

Fives at Bedford School and Bedford Modern School

Author JI Cooper was a pupil at Bedford Modern School in 1946-54, where his father was a master. He joined the staff of Bedford School in 1960, and served as Hon Secretary of the Old Bedford Modernians Fives Club 1961-2007. He is thus admirably qualified to continue our series on the history of Fives in Schools by writing on Fives at the three schools in Bedford. Jerry was President of the RFA in 1988-89.

Presenting the history of Fives at the two schools in Bedford in the same article is not just a geographical convenience, for they share the same foundation, the same endowment and the same board of Governors. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries, a Free School was founded under a Charter from Edward VI in 1552 and endowed by Sir William Harpur in 1566. Harpur, Bedford born, a wealthy Merchant Tailor and Lord Mayor of London may also have been involved in the foundation of The Merchant Tailors' School (the spelling at that time). The Free School became



The old Bedford Grammar School premises in Bedford.



The 1878 Fives Court at Bedford Modern School

The Grammar School which soon also housed The Writing School. Ignoring the subsequent intricacies of the schools' development, the Writing School (through several name changes) moved to separate buildings in 1833 and was re-named Bedford Modern School in 1873. The Grammar School expanded on its original site until relocating in 1890 to its present site, dropping the tag "Grammar" in 1917 to become just Bedford School.

The first record of Fives Courts was at the old Grammar School. A former pupil writing about his schooldays in the early 1820s, said that Fives was the only organised sport and the only other exercise was nature rambles! However, this may well have been a simple one-wall version as three open courts were built at the old Grammar site in 1877.

Two closed courts were built at the Modern in 1878 and very soon afterwards, with the development by both schools of separate playing fields to the north of the town, new courts were built by both schools. The Grammar built four (initially, two open and two closed, but subsequently all four were enclosed) in 1892 on the site to which the whole school had relocated in 1890. The Modern built three closed courts (as illustrated) in 1893 at their school playing fields, the 1878 courts being demolished for new laboratories. The Modern School stayed in the town centre until 1974, when it relocated adjacent to the playing fields.

The courts at both schools were virtually identical in configuration. The floor plan was just the odd inch short of the eventual RFA standard; the back walls were only 4' 6" high and entry was through side doors set just in front of the back wall, meaning that the 'inner' courts had to be accessed through the outer courts. Walls and floors were grey. In 1935, the three Modern courts were incorporated into the structure of the new indoor heated swimming pool (the only one in the

whole of Bedford at that time) to form three rooms creating a tuck shop, foot bath, and boiler room respectively as a link between the pool and the changing rooms. Happily, six new courts were built only a few yards away to the recent RFA standards with red floors/black walls et al and opened in 1936. In 1981, these courts were re-roofed with spare metal sheeting left over from the renovation of the swimming pool. They remain very high quality courts.

The Grammar courts remained unaltered until 1950 when, under pressure from Geoff Prigmore (schoolboy Fives secretary), the doors were moved to the centre of the back wall which itself was raised to 6 feet.

Another 19th Century school, of a different foundation, on the South Western edge of the town, also had Fives courts. The Elstow or County School features in some of the early fixtures of the other two schools and shows that Bedford, as a town, was a real focus for the game and several adult groups played, as indicated by the composition of the opposing teams in many of those early fixtures. Sadly, Elstow School closed in 1916 and all the buildings were subsequently demolished to make way for a crayon factory, so its courts were lost.

But what of the game itself? Detailed references to the playing of the game only came after the inauguration of the school magazines in 1876 and 1881 respectively; the Ousel at the Grammar and the Eagle at the Modern. The Ousel reported on a "Scratch Fives" competition in 1881 with 14 pairs entering. The first reference in the Eagle was to a series of matches against The County School (home and away) in 1884, an internal Challenge Cup, and an increasing popularity of the game with more members than at any previous time. Also, an attempt to light one court by gas had been a fair success.

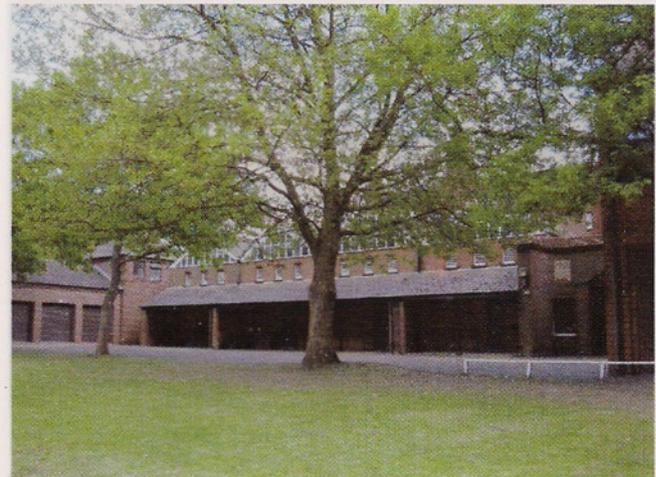
Bedford School

Bedford School had a long tradition of inter-house competitions at both senior and junior level, with the six houses producing teams of four at both age groups and there are records of house matches being played in the 1890s. In these early days, there was definitely a 1st team (of 4 or 6) and, before the full development of the railways, all matches were local, such as those against the County School, Bedford Modern and a selection of Gentlemen's IVs like GS Phillpot's IV, Mr Piper's IV, RW Rice's IV among others.

With the completion of Bedford's railway links, fixtures were beginning to be more ambitious. In 1888, two matches were played against Merchant Taylors' and one against St Paul's. In 1901, there was mention of playing a Cambridge



The Bedford Modern School Courts as they are today after the 1981 re-roofing.



The Bedford School Courts of 1892, as altered in 1950, as they are today.

Team at home and winning by 45 points, showing the status of, and enthusiasm for, Fives. In this year too, there is the first mention of a Past v Present match. In 1904, a list of 12 1st IV matches includes home and away against St Paul's School and a home game against St John's College, Cambridge. In 1905, Dulwich College and Felsted School were added to the list and later, Rugby, Haileybury and Oundle, not forgetting, of course, the valuable fixtures against the likes of Cambridge University Sparrows, the Jesters and the RFAC.

For a long period from the early 20th Century up to the present time, sport at Bedford School was very strongly structured with a system of Major (Rugby, Rowing, Cricket) and Minor sports (Boxing, Gymnastics, Fives et al). In the Autumn term, Rugby was compulsory, but it was also compulsory to do a Minor sport as well. Consequently, even members of the 1st XV would go to a Minor sport after Rugby practice, which meant that some of the most able games players also played Fives and as seniors they were



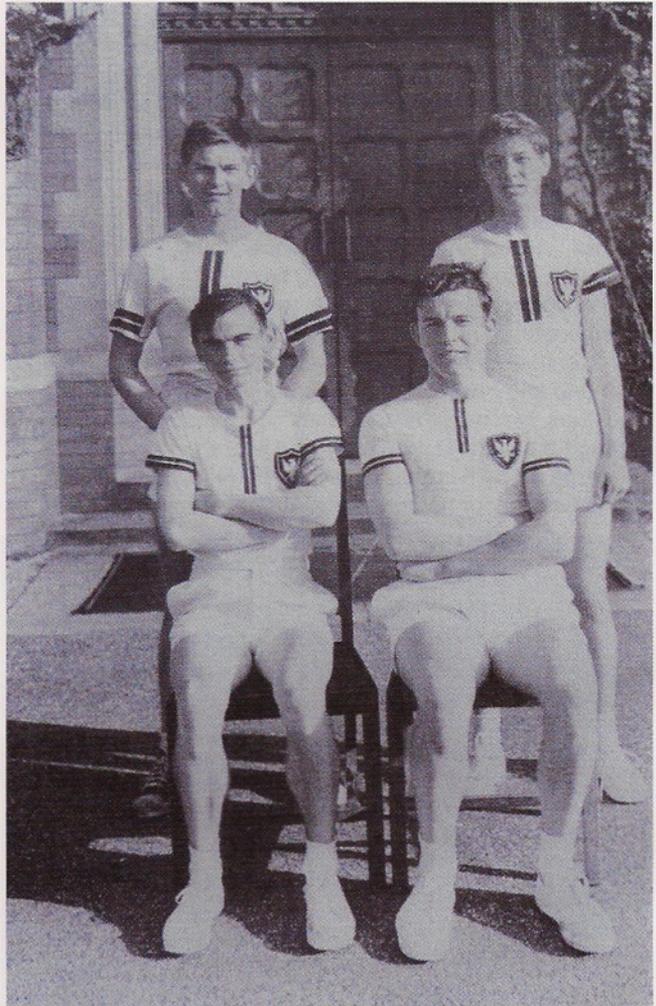
ADR (Tony) Dawes in a Bedford School cricket team photograph of 1948 – three times Amateur Singles Champion, immediately after two years as Schools' Singles champion..

required to coach the juniors. After half-term in the Easter term, Minor sports had priority, which meant that there was a considerable 'power base' of full-time Fives players. The Bedford courts' playing characteristics encouraged an all-round style of play particularly in the use of cross-courts, boasts and drop-shots. (Bill Bailey of Alleyn's' claim to have invented the cross-court shot is surely a matter of self belief rather than a fact!). These qualities were demonstrated to an exceptional degree by such players as John Armitage, ADR Daves and P Mellor among others (of whom more later).

With seniors coaching the juniors, there was a 'trickle down' of skills and the influence and the role of the teaching staff remains a trifle obscure other than that of Owen Bevan (1935 to 1950s), Christopher Steen (1940s to 1960s) who ran a highly organised group in the Lower School and, perhaps, the author, who was in charge from 1963 to 1993.

The fixture list, especially after 1950, incorporated all the best Rugby Fives schools within range of Bedford. Oundle, St Paul's, Merchant Taylors', Denstone, the Modern, Rugby, St Dunstan's, occasionally Haileybury and Felsted, CU Sparrows, the OBMs and OBs. The RFA and the Jesters completed the list. This range of quality opposition certainly helped the boys hone their skills.

Of the players, it was John Armitage who leads, chronologically, the Bedford School Roll of Honour. A member of the 1st IV in 1928 and 1929, he gained Cambridge Blues in 1930, 1931 and 1932, when he was Captain of Cambridge. John was runner-up in the Amateur Singles in 1933 and won the Championships in 1938. He was also runner-up in the Amateur Doubles with DG



The Bedford School 1st IV of 1962. Standing L to R: Bell; Hewitt. Seated M Chesworth; P Mellor.

Mackenzie in 1935 and again (with BR Griffiths) in 1948. Shortly afterwards, ADR (Tony) Dawes emerged as the outstanding player in the whole field of Rugby Fives. Tony won the Schools' Singles in 1948 and 1949 and immediately followed this by winning the Amateur Singles in 1950, 1951 and 1952, plus the Amateur Doubles (with JR Nicols & ER Conradi) in 1950 and 1951 - an unequalled concentration of success. Tony's career as an RAF Officer took him away from the Fives scene thereafter, but it is understood that he then became an excellent squash player!

It was in 1960 that Peter Mellor started a unprecedented run of success for Bedford School singles players. Peter won the Schools' Singles in 1960 (while still a Colt), 1961 and 1962, plus the Schools' Doubles in 1962 with Malcolm Chesworth. Peter was the losing finalist to John Howe in the Amateur Singles in 1966. Chesworth then won the Schools' Singles in 1963 before going on to gain an Oxford Blue. Julian Dalzell then won in 1967 followed by Jeremy Mytton in 1968. The following year, Jeremy won the Amateur Doubles with PW Moger. It was only a young Wayne Enstone who prevented a further clean sweep. In each of the Singles finals of 1969 and 1970, Wayne had to defeat two Bedford players in Stuart Endersby and Ian McLaren. Ian then went on to win in 1971. The author would claim that Stuart, unbeaten in school matches and a West of England Singles and Doubles winner at Colts level was, technically, a better Fives player than Wayne, winning the first game and leading in the second before running out of steam. Stuart was just not prepared for an opponent who rightfully contended that super-fitness is a prerequisite in the preparation for a championship!

In 1972 and 1973, Bedford had to give way to EJR Farrow of Oundle, but a much more significant situation arose which almost totally destroyed Fives at Bedford School. Hockey! The school management decided to introduce Hockey as a Major Sport in the Easter Term and invested heavily to this end, including the development of an all-weather pitch. To justify this expense, it was proposed that Hockey would become compulsory for all first year juniors (except for those who opted for Rowing) and this would work right up through the age groups in the subsequent years. The prospects for Fives suddenly became absolutely NIL! "Oh! They can come down and play Fives after they have played Hockey" "What about match days?" "Fives would have to work round that!" "Pardon?" One voice against the Hockey Cabal and a new Headmaster who had been the Great Britain Hockey Captain, made the prospect for Fives particularly bleak. To be fair to Ian Jones, who inherited the Hockey proposals, he gave Fives very good support, albeit in their reduced circumstances. In addition, Chris Steen had retired and Lower School Fives petered out.

In the meantime, boys who were already in their second year when Hockey started, produced a magnificent final flourish for Bedford Fives. Charles Pattison won the Schools' Singles in 1974, Ian Peck in 1975 and Mark Lloyd-Williams in 1976. Three in a row! Charles and Ian also added the Schools' Doubles in 1974. Of course, Hockey soon discovered that they had too many boys, so graciously released some, ie those not very good at games! Soccer was now available as well, but enough came to the Fives courts to operate a full programme, though inevitably their potential fell far short of their predecessors. Nonetheless, they had plenty of enthusiasm and with hard work they managed to reach a standard where they thoroughly enjoyed the game. A prime objective.

One or two slipped through the Hockey selection net and achieved excellence. Colin Hurt and Gareth Quarry had kept

a very low profile on the Rugby field and were never even listed for Hockey. In 1978, they paired up to win the West of England Schools' Doubles. Both went on to gain Blues at Cambridge. In the same year, Colin won the Schools' Doubles with Nigel Kirkby (a determined retriever!). Gareth and Colin became British Universities Doubles champions in 1980 and Colin again in 1981 with J Boulton. As recently as 2003/04, Jeremy Dickens won his Cambridge Blue.

The details above may have been the key successes, but the spectrum is much wider. Occasional visits to the West of England Schools' produced a range of successes. Singles winners in Dalzell, McLaren, Lloyd Williams and Doubles winners in Dalzell & Mytton, McLaren & Fowler (Charles Fowler went on to an Oxford Blue); and in the Colts' competitions, Endersby & Lindsell, David Dance & Pattison, Peck & Lloyd Williams and Endersby, a singles winner.

Visiting Portugal Place, Cambridge in the early 1950s, one was struck by the frequency of OBs on the CURFC honours boards. Following Armitage from pre-war days came Tony Abrahams and Richard Thomas in the late 1940s and then a whole stream including Peter Picket, Chris Metcalf, Simon Bevan and Peter Ingram. Most were multiple Blues and several gained the captaincy. Peter Ingram then spent many years running the Fives at Merchant Taylors' in the 1960s and 1970s.

In addition to those already mentioned above, there were also Martin Robinson, Martin Wilkinson, Steve Davies and David Arnold. David won three blues and stayed on to take a PhD. The qualifying rules were then changed and he became the first player to win six consecutive Blues. He also won the Universities Doubles in 1974, 1975 and 1976 with different Cambridge partners. In 1977, this trophy also went to Cambridge OBs in the guise of Steve Davies, Richard Kemp and Mark Lloyd-Williams. Ian Peck of the same era could have emulated his peers at Fives, but was too busy earning a sequence of Rugby Blues!

Oxford was less favoured, but Malcolm Chesworth and Charles Fowler were notable Blues. There were many good supporting players, some of whom achieved much elsewhere. Martin Bayfield, a 1st IV player who springs to mind, went on to Rugby fame with Northampton, England and The Lions; is a 'body double' in the Harry Potter films and was recently a TV 4 presenter at Rugby and The World's Strongest Man! There was also Douglas Rice who ran Fives at Blundell's for 17 years and has recently competed in The Vintage and Masters' Championships.

Bedford had a strong nucleus of boarders and many graduates among its alumni, hence the majority of Old Boys left the Bedford area and a structured Old Boys Fives Club never really evolved, just playing occasional matches. On the other hand, the late Mark Daniel, a very modest player at school, ran his own Fives team of OBs during the 1970s and 1980s in an extremely idiosyncratic manner. He was very persuasive in pulling in OBs to play in his matches, but his philosophy was based purely on winning. Never mind the quality! They rarely practised; there was no Club Night, but a whole stream of weak fixtures against strange combinations of opponents. After the usual victory against the Haileybury Staff and Boys, Mark reported in the local paper that it was probably the best doubles played in the World that year! After about 20 years, he presented the School with a brass plaque celebrating 150 consecutive victories by the OB Fives club!

Stalwarts of this period were Tony Dawes, Stuart Endersby, Lionel Lawson, Graham Saunders, and Peter Camfield. The traditional OBs against the School (established in 1888 as Past v Present) often caused problems as Mark insisted in playing the match as an VIII



At an Old Bedfordians fixture against the School in 2008
 –Standing L to R: S Endersby; G Saunders; Dickens and R Lloyd
 of the OBs Club.

(strength in depth to ensure a win?) whereas the home side produced a 1st and 2nd IV. Mark always scored the match as an VIII regardless!

Having toured the USA to play Fives, Mark invited the Americans to Bedford the following year and publicised the match as an International, causing Alistair Mackenzie (RFA President at the time) to write a rebuttal to the local paper in no uncertain terms. In the post-Daniel period, the OBs have supported the National Old Boys KO Competition with Stewart Endersby leading the way.

Loyalties can become blurred as Geoff Prigmore, school Captain in 1952 and as such, playing a significant part in re-building the Bedford v Modern fixture list, played all his adult Fives with the Old Modernian Club partnering David Hebblethwaite in many regional competitions and with him, winning the National Veterans' 6 times and The Vintage 5 times, plus twice with the author with whom he also coached at Bedford from 1994 to 2000. Geoff's son, Stephen, a pupil at the Modern, became the first winner of the Schools' Colts Singles (1975) which is appropriately named The Harpur Cup.

John Osman succeeded the author as master in charge in 1994 and, with the above mentioned visiting coaches, was pleased that the school gained another Cambridge Blue in the guise of Jeremy Dickens. John served for 15 years before handing over to Dr PJ Arnold in 2008.

Bedford Modern School

It would be pure speculation that boys in the former Writing or Commercial School who occupied the same building as the Grammar prior to 1833 may have shared the use of the old Grammar courts, so the proven beginnings of Modern School Fives must be from 1878 when two courts were built at the town centre-site.

From 1884, the Eagle, in addition to the series of games against the County School, reports the progressive growth of the game, and by 1887 a fixture list was evolving with additions of various adult team such as Mr Lovell's, Mr Trevor's, Mr Piper's and Mr J Ferere's, no doubt drawn from local teachers and the former pupils of all three Fives playing schools in the town. University College School was played home and away in 1888, one result being given as 16 games to nil in the Modern's favour and another home match as 240 points to 95. This was the era of AO Jones who went on to captain the MCC in Australia in 1908 and declared that his reputation as an outstanding fielder had much to do with



Bedford School 1st IV in 1952. Standing L to R: C Cole & J Malcolm-Brown. Seated L to R: D Wynn-Williams & G Prigmore (captain).

Fives as it fine-tuned his speed, footwork and hand-eye co-ordination. A quote from The Eagle at that time epitomised the value placed on Fives: "It is a great mistake for anyone who aspires to play Cricket to neglect Fives." With AO Jones, the school team was unbeaten in 1890, being judged "the best ever" and in 1891, the Fives membership reached 100, even though there were just the two courts.

1893 saw the completion of the three courts at the newly developed school playing fields and as time moved into the 1900s, the fixture list began to include St John's College, Cambridge; the Old Boys; Mr Orr's IV; Dunstable Grammar; Merchant Taylors'; University College, London; and Selwyn College, Cambridge. Away matches could be a bit of a lottery for, although the BM courts were very close to the present standard, visits elsewhere could surprise the team with absent back walls or buttresses placed in strange places.

There was no distinction between Major and Minor sports at the Modern, but the column inches ascribed to Rugby, Cricket and Boating in the magazine showed where the main interest lay. Fives was a useful adjunct. Internal competitions were strong with over 30 entering each of the Junior and Senior singles from the mid 1890s and there were still some 'Scratch Fives' competitions (whatever they were) and full inter-house matches.

WW1 caused a pause in play, not least because in 1915/16, the courts were taken over for the storage of military equipment and no matches were played after 1914 until 1919 with a revival of matches against Bedford School and the Old Boys. So it continued during the 1920s and 30s, by which time The County School/Elstow School) had closed and other schools were added to the fixture list. A match was played at Forest School, Walthamstow (no roof and several buttresses), and Alleyn's and St Edward's, Oxford showed up in 1924. In 1936, it was noted that HA Pinnock

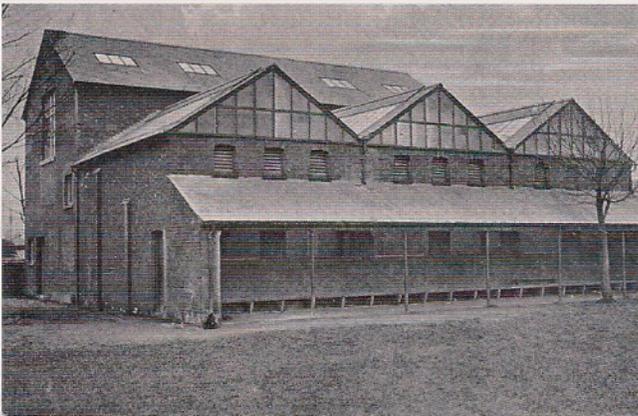


Bedford Modern School, shortly after the new buildings were completed – a lithograph by George Moore of 1835.

reached the last 16 of the Public Schools' Singles and in that year, matches were also played against the Jesters, Old Blues, the Masters and Haberdashers' Aske's. By now the school was playing about 8 fixtures each season.

Whereas the game and a reduced number of fixtures continued at Bedford during WW2 (two courts had become margarine stores for the Ministry of Food!) it faded badly at BMS owing to a lack of equipment and a member of staff to oversee it.

In 1946, JT Dobinson Esq came forward to re-start Fives and we saw the game flourish under his quiet persuasiveness for the next 17 years. He was an organiser rather than a skilled coach and rebuilt the fixture list from the U13s upwards. In the background was the wizened figure of the cricket coach/groundsman/swimming pool guardian, 'Fiddy' Rogers. When time allowed, he did some surreptitious coaching and cared for the courts. In very cold spells he



The "New" Courts at Bedford Modern School, completed 1893, demolished 1935.

would place braziers of hot coals from the swimming pool boiler in the courts to counter the dangers of condensation when milder winds approached. John Dobinson's reign lasted until 1963 being succeeded by a blend of Andy Curtis, Peter Hetherington and George Cullen. Curtis moved on to Millfield School and it was mainly George Cullen who saw the game through until his retirement in 1989. George was a gifted games player (Rugby & Cricket) though in his modesty, he never claimed any coaching skills at Fives. When George retired there was a very disappointing lack of will at the top and nobody was persuaded to replace him at the Fives courts. The fixtures were maintained for only one year after that with a different teacher delegated to supervise each time. All fixtures were then cancelled (as too difficult to manage!) and Fives effectively ceased until 2005 when a small group was allowed to have a 'club' session just

once a week under the aegis of Phil Smith (Staff and OBM) and Chris Ryan (OBM Club). A few fixtures have been re-instated and there have also been two tours. The scale remains fairly small as yet.

Even before WW2, Fives had been firmly established as an Easter term sport but so had Cross-country, Athletics, Swimming and Rowing. Many of the best games players became multi-tasked and part-time at Fives which had to share the available talent. 'Fiddy' Rogers liked his batsmen to play Fives to sharpen up their footwork and reflexes (shades of AO Jones) so that for them, Fives was just something extra to do in the closed season. One of 'Fiddy's' proteges was Dickie Jeeps, a very strong No 5 batsman who was in the 1st Fives IV, but later made his name as a scrum half for Northampton, England and on three British Lions Tours. Others were Geoff Millman (Nottinghamshire and England) and Bob Gale (Middlesex). However, Fives could always produce pretty strong teams and there was a good level of success in their fixtures which included Bedford, Oundle, Merchant Taylors', Alleyn's, the RFA, the Jesters and, variably, Oxford and Cambridge Universities.



At a School v Masters fixture at Bedford Modern in 1948. Back Row L to R: DEC Bristowe; JP Arnold; Mr Clayton; Mr Dobinson; Mr Cooper (the author's father); Mr Thompson; PC Gibb; RA Glynn-Jones. Middle Row L to R: Mr Reeve; Mr Deveson; MJR Hunter; L Kay; ABW Taylor; JS Haywood; Mr Tymms; Mr Harris. Seated L to R: Mr Marshall; Mr Alder; REG Jeeps; JHL Davis; RF Graves (captain); R Marn; Mr Rogers; Mr King.

In the early 1950s, the University Match was played at the Modern for three years (memories of Pretlove and Silk, Rogers and Birmingham, amongst others) so the school had the experience of playing both universities in warm-up matches. Useful experience was also gained against teams like the Jesters when in 1952 the visitors included the ageing John Armitage and Owen Bevan with two OBMs in Alan Taylor and Derek Bristowe. In the same year, David Hebblethwaite and Richard Cooper were runners-up to Oundle in the Schools' Doubles and subsequently Hebblethwaite and Bristowe were losing finalists in the Open Doubles to Pretlove and Silk (1958). The greatest success came in 1966 when Lionel Weston won the Schools' Singles, having won the Schools' Doubles the previous year with Richard Williams. Lionel later won several Rugby caps for England at scrum half. In 1975, Stephen Prigmore won the inaugural Schools' Colts' Singles and in 1985 Mitchell won the inaugural National Schools' U13 Singles, plus the Doubles with Singh.

Alan Taylor was the first post-war OBM to win Blues at Cambridge and captain the University in his final year (1954) whilst in 1963, Richard Dyer-Smith achieved the same distinction (Captain in 1965). George Cullen's last school No 1 was Matt Cavanagh who went on to get a string of Blues at

Phil Atkinson played in more tournaments than anyone else, having started at UCS Old Boys and then returning to his roots. He frequently paired up with Nick Austin to set new records for the length of time to complete three games of doubles! David Hebblethwaite did the regional championship circuit for some years, notably partnering David Barnes and Bob Dolby in a number of doubles successes at the West of England and Scottish. Geoff Prigmore was also his partner on many occasions. David was elevated to President of the RFA in 1983 followed by the author in 1998. For David's Presidency, the club organised an official Invitation World Championships in Singles and Doubles in which Wayne Enstone figured strongly for the three years that the competition ran. David and Geoff were largely responsible for the establishment of the National Veterans' which was played at the Modern for a number of its early years, as was the Vintage in a similar manner. Not surprisingly David and Geoff won the Veterans Doubles 6 times between 1979 and

1985, also going on to win the Vintage Doubles 5 times. Geoff then went on to win the Vintage Doubles twice more with the author (in 1994 and 1995). With no younger players coming through from the school for the last twenty years, the average age of the playing members has risen steadily and the fixture list has been reduced, although Club Nights have survived on Monday evenings each year from September to April. Chris Ryan is the current club organiser.

On a personal note, when travelling to various tournaments with Old Modernian colleagues and meeting up with contemporary Old Bedfordians, we might well have been greeted by Bob Dolby with "Oh, here comes the Bedford Gang!" Sometimes it might be the "Mob". Well, we were proud of our roots and flattered by Bob's inference that here was a group of very competitive players from a background of more than a century of committed Fives.

Jerry Cooper