

Liverpool Gymnasium, Myrtle Street

Liverpool Gymnasium, on its opening in 1865, was claimed to be the largest in the world. It offered training in various gymnastic systems, and in sports including rowing, cycling, swimming and fencing.

It was founded by two local men: Charles Melly – cotton-trader, philanthropist, and ancestor-to-be of singer George Melly; and John Hulley – gymnastics and athletics entrepreneur, who became the director of the gymnasium – or the ‘Gymnasiarch’ as he styled himself.

In 1861, Hulley had been a founder of the Liverpool Athletic Club, and as its Honorary Secretary he had organized various displays, such as the ‘Grand Assault-at-Arms’ at the Theatre Royal, Williamson Square, on 4 December (*Liverpool Mercury*, 5 December 1861). On Saturday 14 June 1862, he presented the first Grand Olympic Festival on the Parade Ground at Mount Vernon, attended by over 10,000 spectators. These Olympic Festivals for a while became annual, and together with the Wenlock Olympian Society would lead directly to the creation of the National Olympian Association, inspiring Pierre de Coubertin and the founding of the modern Olympic Games.

Hulley had already set up the Rotunda Gymnasium on Bold Street in the city centre – opened on 6 October 1862 – but had then been cheated out of his share by his supposed partner, Samuel Wylde Ackerley. Charles Melly, who had been involved in the Liverpool Athletic Club at least since the first Grand Olympic Festival, would prove an altogether more reliable partner in Hulley’s second gymnasium venture, this time on Myrtle Street.

The foundation stone was laid on 19 July 1864, and Liverpool Gymnasium was formally opened by Lord Stanley on Monday 6 November 1865 (though a letter praising the gym in the *Liverpool Mercury* on 10 October clearly shows that it was already operating by this time).

On the same day as the gym’s formal opening, the inaugural meeting of the National Olympian Association was held there, with Hulley as Chairman and with Dr. WP Brookes and EG Ravenstein prominent amongst the members from across England and elsewhere. The NOA subsequently promoted annual series of sports events across Britain, and would last until 1883, passing its metaphorical Olympic torch to the National Physical Recreation Society founded in 1885, which itself would both contribute to the Olympic *Comité Britannique* in 1902, and be a founding body of the British Olympic Association in 1905.

Hulley himself seems to have been a flamboyant figure, as keen on dressing up as he was on speech-making, and there are mentions of him in highland costume, in a velveteen suit, and, at the 1st National Olympian Games in London, as a turbaned Turk ‘to represent the East’.

Described by newspapers as ‘opposite the Philharmonic Hall’, the Gymnasium was actually a little further east towards Mulberry Street. Where in the 1850s this stretch of the north side of Myrtle Street was unbuilt upon except for the Baptist Chapel on the corner of Hope Street, by 1900 it would have filled in, including the Hospital for Cancer & Skin Diseases, the Eye & Ear Infirmary, Liverpool Gymnasium (in 1900 listed at 7 Myrtle Street by *Gore’s Directory* as ‘Young Men’s Christian Association Gymnasium’) and the Children’s Infirmary. The gym would later be home to the Rodney Youth Centre until its move to the former Ritz Roller Rink in 1960.

A 1994 photograph shows the ground-floor remnant of the gym’s frontage of honey-coloured stone, and older photos show a curiously imposing building. Behind the tall pediment above the central entrance, a roof slopes up to meet the foot of a huge semi-circular window in the gable-end of the main hall, while the frontage is flanked by two great square towers topped by steep hip-roofs rising to small central platforms. Large,

elaborately arched windows, plain square pilasters and decorative entablatures combine in a strange classic and gothic mix. It's not beautiful, but it's certainly striking.



Liverpool Gymnasium pictured in *The Illustrated London News*, 18 November 1865.

Even *The Porcupine*, Liverpool's spiky satirical weekly magazine which took great delight in wild fantasies about Hulley's heroic qualities and in poking fun at 'the emporium of muscularity in Myrtle-Street', acknowledged that 'the Liverpool Gymnasium... is, in some respects, the finest in Europe.' (11 & 18 November 1865.)

Except for a separate section for fencing and boxing, the sporting area of the interior comprised one huge hall, surrounded by a 'very pretty balcony', as described by *The Porcupine* on 28 October 1865.

Fancy a hall larger than the Philharmonic, filled with every variety of athletic instruments that has ever been invented. Ropes stretched taut with marvellous position, or hanging loosely from some elevation. Parallel bars, horizontal bars, swings, flying rings, ladders of every description, and in every possible position, swarming poles, imitation castle walls to scale, see-saws, that Marjorie Daw would scarcely have known the use of, are arranged all over the place in a most orderly manner. Ranged around the walls are dumb-bells... Rings of wood, and sceptres formed of a like material, are also arranged with the clubs and dumbbells, together with light, elegant-looking javelins and pieces of apparatus that we know not by name, and which almost defies description. Placed here and there in various parts of the hall are all the heavier appliances for exercise, embracing every new invention that ingenious minds have contrived.

A dominant feature was 'the castellated erection... which completely covers the wall at the north end.' Besides this climbing wall, the gym included elaborate networks of climbing ropes and rope pathways in its heights.

As well as being open for use by members in the daytime and evening, the Gymnasium was host to more of Hulley's 'Grand Assaults-at-Arms', featuring gymnastics, broadsword, boxing, jumping, wrestling and other contests and displays. At least one of these events served as a fundraiser towards the building of the Children's Infirmary next door; and in 1867 the gym hosted the first day of the 6th Olympic Festival.

From January 1869, with the advent of the two-wheeled velocipede – the bicycle – Liverpool Velocipede Club would use the gymnasium. A tournament on 30 January included a bicycle steeplechase with obstacles, and *Liverpool Mercury* 19 April 1869 announces a novel feature to the coming Saturday's 'assault-at-arms'.

The gymnasium affords splendid opportunities for the exercise in the inanimate horse named the bicycle, and accordingly the gymnasium is to be the arena next Saturday, for a velocipede tournament, in the course of which gentlemen mounted on bicycles will tilt at other gentlemen on bicycles, with long lances, from which must result in a considerable quantity of tumbling about of a laughable character.

Hulley would marry in 1869, and have a daughter the following year. Sadly, for such an avid promoter of health, he began to suffer increasingly from bronchitis and emphysema, and died aged only 42, on 6 January 1875 at his home, 91 Grove Street.



‘Interior of the Large Hall, Liverpool Gymnasium.’ Frontispiece as used in the first edition of Alexander Alexander’s *Healthful Exercises For Girls* (1886).

Liverpool Gymnasium seems to have run into financial problems in 1870, and closed for a time; then, around the beginning of October that year, it was leased to Philip Shrapnell as the new proprietor. The annual meeting of shareholders of Liverpool Gymnasium Co. Ltd. on 6 November 1871, chaired by Charles Melly, and with John Hulley present, recorded a further loss that year, but continued the lease to Philip Shrapnell, concluding that ‘that gentleman had conducted the institution entirely to the satisfaction of the company.’ (*Liverpool Mercury*, 2 October and 7 November 1871.)

Philip Shrapnell would keep up the use of the gym for public displays: an ‘Assault-at-Arms at the Liverpool Gymnasium’ on the evening of 23 November 1871 was reported by the *Mercury* of the following day; and Friday 14 February 1873 brought a more exclusive ‘fete of considerable novelty’ – ‘a “soiree calisthenique” ... in which the lady members of the gymnasium were the performers...’ (*Liverpool Mercury*, 17 February 1873.)

Another notable character at Liverpool Gymnasium was Alexander Alexander. Born in 1849, Alexander had contracted typhoid as a boy; and during his convalescence, the family doctor had recommended that his parents consult John Hulley to assist in his physical recovery. Subsequently, as well as being educated at Liverpool College and Liverpool Institute, Alexander became an apprentice to Hulley; and when Liverpool Gymnasium opened in 1865, he became its Public Demonstrator of Physical Training, employing a wide variety of skills from fencing to weightlifting, but also specializing in agility exercises. On the Gymnasium’s temporary closure in 1870, he began giving lectures, demonstrations and coaching in public schools and military establishments around Britain (Furlong, 1992 & 1993). In 1875, ‘he became what he described as Professor of Gymnastics at Trinity College in Dublin.’ (Furlong, 1993.)

In 1880, accompanied by his wife Emily, also a physical training instructor, Alexander Alexander returned to Liverpool to become Director of Liverpool Gymnasium – now owned by Samuel Smith and run by the YMCA. He took enthusiastically to the Directorship, running classes, organizing public displays, and coaching teams for competition and exhibition. He also became known for his own

feats of strength and other stunts, including acrobatics in the rafters in the Gymnasium's main hall.

In 1884, having been leading gym classes for the YWCA at Gordon Hall on Blackburne Place, Alexander wrote an article for the YWCA magazine *Our Own Gazette*, where a postscript adds, 'As Mr. Alexander is one of our first Professional Gymnasts, and the Director of the largest Gymnasium in the world, we anticipate that considerable proficiency will be attained by this Class...'

In 1886 he would publish his *Healthful Exercises For Girls* ('with 200 illustrations, and specially adapted musical accompaniments'), which would run to at least six editions. Over the years, he would have a total of at least 16 books on physical training published. With his wife Emily, he founded Southport Physical Training College in 1891, and co-authored *British Physical Education For Girls* (1910).

And, according to the *Oxford Dictionary Of National Biography*, 'He also claimed to have invented bent handlebars for racing bicycles.'

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www.johnhulley-olympics.co.uk This website, *John Hulley – British Olympic Founder*, is by Ray Hulley, based on his own research, and includes many contemporary articles from the *Liverpool Mercury*, *The Porcupine*, and other sources. Thanks to Ray Hulley for the use of his John Hulley research and Liverpool Gymnasium illustrations.

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