

MEDICINE, THE MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES and PHILATELY

With the opening of the Sydney Olympic Games on September 15th, world-wide there will appear a flood of philatelic material, issued by participating and non-participating countries alike, all with an eye on their exchequers. Collectors interested in the philately of specific countries, of specific field or track events, or in the Olympic movement *per sê*, will clamour for the material. However, nowhere will they find a philatelic reference to the man about whom it was said "*if the Olympic Games that Modern Greece has not yet been able to revive still survives today, it is due, not to a Greek, but to Dr. William Penny Brookes*" (Fig.1).



Dr. William Penny Brookes

Born in 1809, the son of a country doctor in the Shropshire town of Much Wenlock, William Penny Brookes (1809-1895) studied medicine at Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals, London, the Sorbonne, Paris and in Padua, Italy. Returning to Much Wenlock, he became actively influential in local affairs, a Justice of the Peace, Commissioner for Road and Taxes, restored the Guild Hall and Corn Exchange, founded the Wenlock Gas Company and brought the railway to Much Wenlock and the Severn Junction.

In 1850, William Penny Brookes founded the Wenlock Olympian Society, to "*promote the moral, physical and intellectual movement of the inhabitants of the town by the encouragement of out-door recreation and by the award of prizes annually for skill in athletics, and proficiency in intellectual and industrial attainments*". The first Games was held in October 1850. There followed the creation of the Shropshire Olympian Games (1861) for which the King of Greece sponsored a silver cup to be awarded to the winner of the Pentathlon; and the National Olympian Society (1865), the first meeting of which was held before 10,000 spectators at the Crystal Palace.

Brookes repeatedly petitioned the Greek authorities to resuscitate the Olympic Games, abolished by the Roman Emperor, Theodosius in A.D. 394. Guiding by example, in 1859, he donated £10 as prize money in the Athens Olympic Games held that year. Concurrently, through the Wenlock Olympian Society, he persistently campaigned for the inclusion of physical education in school curricula. These two elements, physical education and the notion of a modern Olympics, brought together he and Baron de Coubertin, the man to whom the world attributes the creation of the modern International Olympic Movement.



Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937)
Bain News Service, 1915. Library of Congress

Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) (**Fig.2**) was a brilliant educator and influential scholar, but certainly no athlete. In 1889, following an appeal for assistance in organising an International Congress on Physical Education, he was invited by Brookes to the 1890 Wenlock Olympic Games. De Coubertin's enthusiasm for what he saw knew no bounds. From it, he drew the inspiration for what was to become the modern International Olympic Movement. Though actively involved in the resurrection of the Olympic Games, Brookes was not to live long enough to see his idea come to fruition, for he died in December 1895, weeks before the opening of Athens games held under Greek royal patronage in a new marble stadium especially constructed for the purpose.

Over time, Dr. William Penny Brookes' association with the International Olympic Games was lost to collective memory, and to-day, universally, only Baron de Coubertin's role in its establishment being recognised.

de Coubertin, however, humbly always paid tribute to Brookes, and planted an oak tree in his memory on Linden Fields in the town years later. It still stands tribute to Brookes.

In 1986, the Wenlock Olympian Society celebrated its own 100th Olympian Games in the presence of de Coubertin's grand-nephew Geoffrey de Navacelle. And 1990, the centenary of de Coubertin's visit to the Much Wenlock Games, saw the Princess Royal and the British Olympic Association similarly recognise his pivotal role in the recreation of one of the great spectacles of our day, the International Olympic Games.

For a virtual visit to Much Wenlock, Shropshire and the Wenlock Olympian Society, go to: www.wenlock-olympian-society.org.uk

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