

Manchester's Sporting Past: Nineteenth Century Athletic Grounds

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Royal Oak Park Grounds

Royal Oak Park, established in 1864, was attached to the Royal Oak Hotel, situated on Oldham Road-Fletcher Street, Newton Heath. Under the guidance of the pub's proprietor, George Martin, the grounds underwent development in 1863, enclosing sixteen acres of land behind the hotel into a first-class athletic venue and pleasure garden located perfectly along one of Manchester's principle roads; Miles Platting railway station was nearby, omnibuses and trams stopped within 200 yards of the ground, and it was less than half a mile from the renowned Copenhagen Running Grounds. To the cost of £2000 (approximately £145,000 in today's monetary value), the Royal Oak Park was reopened on 17th April 1864 to acclaim, with reports in the *Manchester Guardian* suggesting that Martin had created 'one of the most superior sporting arenas in England, if not the world'.

The ground itself boasted and 651 yard circular track, quarter of a mile straight course, circular 750 yard rabbit course, wrestling arena, bowling green, quoits ground, trotting course and grandstand, all within the fenced enclosure capable of holding 20,000 people with ease. Further amenities included a shower-bath with soap, towels and brushes which could be used by the public for the sum of one penny, and a portable dressing room, with carpets and fitting, where athletes could 'strip by the fireside opposite the starting post'. Martin's grounds featured ornamental gardens with statues and sculptures, pianists and singers, aeronauts and photographers, as well as "live exhibits", such as Tonawanda Indian, "Steeprock", who resided in a wigwam in the centre of his newly constructed arena, and in September 1865, the Gypsy King, Queen and tribes who were displayed in a similar fashion.

George Martin, 'Wizard of Pedestrianism' (1826-1865)

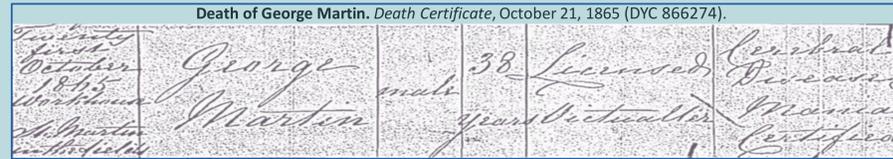
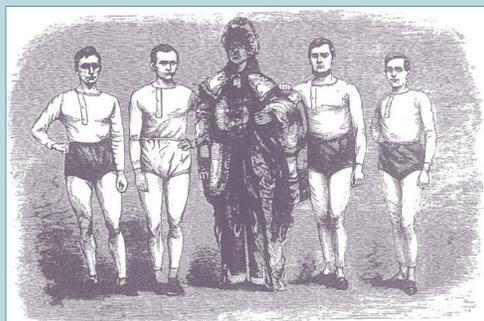


George Martin. Rob Hadgraft, *Deerfoot: Athletics' Noble Savage* (2007), 142.

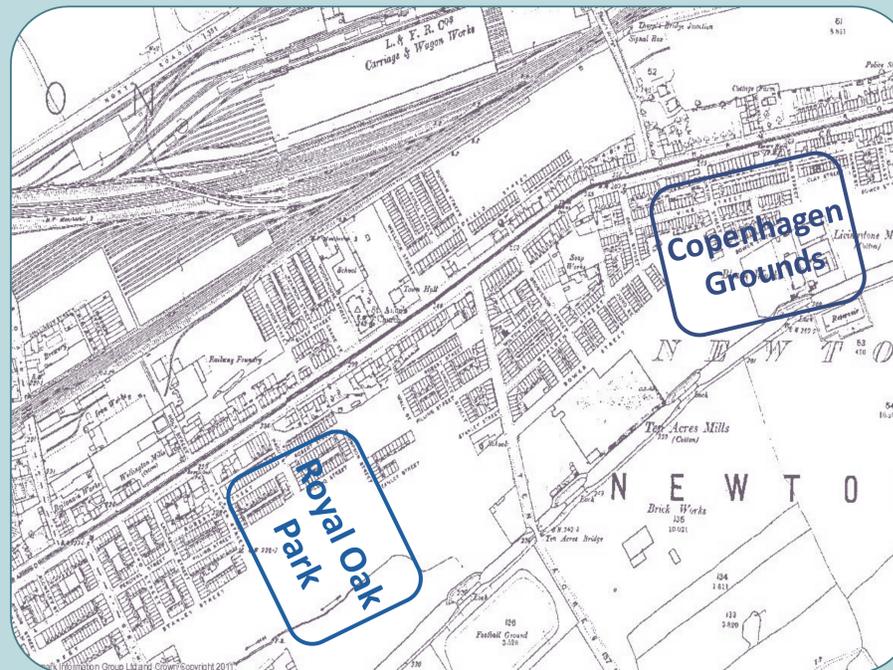
Martin himself was no stranger to the athletic world. Born in 1826 in Hampshire, he practiced as a journeyman shoemaker before embarking on a sporting career under the care of Edward "Ned" Smith, the 'West-End Runner', moving to London in 1845 to begin training as a 120 yard sprinter and short distance hurdler to great avail.

In 1849 Martin, a 'pedestrian of celebrity', continued to pursue athletic competition and travelled to Manchester, residing at the White Lion, Long Millgate, where he forged a friendship with James Holden, the 'great stakeholder of Lancashire pedestrianism' and proprietor of aforesaid public house. By 1851, Martin married Holden's eldest daughter, Alice, and took licence at the Plasterer's Arms, 29 Gregson Street, Deansgate, where he announced his intention of training young pedestrian sprinters. His athletes were strictly trained and promoted, and quickly became champions within the sport.

Due to his success as a pedestrian trainer Martin travelled to America in May 1861, returning in July 1861 with native Indian runner Louis "Deerfoot" Bennett, and commenced in organising and promoting the 'Deerfoot Circus', travelling the UK with his athletes in a collapsible tent for a year before retiring as athletic trainer and focussing on promoting sport within the city.



Martin's death in October 1865 was a shock to the sporting community. Reports spread that Martin, 'the energetic and spirited proprietor', had been suffering from 'mental afflictions' and on the 7th September, 1865, Martin was hospitalised at Wye House, a private asylum, 'for the care and treatment of the insane'. Less than one month after his release he succumbed to his mania and died at St Martins Workhouse Hospital, Middlesex, under 'deplorable circumstances'. After his death his family and pedestrian friends continued his legacy, sharing the responsibilities of proprietor, referee, starter, stakeholder and timekeeper at the Royal Oak Park until its eventual sale to John Cooper in September 1866.



Additional Grounds and Pleasure Gardens

Attenbury's Salford Borough Gardens, Salford

Mr Attenbury of the Borough Gardens, Eccles New-road, Manchester, in addition to his pleasure grounds, has made a race ground quite level, 160 yards long and eight within the rails, which is to be opened on Saturday in Easter week, (Bell's Life, 1851, Mar 23, p.6)

Situated on Regents Road, Salford, and attached to the Borough Inn, the Salford Borough Gardens was established by the Attenbury family in 1851. Evolving from a pleasure ground to a race course, this arena hosted numerous pedestrian event until its closure on 23rd October 1863.

Peter Waddacor's City Grounds, Bradford, Manchester

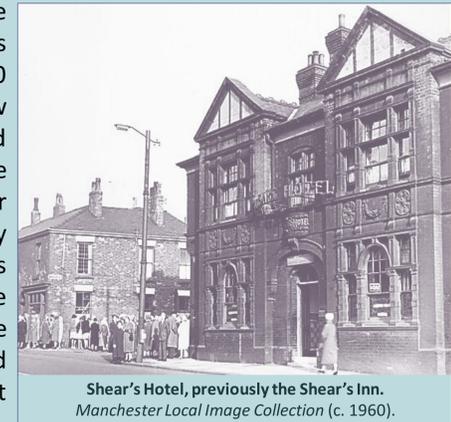
City Grounds.—Saturday next, Waddacor's 130 yards Sprint Handicap; the best in this part of the country since the death of the Wizard, G. Martin. Plenty genuine betting. 1st heat at three.

Developed in rural Bradford, the City Grounds became a first-class rabbit course and pedestrian venue under the leadership of Peter Waddacor. Attached to Grange Farm, later the Grange Hotel, Waddacor attended to the grounds until his death in 1870 when son, Peter Waddacor, took licence until 1876.

Copenhagen Grounds

The Copenhagen Grounds became one of leading sporting venues in Manchester during the mid-nineteenth century, hosting pedestrian, wrestling, rabbit coursing and pigeon shooting events, all under the watchful eye of Thomas Hayes. From their creation in March 1857 to their demise in June 1869, the grounds were situated behind the Shear's Inn, Oldham Road-Shears Street, Newton Heath, two miles outside of Manchester city centre.

Costing approximately £600 and taking five months to construct the Copenhagen Grounds opened on the 21st March 1857 with over 3,000 spectators paying threepence admission to view the 750 yard circular course, with 235 yard straight, which was fully enclosed, 'except where the canal forms a boundary', by high barriers. For an additional fee, 1,000 spectators could enjoy the view from the 'substantial and commodious stand, from which an uninterrupted view of the contests is obtained'. Reports suggested that the grounds quickly gained a good reputation and 'rank high in the estimation of the lovers of sport in the locality in which it situates'.



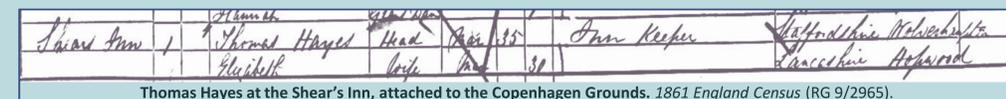
Shear's Hotel, previously the Shear's Inn. Manchester Local Image Collection (c. 1960).

After its sale in 1869 the arena was destroyed, but the pub itself remained a sporting institution, continuing to house pedestrians under the licence of several proprietors, before becoming renowned as the location of Manchester United's formation in 1878.

Thomas Hayes, Manchester Sporting Entrepreneur (1818-c.1894)

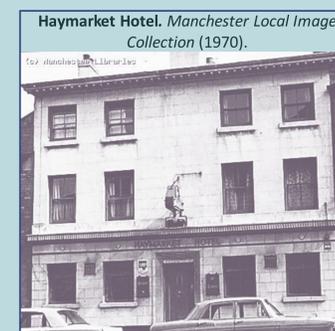
A professional distance runner, Thomas "Tommy" Hayes, born in 1818 in Wolverhampton, Staffordshire, moved to Middleton, Manchester to pursue athletics in 1846. Alias the "Halshaw-Moor Pet", his pedestrian career was illustrious and Hayes became the leading runner over four miles.

In 1852 the newly married Hayes moved to the Commercial Inn, Middleton where he conditioned athletes whilst continuing to compete in middle-distance events under the guidance of J. Walker, the "Rochdale Antelope". In 1857, Hayes took licence at the Shear's Inn, Oldham Road, where, amid the construction of the Copenhagen Grounds, he continued his pedestrian pursuits for the next 12 years.



Thomas Hayes at the Shear's Inn, attached to the Copenhagen Grounds. 1861 England Census (RG 9/2965).

During his time at the Shear's, Hayes developed the profile of several pedestrian athletes, most notably Thomas Horsepool who became the 'English Champion' and record holder for the mile in 1858. After Horsepool announced his retirement Hayes subsequently retired as a pedestrian trainer, focussing on promoting the grounds and finding new talent to fill the arena.



Haymarket Hotel. Manchester Local Image Collection (1970).

After lease expired in 1869 Hayes continued to promote sport within Manchester, taking license at the Haymarket Hotel, 10-12 Tonman Street, Deansgate, where he forged ties with proprietors of the Salford Borough Gardens, City Grounds and Royal Oak Park. In 1871, at the age of 53, Hayes announced his retirement from pedestrianism in order to focus on the promotion of pigeon shooting and wrestling, his preferred pastimes.

Known as an 'enterprising proprietor' and local sporting celebrity, Hayes continued to be active within the sporting community until his death c.1894 in Salford.