

The Wenlock Games

It may well be that the biggest mistake in British sporting history was to share it with others. Had we kept football and rugby and tennis and golf and cricket to ourselves, we would still be world champions in them all.

It was in the 19th Century - self-evidently the age of British dominion - that organised sport became central to our nation's cultural life. A grass-roots movement at the English public schools - most notably at Rugby and Shrewsbury - and then at the two universities, spearheaded the doctrine that muscles were as important as minds. The reformers called it "muscular Christianity", and Tom Brown's Schooldays became its founding text. The fields of Eton could now be a place of play as well as military drills.

That belief in exercise of body as well as mind, and a conviction that recreation was as important as work, was not limited to the nation's elite institutions. In the small Shropshire town of Much Wenlock a local doctor took his message into the lives of its agricultural workers. His name was William Penny Brookes.

In this month of the London Olympics, Penny Brookes has every right to see his flowers on his grave on the south side of St Milburga's church. His Olympic dream has, in every sense of the word, come of age. The strangely disturbing mascot of the 2012 Games is itself called Wenlock, and every athlete who raises it in triumph, is saluting the little Shropshire town.

The story of Penny Brookes' Wenlock Games is expertly told by Catherine Beale in the wittingly titled *Born out of Wenlock*, Derby Books, 2011, £12.99. The book also includes a fascinating trail through Brookes' home town, through its medieval streets and out onto Linden Field and Windmill Field, where those first Wenlock Games were held more than 160 years ago.

It was in October 1850 that Brookes first led his motley band of Wenlockians - ag labs and butchers, carpenters and grocers - out into the fields for the first Wenlock Games. That first competition included cricket and football, quoits and jumping, precious little that the Ancient Greeks would have recognised. Later years added even more curious (and quintessentially English) pastimes, such as a pig race, a donkey race, a wooden leg race and a race for elderly women for a pound of tea. Beale rightly points out a link with the old church wakes, which regularly included such novelty events.

But it was less the individual sports than the notion of healthy competition that interested and inspired Penny Brookes. The sports day had developed from the Wenlock Agricultural Reading Society, founded nine years earlier. It was in the spirit of self-improvement - mind and body - that Brookes led his team out.

William Brookes died, at the age of 86 years, just four months before the inaugural games of the Modern Olympiad at Athens in 1896. But by then, like some expert relay runner, he had passed on the baton to others to run with. Brookes may not have appreciated the professionalism of modern sport, but in its internationalism and

spirit of peaceful competition, it was made in his image.

The final chapter of Catherine Beale's book is devoted to the visit by Pierre de Coubertin to the Wenlock Games of October 1890. The railway line by which the Frenchman arrived, alas, is no more, though its route beside Linden Field is still clear enough.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the modern Olympian movement was born at the moment de Coubertin stepped off the train in Shropshire, though undoubtedly it gave the campaign momentum and focus. Beale is careful to avoid such a simplistic explanation. Indeed, one of the particular strengths of her book is how the author weaves together the strands that contributed to the revival of the ancient games.

There was the renewed interest in the Ancient Greeks, for one thing, stimulated both by archaeological excavations at Olympia itself, and by the war for Greek independence. There was the growing belief in physical exercise and education too. And there were those village sports that had been long held in England and Scotland - at Wenlock, of course, and at Dover's Hill above Chipping Campden. Both of these had, at least in name, harked back to Olympia.

For Pierre de Coubertin himself it was the failure of French manhood, shown so starkly in the disasters of the Franco-Prussian War, that turned his head towards England. Here, in the most successful economy in the world, physical exercise and sporting competition had become part of the recipe for success. It took him years to forgive its people for not allowing themselves to be conquered by Napoleon, but a sneaking admiration grew.

In the Frenchman's eyes, what was happening before him, on a wet weekend in Shropshire, was, more than anything, an exercise in physical education. But, in the procession of athletes who were by now arriving from all corners of England to take part on Brookes' Games (Beale's book includes a fullsome list of them), there was a hint of something global, an event to bring the whole world together.

And so let the Games begin.