

Alperton's 1948 Olympic Village

When Wembley hosted the Olympic Games in 1948 the country was still recovering from the Second World War. There was no money to build an athletes' village, and most of the 4,100 competitors from 59 nations were housed in RAF camps, colleges and schools around London. Wembley County School in Stanley Avenue (now part of Alperton Community School) was one of them.

Wembley County School, Stanley Avenue, in 1939.

[Courtesy of Ken Kirkman,
"Old Alpertonians"]



As soon as the school broke up for its summer holidays, teams from the Ministry of Works moved in. Most of the upstairs classrooms were converted into dormitories, with a bed and half-share of a wardrobe for each of more than sixty athletes and team officials who would be staying there. Other classrooms downstairs were turned into a competitors' lounge (with armchairs, radio set and piano) and an indoor sports room (including table tennis and darts). These and the dining hall were decorated with colourful curtains, and with vases of flowers donated by local residents from their gardens at the request of Wembley's Mayor.

A week later, on the evening of Friday 23 July, the school welcomed the men's teams from seven small Commonwealth countries – Bermuda, British Guiana (now Guyana), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Jamaica, Malta, Singapore and Trinidad. Throughout their stay the flags of each nation flew from dawn to dusk outside the school building, in a semi-circle of poles around the Olympic flag on the school's main flagpole.



The Jamaican Olympic Team outside the school building, July 1948.

[Courtesy of the "Old Alpertonians"]

Life at this Olympic Games Centre was soon into its routine. Breakfast was served at 7.30am, and from then until lunch at 12.30pm the athletes would be training at various centres or, after the Games opened on 29 July, taking part in heats at Wembley Stadium or the Empire Pool. Wembley County School's gymnasium was the main training centre for competitors in the boxing, wrestling and weight-lifting events. There would be further training until the evening, when dinner was served between 6.30 and 8pm. Although local people were still having to put up with strict food rationing, competitors were allowed special rations, and the teams had brought most of their own food supplies with them.

Despite the small contingents, athletes staying at the school met with great success. Duncan White of Ceylon was second in the 400m hurdles final, having equalled the world record in the semi-finals. Rodney Wilkes of Trinidad also won a silver medal in his weight-lifting division. The school's biggest celebration came after the 400 metres final, which saw the

Arthur Wint taking gold ahead of Herb McKenley in the 400 metres final.

[Source: Brent Archives – 1948 Olympic Games Official Report]

Jamaican pair of Arthur Wint and Herb McKenley winning the gold and silver medals. Arthur Wint, who also came second in the 800 metres, was 28 years old, and had left Jamaica to train as a volunteer pilot during the Second World War. After five years in the RAF, he had just finished his first year as a medical student at St. Bartholomew's Hospital when he came to Wembley to compete for his country in the Olympics.



Some female competitors from these countries stayed with two of the school's pupils. Denise Verrinder's family looked after the entire Bermudian women's team of two sprinters, plus the team manager's wife as their chaperone, at their home in Stanley Avenue. The ladies' first accommodation in Earl's Court had been too noisy, so they asked if the school could find somewhere suitable for them, close to the rest of the team. Mr and Mrs Verrinder gave up their large bedroom, next to the family's bathroom, for their guests. Denise remembered how friendly the athletes were, and their thrill at seeing the Royal Family at a reception at Buckingham Palace and at listening to Big Ben strike in Westminster, something they had heard so often on the radio at home. They even let Denise and her sister, Valerie, wear their blazers one day, and walk down the road pretending to be athletes!



Some of the Bermudian 1948 Olympic Team, including sprinters Phyllis Lightbourn and Phyllis Edness.

[Source: Bermuda Olympic Association]

The Welson family welcomed three Jamaican athletes into their house in Scarle Road – Mavis a hurdler, Carmen a high-jumper and Kathleen who was sixth in the long jump final as well as competing in the 100 and 200 metres. Jennifer Welson learned that they were part of the first ever Jamaican Olympic team, paid for by public subscription, and that they had travelled for twenty-four days on a banana boat to get here. As they came from a tropical country, she was surprised that they found the summer heat in Wembley unbearable! They were used to a cool breeze off of the sea at home. Like the men's teams at the school, the Jamaican women brought much of their own food with them, and a new dish was introduced into Jennifer's home, boiled rice with grated coconut and red beans. Their guests also shared pineapples with the family, a rare treat when food in Britain was tightly rationed.

Olympic teams from several other countries were housed in local schools. Kingsbury County School in Princes Avenue (now part of Kingsbury High) was home to Sweden's women athletes and gymnasts. Preston Manor hosted the Mexican team, while Willesden County School (now the site of Capital City Academy) accommodated the Koreans, as well as providing the Olympics Catering headquarters. Two parts of the modern College of North West London, the Kilburn and Willesden Technical Colleges, housed the Chinese team and men's teams from Ireland, Australia and New Zealand respectively.

Wembley's Olympic Games in 1948 were a "make-do" affair, although with the community's help they turned out to be a great success. The athletes at London 2012 may have a comfortable village, but they will miss the contact with local people which their forerunners in 1948 enjoyed.

© Philip Grant, 2012

A shorter version of this article appeared as a Secret History item, "Alpertons Olympic Village", in the July 2012 Brent Magazine.



Badges from the 1948 Olympic Games in the Brent Museum collection.



One of the plaques showing the winners of events at the 1948 Olympics (including A S Wint of Jamaica in the 400 metres) which were erected on the wall of the old Wembley Stadium after the Games.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

ATHLETICS MEN		BOXING	
100 METRES	H DILLARD USA	FLYWEIGHT	F PEREZ ARGENTINE
200 METRES	M E PATTON USA	BANTAMWEIGHT	T CSIK HUNGARY
400 METRES	A S WINT JAMAICA	FEATHERWEIGHT	F FORMENTI ITALY
500 METRES	M G WHITFIELD SWEDEN	LIGHTWEIGHT	O DREYER SOUTH AFRICA
1500 METRES	H BELSDON BELGIUM	MIDDLEWEIGHT	L TORJA CZECHOSLOVAKIA
5000 METRES	G REIFF SWEDEN	HEAVYWEIGHT	L PAPP HUNGARY
10000 METRES	E SATOROVIĆ CZECHOSLOVAKIA	LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT	G BUNTER SOUTH AFRICA
MARATHON	D CABRERA ARGENTINE	HEAVYWEIGHT	A R KELESIAS ARGENTINE
100M HURDLES	W F PORTER USA	10000M K1	G FREDRIKSSON SWEDEN
400M HURDLES	F COCHRAN USA	10000M C1	F CAPEK CZECHOSLOVAKIA
1000M STEEPCHASE	T SJOSTRAND SWEDEN	10000M K3	USA
HIGH JUMP	J L WINTER AUSTRALIA	10000M C2	J HOLECIC CZECHOSLOVAKIA
LONG JUMP	W S STEELE USA	1000M C1	J HOLECIC CZECHOSLOVAKIA
POLE VAULT	O G SMITH USA	1000M K1	G FREDRIKSSON SWEDEN
HOP STEP & JUMP	A AHMAN SWEDEN	1000M K2	USA
PUTTING THE SHOT	M THOMPSON USA	5000M WOMEN	K HOFF DENMARK
THROWING THE DISCUS	A CORSOINI ITALY		
THROWING THE JAVELIN	KJ ANTANARA FINLAND	CYCLING	
THROWING THE HAMMER	I KELETI HUNGARY	1000M SCRATCH	M GRILLA ITALY
DECATHLON	R E MATHIAS USA	4000M TEAM PURSUIT	FRANCE
400M RELAY	USA	2000M TANDEM	ITALY
1600M RELAY	USA	1000M TIME TRIAL	J DUPONT FRANCE
10000M WALK	H NILARSSON SWEDEN	ROAD RACE INDIVIDUAL	J REVALET FRANCE
50 KM WALK	J JUNGREN SWEDEN	ROAD RACE TEAM	BELGIUM
		EQUESTRIAN	
		DRESSAGE INDIVIDUAL	H MOSER SWITZERLAND
		DRESSAGE TEAM	FRANCE
		THREE DAY EVENT INDIVIDUAL	J M CHEVALLER FRANCE
		THREE DAY EVENT TEAM	USA
		PRIX DES NATIONS INDIVIDUAL	H MARLES COATES MEXICO
		PRIX DES NATIONS TEAM	MEXICO
		FENCING	
		FOIL INDIVIDUAL	J BURMAN FRANCE
		FOIL TEAMS	FRANCE
		EPEE INDIVIDUAL	E CASTONE ITALY
		EPEE TEAMS	FRANCE
		SABRE INDIVIDUAL	A GEREVICH HUNGARY
		SABRE TEAMS	HUNGARY
		FOIL INDIVIDUAL WOMEN	I ELEK HUNGARY
BASKETBALL	USA		