



Viewpoint

The Cotswold Olympicks



Time: 15 mins

Region: South West England

Landscape: rural



Location:

Dover's Hill, Cotswold Way, Weston Subedge,
Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire GL55 6UW

Grid reference:

SP 13635 39533

Directions:

From the car park walk down and stand just below
the summit of Dover's Hill

Walk down from the car park and stand just below the summit of Dover's Hill to look across the large natural amphitheatre. Every year, on the Friday after the Spring Bank Holiday, local people meet here to join in the Cotswold Olympicks.

They take part in such strange sports as shin kicking, spurning the barre (like tossing the caber) and tug o' war. This tradition dates back to 1612 but is also believed to be the forerunner of the modern Olympics.

So why did a Cotswold hillside cause 'the first stirrings of Britain's Olympic beginnings'?



Dover's Hill is one of the high points along the Cotswold scarp, a steep edge of high land running from Bath in southern Gloucestershire to Chipping Campden in the north. It is made of Jurassic limestone, a kind of rock that was formed about 165 million years ago beneath a warm tropical sea. It is this rock that was responsible for the bowl-shaped amphitheatre we see before us today.

The limestone sits in a band, or cap, across the top of the slope. Beneath it are layers of weaker sandy clays and mudstone. When wet these layers are fairly unstable. Water percolating through the limestone above, wets and erodes the rock layers below. This can cause blocks of the limestone rock to fracture and slip. When this happens the mud and clay layers underneath slump downwards, forming a natural amphitheatre. The amphitheatre immediately below Dover's Hill summit is a classic example.

In 1612, local lawyer Robert Dover saw the potential of this natural amphitheatre. He established the annual Games, known after 1636 as 'the Cotswold Olympicks'. Dover wished to bring rich and poor together in a community activity. His plans included horseracing, coursing with hounds, running, jumping, shin kicking, dancing, sledgehammer throwing, fighting with swords and wrestling.

The short springy limestone grassland made an ideal base for all these outdoor activities. Booths were set up for food, drink and card games - along with a temporary wooden structure called Dover Castle! The contemporary poet Nicholas Wallington was full of praise for the games:

*He [Dover] spares no cost; this also doth afford
To those that sit at any board.
None ever hungry from these Games come home,
Or e'er made plaint of viands, or of room.*



A turbulent history

After the Civil War, the Puritans gained control in England. They disapproved of festivities like the Games, believing them to be pagan in origin, and so they put a stop to them. The Games were revived after the Restoration of 1660, but lacked Dover's organisation, becoming "just another drunken country festival" according to critics.

In 1852, the Games closed again when the land was enclosed. It was not until 1965, when the Robert Dover Games Society was formed, that the Games were revived once more.

The Games have been held each year since then and include many of the original events like shin kicking. In its successful bid for the 2012 Olympic Games, the British Olympic Association recognised the Cotswold Olympicks as "the first stirrings of Britain's Olympic beginnings". And all because of the local geography and the insight of an enterprising man!