was especially inspired by this cause; in 1823, he joined the fight in defence of Greece and lost his life to the conflict in 1824. Byron is still memorialised in Greece for his contributions to their cause and the continuing celebration of him as both an English Romantic writer and an advocate for Greek sovereignty embodies the close relationship between the two movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Whether through the concerted effort taken to translate Greek texts into English, the patterning of literary and other artistic works after the Classical ideal, an active involvement in modern Greek politics, or simply the acknowledgement of contemporary society’s debts to that Ancient culture, the second-generation Romantics are not only the most clear example of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hellenism in England, but indeed, also a influence on British cultural perception of the Ancient Greeks that



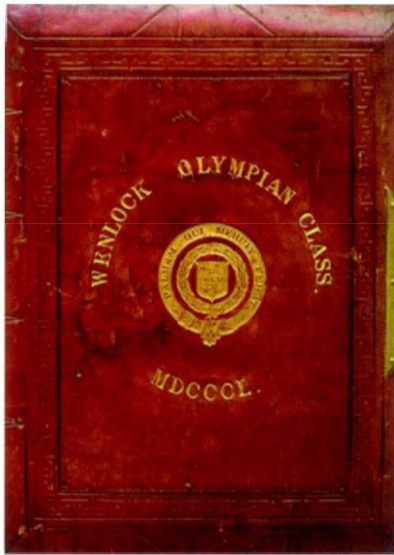
**Wenlock Olympian Games on Linden Field in June 1867.** The picture is considered to be the earliest sporting photo.

would endure for many years. Resultantly, and as we will now argue, the efflorescence of Ancient Greek culture in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England, known as Romantic Hellenism, had a continuing and enduring cultural influence that would inform William Penny Brookes and contribute to the development of the Wenlock Olympian Games later that century.

As mentioned earlier, Brookes’ desire for the continued physical and intellectual edification of Much Wenlock’s population drew heavily on Ancient Greek sources. Furthermore, the early Wenlock Olympian Games, the name itself a homage to Ancient Greece, featured many components consistent with Romantic Hellenism. The model of the Ancient Greek Olympics, used by Brookes in his Wenlock Olympian Class beginning in the 1850s, included competitions in arithmetic, English history, Bible history, drawing, singing, essay writing and poetry.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as Polley notes, the winning entry from the poetry competition in 1860 explicitly links English and Greek history: “O England! Wise as thou art free ... Like Greece – which in her mighty prime / Pluck’d Immortality from Time / Thou to thy manly pastimes cling!”<sup>18</sup> This poem, in both form and content, is emblematic of the Romantic Hellenic poetic tradition, as it is structured as an ode, employs allegorical figures, and directly addresses an embodied version of England. In addressing the Wenlock Games’ inclusion of intellectual pursuits alongside athletics, Sam Mullins notes that “this broader cultural conception of the Olympics was clearly drawn from the classical model”.<sup>19</sup> Considered in this way, the Wenlock Olympian Games, born out of the Wenlock Olympic Class, were quite clearly an attempt to resurrect the Ancient Greek Olympics and aligned with Romantic Hellenic ideals.

### **Hero Worship: Romantic Individual Achievement and the Wenlock Olympian Games**

One of Romanticism’s most distinctive features would later go on to become a foundational component of the Wenlock Olympian Games: an emphasis on individual achievement. In his introduction to *English*



*Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830*, Gary Kelly explains that Romanticism “attempted to redefine secular culture in the image of the progressive professional middle classes”, and one of the ways they worked to accomplish this was “by redefining the idea of the self” in relation to the “experience of community, the nation, and nature”.<sup>20</sup> This attempt to redefine “the idea of the self”, especially in relation to “community, the nation, and nature”, led to a conception of the individual as the movement’s focal figure and renewed interest in how each relates to others and

their world. In the Romantic period, this emphasis on the dynamic relationship between an individual and his or her environment led to “the notion of *self-development*” itself, which Steven Lukes asserts is “typically Romantic in origin”.<sup>21</sup> Daniel Shanahan elaborates on how this burgeoning “notion of self-development” and renewed interest in individual experience culminated in “a social, literary, and philosophical movement that places an emphasis on the solitary individual as nothing less than the center of the universe”.<sup>22</sup> This conception of Romanticism as a movement that not only considered the significance of human experience, but indeed lauded the individual as “nothing less than the center of the universe”, led to the emergence of “the individual – fully conscious and anxious to test his or her powers of awareness to the utmost” as an “overriding Romantic motif”.<sup>23</sup> As a result, in the Romantic period, exploring how individuals uniquely engaged in processes of self-development became of focal interest and while the period maintained a pointed interest in the central tenets of “community”, “nation”, and “nature”, these aspects were all read in relation to the individual experience of testing “his or her powers of awareness to the utmost”.

Romanticism re-casts the individual as the subject of *the greatest* interest to society, reading individual accolades, achievements or attempts at self-development as not only exemplary behaviour, but also as the greatest tribute to the community, nation or natural setting from which these exceptional individuals emerged. Therefore, individual successes were cast as broader societal gains and these figures were publicly lauded for their contributions. Consequently, this view of the successful individual as both an exemplum for self-development and a representative of and benefactor to the community, nation or nature itself, led to what Lillian Furst terms “the Romantic cult of the exceptional individual”.<sup>24</sup> This near cult-like worship

of the “exceptional individual” in the Romantic period meant that these figures were not only acknowledged as integral to the Romantic world view, but also revered, respected and celebrated as heroes.

The “Romantic hero” emerged as Romanticism’s key archetype and became emblematic of the period’s championing of the exceptional individual. Furst attributes the rise of the Romantic hero as an archetype to the period’s “preoccupation with heroism in the widest sense of the term”.<sup>25</sup> Peter L. Thorslev Jr. reiterates this view and observes that there was “a distinctive heroic tradition” in the Romantic age, so much so in fact that it was “our last great age of heroes”.<sup>26</sup> But while Furst argues that “the Romantic hero has become something of a stock figure on the literary scene”, its ubiquity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects the concept’s pervasiveness in 19<sup>th</sup>-century society as well as its continuing currency.<sup>27</sup>

As early as 1919, Irving Babbitt was articulating a definition of the Romantic hero as the embodiment of “an almost unparalleled triumph ... of the sense of the individual”.<sup>28</sup> In addition to representing the sense of “triumph” associated with individual experience in the period, the Romantic hero also embodied a specific set of experiences and attributes: a sensitivity to nature, pride in England, artistic ability, appreciation of the Classics, exemplary physicality and, vitally, a traditional masculinity. The Romantic hero represented an ideal to which anyone could strive, but only the most exceptional few could achieve: the epitome of sensitivity, masculinity, strength, and intellect. The sense of rugged intrepidity associated with the figure is reflected through Berlin’s characterization of the Romantic hero as “the heroic individual”, who operates as “the contemnor of danger who defies the storm”.<sup>29</sup> As this description suggests, the Romantic hero represents the ultimate culmination of individual self-development in the period: becoming somehow representative of humanity at its best and excelling to super-human heights.

Significantly, this Romantic hero archetype and its popularity within the period extended to different facets of society and led to a widespread interest in individual achievement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As John Strachan observes, the Romantic age also saw the return of “the sporting hero”<sup>30</sup>, as both a callback to the Ancient Greek celebration of athleticism and the period’s interest in individualism. Consequently, Strachan asserts that Romanticism’s pervasive interest in “heroism and hero-worship” became a defining feature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century sporting culture through their “celebration of contemporary sport’s most vigorous champions”.<sup>31</sup> Considered in this way, the rise of the hero-athlete in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England was a distinctly Romantic innovation that emerged from the movement’s emphasis on individuality and concerted return to Ancient-Greek paradigms.

Minute Book of the Wenlock Olympian Class. Erookes had introduced this in 1850 with the aim “to promote the moral, physical and intellectual improvement of the inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood of Wenlock, and especially of the working class, by the encouragement of outdoor recreation”.

For their part, the Much Wenlock Olympian Games celebrated individual achievement as well, awarding cash prizes to the competition's victors, whose achievements were recorded after a process of rigid measurement, careful categorisation and scientific play.<sup>32</sup> However, Brookes' Wenlock Games saw the individual's victory as an achievement for the entire community. As the original mission statement of the Wenlock Olympian Class stipulated, the purpose of the Games was "for the promotion of the moral, physical, and intellectual improvement of the inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood of Wenlock".<sup>33</sup> Considered through the lens of Romantic heroism, celebrating the individual's achievement as a victory for the larger community was a distinctly Romantic enterprise.

Although the town of Much Wenlock was, and still is, a small community, the exploits of those who took part in the Wenlock Olympian Games had lasting repercussions, both for the individuals and the town itself. Exceptional individuals, recognised as such by the Wenlock Olympian Games, were to serve as examples for the larger community. Employing physical culture as a means of modelling ideal public behaviour was a practice with roots in the Romantic period. These individual and larger community achievements were celebrated at the Much Wenlock Olympian Games and fit neatly within the Romantic paradigm. Consequently, the championing of the exceptional individual, as an exemplum for the community, again demonstrated the influence that Romanticism had on Brookes.

### Faultless Forms: Romantic Physicality and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Physical Culture

Having addressed the salient connection between Romantic Hellenism, the Romantic hero, and the Wenlock Olympian Games, we now turn to the direct link between Romanticism and 19<sup>th</sup>-century physical culture in England. To do so, we return to the perceived disjuncture between later readings of Romanticism as an ethereal, poetic movement and the corporeality of Britain's burgeoning sporting culture. In his article "Romanticism and Sport", Strachan acknowledges the persisting discord that underpins our critical reading of the relationship between Romanticism and sport by observing that the two might first appear to be "an unlikely conjunction".<sup>34</sup> Despite the prevailing perception of Romanticism as a strictly artistic movement concerned only with the imagined or abstract, it is important to note that physical forms, culture and education played a major role in Romantic society and, indeed, that these were greatly developed during the period. Speaking again in his preface to *Hellas*, Shelley encapsulates the equal privileging of both the physical and the intellectual in the Romantic period, through his

assertion that both the "human form" and "the human mind" are "faultless productions", which were both "attained to a perfection in Greece".<sup>35</sup> This assertion not only underscores Romanticism's emphasis on both physical and intellectual development, but it also aligns the movement with the Ancient Greek view of holistic education. As Athena S. Leoussi observes, "for the Greeks, muscular development should be combined with and tempered by the development of moral, intellectual and aesthetic qualities".<sup>36</sup> She goes on to state "this balance was considered, then as now, to be the measure of the perfect man" and that "without it, athletics and muscular development were of no cultural value".<sup>37</sup> Resultantly, Shelley's celebration of both the "form" and the "mind" here not only recalls the Ancient Greek celebration of holistic development, but also reflects the Romantics' broader interest in the relationship between physical, intellectual and spiritual growth during the period. Furthermore, this Romantic and Ancient Greek view directly correlates to the concurrent development of English sporting culture during the period, as exemplified through the Wenlock Olympian Games.

The Romantic view of education, and especially their championing of experiential knowledge and their view of the natural world as the ideal classroom, put the movement in direct line with the underlying tenets of physical education in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England.<sup>38</sup> In *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*, Onno Oerlemans attributes the Romantics' "notable interest in the physical sciences" as due in part to their "profound interest in the natural world" and the "seeming rejection of the city and the culture it represented"<sup>39</sup> that characterised so much of the period's writing. Strachan reiterates this view of Romanticism and physical education as intrinsically linked, by asserting that both emphasize "the educative power of sport".<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Strachan acknowledges that the championing of sport, as seen through sporting literature, Romanticism, and the nascent physical education movement in England, was bolstered by their shared belief that "nature teaches the mind and imagination through 'boyish sports'" and the shared themes 'of exercise and play' that informed and united these distinct movements.

### The Second Generation's Participation in Sport

In addition to the fact that the Romantic era was an important time for the broader development of sport in England, especially through innovations in physical education and the genre of sport literature, the second-generation Romantics themselves also personally participated in 19<sup>th</sup>-century sporting culture. Strachan captures this close tie between second-generation Romanticism and physicality in his use of the term "the

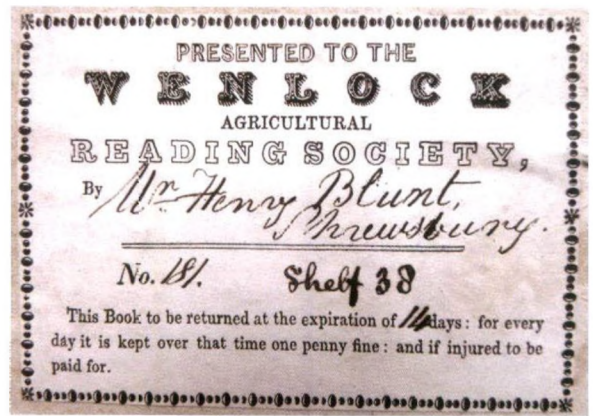
Brookes had founded the Agricultural Reading Society in 1841. This also had a lending library. The label indicates that a book was loaned to a Mr. Henry Blunt for 14 days.

sporting Romantic",<sup>41</sup> which recasts these figures as active participants in the country's burgeoning athletic culture. As Strachan observes, although their individual emphasis on sport varied, the male writers associated with the second generation of English Romanticism both wrote about and took part in English sporting life: "Consider also the poet Keats shooting at tom-tits on the heath at Hampstead, Hazlitt's obsession with the fives court, Lord Byron's love of boxing,<sup>42</sup> and P.B. Shelley sneaking off to practise shooting behind his lordship's back, the better to defeat him in a contest of marksmanship."<sup>43</sup> While Strachan's representative list here speaks to the apparent ubiquity of sport in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England, it also demonstrates that the Romantics themselves were not only actively interested in sport, but also directly participated.

### "The Educative Power of Sport:" Romantic Education in Much Wenlock

Romanticism's emphasis on holistic development and the cultivation of strong intellect, character and physicality both reflected, and actively contributed to, 19<sup>th</sup>-century educational practices. More specifically, the Romantics' progressive view of education, which was variously articulated through polemical treatises, creative depictions, or memoirs,<sup>44</sup> all presented a view of education that was entirely revolutionary for its time; one that hinged on a deep appreciation for childhood as a distinct phase, holistic education, and guided, experiential learning in nature. In his introduction to *The Educational Legacy of Romanticism*, John Willinsky asserts that Romanticism's influence on education "is as an unnamed force shaping the very form of schooling" and he attributes this formative influence to the Romantics having "revered childhood and celebrated the imagination",<sup>45</sup> as well as their provision of an "inspiring vision and vocabulary" for what education could look like. As Willinsky's argument here suggests, the Romantics' innovative approach to education, as individually conceived through their accounts and depictions, helped inspire new developments in 19<sup>th</sup>-century pedagogical practices that continue to resonate. Importantly though, beyond Romanticism's more general contributions to educational practices at large, the movement had an immediate and discernible influence on English public schools, specifically with regards to physical education.

Speaking to the development of physical education in the Romantic period, Kyle Grimes asserts<sup>46</sup> that "collective classes for the sole purpose of improving the participants' level of fitness constituted an innovation of the era", which leads him to conclude that the modern fitness movement and its efflorescence in England was an "unlikely product of the Romantic movement".<sup>47</sup> The



Romantic interest in organising classes for the purpose of exercise is patently similar to Brookes' own attempt at organising the Wenlock Olympian Class, alongside the Wenlock Olympian Games. Certainly, through Brookes' actions, it can be inferred that he believed in the "educative power of sport" and endeavoured to unify public education with public recreation in the town of Much Wenlock. Brookes was passionate about improving the lives of Wenlock's citizens and believed that exercise was a crucial aspect of both a proper education and proper working conditions for the English working class.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout his life, Brookes would tirelessly champion the cause of public physical education, an endeavour that would ultimately lead to his contact with modern Olympic founder Pierre de Coubertin, first by letter and later, in 1890, through organising a festival in his name. Coubertin admired Brookes' efforts to enshrine public physical education in English schools and his attempts to balance physical and academic development. Again, Brookes' advocacy for the English working class and children, even in light of his relative affluence<sup>49</sup>, directly mirrored the second-generation Romantics and their championing of working-class rights.<sup>50</sup> Read in this way, Romanticism's emphasis on educational reform and celebration of nature not only influenced the modern physical education movement in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England, but also directly contributed to a particular conception of English sporting culture, crystallized in Brookes' Wenlock Olympian Class and Wenlock Olympic Games.

### Conclusion

The efforts undertaken by William Penny Brookes to create the Wenlock Olympian Games culminated in what is largely considered to be one of the most important precursors to the modern Olympic Games, which were resurrected at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the existing sport literature largely ignores the intellectual culture that shaped Brookes' actions, presenting Brookes' desire to revolutionise British, and later international, sport as solely the product of

singular inspiration and single-minded determination. While Brookes was clearly both an inspired and determined person, it is important to consider the intellectual context in which he lived and the influences that formed Brookes' society, eventually leading to the Wenlock Olympian Games. The Romantic period, in full-swing during the time of Brookes' birth in 1809, was not, as popular memory suggests, exclusively concerned with the ethereal. Furthermore, Romantics, especially those from the second generation, shared Brookes' passion for physical education, the Ancient Greeks, celebrating individual achievement, and participating in sport. Brookes' Wenlock Olympian Games are, in many ways, a Romantic legacy project, bringing to fruition a mixture of the modern and the classical. Considered in this way, the Wenlock Olympian Games mark the culmination of both a cross-cultural exchange from the Ancient Greeks to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century English and a source of intracultural inspiration from the second-generation Romantics to William Penny Brookes. Ultimately, then, the Wenlock Olympian Games stand out as an exceptional development in the Olympic Movement, as they embody the passing of the torch from Ancient Greece to England, the Classical to the modern, and the poetic to the physical at this important juncture in the Games' modern revival. ■

- 1 Martin Polley, *The British Olympics: Britain's Olympics Heritage 1612–2012* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2011), 38.
- 2 For a history of the term's etymology, early applications in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and efflorescence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, see: Carmen Casaliggi and Porscha Fermanis. *Romanticism: A Literary and Cultural History* (New York/London: Routledge, 2016).
- 3 For more on these discussions see, for example, Frye's *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968), Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973) or De Man's *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984).
- 4 Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 20.
- 5 David Simpson, "Romanticism, Criticism, and Theory" in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.
- 6 Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.
- 7 For more on Romantic coterie culture, see Scott Krawczyk, *Romantic Literary Families* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- 8 H. Ashrafian, "William Penny Brookes: Forgotten Olympic Lord of the Rings," *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 39, no. 12 (2005), 969.
- 9 Martin Polley, *The British Olympics: Britain's Olympic Heritage 1612–2012* (Swindon, UK: English Heritage, 2011), 39.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 11 Ashrafian, "William Penny Brookes", 969.
- 12 Polley, *The British Olympics*, 39.
- 13 Stephen Hebron, "The Romantics and Classical Greece", *British Library*, Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Timothy Webb, "Romantic Hellenism," *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 150.
- 16 Percy Shelley, "Preface to *Hellas*". *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York/London: Norton, 1977), 409.
- 17 Polley, *The British Olympics*, 44–45.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 45.

- 19 Sam Mullins, *British Olympians: William Penny Brookes and the Wenlock Games* (London: British Olympic Association, 1986), 17.
- 20 Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830* (London/New York: Longman, 1989), 24.
- 21 Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), 67.
- 22 Daniel Sheehan, *Toward a Genealogy of Individualism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 90.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 24 Lillian Furst, "The Romantic Hero, Or Is He an Anti-Hero?" *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 9.1 (1976), 56.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 26 Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 165, 16.
- 27 Furst, "The Romantic Hero," 53.
- 28 Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 114.
- 29 Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 126.
- 30 John Strachan, "Romanticism and Sport", *Romanticism*, 19.3 (2013), 238.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 239.
- 32 Polley, *The British Olympics*, 40.
- 33 Mullins, *British Olympians*, 13.
- 34 Strachan, "Romanticism and Sport", 233.
- 35 Shelley, "Preface to *Hellas*", 40.
- 36 Athena S. Leoussi, *Nationalism and Classicism: The Classical Body as National Symbol in Nineteenth-Century England and France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 61.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 As Strachan's article helps establish, sport literature and culture as we now know it came of age in the Romantic period and he asserts that "the rise of sports publishing is one of the great success stories of Romantic-era print culture" (234). In defense of this argument, he observes that, "the rise of sports publishing is one of the great success stories of Romantic-era print culture", "there were unprecedented numbers of press columns on the subject of sport in this period" (234) and that "a series of training manuals sold in large numbers during the Romantic era" (234; 234; 242).
- 39 Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 3.
- 40 Strachan, "Romanticism and Sport", 241.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 234.
- 42 Although all the men of Romanticism's second generation were involved with sport or physical culture in different ways, the most notable and influential example of Romantic-era physicality can be seen in the still-visceral corporeality of Lord Byron whose fervor for Greek independence led him to join the cause abroad. Lord Byron is the epitome of "the sporting Romantic". This identity was reinforced through his literary interest in physical culture, which can be seen through his frequent depiction of Classical athleticism in his writing and the frequent evocation of figures from Greek mythology that embodied this ideal.
- 43 Strachan, "Romanticism and Sport", 236.
- 44 For examples, see Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (1762), Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).
- 45 John Willinsky, "Introduction", *The Educational Legacy of Romanticism*, Ed. John Willinsky. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), 1.
- 46 In his article "Fit audience, though few: Romanticism and Physical Education in the 1820s", Grimes traces the history of our "emergent concern with physical fitness" and connects the movement's popularity in England in the 1820s and 1830s to two related influences: Romanticism and the "increasingly prominent discourse of English nationalism and a transformation of the political order," Kyle Grimes, "'Fit audience, though few': Romanticism and Physical Education in the 1820s", *Romanticism* 19.3 (2013), 261–62.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 261.
- 48 Mullins, *British Olympians*, 10–13.
- 49 Brookes was the son of a medical doctor and later married into a wealthier family, further advancing his social status.
- 50 Percy Shelley himself wrote the poems "The Mask of Anarchy" and "A Song: 'Men of England'" that directly address the conditions of the working class in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England. See also: Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 1980).