

Handball in County Durham. As a result of reading Alastair Mackenzie's account of the World Handball Championships which were played in Ireland a year ago, Mike Haslam sent me a truly fascinating account of handball at Ushaw College in County Durham. He also sent me archive pictures of the games being played and, because they don't photocopy well, I have made line drawings from them to illustrate the following summary. [I am not reproducing the whole of Mike's article in its original form (a) because it is a bit long, and (b) because I found parts of it a bit difficult to understand, even after several readings. If, however, anyone would like a full transcript, let me know and I'll put it in the post to you.]

Mike's article is centred about the games played in two very different types of court, examples of both of which are to be found at Ushaw College in County Durham. The College was established in Durham in 1805 after the Catholic Emancipation Act permitted the setting up of Roman Catholic schools and colleges in this country. Prior to that it had been in Douai (France) and, when it moved, it brought the handball games with it.

The big courts, illustrated in the first three line drawings, are enormous with a high front wall some 15 yards wide. The side walls extend back some 16 yards, declining in height as they do so and also getting slightly further apart. There is no back wall - I was therefore somewhat confused to read in Mike's extract from the rules: 'When the ball in coming from the rear wall hits either side wall...' - and the court floor appears to extend further back than the side walls. By far the most interesting feature is the penthouse on the right-hand wall - shades of real tennis! - but the extracts from the long and complicated rules from which Mike quotes fail to make it very clear how this hazard affects the play.

An interesting extract from the rules quoted by Mike comes presumably from a section devoted to the various ways of playing the game, just as we sometimes play our game to 11 and sometimes to 15. I quote: 'Fives are the proper game, i.e. a person is out when he has got five according to any or all of the following rules: etc.' Is this where the name of our game comes from? Is it something to do with the way the game was scored?

The handball game called 'fives' that was played on these big courts was played between teams of four. How is it then that only seven players are shown in the first line drawing? I think that it may be that the 'five' which a player may accumulate before he is 'out' are penalty points for hitting the ball out of court, and that when he has got five, he is disqualified from taking any further part in the game. Maybe I'm barking up quite the wrong tree but, as I wrote at the beginning, I found part of Mike's original article, referring as it did to only a small selection of the rules, a bit difficult to understand.

As can be seen in the second line drawing, the large courts were also used for a game called 'battledore' in which the ball was struck with a bat (the battledore from which the game takes its name) somewhat resembling a very large wooden kitchen spoon. This would appear to have been played between teams of two.

In the smaller and quite different 'racquet houses' (alternatively known as 'racquet sheds') the game was always played with the hands! (The more I read Mike's article, the more convinced I am that, although the game was brought to County Durham from France, the French establishment must have been staffed by Irish monks! Mind you, the French call real tennis - played with a racquet - jeu de paume.)

It would seem that either singles or doubles could be played in these vaulted chambers, the ceilings of which formed part of the court. I don't know what sort of ball was used but unless it was very dead the game must have been fast and furious, calling for lightning quick reactions.

That's enough to have whetted your appetites. If any readers know about old handball games in other parts of Britain or in neighbouring countries - particularly Ireland and France - please do write and tell me about them. You may also like to engage in correspondence directly with Mike about the games played at Ushaw.

* * * * *

