

Olympic records go online

Hundreds of historic documents and images relating to the Olympic and Paralympic Games are being made available online by The National Archives for the first time: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/olympics

The records date back to the first modern Games in 1896 and include government documents from the two previous occasions on which London hosted the Games - in 1908 and 1948 - as well as material relating to an ambitious plan to host the Olympics in London's Docklands area in the 1980s.

The web resource includes a timeline feature enabling visitors to track back through time and browse material from every summer Olympics from Athens in 1896 to Beijing in 2008.

Visitors to [The Olympic Record](http://TheOlympicRecord) site will have free access to more than 180 records and 60 pictures at the touch of a button.

Highlights* include:

- Dispatches from the British ambassador to Athens from the first 'Olympian Games' in 1896
- Records from the London Olympic Games in 1908 and 1948 including arrangements for the first marathon at the now-standard distance of 26.22 miles and accommodation and rations for athletes in the aftermath of WWII
- Foreign Office discussions over Britain's participation in the controversial Nazi-run Berlin Olympics in 1936
- Papers relating to the Greater London Council's (GLC) plan to host the Olympics in London's Docklands in 1984 and 1988 and Manchester's failed bid for the Games in 2000
- Archived web pages in the [UK Government Web Archive](http://UKGovernmentWebArchive) from Athens 2004, Beijing 2008 and London 2012

*See [Notes to Editors](#) for more details

Sarah Hutton, records specialist at The National Archives, said: *"These files show the impact the Olympic movement has had on our history in the 116 years since the modern Games were revived. From a brief dispatch in 1896 to the huge online presence today, the records reflect the growth of the Games throughout the 20th century as well as its remarkable survival through two world wars, political turmoil and boycotts."*

The site also provides a gateway to the hundreds of different sporting and cultural activities happening across the country this Olympic summer, from celebrations at national and regional venues to local school and community projects.

The National Archives has taken the lead in working with central and local government as well as sporting, cultural, media and heritage organisations to ensure records relating

to London 2012 are preserved for future generations. This will be the prelude to The National Archives taking and making available vast collections of digital records in the future.

Oliver Morley, Chief Executive and Keeper of The National Archives, said: *“The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games represent a key moment in our nation’s history, when London becomes the first city in the world to host the Games on three occasions. In addition to making historic material from our collection freely available online, The National Archives is helping other organisations to preserve and make accessible their Olympic records as a permanent legacy of this extraordinary event.”*

Hugh Robertson, Minister for Sport and the Olympics commented: *“As London 2012 gets ever closer these historic Olympic documents from the past, made available by The National Archives, give us a chance to look back and appreciate how the Olympic movement has evolved over many years.”*

Notes to Editors

Highlights guide:

- In a dispatch dated 14 April 1896, the British Ambassador to Athens wrote that the “Olympian Games” had been a great success, despite bad weather which forced the cancellation of the naval regatta. He continued: “The Americans were the only good team of athletes and they won the majority of the prizes for which they contested”. He also praised the management of the Games and concluded that they had served to show the Greeks in “the best possible light, as competitors, spectators, organisers and hosts” [FO 286/434]. However it was to be another 108 years until Greece hosted the Games again in 2004.
- The fourth Olympic Games of 1908 were due to be held in Rome, but the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1906 meant London had to take the Games with less than two years to prepare. A highlight of the first London Games was the marathon race. The Daily Mail reported that it would be “the greatest long-distance race ever held...exciting enormous interest all over the world”. Two thousand policemen were required to “preserve order, prevent obstruction and regulate traffic” and **MEPO 2/1156** contains a sketch showing the official route from the Royal Box at Windsor Castle to the stadium at White City. This was eventually to become the standard distance for marathons. A warm, sunny day and the crucial extra 385 yards that had been added to the race made for a dramatic finale with the Italian runner Dorando Pietri disqualified for being helped across the finish line after collapsing near the end.
- The 1936 Olympic Games were hosted in Berlin. Germany had been handed the Games several years before the Nazi rise to power and the world now watched the launch of a huge propaganda machine. A German press article sent to the Foreign Office spoke of its people being “deeply imbued with the Olympic idea” declaring that “the world shall judge from the sincerity of their hospitality, their will to friendship with all nations” [FO 371/19940/5677]. The same article notes that the “Olympic flame will enter Berlin just 22 years to the day since the war flame of 1914” something the writer considered “a good omen” [FO 371/19940/5677]. Several nations threatened to boycott the games altogether. There was concern

at the Foreign Office over the Prime Minister's attendance at an Olympic Dinner and the British Embassy in Berlin reported that the press could not be "allowed to breathe a hint of this sporting storm in a tea-cup" after the American team refused to give the Olympic salute "on the ground that it was the same as the Hitler salute" [FO 371/19940/930]. The 11th Olympiad, were characterised by a tense and troubled atmosphere.

- The second time London hosted the Games was again marked by challenges. In 1948, just three years after the end of the Second World War, resources were scarce, bombed-out buildings were still being rebuilt and the population was still living on rations. The Games were run on a tiny budget with competing countries even forced to bring their own sports equipment [CUST 49/2967] and food and athletes housed in temporary accommodation in schools and parks [T 272/108]. The 'austerity Olympics' showed the continuation of Britain's 'make do and mend' mentality from the war years and provided a morale-boosting antidote to the previous Games in Berlin. With the arrival of so many representatives from different countries, officials showed a keenness to extend welcome and hospitality, although foreign customs and diets still attracted curiosity. There were investigations into the diets of different nationalities and demands for concessions to be shown to our European neighbours, France and Spain, when it came to bringing wine into the country; "the point is, of course, that for such competitors, wine is part of their normal diet, and in their view at any rate, is a food-stuff" [CUST 49/2967].
- London's Docklands could have looked very different if a GLC plan to host the Olympic Games there had come to fruition. The idea of building Olympic facilities in London's run-down docklands area was first proposed by Councillor Roland Freeman for the 1984 Games, when London's main competitor was thought to be Tehran [AT 60/102]. The 1984 Games went to Los Angeles, but the idea was revived with the 1988 Games in mind. In 1979 the GLC commissioned a feasibility study to explore the idea of building a new 70,000-seat national stadium on Royal Victoria Dock. A new "national lottery" was one of the ideas suggested to help fund the Games. However, concerns about cost and a lack of enthusiasm from the new government meant the idea never got off the ground [AT 60/156].
- In contrast, Manchester's bid for the 2000 Olympic Games [INF 12/1210] received the "wholehearted" backing of the government of the day. It committed £53 million for the provision of facilities in advance of the nomination and a further £2m to support the bid itself. This file provides details of the Central Office of Information's (COI) efforts to publicise and support the bid, in conjunction with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It was thought necessary "to scotch the myth of Manchester weather" by using flattering shots of the city taken on a clear day. Members of the cast of Coronation Street were also enlisted to fly the flag for the bid by wearing red and blue ties. Early memos show a considerable degree of optimism surrounded the bid and the Prime Minister John Major personally lobbied the President of the IOC, Juan Antonio Samaranch. However it was Sydney which eventually won the bid while Manchester hosted the 2002 Commonwealth Games.
- The UK Government Web Archive [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/webarchive/] contains more than a billion pages of web material drawn from 2000 government

websites dating back to 1997. These include a themed collection around the *2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and Cultural Olympiad* as well web-based material from recent Olympic Games in Beijing 2008 and Athens 2004

The National Archives

For the record, for good...The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files.

Our 21st-century role is to collect and secure the future of the record, both digital and physical, to preserve it for generations to come, and to make it as accessible as possible. We do this by devising technological solutions to ensure the long-term survival of public records and working to widen access to our collection. The National Archives also advises on information management across government, publishes all UK legislation, manages Crown copyright and leads the archive sector. We work to promote and improve access to public sector information and its re-use.

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk