

CAPTAIN ROBERT DOVER'S OLYMPICK GAMES (Issue 1)

Robert Dover was born in 1575, son of John Dover of Great Ellingham, Norfolk, 11 years after Shakespeare. He studied at Gray's Inn 1604-5. He became the second husband of Sibilla Sanford of Stow-on-the-Wold daughter of Dr. Cole, dean of Lincoln. They lived at first at Barton where Dover practiced as an attorney and then to Wickhamford where he was Steward of the Manor. He died in July 1652 and was buried at Barton-on-the-Heath. There is no evidence that he ever lived in Chipping Campden. He became a Captain in the Civil War. He had two sons. A grandson, Dr. Thomas Dover, rescued Alexander Selkirk in 1708 and invented "Dover's Powders" - a sedative still in use.

Robert Dover was strongly anti-puritan and a great lover of the old ways, the sports and the activities of the countryside. The Olympick Games opened about 1605 - 12 - the exact date is uncertain. They made Chipping Campden famous throughout the Shires and even at court. Amongst his friends were Ben Jonson and Endymion Porter. Porter was a great patron of the arts and played an important part in forming Charles I's great collection of pictures. Through his position at court Porter was able to obtain not only James I's permission and encouragement for the games but was given hats, ruffs, and other clothes cast off by the King, and in these Dover used to dress when he rode on the hill, officiating at the games, which were attended by nobility and gentry from as much as 60 miles away. The games were a conscious protest against the puritanism of the age and were a combination of current ideas of the Olympic festivals of ancient Greece and the Cotswold Whitsun Ales. Dover by combining the two elements and enlarging and organising the games, created a festival which must have been unique.

The games consisted chiefly of football, skittles, quoits, shovel-board, chess, cudgel and singlestick bouts, bull-baiting, cock-fighting, bowling, wrestling, leaping, dancing, racing on foot and horseback, pitching the bar or harner, handling the pike, leaping, walking on hands, hunting the hare with hounds and coursing. Dover opened them by riding up on his white horse to a portable castle of timber that he had erected on the hill, and firing off a salvo from the castle's mimic battery of guns. Prizes of value were given, and yellow ribbons were distributed as "Dover's Favours". Wood said that 500 of the gentry wore such favours a year after one celebration. At this time the whole of the top of Dover's Hill was unenclosed land - a great flat open plateau of 500 acres in the parish of Weston-sub-Edge. The games were opened on the Thursday of Whit week and lasted three days. They continued till 1644, when they were stopped, probably at the instigation of Campden's puritan vicar, William Bartholomew. They were revived again after the Restoration (29th. May) and continued with varying degrees of popularity and success till 1852 when, largely by the influence of Canon Bourne, the rector of Weston-sub-Edge, they were finally stopped. The crowds that the work on the new railway brought made the games disorderly to an extent that shocked the Victorian conscience.

William Sonerville, a highly cultured gentleman published his poem "Hobbinol, or the Rural Games" in 1740. Its main interest is the vivid description it gives of Dover's Games. In 1772, Richard Graves the

younger of Mickleton published "The Spiritual Quixote" a satire on the Methodists of his day. Graves imagines his hero setting out to convert the world and going to Dover's Games. The account of the scene gives a good idea of the taste and flavour of an 18th century country gathering, no better and no worse than many another. Towards the end of the 18th century the games seem to have declined. Rudder in "A New History of Gloucestershire" 1779 merely said "there is still a meeting of young people upon Dover's Hill, about a mile from Chipping Campden, every Thursday in Whit-week". The games were no doubt pretty rough and disorderly, but they were part of 18th century life and an important and essential part of it, as also were the public executions at which large crowds of people of all classes gathered.

In Campden at the start of the 19th century the past was still present, symbolised by the slow revolving year, and the annual event of Dover's Games, with their crowds and junketings and confusions. The older men were born in and belonged to the 18th century, and the young had not yet found the new world of piety and self-improvement and progress that was to come, but clung to the robust past that their fathers knew and remembered. Hunting, coursing and shooting and the annual Dover's Games were the recreation of the gentry and some of the larger farmers, but the district around Campden seems to have lost the fashionable repute it had in the 18th century for sport and social intercourse. Of the Meeting of 1826 the Mirror (No. 199) wrote "It is still a great holiday for all the lads and lasses within 10 to 15 miles of the place, and is attended by numbers of gentry and people of respectability in the neighbourhood."

The coming of the railway was an event which caused much local disturbance. The intrusion of large numbers of "navigators" brought an element of disorder and lawlessness into the district. The shops, public houses and bookmakers benefited while Dover's Games became more and more rowdy, and were attended by larger and larger crowds. Grosart in the introduction to his edition of Annalia Dubrensis of 1877 said that "during the five years (1846-52) Mickleton Tunnel was in progress a body of navvies converted the gathering into a riotous and dangerous assembly". The opening of the railway to Wolverhampton and Birmingham in the spring of 1853 the games became more the resort of roughs and undesirables from as far away as the Black Country. Vyvyan in his edition (1878) of the Annalia Dubrensis said the games became the trysting place of all the lowest scum... of Birmingham and Oxford. Some time before 1851 the Rev. G. D. Bourne, later Canon, the wealthy and powerful Rector of Weston-sub-Edge from 1846 till 1901, who was also a magistrate, saw over 30,000 at one of the gatherings and was much concerned at the drunkenness and general licence that prevailed. To stop them an enclosure act was obtained with the help of the Earl of Harrowby in 1853-4 for the parish. The hill was divided into fields leaving no space big enough for the crowds or the steeplechases or athletic events. The last official meeting was in the summer of 1852 but the old custom died hard for much later in the century there were still gatherings of young people, for sports and games, either on what was left of the open part of the hill, or in the Mile Drive. The Games did not only occupy Dover's Hill. In Campden there were cock-fighting, plays & balls and a Wake on the Saturday with booths, stalls and roundabouts.