

Address at Unveiling Ceremony
Friday 25 April 2014
held at Lifestyles Park Road, Liverpool

My Lord Lieutenant, My Lord Mayor, Aldermen, Councillors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Robin Baynes, founder of Liverpool Heartbeat, for inviting me to this ceremony, and who has done so much to publicise the life and work of John Hulley, even more than I could have ever done by myself.

I am a family historian with a particular interest in the Hulley surname. I first came across a reference to a John Hulley of Liverpool in November 2006 in an article about him written in 2001 by an ex-Olympic athlete and historian called Dr. Don Anthony entitled "The Mystery of John Hulley". This was because he had been the forgotten man of British Olympic history and all trace of him after 1868 had been lost.

Dr Anthony wrote "John Hulley was certainly a tour de force. He began to define Olympism long before the formation of the International Olympic Committee. Like Brookes and Ravenstein he influenced the thinking of the young Coubertin. If Hulley had not died so young he would have been 62 when the IOC was constituted in 1894 and would have been part of the inner circle of Olympism." I was intrigued by the mystery and set out to solve it.

Initially I would like to describe the life of John Hulley and to mention particularly his work in organising 6 Olympic Festivals in Liverpool and Llandudno, and his connection to William Penny Brookes and the Much Wenlock Olympian Society.

John was born in Liverpool 1832. He was a member of a family who had a strong connection with the medical profession. His father, 2 uncles, grandfather and great grandfather were all surgeons and he was a descendant of a landed Cheshire family whose ancestry I have taken back to 1488.

From an early age Hulley had a keen interest in physical activities, education and fitness and was taught by Louis Huguenin, the famous Swiss gymnast. Hulley established the first Liverpool Gymnasium in 1862 after he had organised the first Liverpool Olympic Festival.

He went on to organise Liverpool Olympic Festivals in 1863 and 1864 and his prowess in the field of physical education was formally recognised by the Wenlock Olympian Society when he was awarded a silver medal in appreciation of his valuable services in the cause of physical education.

In 1865 the National Olympian Association was established at the Myrtle Street Gymnasium with John Hulley appointed as its chairman. He was one of the founding triumvirate together with William Penny Brookes of Much Wenlock and Ernst Ravenstein of the German Gymnastic Society London

The next 2 Festivals were held at Llandudno in 1865 and 1866 and in Liverpool in 1867.

You will have heard of the Much Wenlock Olympic Festivals which started before those at Liverpool. The main difference between the Wenlock Olympic Festivals and those of Liverpool were initially mainly of scale and content. At Wenlock competition was generally between parishes and the events were more of a rural nature than those at Liverpool. Here the number of spectators were much larger, the competitors came from other counties and even from overseas, and the list of events were much closer to those held at the 1st Olympiad at Athens in 1896.

After 1867 Hulley faded from the National Olympic scene, possibly because of the National Olympian Association subsequently foundering in the face of rivalry from the Amateur Athletic Club. His ideologies of physical education were clear when he declared "What I desire to impress upon you is that Olympic festivals are not the end of physical education. Physical education, or rather its dissemination, is the end. Olympic festivals are the means of securing that end."

John Hulley died in 1875 from Emphysema of lungs and Bronchitis and his life was remembered 13 years later in an article in the Liverpool Citizen of 1888 which concluded by saying "John Hulley, professor of gymnastics and Gymnasiarch, is still a pleasant memory in this native city, and his surviving pupils retain an affectionate remembrance of their old teacher. Hulley was born with a mission, which he fulfilled; and, take him for all and all, we may never see his like again."

My researches of John Hulley started by tracing his grave in Smithdown Road cemetery. This was in a terrible condition with the almost unreadable headstone detached from the grave covers and the stonework adversely affected by over 130 years of atmospheric pollution. I decided to raise funds for its renovation and thanks to donations from the International Olympic Committee, the British Olympic Foundation, members of the public and of my family, I engaged Messrs Welsbys to undertake the work.

The results were amazing, with the white marble being brought back to its original colour. A rededication ceremony was held in June 2009 conducted by the Rev. Graham Murphy Minister of Toxteth Park chapel where John Hulley had been married. Revd. Murphy ended his address with the following:

"Until now, Hulley has suffered from obscurity following his early death. Let the restoration of his grave be an end to that. It is with great pleasure that I declare this restoration to be the granting to John Hulley of a place in history, which he undoubtedly deserves."

I have produced an entry for John Hulley in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, placing him in the national record of 59,000 men and women who have shaped British history and culture, worldwide. Also, there is now a Wikipedia entry for him.

The John Hulley story and his name and reputation was once again part of local history through a series of events organised in 2010 by Liverpool Heartbeat and held to encourage physical activity amongst all ages. These continue to this day under the banner of the John Hulley Olympic Festival.

This ceremony, although almost 140 years after his death, is an appropriate event in which John Hulley's name and devotion to the physical education concept will be forever remembered in this city and my sincere thanks go to all who play a part in it.