



▲ After the opening ceremony, the 2009 Cotswold Olimpicks get under way with the **Championship of the Hill**, a series of relay races contested by teams of four, many of them representing local pubs and churches.

Very much in the spirit of the classic television series *It's A Knockout* the wheelbarrow race requires each team to carry bales of straw over an obstacle course. After each leg an extra bale is added, with the final leg seeing the smallest member of the team perching on the top.

Another race requires the four team members to ski in unison across the turf (*above right*).



Rather more serious is the tug-of-war (*above*), contested by men and women, typically from pubs, rugby clubs and young farmers' clubs. Apart from the running race, this is the only event that has ever been mirrored by the main Olympics, a tug-of-war tournament having formed part of the London Olympics in 1908 (*see page 110*).

One other link is that, however informal or light-hearted the games might appear – the Hill being no place for purist or puritan – every winner is rewarded with a medal, cup or trophy, formally presented by the President of the Robert Dover's Games Society.



▲ A contest that more than any other keeps alive the 17th century spirit of rough play, **shin-kicking** has become the iconic event of the Cotswold Olimpicks. As the T-shirts say, come to Dover's Hill and 'Get the shin kicked out of you!'

Gone are the iron-tipped boots once worn by 19th century kickers, some of whom, it was said, would harden their shins with coal hammers. But if the footwear has become less lethal since the Games' revival in 1951, shin-kicking remains a tough contact sport, and one for which the attendance of paramedics is occasionally necessary.

The rules are simple. Two contestants – usually, but not always male – face up, each gripping the other by the shoulders. They are dressed in white coats, to represent the smocks worn by shepherds, and have straw taped to their shins or stuffed down their trouser legs.

The 'stickler', or referee, then gives the signal. Kicks must be aimed between the ankle and knee, but players may also hook their feet behind their opponent's legs to force a fall. The first shin-kicker to floor his rival wins. Bouts can last from ten seconds up to five minutes.

Shin-kicking is a knockout event, so with up to twenty contestants usually entering it can take the best part of two hours before the gruelling best-of-three final takes place around 9.00pm, forming the climax to the programme on the lower arena.



In the single stick contest (*left*), entrants aim to strike their opponents with a slender ash rod. They can target any part of the upper body. Like shin-kicking, this is a sanitised version of a much older, bloodier sport, and is a reminder that for all its jollity, Merrie England had its violent side. Also taking place on the upper arena are displays of cudgel fighting, as illustrated on page one.