

Contexts: The London 2012 Olympics

Xavier Edwards explores the Olympics and East London regeneration



Coubertin, 1863-1937

1948 Games poster

WHEN THE OLYMPIC GAMES, LONDON, start on 27 July 2012, it will be the completion of a project that gained a narrow 54 to 50 votes endorsement over the Paris rival bid in July 2005. Although the first Olympic Games began in 776 BC, about the time of the birth of Homer [the poet and author of *The Iliad*], and was associated with the improvement of the fitness of the male population and thereby, their military usefulness, Pierre Frédy, Baron de Coubertin, the founder of the modern games, had other aims. The son of an aristocrat, Coubertin, taught by Jesuits, was an intellectual. He became interested in education and the part of physical education in schooling. He visited Thomas Arnold at Rugby and wrote about English schools in *L'Éducation en Angleterre*, 1888.

Coubertin founded the 'Comite pour la Propagation des Exercices Physiques' [Committee for the popularisation of physical education] in 1888 but he had little influence on French schools. Coubertin had met Dr William Brookes when in England. This doctor believed that the best way to prevent illness was physical exercise. In 1850 Dr Brookes had started a local athletic competition that he referred to as 'Meetings of the Olympian Class' at Much Wenlock in Shropshire. It is mentioned, in passing, that Wenlock is the name of the 2012 mascot. Then, in 1894, Coubertin assembled 79 delegates from 12 countries to attend a meeting on the re-establishment of the Olympic Games. At that meeting, they formed the IOC (International Olympic Committee) and chose the official motto of the modern Olympic Games, 'Faster-Higher-Stronger'. They decided to hold the first modern games in 1896 in Athens, Greece. There were representatives from 13 nations and competitions in 9 sports by 42 events. In contrast, in the summer of 2012 there will be 26 sports.

After a slow start, in 1900 and 1904, and sequence of interruptions in 1916, 1940 and 1944 because of world wars, the games have grown, especially during the last 40 years, helped by the development of the media and corporate sponsorship. London has hosted the Games twice before, in 1908 and 1948. That which is particularly notable

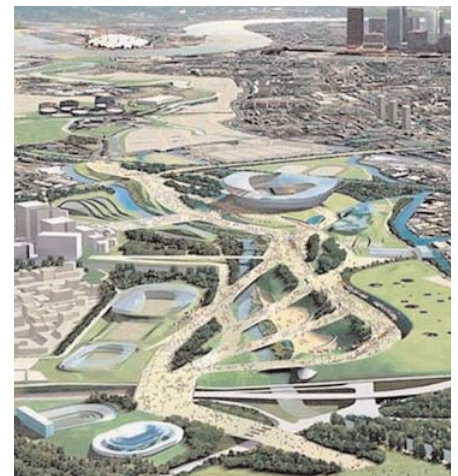


Illustration of the Olympic project with O2, Canary Wharf and Rivers Lea and Thames shown

about the 2012 games is their connection with the regeneration of 250 largely derelict acres in East London. Work on the Olympic Park construction site, one of the largest in Europe, costing some £9 billion over five years, is well advanced. After the games the Olympic Park will be transformed into one of the largest urban parks created over the last 150 years. It will follow the River Lea and stretch from Hertfordshire to the tidal Thames. In addition, the use of the athletes' village, which will become housing, the stadia, media centre, car parks and improved transport, will transform this area of East London.



The 250-acre Olympic Park project, as seen around 2008, looking south towards the O2 arena (Millennium Dome) just right of centre with the Canary Wharf towers further to the west (to the right of the O2), both in the middle distance. The legacy, with athletes' village, stadia, media centre ... will be very considerable



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