

Sport

Horse-racing

Formal horse-racing began on Cleeve Hill outside Cheltenham in 1818¹ and the first Cheltenham Gold Cup was run as a flat race the following year.² In 1826 the races were described as generally taking place in July and lasting three days.³ In 1831 a new course was established at Prestbury Park and the Cheltenham Races in July attracted a large crowd of spectators.⁴ The Cheltenham Racecourse Company bought Prestbury Park in 1902, outside the borough limits within the parish of Prestbury.⁵ The Cheltenham Steeplechase Club was formed in 1907.⁶ A grandstand and club-house were built in 1908 and a race-course station was opened in 1912 on the main railway line. The course has been described as the finest steeplechase course in the world and since 1924 the race for the Cheltenham Gold Cup has been held there over jumps.⁷ In the late 1960s the Steeplechase Club provided two or three days' racing each month between October and April, in addition to the National Hunt meeting in March.⁸ The railway line closed to passenger trains in 1968, but Gold Cup excursion trains continued to run until the line was closed completely in 1976.⁹ In 1988 the National Hunt Festival in March brought 25,000 visitors to Cheltenham.¹⁰ In 2001 the Gold Cup was not run for the first time since 1944, because of the Foot and Mouth epidemic.¹¹ In 2012 60,000 people attended the Gold Cup.¹²

Hunting

The Berkeley Hunt had established kennels in Cheltenham by 1815.¹³ In the 1820s the Berkeley Hounds hunted in the vicinity of Cheltenham in November, January, March and part of April. The kennels were kept at the expense of Colonel Berkeley. There was also a pack of harriers kept by subscription in the town.¹⁴ In 1836 the Cheltenham harriers became the Cheltenham staghounds, a number of captive red deer stags being maintained for the purpose of hunting. Stag hunting continued from Cheltenham until 1858.¹⁵ The Berkeley hounds were withdrawn in 1857, when Sir Maurice Berkeley became Lord Fitzharding, leading to the establishment of the Cotswold Hunt of foxhounds.¹⁶ The hunt continued a tradition of meeting in the Promenade into the 1950s.¹⁷

Cricket

Cricket was played by the pupils of Cheltenham College from its inception, a match against Stowe being reported in 1848.¹⁸ In 1853 the Sussex player James Lillywhite joined the staff as cricket

¹ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 13 & 20 Aug., 1818.

² *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 15 Aug., 1819.

³ Griffith, *New Historical Description of Cheltenham*, p. 60.

⁴ *Cheltenham Journal and Gloucestershire Fashionable Weekly Gazette*, 21 Jul. 1831

⁵ J. Welcome, *The Cheltenham Gold Cup* (1957), 12.

⁶ *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 19 October 1907.

⁷ *VCH Glos.* VIII, 71.

⁸ *Cheltenham Spa Official Guide* [undated, pre-1972]

⁹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 13 Apr. 1968 & 25 May 19676.

¹⁰ *Cheltenham Bicentenary 1788-1988 Commemorative Programme*

¹¹ *The Times*, 8 Mar. 2001.

¹² *The Diamond Jubilee in Cheltenham* (2012), published by Cheltenham Borough Council.

¹³ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 9 Mar. 1815.

¹⁴ Williams, *New Guide to Cheltenham*, pp. 107-8.

¹⁵ Peter Southerton, 'Hunting the Cotswold Stag', *CLHS* 14 (1998), pp. 52-7.

¹⁶ *Cheltenham Examiner*, 24 Feb. 1858; *VCH Glos* II, 289-90.

¹⁷ *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 11 Jan. 1950; Hulton Archive, HL2785.

¹⁸ *Bell's London Life and Sporting Chronicle*, 26 Nov. 1848; see also *Morning Advertiser*, 23 Jun. 1851.

coach.¹⁹ Lillywhite also established a business as a supplier of cricket and other sporting goods in the town.²⁰ Lillywhite was instrumental in organising the first Cheltenham Cricket Week in August 1878, when Gloucestershire led by W. G. Grace played Sussex and Yorkshire.²¹ It became an annual event. In 1906 a third match was added and the name altered to the Cheltenham Cricket Festival.²² The annual festival continues to be held in the grounds of Cheltenham College to the present day.

The Cheltenham Town Cricket Club was formed in 1858, when they played at the Folly Ground.²³ In 1888 the club was in danger of folding, for want of a new ground,²⁴ but were able to secure a ground in Hewlett Road.²⁵ In 1887 the *Cheltenham Chronicle* opined that, while Cheltenham had a reputation founded upon the sporting proclivities of its inhabitants, it lacked sporting facilities.²⁶ Certainly cricket, rugby and football teams all found it difficult to find permanent grounds in Victorian Cheltenham. The Victoria Ground, Prince's Street was opened in June 1897 with a match against a team led by W.G. Grace.²⁷ It remains the club's home in the 21st century.

Rugby & Football

The long history of ball games in Cheltenham is suggested by Football Close, a small area of arable land immediately west of the parish church, first noted in 1605.²⁸ In the 19th century a variety of games played to different rules were encompassed by the term football. Cheltenham College was one of the first public schools to follow Rugby in the adoption of the rugby code.²⁹ The game was also played by a high proportion of the student body at St Paul's by the late 1870s.³⁰

Cheltenham Red Cross Harriers were playing a form of rugby by 1883³¹, with scores for tries and touchdowns, but also praise for 'good dribbling'.³² In 1886 the team changed their name to the Cheltenham Town Football Club.³³ Over the next decade they played on number of venues around the town, including Cemetery Road, the Agg-Gardner recreation ground and Montpellier Gardens.³⁴ In 1899 the team took possession of the Athletic Ground, Albion Street.³⁵ In 1981 they moved to the newly-built Prince of Wales stadium on a 35 year lease.³⁶ In 2004 the Cheltenham Tigers secured a lease of the sports ground in Bishops Cleeve owned by Smiths Industries PLC and subsequently the freehold, moving to Newlands Park for the 2013-4 season.³⁷

¹⁹ *Bell's London Life and Sporting Chronicle*, 11 Sep. 1853.

²⁰ *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 26 Mar. 1859 – then based at 6, Suffolk Parade.

²¹ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 16 Jul. & 30 Jul. 1878.

²² *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 18 Aug. 1906.

²³ *Cheltenham Examiner*, 5 May 1858.

²⁴ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 12 May 1888

²⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 27 July 1892.

²⁶ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 7 May 1887.

²⁷ *Cheltenham Examiner*, 23 June 1897.

²⁸ Hodsdon, *Cheltenham Gazetteer*, p. 64.

²⁹ See *Lillywhite's Guide to Cricketers* (1866), including the laws of football as played at Eton, Harrow, Rugby and Cheltenham.

³⁰ More, *Training of Teachers*, p. 130.

³¹ *Gloucester Citizen*, 4 Dec. 1883.

³² *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 17 Nov. 1885

³³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 25 Aug. 1886

³⁴ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 9 Oct. 1886; *Gloucestershire Echo*, 15 Nov. 1889 & 10 Oct. 1890

³⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 15 Sep. 1899.

³⁶ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 9 Jan. 2010

³⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 26 Oct. 2013 & 6 Jan. 2014.

Occasional matches for those who preferred ‘the dribbling rules’ were arranged at St Paul’s by the mid-1880s, although a football team playing external fixtures was not established until the turn of the century.³⁸ Cheltenham Albion Association Football Club was set up in 1890³⁹ with a team drawn predominantly from the firms of Cavendish House, Shirer and Haddon’s and Lancer’s.⁴⁰ Their first match was played against a team from Dean Close School.⁴¹

In 1895 Col. Russell M.P. offered a cup for competition by clubs in the town and neighbourhood, but it was felt that there were insufficient teams to form a league.⁴² Finding a ground that was suitable and not too expensive proved as difficult for the association football teams as their rugby counterparts.⁴³ In 1899 the Cheltenham District Football League was formed with Albert Close White as its chairman.⁴⁴ Close, a teacher at the Parish Church Boy’s Schools, retained the position until 1937.⁴⁵

Cheltenham Town Association Football Club was in existence by 1895.⁴⁶ By 1912 it was established in Whaddon Lane (now Whaddon Road), possibly on a recreation ground south of the road.⁴⁷ The club played in local leagues until 1932, when it joined the Birmingham Combination League.⁴⁸ At the same time it moved to the sports ground built by the Cheltenham Original Brewery Company on the site of the former kennels of the Berkeley Hunt on Whaddon Road, where they still play.⁴⁹ In 1935 the club joined the Southern League.⁵⁰ Fifty years later they were promoted to the Gola (subsequently Conference) league,⁵¹ but were relegated seven years later.⁵² They were promoted once more in 1997.⁵³ In 1999 they won the Conference league and were promoted to the Football League.⁵⁴ They were relegated in 2015, but gained promotion again after a single season and in 2018 were playing in English Football League Two.⁵⁵

Other Sports and Games

Archery was among the amusements available to the fashionable inhabitants of Regency Cheltenham.⁵⁶ Around 1855 Horace Alfred Ford, national champion of the Royal Toxophilite Society 1850-1859, settled in Cheltenham.⁵⁷ Presumably as a result the national championships were held in the town in 1856 and 1857.⁵⁸ The Cheltenham Archers were founded in 1857.⁵⁹ The society met

³⁸ More, *Training of Teachers*, p. 130.

³⁹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 19 Sep. 1890

⁴⁰ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 11 Oct. 1890

⁴¹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 20 Oct. 1890

⁴² *Gloucester Citizen*, 30 Aug. 1895.

⁴³ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 31 Aug. 1895 & 29 Aug. 1896.

⁴⁴ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 19 Aug. 1899.

⁴⁵ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 22 Oct. 1938; *Gloucestershire Echo*, 6 Jun. 1939.

⁴⁶ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 31 Aug. 1895.

⁴⁷ *Cheltenham Annuaire*, 1912.

⁴⁸ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 21 Apr. 1932.

⁴⁹ GA CBR/C5/6/1/2/7 Plan no. 2640.

⁵⁰ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 29 Aug. 1935.

⁵¹ *The Times*, 4 Sep. 1985.

⁵² *The Times*, 24 Aug. 1992.

⁵³ *The Times*, 5 May 1997

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 18 May 1999

⁵⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 19 April 2016.

⁵⁶ *The Morning Post*, 2 Oct. 1829.

⁵⁷ ODNB, Ford, Horace Alfred

⁵⁸ Ford, *The Theory and Practice of Archery* (1859), pp. 121-3

⁵⁹ *York Herald*, 4 Jul. 1857

fortnightly in Montpellier Gardens until 1865, when Ford left the town. The society was in abeyance for several years, but revived when the national championships were again held in the town in 1871.⁶⁰ Alice Blanche Legh was national ladies' champion twenty-three times, between 1881 and 1922, while Queenie Newall won gold at the London Olympics in 1908.⁶¹ The society continued to shoot in Montpellier Gardens until 1934, when it moved to the East Gloucestershire Tennis Club in Old Bath Road.⁶² Membership declined significantly during the war, standing at 16 by 1946, but had increased to 26 a year later.⁶³ After the shooting ground was lost when the tennis club developed its facilities in the 1950s, the club was without a home for many years.⁶⁴ In 2007 it moved to a site at the racecourse.⁶⁵

References to bowling greens or allies in Cheltenham appear in the 18th century.⁶⁶ The Cheltenham Bowling Club was formed in 1880 and in the 1890s was provided with a new green at the Winter Gardens.⁶⁷ In 1917 Lt-Col F.J. Asburner provided £500 for the purchase of the Suffolk Square ground, which opened in 1918 and was still in use a century later.⁶⁸

There was a croquet club in Cheltenham by 1869, when several members took part in an all-England tournament in Oxford.⁶⁹ Annual tournaments were held on in Montpellier Gardens in the 1870s.⁷⁰ The club appears to have fallen into abeyance and to have reformed in 1909, using a ground in Charlton Kings, and continued to play there in 2018.⁷¹

The Cheltenham Quoits Club was in existence by 1889.⁷² It closed in 1906⁷³, but was revived during the 1920s.⁷⁴

The modern game of Badminton has strong Anglo-Indian associations, which may explain its popularity in Edwardian Cheltenham.⁷⁵ Badminton tournaments were held at the Winter Gardens from 1905 until World War I⁷⁶ and were briefly revived before World War II.⁷⁷ In 1907 the existence of 3 clubs in the town enabled enthusiasts to play every day except Sunday.⁷⁸

The Cheltenham Golf Club was established on Cleeve Common in 1891. In 1907 it had 363 members, of whom 110 were women.⁷⁹ It closed in 1935.⁸⁰ The Cotswold Hills Club, established in 1902, played

⁶⁰ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 28 Jun. 1871.

⁶¹ *ODNB*, Legh, Alice Blanche & Newall, Sybil Fenton [Queenie].

⁶² P. Cant, *The history of Cheltenham Archers, 1857–1975* (1975).

⁶³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 4 Apr. 1946 & 24 Sep. 1947.

⁶⁴ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 22 June 1950; *Western Daily Press*, 1 Oct. 1999.

⁶⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 29 May 2015.

⁶⁶ Hodsdon, *Cheltenham Gazetteer*, p. 23; Hodsdon, *Manor Court Books*, p. 76.

⁶⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo* 16 July 1898.

⁶⁸ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 8 Dec. 1917; *Gloucestershire Echo*, 13 May 1918.

⁶⁹ *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 10 Jul. 1869.

⁷⁰ *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 10 June 1871.

⁷¹ *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 29 May 1909.

⁷² *Gloucestershire Echo*, 1889.

⁷³ *Cheltenham Examiner*, 5 May 1906.

⁷⁴ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 25 Nov. 1922 & 11 Jan. 1926.

⁷⁵ J-Y Guillain, *Badminton: An Illustrated History* (2004), pp. 47-8

⁷⁶ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 23 Mar. 1905.

⁷⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 3 Jan. 1938.

⁷⁸ *Cheltenham Annuaire*, 1912.

⁷⁹ VCH Glos II, 304; *Cheltenham Annuaire* (1893).

⁸⁰ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 28 Dec. 1935.

on the same Cleeve Common course.⁸¹ The club moved to Ullenwood, south of Cheltenham, in 1976.⁸²

In 1988 Michael ‘Eddie the Eagle’ Edwards, a plasterer from Cheltenham qualified for the Olympic Games 70m and 90m ski jump events. He came last out of the 58 competitors in the first event and last out of those who jumped in the second.⁸³ In 2016 he was the subject of a feature film *Eddie the Eagle*.

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⁸¹ VCH Glos II, 304; *Cheltenham Annuaire* (1907).

⁸² <http://www.cotswoldhills-golfclub.com/club/history/>

⁸³ XV Olympic Winter Games Organizing Committee, *Calgary 1988 Official Report* (1988), pp. 597–605.