

HAROLD WHITLOCK'S HITLER OAK

Both Maisie Whitlock and Joan Whitlock sent in copies of the August 19, 2007 Article by Peter Radford and David Smith from *The Observer* regarding Harold Whitlock's oak tree:

“Hitler's Olympic oak gift to Briton axed Tree planted at the 1936 gold medallist's old school was a danger to pupils

They were possibly the oddest sporting prizes ever awarded. Along with gold medals, the champions of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin were each presented with an oak sapling by Adolf Hitler.

Many of the 130 oaks disappeared without trace, but others were dispersed around the world and planted in the athletes' home towns so that they would grow into mighty oaks. Among them was the tree won by Harold Whitlock, the British long-distance walker, which took root at his old school in north London.

For 70 years it stood giving shade to generations of children and famed as a local landmark nicknamed the 'Hitler Oak'. No more. Last month the magnificent 50ft tree was chopped down, severing a precious link with Britain's sporting past.

Hendon School explained that the tree had been diagnosed with a fungal disease and was in danger of falling down and injuring pupils. Harold Whitlock's sons, who were not consulted about its fate, expressed disappointment but accepted the school's reasons.

The oak saplings, each standing about 18 inches high in a terracotta pot, were awarded by the German Olympic Committee in the hope that winners would plant German oaks all over the planet. The few that survive today include one awarded to Jesse Owens, the black sprinter who upstaged Hitler by winning four gold medals. It now has pride of place at James Rhodes High School in Cleveland, Ohio, where a commemorative plaque was recently added.

Britain's only known oak was that won by Whitlock, who took a gold medal in the 50-kilometres walk despite a severe bout of illness in the four-and-a-half hour race. The athlete, a tall, upright figure in white with a moustache, was unmistakable as he neared the finish in Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

His son, Ross Whitlock, 74, said: 'Apparently Hitler was in the stadium when my father came in at the end of the race, and apparently Hitler jumped up and applauded - I don't know if he thought my father was German. I say to people sometimes, "Hitler applauded my father". It's a conversation stopper.'

Whitlock brought his sapling back to Britain, but decided against planting it in his garden in case he moved to a different address. So he donated it to his former school, the then Hendon Grammar School, where a ceremony marked the occasion. He died in 1985 aged 82.

Ross Whitlock was unaware of the demise of his father's tree until told by *The Observer*. 'These things happen,' he said. 'I don't think it can last forever. I'm fairly relaxed about it. We've got a couple of saplings here growing from acorns that fell from the tree. Maybe we could give one of those to the school and it would be "Son of Hitler Oak".'

His brother Terry, 76 who has their father's gold medal at home, added: 'What a shame, it was a nice tree and, with that bit of history, something unique. Dad wouldn't have been too happy about it being cut down. But the school's headteacher has apologised and invited us there in September. I accept his

explanation.’

The Hitler oak was felled on the orders of Scott Sturgeon, head caretaker of Hendon School. ‘It had a fungal disease, which we first diagnosed two-and-a-half years ago,’ he said. ‘The tree expert I work with said in 20 years he’d never seen such large spores and strongly recommended re removal. We did everything we could to preserve its life, but it was close to the gym and other outbuildings so it had to come down this year, it would have come down with the wind next year.’

Kevin McKellar, the hear, said: ‘We were worried because, with inclement weather and kids playing near it, there were health and safety concerns. I’d be happy to acknowledge it in some way: one idea is to turn the stump into a round table that the kids could use.’

Hector Harold Whitlock was born December 16, 1903, so was 32 when he won his gold medal at the 1936 Olympics and was one of the oldest athletes to attend. Harold is part of the WHITLOCK53 chart and is a descendant of Henry Whitlock, coach builder whose descendants made Whitlock cars until the 1930's. Harold worked as a motor-mechanic.

The family set high ideals for all their children, starting with their names. Harold’s father was Charles Robert Octavius Whitlock son of Octavius Whitlock and Harold’s first name was Hector. Hector was the eldest son of King Priam and was the prince who lead the Trojan army against the Greeks during the siege of Troy. Large shoes to fill!! Harold also had a brother “Rex”.

The family is a long time London family and has been traced back to the early 1700's residing in the parish of St.John, Wapping.

Harold has been the subject of two other articles in the Newsletter in March 2002 and March 2003. Our thanks to Maisie and Joan for passing on this unusual but interesting article to us.

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