

Of marks and medals

Unless you have just landed from another planet, you will be aware that in just over five months London will be hosting what some have described as *the greatest show on earth*. It will be the third time that the honour of playing host has been bestowed upon London; the first occasion was over 100 years ago in 1908. Needless to say, a lot has changed since then; however, plenty has not. It was around the time of the *original* London Olympics that the first vehicle registration marks were issued.

The story goes that in December 1903, Earl Russell and others waited in line all night outside the London County Council building – each man hoping to secure the coveted registration mark A 1. The Earl got there first, a mere five seconds ahead of the next fellow car plate enthusiast, and consequently was assigned the mark. So it will be when it comes to winning gold in London 2012 – fractions will decide who gets the medals. Curiously, the passage of time has not altered the popularity of so called *private plates*, with city-related ones (such as AB11 DHB) attracting bids from thousands of miles away and for *hundreds* of thousands of pounds.

But some things have changed remarkably since 1908. The birth and rise of television, global travel, mobile phones and the internet all spring to mind. The *digital age* we now live in, spear-headed by the growth of social networks such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, could never have been conceived in 1908 or even 1948 for that matter (when London hosted the Games for the second time). Nor indeed could the emergence of the SMS-derived language, textese. Love it or loathe it, this year's Olympics are more likely to be referred to as *LDN 2012* than the official title, *Games of the XXX Olympiad*.

This brings me onto a registration mark that I have recently come across; H15 LDN. I am told that it represents "His London", and, to those under the age of thirty, I suppose it does. This led me to think, *whose London will it be when all the javelins, discuses and hammers have been thrown, races run and lengths swum?*

Looking through the archives, there have been some record-breaking performances by notable athletes – each of whom could justifiably stake their claim to the Games in which they competed. Paavo Nurmi, the Finnish runner, won five gold medals at the Paris Games of 1924. Nearly fifty years on, the American Mark Spitz swam his way to seven gold medals in Munich 1972. Once again in the pool, who could forget Michael Phelps' eight gold medals at the Beijing Olympics of 2008? Few could argue that it was not "His Beijing".

That same year, Sir Chris Hoy thrilled us all with his three gold medal scalp; a feat not achieved by a Briton since Henry Taylor at the *original* London Games of 1908. Though Henry Taylor went on to live a life of near obscurity and died penniless, in 1908 the London Games belonged to him – it was "His London". Now, some 104 years later, whose LDN will it be?