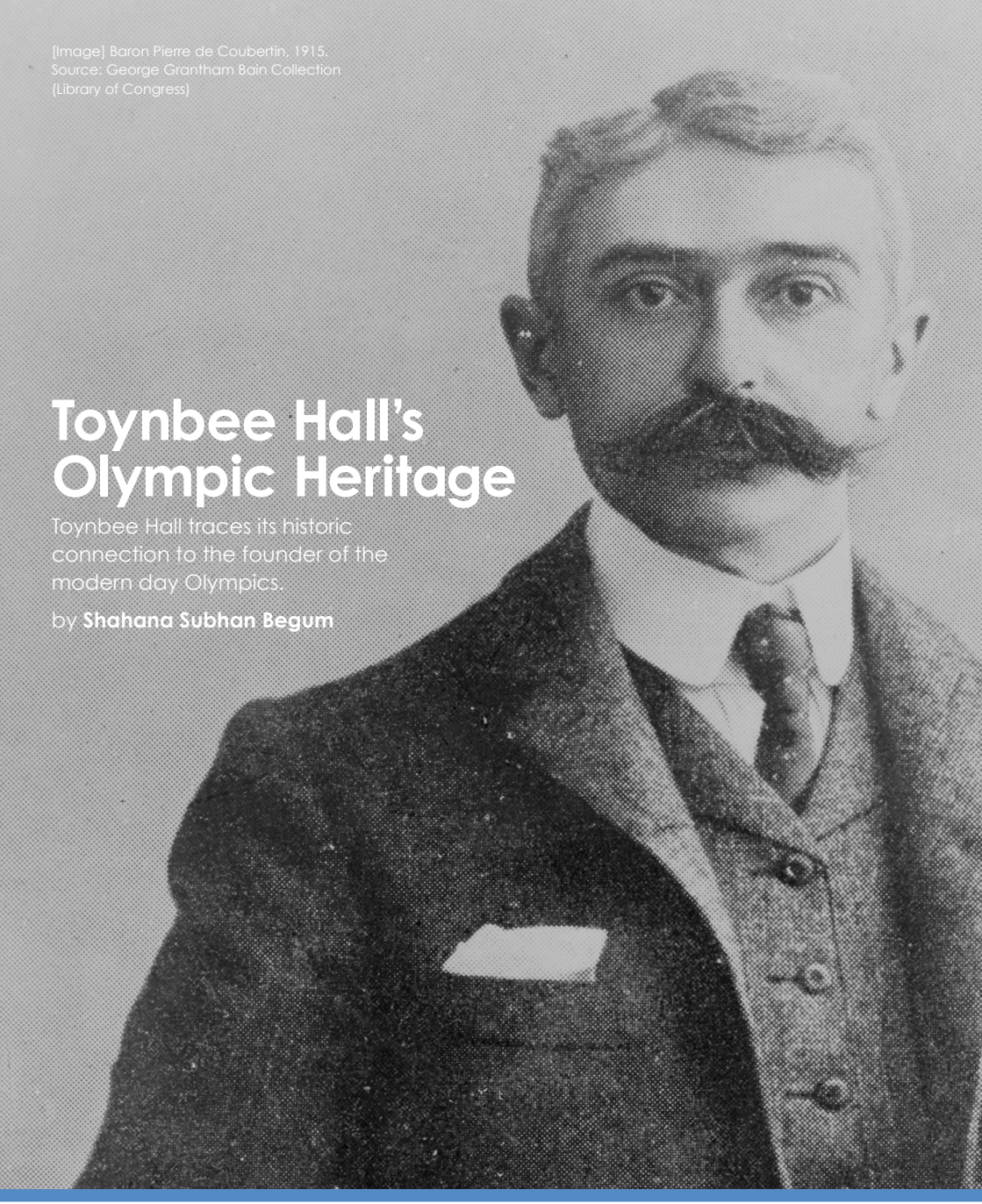


[Image] Baron Pierre de Coubertin, 1915.
Source: George Grantham Bain Collection
(Library of Congress)

Toynbee Hall's Olympic Heritage

Toynbee Hall traces its historic connection to the founder of the modern day Olympics.

by **Shahana Subhan Begum**

Toynbee Hall

Learning from local action | developing national solutions



[Above] Pierre de Coubertin.
Source: Unknown

In June 1886 a young French gentleman in his twenties, with an impressive moustache, visited Toynbee Hall. The Frenchman was Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), who in 1896 revived the Olympic Games in its modern form.

Today, Coubertin is most known for his role in the revival of the Olympics, but he described himself first and foremost as an educational reformer and it was this work that brought him to Toynbee Hall.

Pierre Frédy de Coubertin was born in Paris in 1863 to an aristocratic family. He turned his back on the military career planned for him, in order to engage with social issues and pursue educational reform in France. Following France's demoralising defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1, Coubertin like many of his contemporaries believed that there was a need to revive the French nation. He believed that education and the development of the individual was the key to the future of society.



[Left] Samuel Barnett with residents in front of the Lecture Hall entrance, Toynbee Hall c. late 1890's

Coubertin's interest in education and sport led him to England where sport had become an integral part of the curriculum in several leading public schools. During his first visit to England in 1883, Coubertin toured a number of leading English educational institutions including Harrow, Eton and Rugby schools and Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He was impressed by the curriculum at the public schools, where study was divided between intellectual subjects and physical education.

This, he felt, was something needed in the French educational system. In particular, Coubertin was inspired by the headmaster of Rugby school, Thomas Arnold. Arnold's educational theories had a profound impact on Coubertin and it helped him realise the potential of physical education in general education.

It was during these visits that Coubertin first heard of Toynbee Hall. Toynbee Hall was founded by Reverend Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta Barnett in 1884, in memory of their friend Arnold Toynbee (1852- 1883).

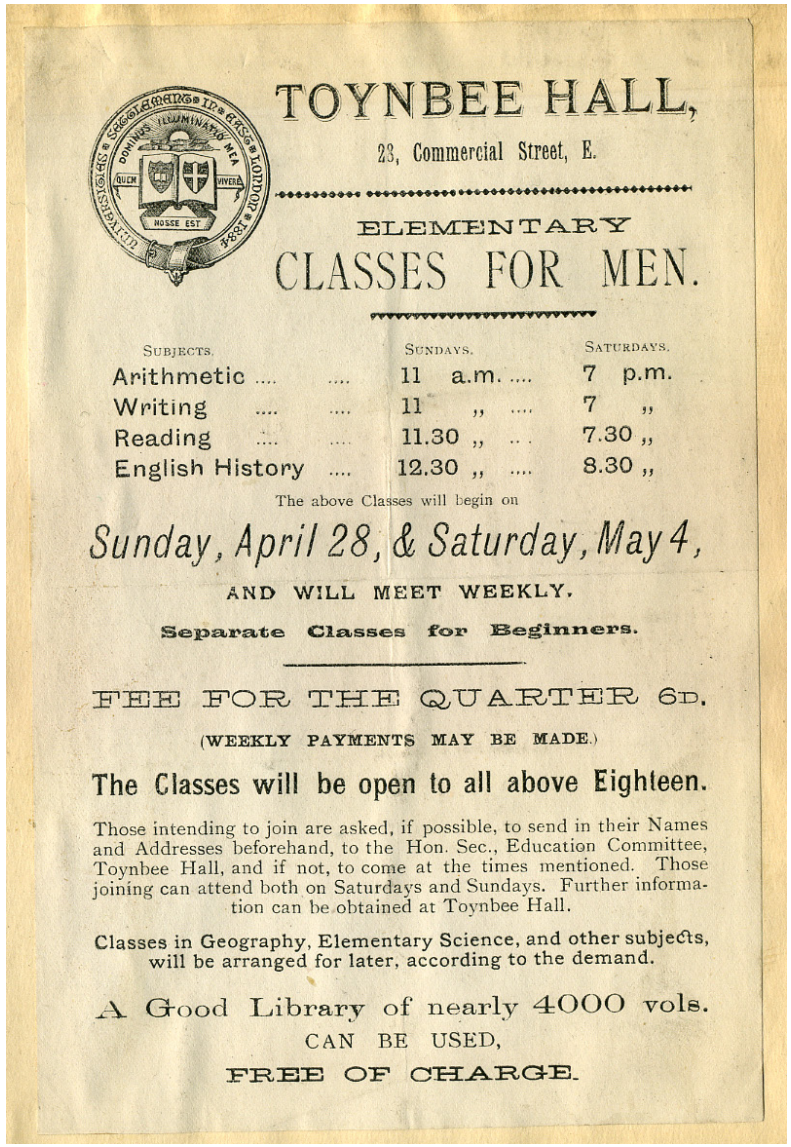
Before his untimely death, Toynbee had been a young Oxford historian who had devoted his time working with the poor of the East End of London. The Barnetts believed that to tackle the problem of poverty the privileged classes of society needed to engage directly with the poor. Thus, they pioneered a new movement for social reform that emerged in the form of University Settlement.

The idea was to bring young male graduates of Oxbridge to live amongst and work with London's poorest inhabitants. This idea caught on fast and in the next two decades it inspired countless other settlements in the United Kingdom and worldwide.

On Christmas Eve of 1884, the settlement opened its doors to its first two residents and soon Toynbee Hall achieved a reputation for its significant social welfare and education programmes.

Many of the original residents went on to lead the world in social reform and research. At the beginning of the twentieth century it became the powerhouse for new ideas of social reform and the leading reformers of the day were closely associated with Toynbee Hall. Among key historical residents were the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee (1883 - 1967) and William Beveridge (1879 - 1963) the British economist and the author of the 1942 Beveridge report, which formed the basis of the modern Welfare state.

One of the main activities of Toynbee Hall in its early years was in educational reform and this is what attracted the young Coubertin to the Hall. In September 1887, an article written by Coubertin entitled 'Toynbee Hall', appeared in the journal La Réforme Sociale. Here, Coubertin described his visit of the previous year. The visit was prompted by his interest in the work of the Oxbridge graduates, who were involved in the work of Toynbee Hall. He described the area of Whitechapel and the work carried out by the residents and the activities that took place at the Hall.



TOYNBEE HALL,

23, Commercial Street, E.

ELEMENTARY

CLASSES FOR MEN.

Subjects.	Sundays.	Saturdays.
Arithmetic	11 a.m.	7 p.m.
Writing	11 ,, ...	7 ,,
Reading	11.30 ,, ...	7.30 ,,
English History	12.30 ,, ...	8.30 ,,

The above Classes will begin on

Sunday, April 28, & Saturday, May 4,

AND WILL MEET WEEKLY.

Separate Classes for Beginners.

FEE FOR THE QUARTER 6d.

(WEEKLY PAYMENTS MAY BE MADE.)

The Classes will be open to all above Eighteen.

Those intending to join are asked, if possible, to send in their Names and Addresses beforehand, to the Hon. Sec., Education Committee, Toynbee Hall, and if not, to come at the times mentioned. Those joining can attend both on Saturdays and Sundays. Further information can be obtained at Toynbee Hall.

Classes in Geography, Elementary Science, and other subjects, will be arranged for later, according to the demand.

A Good Library of nearly 4000 vols.

CAN BE USED,

FREE OF CHARGE.

[Above] Handbill advertising for elementary education classes at Toynbee Hall, April 1889

While at Toynbee, Coubertin assisted a debate arranged by the Debating society on underage marriage. This debate took place in the Lecture Hall on the ground floor. Coubertin remarked on the passion of the speakers, their 'original intelligence' and the seriousness of the ideas expressed by the workers[1].

De Coubertin on Toynbee Hall:

"The most curious part of Toynbee Hall, is unquestionably the Drawing Room on the ground floor which as I mentioned earlier is filled with ornaments, prints, fabrics, book cases and small furniture. This space of worldly elegance contains much that it is believed that the working classes remain indifferent too.

In this place many close links across the classes were developed and many friendships too were formed, Beliefs have joined these different men who fight for the same cause.

This is particularly so after evening dinner.... once, for example, the residents invited the executive committee of the cooperative society to join them, the men brought their women and everyone had a wonderful time."[2]

[1] Source: Marie-Thérèse Eyqum, Pierre de Coubertin: L'épopée Olympique, Trans. Sophia, (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1966), p.47

[2] Source: Pierre de Coubertin, 'Toynbee Hall': Le Patronage social a Londres et les Étudiants Anglais', La Réforme sociale, Trans. Catherine Rose and Graham Fisher (Paris: 1887), p.230

Coubertin was impressed by the strong emphasis placed in the development of adult education for the working class population of the area.

During the winter of 1886, there were 582 working-class people enrolled on the wide ranging courses offered by Toynbee Hall. Coubertin commented on the intelligence and insight of the workers who attended these classes and recalled his surprise at the high-brow books that these workers requested in the library. Coubertin's report mentioned the role that sport played at Toynbee Hall:

'Of course, sport plays an important role in the association, we meet for football, for lawn tennis, there is a circle of fencing and boxing and a crew of Rowingmen. There is also a gym and a corps of 60 volunteers exercised by officers.'

Coubertin also noted the work carried out by the many diverse societies based at Toynbee Hall, including the holidays arranged for poor children to the countryside by the Children's Country Holidays Fund, the benefits of which he saw as both 'physical and moral'.

One day, while making his way to a Bible reading, Coubertin walked with a worker whom he conversed with as he made his way to the chapel. He learnt that the man was attending the class because he liked the teacher, who had earlier in the week taught him to row and swim.[3]

Coubertin was much impressed by the dedication of the young graduate residents who he commended for adding 'a new stage of 2 or 3 years to their university training' by devoting their time to working at Toynbee Hall.

In 1887, en route to his visit to Rugby school, Coubertin stayed at Toynbee Hall. The following year, he published his research on English education, L'Éducation en Angleterre (Education in England). The research presented his findings on the educational institutions that he visited between 1883 and 1887. The book contained 16 chapters including one entitled 'Toynbee Hall'.

[3] Source: Marie-Thérèse Eyquem, Pierre de Coubertin : L'Épopée Olympique, Trans Sophia (Paris: Calmann-Lévy;1966), p.47

[4] Source: London Metropolitan Archives, ACC 2486/240/004, Letter from Donald Chesworth, the Warden of Toynbee Hall to David Kingsley Esq. of the London Consortium, 19 March 1984

[Right] Sailing ships and HMS 'President' in the South West India Docks, circa 1880. Source: National Maritime Museum



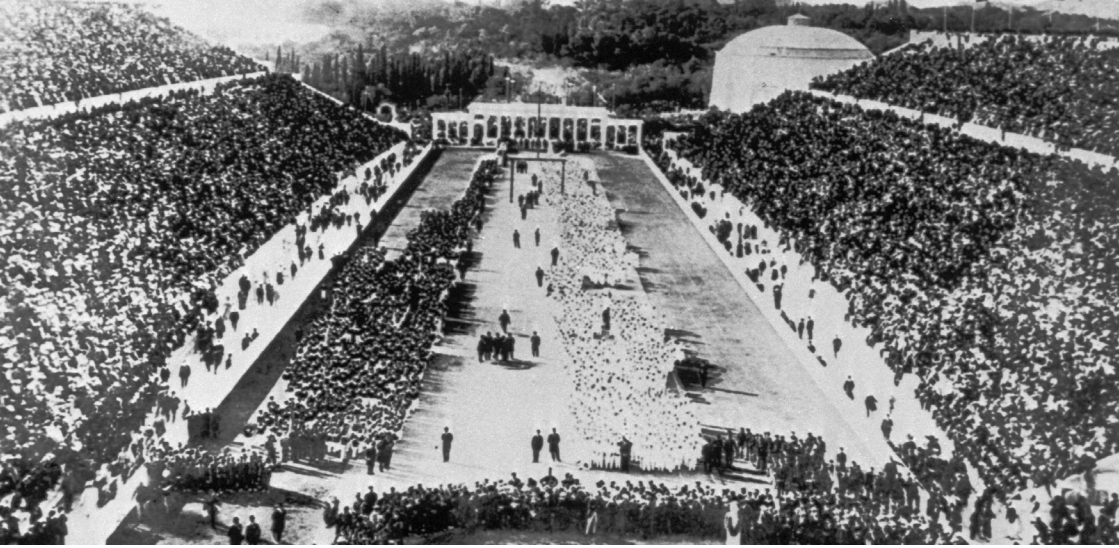
Coubertin's time at Toynbee Hall had a profound impact on him and he would never forget the contacts he made with the working class people of Whitechapel. He would later return 'to give lectures on the stage at Toynbee Hall, praising the social experiment that was playing out there.'

While staying at Toynbee Hall Coubertin "disembarked in the London Docks, where an attempt to rob him was thwarted by a young Stevedore wwwho had learnt French at Toynbee Hall, with the consequence that they set off to Toynbee Hall arm in arm." [4]

Coubertin was much struck by the intermingling of Toynbee Hall residents in the community and by its emphasis given to both education and sport. They left him convinced of the role of sport in promoting both personal and cultural change. Coubertin's time at Toynbee Hall and the other educational institutions in England inspired him to make the modern Olympic Games more than just an international sporting event.

London's vision for the 2012 Games has many parallels to Coubertin's own vision. The London Games are being built on ideas of legacy and sustainability and London has set out to host the Olympic as not merely a sporting event but a catalyst for social, political and economic change.

In such ways, through shared ideals and history, Toynbee Hall has contributed to the revival of the Modern Olympic Games and with the return of the Games to London, Toynbee Hall reflects on its proud Olympic heritage.



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Tower Hamlets Local Library Archives
Toynbee Hall Archives

[Above] 1896 Opening Ceremony.
Source: Getty Images

Shahana Subhan Begum
Historical Research/Writing Intern: July -October 2011