

ISOH Article

The Crowning Glory – The Champion Tilter, Coubertin and the Olympics

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One hundred and forty years after they were first awarded, four silver cups relating to the revival of the Olympic movement have been discovered in Zimbabwe, Africa.

The trophies have been returned to their home town, Much Wenlock, Shropshire, England, where they were first competed for at Olympian Games held in the nineteenth century. These were the Wenlock Olympian Games established by William Penny Brookes and are the forerunner of the revived modern Olympics of Coubertin.

The Wenlock Olympian Class (later called Society) held its first Games in 1850 to “promote the moral, physical and intellectual improvement of the inhabitants”. From the beginning most events were open to all comers or as Brookes said “every grade of man”. The first Games were a mixture of athletics and traditional sports such as quoits, football and cricket. The Wenlock Olympian Games continued to go from strength to strength to become an important event in the sporting calendar. Silver cups, medals and prizes attracted competitors from London in the south and Liverpool in the north.

While the classical world and the Ancient Greek Olympics inspired William Penny Brookes his vision also drew upon the traditions of chivalry with a Knight and his lady and a simplified medieval test of strength and horsemanship called, Tilting at the Ring.

Coubertin himself saw this event when he visited the Wenlock Olympian Games in 1890 and was to express the wish to include elements of the crowning ceremony and pageantry in his own vision of an Olympic Games.

As Coubertin wrote;

“As the head of the 'Olympian Society' Dr Brookes wrote these words which summaries the whole project. 'The object of the Olympian Society is to contribute to the development of 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'. This plan is summed up in the fine motto, “Civium vires civitatis vis”, the strength of the citizens is the strength of the city interpreted, not in the Spartan manner, but in the Athenian. But on certain points antiquity was not enough for Dr Brookes; 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 to receive his symbolic laurel from the hands of a lady.”(1)

The Tilting at the Ring event was introduced into the Wenlock Olympian Games in 1858 and a further event of Tilting at the Ring Over Hurdles was introduced ten years later. These events replicated the practice of jousting tournaments by medieval Knights in which a horseman carrying a lance charged under a frame from which hung a small metal ring. The aim was to dislodge and carry off the ring with his lance.

This is how Coubertin described the Tilting event he witnessed at Wenlock;

“Tilting consists of using a pointed lance to remove a metal ring, whilst passing at a full gallop. At Wenlock the lance is very long and the ring very narrow; in addition, to make it more difficult, there is a fence across the track a little above the archway from which the ring hangs. So the rider has a lot to do and his ability is by no means small. Each year, the previous year's champion has to defend his position.. The Herald solemnly proclaims the challenge and the champion throws down his glove. All those who accept the challenge come to pick up the glove one at a time and the struggle is engaged. The winner received his award from the hands of a lady who passes over his shoulder a richly embroidered sash and sets a laurel crown on his head.” (2)

Each annual Wenlock Olympian Games started with a procession that all competitors were required to attend and in which the Tilters held a prominent role. A Herald led the procession on a white pony, followed by cup bearers, the local band, supportive banners and floral displays, then Brookes himself followed by all the Tilters, and the Wenlock town and Olympian flags.

The crowning of the winning Tilter was full of ceremony and pageantry;

“The ceremony of the crowning was most interesting. Preceded by the band, who played “See the Conquering Hero Comes” and the National School girls, bearing baskets of flowers which were strewn in the path of the victor, he was conducted to the front of the Grand Stand, where he dismounted, and kneeling upon one knee upon the steps he was

adorned with a laurel crown and the silver cup which was filled with sparkling champagne.” (3)

The winner also had a yellow sash emblazoned with the words “Honour my Guide” placed across his chest.

The competitors in the Tilting had a strict code of dress;

“ All Tilters, being members of the Wenlock Olympian Society, must appear, both in the Procession and in the contest in proper Tilting Costume, viz the Society's Regulation Tilting Cap, Black Boots and Hunting Breeches, a coloured Tunic, and white gloves, the latter two will be provided by the Society. Colours to be declared at the time of entry. This rule will be strictly enforced.”(4)

The Tilting was the most eagerly watched and contested event held at the Wenlock Olympian Games, 10,000 spectators were reported to have cheered the victor in 1876.

“Numbers unprecedented upon the grounds and the adjacent hill, from which an excellent view of the sports is to be obtained, there were in the afternoon some 10,000 spectators and a very gay and interesting scene was presented. The winner after a capital contest was found in C E Ainsworth who rode well and took his rings in capital style.” (5)

The size of the crowd demonstrated the success of Brookes in encouraging others to join his Olympian movement. Building on his support for the National Olympian Association Games across England and for the Zappas Games of 1859, the latter held in its ancient home of Athens, Greece.

The winner of the four recently discovered silver cups for Tilting at the Ring Over Hurdles was Charles E Ainsworth, who won the event in 1876, 1878, 1882 and 1887. He came from an Olympian dynasty with members of his family winning athletic and tilting Olympian titles over many years.

The significance of the Tilting at the Ring to the revival of the Olympic movement was the impact it had on Coubertin when he attended the Wenlock Olympian Games held in his honour at Much Wenlock in October 1890. These special Games comprised seven events, one of which was the Tilting at the Ring.

Coubertin saw all its pomp and ceremony:

“The trumpet was blown in fanfare, the Herald proclaimed the event. The Champion Tilter at the last Games, James Rudd, rode up to the front of the grandstand, threw down his glove in a chivalric challenge in a gesture that should have been familiar to Coubertin from the medieval literature of France. The competition that followed saw a 'severe struggle' beneath the tilting bar, with its Greek script saying 'always to excel.'

The local band struck up 'See the Conquering Hero Comes' sound the trumpets, beat the drum, sports prepare, the laurel bring, songs of triumph to him sing.

The local school girls made a carpet of flowers through which the winner, the reigning champion Rudd came to sink down on his knee to be crowned by a lady with olive leaves and exhorted to 'let honour be your guide.' School children sang the Victors Ode, written by William, son of William Penny Brookes aged 14.” (6)

At the dinner in the Raven Hotel, Much Wenlock to celebrate the success of the 1890 Wenlock Olympian Games and to welcome the special French visitor, Coubertin was introduced to a long standing Tilting Champion of the Kingdom and WOS Committee member, Charles E Ainsworth. No doubt his collection of silver cups and olive crowns would have been a subject of conversation.

Writing in “Les Jeux Olympiques a la Wenlock” 1890 Coubertin relates in detail the Tilting at the Ring he witnessed in Much Wenlock. He equates medieval knights with ancient Greek athletes and jousting tournaments with Olympic Games.

“ When Coubertin witnessed the Tilting at the Ring in 1890 he was so impressed that ever after he conflated medieval chivalry with Greek athletes as he defined the Olympic spirit. The tilting was full of ceremony and pageantry – the pageantry that would dazzle Coubertin and enter our own Games.” (7)

Having witnessed first hand the Tilting at the Ring contest with its associated ceremony and pageantry Coubertin wrote in 1897 about its importance to his developing Olympic vision.

“ Not feeling satisfied with giving the ladies with the best seat at the Wenlock festival he had forced upon his countrymen the queer custom of having the champion tilter crowned with laurels by a lady After the title of champion for the coming year had been solemnly proclaimed by the herald, the winner was ordered to kneel before the lady who

had accepted the duty of crowning him and to kiss her hand. The scene was indeed strange, because of its derivation from three very different forms of civilization; dress and the speeches were modern; the use of laurels and the quotations from Greek authors inscribed on the flags and banners were antique; the latter part of the ceremony was a homage paid to medieval ideas and theories.” (8)

In June 1894 Brookes wrote to the Greek Prime Minister Trikoupis to support the work of “*my friend Baron Pierre de Coubertin*” in attempting to revive the Olympic Games. In the letter Brookes praises the idea of crowning modern victors with the olive crown as in his Tilting at the Ring contests “*following the noble and highly appreciated example of the ancient Greeks.*”(9)

Brookes also mentions the links of his Wenlock Olympian Society to Greece, from the Wenlock prize at the Zappas Games of 1859 to the cup given to the Wenlock Olympian Society as a prize by the King of Greece in 1877. Also mentioned was a tree planted in honour of the King of Greece on the Wenlock Games ground in 1888.

“We will perform the ceremony of dedication of the tree according to our usual custom by pouring upon the tree a libation of champagne and of drinking out of the champion tilter's cup to the health of the nobleman we wish to honour. I now on behalf of members of the Wenlock Olympian Society dedicate this stately young oak tree, the emblem of strength and durability, to his Majesty George the 1st King of the Hellenes trusting that centuries hence it may be seen standing in its strength and beauty to testify to the enduring friendship and alliance between Great Britain and Greece.” (10)

At the 129th Wenlock Olympian Games held in 2015 a ceremony was held to rededicate a replacement oak tree for the original which sadly had to be removed.

In a further link to the Tilting Contest, in 1890 Coubertin promised in his address to the Wenlock Olympian Society at the dinner in his honour at the Raven Hotel that he would donate a medal as a prize for the following year's Wenlock Olympian Games. This is a medal of the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques. It is engraved “Presented by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, Paris.”

This medal was awarded to Edward Marston Farmer, the winning Tilter at the Wenlock Olympian Games in 1891. In 1994 His Excellency, Juan Antonio Samaranch, President of the IOC came to lay a wreath at the Brookes family grave. During his visit, Miss Joyce Farmer, then aged ninety two, presented the Wenlock Olympian Society with the original Coubertin Medal which was won by her father.

The Wenlock Olympian Games founded by Brookes and held since 1850 were important in reviving the concept of an international Olympic Games. Building on the original ancient philosophy and through events like Tilting at the Ring with all its ceremony and pageantry inspiring Coubertin to continue the work of William Penny Brookes to establish the Olympic Games we have today.

As Coubertin himself announced in 1897;

“The Wenlock people alone have preserved and followed the true Olympian traditions.”

Further recognition of the importance of the Wenlock Olympian Society and the work of William Penny Brookes in reviving the concept of an international Olympic Games was evidenced in the mascot for the London 2012 Olympic Games being named Wenlock.

This Olympic year will see the 130th Wenlock Olympian Games, featuring events ranging from athletics to volleyball, open to all as Brookes would have wanted.

It is fitting that these long lost four silver cups have finally come home to Much Wenlock from distant lands. They stand testament to the role of the Olympian Champion Tilter in influencing Coubertin and in the revival of the Olympic movement.

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References

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“Les Jeux Olympiques a Much Wenlock” Pierre de Coubertin
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- 7 *“The Modern Olympics – A Struggle for Survival” David C Young 1996 p11*
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- 9 *Letter from Brookes to “S. Trikoupis, Prime Minister” June 11th 1894 Dragoumis Documents in the Gennadius Library, Athens*
- 10 *Speech of Brookes at the 38th Wenlock Olympian Games on 22nd May 1888 at the dedication of an oak sapling to His Majesty King George I, King of the Hellenes*

During Samaranch’s visit, Miss Joyce Farmer, then aged ninety two, presented the Wenlock Olympian Society with the original Coubertin Medal which was won by her father, Edward Marston Farmer, in 1891 for Tilting at the Ring. When he visited Much Wenlock in 1890 Coubertin promised that he would donate a medal as a prize for the following year’s Wenlock Olympian Games. This is a medal of the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques but it is what is engraved on it that makes it especially significant. It says “Presented by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, Paris” and it is thought to be the only personal award ever made by Coubertin.