

Mens Sana in Corpore Sano: The Rise and Fall of the Winchester Gymnasium, 1865-9

The Winchester Gymnasium and Athletic Club was established in 1865 and remained active for four years before closing in 1869. The club represents the first instance of a publicly available indoor facility in the city dedicated to what would now be termed 'physical training'. The club also staged a number of public events - including several 'assaults at arms', a series of annual outdoor sporting fetes and a swimming gala - each of which attracted large numbers of spectators. In addition, the Gymnasium also fielded teams which competed at both cricket and 'football', the latter being among the first recorded instances of the game being played in the city.

Initially funded by popular subscription, the club was supported by the local upper and middle classes who regarded the provision of such a facility as a means by which the ideal of the 'muscular Christian' might be realised and to prepare the local youth, if the circumstances arose, to defend the country. They also saw the Gymnasium as providing a more wholesome alternative to the attractions of the local alehouses. The membership of the club was composed largely of unmarried men in their late teenage years from skilled working-class households, who may have shared these beliefs. However there is evidence that at least some of these men were also attracted by the prospect of public displays of their personal athleticism.

Throughout its existence the club struggled financially. Within two years it faced closure, seemingly due to profligate spending sanctioned by a Committee which was composed exclusively of active members of the Gymnasium. The club was rescued by funds donated, again, by the local elite through another public subscription. However, as a concession to having been saved by the largesse of Winchester's wealthier citizens, the leading club officials were to be replaced by appointees that were trusted by the donors. There was much initial optimism that these changes would instigate a rebirth of the club. Nonetheless the financial problems persisted and, in 1869, the Gymnasium's equipment was sold to clear the club's longstanding debts. This act signalled the final closing the Winchester Gymnasium and Athletic Club.

In this paper we chart the rise and decline of Winchester's first public sports organisation, primarily through extensive use of the British Library's online British Newspaper Archive. We identify the inspiration behind the establishment of the club, and explore what motivated so many of Winchester's citizens to contribute financially both towards its creation and the attempt to save it. The activities undertaken by the club are also examined, as is the social background of its membership. In doing so, we present a local example of the contemporary national proclivity towards establishing public gymnasia. We provide both an insight into the nature of mid-Victorian philanthropy, and an illustration of one of the ways in which the local elite sought to encourage the 'rational' use of the free time which was being acquired by the young workers of the artisan class.

Ian Denness
University of Winchester