

Cheese rolling

The origins of the Cooper's Hill cheese-rolling contest are unclear. A common theory is that the boisterous event began hundreds of years ago as a pagan festival—a celebration of the onset of summer. However, it is now an annual social event held each May. It is primarily for the residents of Brockworth, near Gloucester in England, but now people from all over the world take part.

This traditional event takes its name from the infamous hill. From the top of the hill a round of Double Gloucester cheese is rolled, and competitors race down the hill after it. The first person over the finish line at the bottom of the hill wins the cheese. In theory, competitors are aiming to catch the cheese, but since it has a one second start and can reach speeds up to 100 kilometres per hour, this rarely occurs.

The tradition is at least 200 years old.

The thrill comes from the fact that the face of the hill itself is concave, that is, it curves inwards. The grassy slope has a gradient that is in places 1-in-2 (one step forward and two down!), and in others 1-in-1. Its surface is very rough and uneven and it is almost impossible to remain on foot for the descent. At the bottom of the hill there are posts with signs erected by the local council, requesting that people do not walk on the face of the hill as this causes soil erosion. The posts are removed for the race.

Because of the steepness and uneven surface of the hill, there are usually a number of race injuries, including sprained ankles, broken bones and even concussion. A number of ambulance vehicles will attend the event, since there is invariably at least one injury—and often several more—requiring hospital treatment.

Cooper's Hill cheese rolling has been summarised as “twenty young men chase a cheese off a cliff and tumble 200 metres to the bottom, where they are scraped up by paramedics and packed off to hospital”.

Whatever its origins, it is not hard to argue that cheese rolling is a wild sport for the rash and the courageously reckless.

Sources: <<http://www.doctordanger.com/other/CheeseRoll.htm>> and
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheese_rolling>

Photographs courtesy of Jean Jefferies <www.cheese-rolling.co.uk>

