

## **Coubertin Oak Tree, Much Wenlock, Shropshire, England**

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The Coubertin Oak Tree is a legacy of Pierre de Coubertin's visit to the Wenlock Olympian Games in 1890. It is a Golden-leaved English Oak (*Quercus 'Concordia'*), growing at the edge of the Gaskell Recreation Ground in Much Wenlock, Shropshire. Coubertin planted the tree at the invitation of his host, William Penny Brookes of the Wenlock Olympian Games Society, to commemorate the trip that was to prove so influential. The tree was originally marked by a metal plaque bearing the legend 'Quercus Concordia / Planted in honour of / Baron Pierre de Coubertin / Oct<sup>r</sup> 22<sup>nd</sup> 1890'. This plaque is now in the Wenlock Museum, having been replaced by one bearing the anachronistic text 'This oak tree was planted by / Baron Pierre de Coubertin / President of the / International Olympic Committee / in October 1890'. The Recreation Ground, along with the facilities at the nearby William Brookes School, remains the venue for the annual Olympian Games.

Brookes, born in Much Wenlock in 1809, was a doctor and magistrate. After training in Padua and Paris, he returned to his home town, established his practice, and initiated philanthropic projects linked to health and education. Sport became part of this work when, in 1850, he founded the Wenlock Olympian Class to promote the 'moral, physical and intellectual improvement of the inhabitants of the town & neighbourhood of Wenlock and especially of the Working Classes by the encouragement of out-door recreations ... at public meetings for skill in Athletic exercises and proficiency in intellectual and industrial attainment'. The first edition took place in October 1850, and over the rest of the century they became a key event in the region's sporting life. The Games featured a variety of sports and games, along with artistic and educational activities, such as knitting and poetry. Brookes was also a key player in the National Olympian Association, which flourished in the mid-1860s, while his international lobbying led him to donate a £10 prize for the first of Zappas' Olympics in Athens in 1859. King George of Greece reciprocated in 1877, sending a silver trophy, which Brookes duly awarded at that year's low-key National Olympian Games at Shrewsbury.

Brookes was thus versed in transnational networking when, in May 1889, he saw a letter in *The Times* from Coubertin, writing as Secretary of the Congress for Studying the Aims and Advantages of Athletic Education, part of that year's *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. The 26-year-old Coubertin had first visited Rugby School in 1883, and subsequent visits to the UK had taken him to other leading schools, including Winchester and Christ's Hospital, and to Henley Regatta. These trips, and similar ones he made to the USA, had confirmed Coubertin's belief that sport was central to a successful education system. His circular, which *The Times* published on 28 May 1889, called for information on school and university sport. He asked questions on how much time was dedicated to sport, and which sports students played. Question 6 must have resonated with Brookes: 'Do you believe in athletic games improving companionship?—morality?—temper?—work?' Brookes replied, sending a copy of his speech from the 1866 National Olympian Games. He told Coubertin about the Wenlock Olympian Games, and invited him to visit.

Coubertin made the trip in October 1890. *The Wellington Journal* published a full account. Brookes staged a special one-day edition of the Games for Coubertin, starting with a ceremonial parade to the playing field. In line with the honour bestowed on other important

guests who visited, Brookes invited Coubertin to plant an oak tree. Brookes' speech at the planting ceremony stressed the symbolism of the moment: 'May this tree flourish for ages, and always be looked upon...with feelings of pleasure, and of respect for Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the earnest and eloquent promotor of all those athletic sports which help to build up a manly and noble race.' After Brookes poured champagne on the sapling, Coubertin thanked Brookes for the 'kind thought of planting that tree in remembrance' of the visit, and hoped that it 'would tend to cement the friendly feelings between the two countries which ought to be everlasting'. Coubertin wrote about his visit in *Revue Athlétique*. He drew attention to Brookes' commitment to the idea of staging Olympic Games, and he praised the ceremonial aspects of the Wenlock festival, including the tree planting.

The two men maintained their correspondence until Brookes' death at the age of 86 in December 1895, and in a letter of 1893, Brookes assured his friend 'Your tree is in a flourishing condition'. Although he did not live to witness the Athens Olympics of 1896, Brookes died knowing that Coubertin had succeeded in creating an International Olympic Committee. Coubertin later played down Brookes' role in the evolution of his own Olympic idea, but it is clear that the sports and ceremonies he witnessed under the name 'Olympian' in Much Wenlock in 1890 had a lasting impact.

The Coubertin Oak has survived. It witnessed the gradual decline of the Wenlock Olympian Games after Brookes' death, and their brief revival in the 1950s. Their more lasting revival started in the 1970s. This period of their history saw renewed recognition from the IOC when, in 1994, President Samaranch spoke at Brookes' grave, calling him the 'true founder' of the Olympic movement. The organisers of the London Olympics of 2012 recognised this heritage, and named their mascot Wenlock.

The Coubertin Oak also played a role in the 2012 London Olympics. In 2004, during the bidding process, students at William Brookes School collected acorns from the tree, and grew them into saplings. When London won the bid in 2005, planners started work on a ribbon of trees, all grown from the Coubertin Oak's acorns, running from Wenlock to the Olympic Park. With help from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, forty saplings were ready for planting in 2012. The tree at the London terminus of the ribbon stands in the 2012 Garden, close to the Stadium. Like the original in Wenlock, it is thriving, a living symbol of the transnational strands that came together to create the modern Olympic movement.

## References

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