

# Bradfield College Fives

Former Master-in-charge David Barnes looks at the history of the game at the school

Founded in 1850, Bradfield had its first Fives courts by the end of the decade. They were unroofed, with two on each side of a high wall; and the side walls, descending in stages, had projecting pieces of buttresses and wall, described in Leach's History of Bradfield College as 'pepper-boxes'. No plans or drawings have survived, so we can only speculate as to the position, size and angle of the buttresses.

The next two courts, erected in 1873, had roofs and survive, in part. Incorporated into the Maths Block in 1975, their Winchester-style buttresses are still visible in two classrooms.

Winchester's influence on Bradfield was so strong that these were likely to have been modelled on its 1862 courts.

The earliest Fives trophy in the Bradfield Archives dates from 1863 and was won by F.A.Souper, who a mere nine years later was appointed Headmaster. A Challenge Cup for Singles Fives was presented in 1874; Doubles were also contested, as were Junior competitions from 1877.

## Changing fortunes

The Bradfield Chronicle was first published in 1879, and reports record the ebb and flow of Fives' popularity. Letters complain about leaky roofs and the price of balls at the Tuck Shop (threepence), and a bat-Fives enthusiast wants the outside courts mended before they 'fall into dilapidation'. An 1890 letter asks for a match with Radley, and the first inter-school fixture was in 1892. It was lost heavily, and the school had to wait until 1899 for a win.

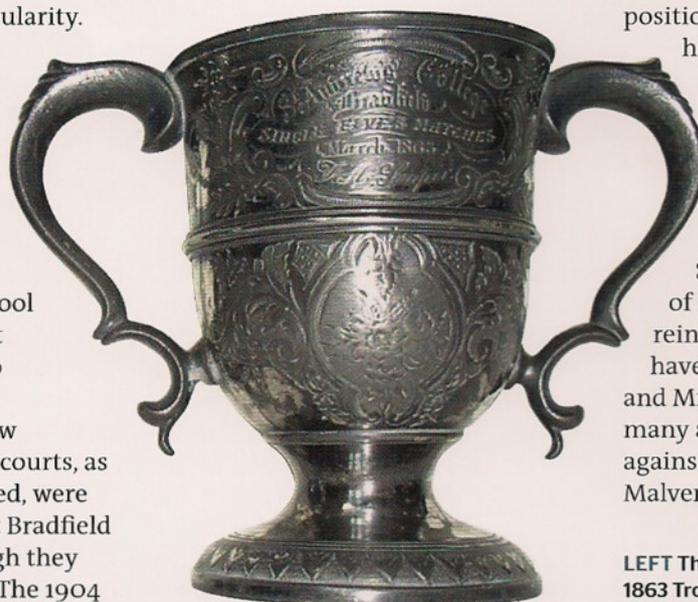
In the first decade of the new century, several schools built courts, as their old ones, often uncovered, were inadequate. The two courts at Bradfield were already covered, although they suffered from condensation. The 1904

Chronicle reported that: 'In recent times we seem to have acquired a veritable mania for Fives', and described the siege at the captain's door to book a court, but Bradfield had to make do with them for 25 more years.

Radley were the only school opponents in the first two decades of the new century, and the familiar pattern of home wins and away losses emerged. The 'foreign' courts were reported to be the wrong size, the floors of different materials, the balls of strange weight and speed – a litany not unfamiliar to modern players.

The Chronicle reports were often written by boys, although sometimes the tone betrays a pedagogic origin. Various teachers played, and at least three housemasters in the immediate post-War period, L. de O. Tollemache, O.L.C.West and C.S.B.Hayward, coached.

## 'Letters complain about leaky roofs and the price of balls at the Tuck Shop'



During the second half of the 1920s, Bradfield added Winchester (1926) and Malvern (1930) fixtures to the list. The Winchester match was the first to be decided on total points rather than games. Travel was becoming easier, and adult sides came from Oxford and London. There was a demand for more courts as Bradfield found that its school opponents had blocks of at least four, and a positive response soon came.

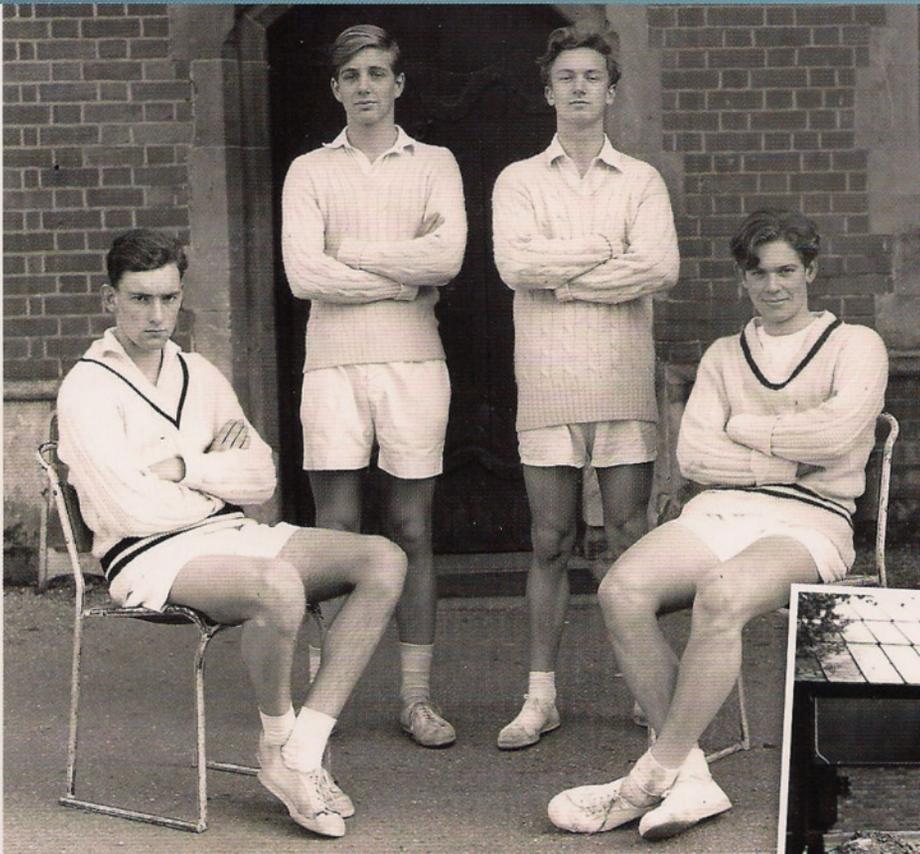
The two new courts, built for about £1000 and opened in 1929, were a sound investment, although they were not enclosed, making them vulnerable to condensation. The back walls were less than five feet high, unlike those at Radley and Winchester.

## New tactics

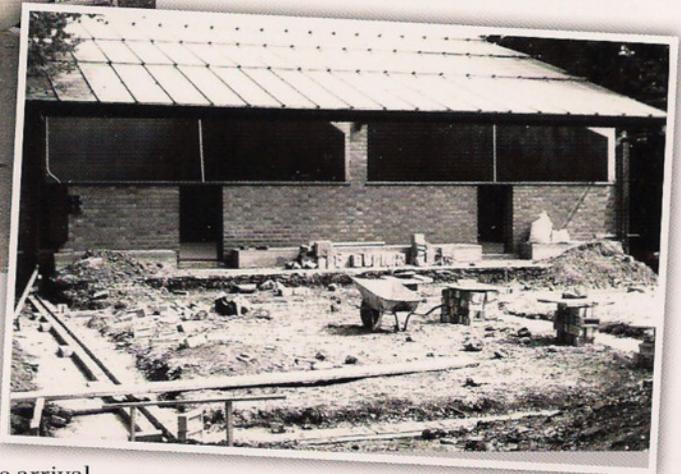
The inaugural Malvern match on the new courts showed the Malvernians had already, because of the unusual design of their own courts, adapted to the demands of the buttress in doubles. Whereas the traditional approach had been for one of the pair to crouch under the bar to 'guard' the buttress, the Chronicle noted: 'The Malvern first string gave a fine exhibition of volleying, and the position he took up near the right-hand wall halfway up the court proved disconcerting.'

The 1930s were a good decade for school sport, as this example from 1935 shows: 'A great deal has been done this year to improve School Fives. The system of House Courts has been reintroduced, and the best players have been coached by Mr Bellamy and Mr Hayward.' Matches with as many as three pairs were played against Winchester, Radley and Malvern, as well as the Senior Common

LEFT The 1863 Trophy



LEFT The 1960 team:  
(from left) MD Seymour,  
AO Warburg, RJ Pakeman,  
HEM Murphy  
BELOW The 1929 Courts,  
pictured during the new  
court construction in 1976



Room, the Old Boys, the RFA, the Jesters and Oxford; the Under 16s played the Nautical College, Pangbourne.

Bradfieldians began to make their mark externally. M.B.Hall, whose three sons all captained Bradfield Fives, played three times for Oxford (1935-7); R.E.Henshaw did well in the 1937 Public Schools Championships and played for Oxford in 1938; and M.Paine, who represented his school with distinction in 1937 and 1938, played for Cambridge in 1939. Other stand-out players at the time were D.R.Gibbs and B.C.Elgood, who played three years (1938-40) as a pair and lost only once. Cambridge selected B.C.Elgood in 1948, R.L.Elgood in 1949 and A.C.Bambridge in 1950.

### Wartime play

Although the Schools Championships were suspended in the War, matches continued. Illness struck in 1941 and 1942, but in other years Bradfield played schools as far away as Dulwich, Tonbridge, Eastbourne and Haileybury, plus old foes Radley and Winchester.

1946 saw the first Fives report in the Chronicle by A.J.N.Young, back from war. 'It is good to see plenty of Fives being played, even with the modern unresponsive balls. But elastoplast helps to lengthen their life!' 1947 was the worst winter in living memory,

and the courts were very popular although the ball supply deteriorated.

The standard improved further with the arrival in 1950 of M.R.Ricketts, who had led a winning Oxford team in 1949. Young's last report in 1951 read: 'At present the emphasis is all on hard hitting, but the players of old were more subtle, and Fives is a game in which there is much scope for cunning.'

More Fives was now being played in the Michaelmas Term, and the standard was improving as a result of the example set by Ricketts, a Cyriax Cup finalist in 1952 and 1953. The 1951, 1952 and 1954 sides were unbeaten.

A player who emerged in the middle of the decade, D.H.Beevers, played for Cambridge in 1959 and 1960. In 1957 an unusual phenomenon occurred: the team against Winchester comprised four lefthanders – a major handicap serving on a buttress court! One was J.M.Tyrrell, who played for Oxford in 1960 and 1961. An opponent in the 1961 Cambridge side was fellow Bradfieldian M.D.Seymour, a top-class court games player who also played for Cambridge in 1962 and 1963 – the first O.B. to represent that University three times.

One of Seymour's initiatives was

a 'Captain's Book' with the detailed scores of matches and, when the captain was keen, a short report. This custom was to last more than 30 years and fill several exercise books. Seymour also founded an O.B. Fives Club in 1961, which played about a dozen fixtures a year for a few seasons.

### Lack of experience

Bradfield had entered players for the Schools Championships since the 1950s, but they had not managed to defeat the more experienced Rugby Fives players. Seymour played three years running and reached the third round twice, while J.Leggett made it to the fourth round of the 1961 singles and, with his partner A.O.Warburg, the same round of the doubles. The same pair were to reach the semi-finals the next year, and the Bradfield IV were undefeated that season and the next.

In 1963, the Bradfield 1st pair contained a future England cricketer, G.R.J.Roope. His partner, A.J.Spicer, became the first Bradfieldian to win a National Rugby Fives title. He won the



ABOVE LEFT The 1975 squad: (from left) MCJ Nicholas, KC Smith, HCJ Collier, DHR Flint, AM Bradshaw. Smith was the first Bradfieldian to win the National Schools Open Singles ABOVE RIGHT The 1981 team: (from left) NG Layton, A Brown, RP Hollins, IP Levett – a 'vintage year' for the school

1965 British Universities Singles title and retained it in 1966. At the same time, M.Lintell, from the 1961 Bradfield team, played for Cambridge.

J.D.C.Vargas, an Eton Fives player, took on Fives in 1966, handing over to this writer in 1968. By then, Merchant Taylors' had been added to the fixture list, but no Bradfieldians entered the Schools Championships between 1967 and 1971, and the results in school matches were patchy.

In 1974, an outstandingly unselfish captain, R.J.Hope, introduced 'Fives for Amateurs' to encourage non-team players; and the school started an 'Introduction to Games' for first-years, which led to a larger number taking up minority sport. Next year, a promising 1st IV emerged under H.C.J.Collier, laying the foundations for success.

In 1975, the old courts were closed, so the bulk of the season was played on two courts. A plan was soon conceived to build two more courts up the hill, finance was made available, and by the start of the 1976 Michaelmas term an enclosed block of four courts was ready.

In 1975, Under 16 Championships began alongside the Open event. The school entered both, gaining valuable experience, and K.C.Smith won the West of England and then the National Schools Under 16 singles in 1976.

Smith became the first Bradfieldian to win the National Schools Open singles. In the 1977 final he defeated

S.Ashton from South Trafford College, and the report read: 'they played an exhausting final in which much of the Fives was of a very high standard. One dare not guess how far Smith had to run to frustrate an opponent who probably had greater experience and a greater range of shots.'

### Higher numbers

The new courts and Smith's success brought a dramatic increase in the numbers playing. A new match was arranged against St. Dunstan's, one of the leading schools in Rugby Fives. 1978 captain K.K-Mengrai went so far as to suggest: 'can we not begin to say that Fives is the major of all minor sports?'

Mengrai himself, H.M.Barford and N.D.H.Spencer all played at university, Spencer winning three half-blues at Oxford (1980-82). E.W.Vinelott was the captain in 1979 and 1980. He and P.A.F.Wilson won the Manchester Youth Championships doubles in 1979 and reached the finals of the West of England and National Schools doubles in 1980. P.J.Richardson, from the same side, played for Oxford in 1983.

Vinelott's Colts and Junior Colts sides were full of talent. A.Brown and J.J.Davies surprised themselves when they reached the final of the Schools Under 16 singles in April 1979. Brown won, but somehow they contrived to miss out on the doubles! Bradfield had further success at Manchester in 1979,

when R.P.Hollins and B.P.L.M.Wright won the Under 16 doubles.

Several masters played Fives at this time. Without them and particularly the support of two housemasters, C.J.Saunders and M.C.Parkinson, Fives would have been much harder to run. The fifth pair in the masters' team in 1980 was N.A.Marshall and T.J.Ronan, described in the captain's report as 'inexperienced, but could go far!'

1981 was a vintage year. Brown and Hollins won the West of England Schools doubles and in the National Schools, Brown won the singles title and, with Hollins, the doubles. In addition, in N.G.Layton and I.P.Levett the School had the best regular second pair that this writer has witnessed. This IV won all eleven of their matches.

Hollins and Wright won the Open doubles at the Manchester Youth Championships in October, and R.M.Layton and J.M.Tremellen the Under 16 doubles.

In 1982, Hollins won the West of England Schools singles, and Tremellen and Layton the Under 16 doubles. At the West of England and the National Schools Championships in 1983, Layton won the Under 16 singles. Tremellen reached the final of the Open Schools singles a year young, and he and Layton got to the doubles final, too.

In the Michaelmas term we again had success in Manchester: Tremellen beat Layton in the singles final, and

together they won the doubles. Soon after this, however, Layton suffered an injury which put him out for the rest of the season. This ill fortune turned what was potentially a triumphant season into a rather disappointing one.

In 1984 at Manchester, D.R.H.Spencer won the Under 16 singles and the doubles with R.J.Maitland. They confirmed their quality at the West of England Schools in 1985, taking the Colts doubles. J.B.W.Keaney beat good players to win the West of England and the National Schools singles plates.

In the mid to late 1980s, OBs had success at university. Hollins won half-blues at Oxford in 1984, 1985 and 1987, taking the British Universities doubles title in 1984. Tremellen – at Cambridge from 1986 to 1988 – was 1986 British Universities singles and doubles winner. R.M.Layton, at Durham, won the Universities singles in 1987, and C.A.J.Glennie played for Oxford in 1989.

The late 1980s saw less silverware, but it would be wrong to belittle the efforts of players and coaches. Successive captains – D.R.H.Spencer, R.J.Maitland, J.N.B.Birch, J.G.Hibbard, T.M.Hebblethwaite and R.W.Fox – led their teams well, but the squads were often too small. Birch played on and was in the 1992 British Universities side. S.J.A.Lord played in three winning Oxford sides from 1993 to 1995, was

## “The captain asked, “Can we not say that Fives is the major of all minor sports?””

captain in his last year and won the British Universities doubles.

In 1993, Neil Marshall took over Fives, with an inexperienced side under captain M.J.Dorman and including B.R.Elfick. Next year, with the same captain and a team strengthened by good young players such as J.Sinton, P.M.J.Lord, J.H.McGill and R.J.Holland, the 1st IV were back to winning ways. In January 1994 Dorman and Elfick won the West of England doubles title, while Sinton and Holland emulated them in the Colts, Sinton also winning the singles. Three months later, Sinton and Lord became the only Bradfield winners of National Under 16 doubles, and Elfick showed his potential by reaching the final of the National Schools singles – he later played for Oxford (1996-98) and Cambridge (2003-05), captained both and shared four British Universities doubles titles.

### Worrying times

Sadly, there was cause for concern lower down the school. The Fives report recorded the ‘expansion of hockey to

unprecedented levels’, taking talented players away from minority sports. Raising a team at Junior Colts and Junior levels was becoming a challenge, and the Juniors lost all their matches.

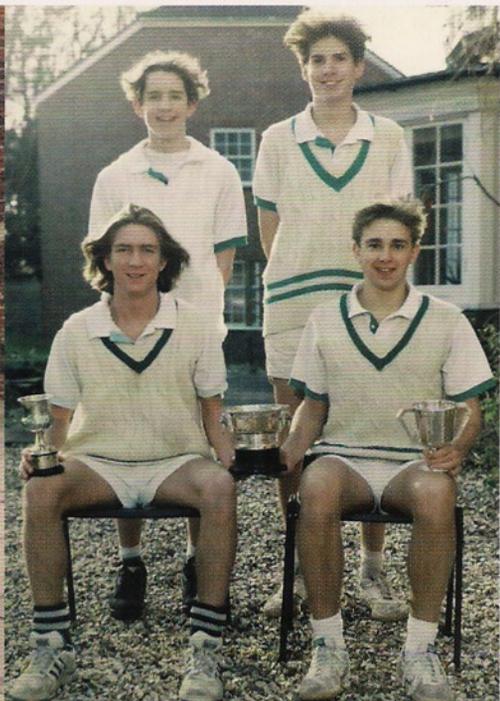
The Sports Centre, opened in 1995, was another rival, but Fives remained competitive at the top of the school for another two seasons, thanks to a fine captain in J.H.McGill and good players.

Holland won the West of England Colts singles title in January 1995 and the National Colts singles in March; he and Sinton reached the Open doubles final. These feats masked the looming crisis, with Marshall reporting: ‘no real impact will be made, unless new players are attracted to the sport.’

Ironically, in 1995, the O.B. Fives Club won the National Club Championship, albeit with one ‘honorary’ member. Messrs Tremellen, Layton, Last and Wilson played like to demons to beat the Manchester YMCA in the final.

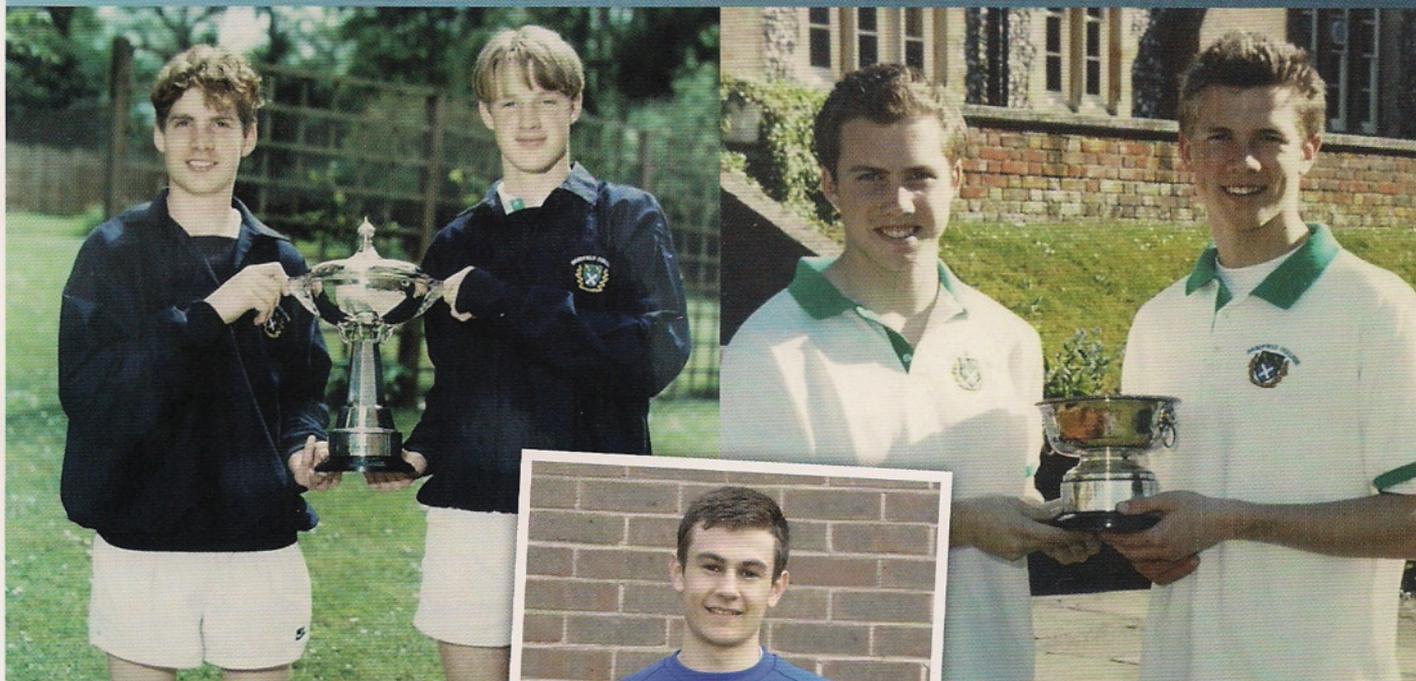
The advent of coeducation brought together a group of girls, under Denise Hall-Wilton, to play some good Fives in 1994 and 1995. Ailsa Mackay – the first girls’ captain – and Emily Prest were the best players.

The 1996 boys’ season started well, with Lord winning the West of England singles and, with Holland, the doubles. Then injuries struck again: Sinton hurt a shoulder; Lightfoot picked up



ABOVE LEFT The 1984 squad: (standing, from left) JBW Keaney, MR Wood, CAJ Glennie, DRH Spencer, CO Brunner; (seated) PM Last, RM Layton, JM Tremellen, JP Boorman ABOVE RIGHT The 1994 West of England trophy-winners: (from left) MJ Dorman, RJ Holland, J Sinton, BR Elfick)

## Fives at Bradfield College



ABOVE LEFT J Sinton and PMJ Lord with the Marchant Cup in 1994 ABOVE RIGHT EO Ronan and AJ Marshall with the RFA Bowl in 2002 RIGHT DT Butler, 2012 Jesters Cup winner

a bruise; and just before the Nationals, Holland twisted his ankle, leaving Lord and the recovered Sinton to reach the doubles final, losing to a talented Sedbergh pair. Lord represented Oxford from 1997-99 and partnered Elfick to two Universities Doubles titles.

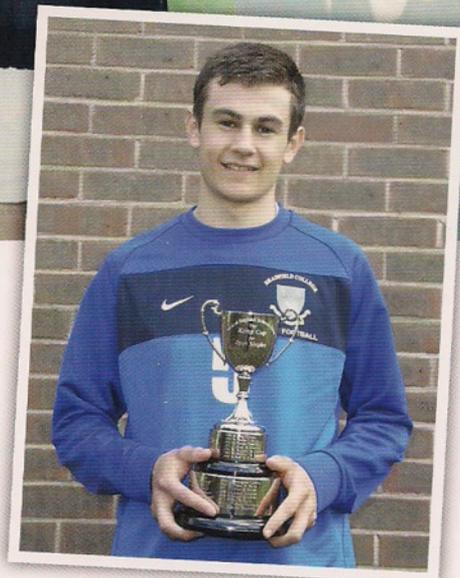
Meanwhile, the authorities instituted a Junior House league, which injected some fresh enthusiasm. The master-in-charge recruited a couple of junior masters to help, but neither stayed long enough to have a lasting effect.

Only Holland was left in 1997, and he did his best to build a senior squad. Lacking competition at school, he managed to win the West of England singles in January but was beaten in the quarter-finals of the Nationals.

In 1998, F.A.S.Gray took over a side lacking in stars but more determined for it. The Colts, too, were committed, but there was little support lower down the school. Meanwhile girls' Fives was struggling, with 'more conscripts than volunteers', although Anna Moss-Gibbons and Suzie Trevor tried hard as captains to involve their recruits.

### Growing enthusiasm

A fresh attempt was made to teach the basics of the game to the new intake in 1998. The 1st and 2nd IVs were respectable, with T.H.Scott-Malden and I.S.Peacock-Edwards a good first pair.



In the new millennium, Terry Ronan took over, and there was some renewed enthusiasm in the Shell and IVth form. Evenings were used for leagues and practices, which worked wonders for turnout. There was some dynastic compulsion, as two of the best players were A.J.Marshall and E.O.Ronan, but they provided a great example!

In 2001 four pairs entered the West of England Colts, and J.O'Halloran did well to reach the singles final. The Colts had a great 2002. First, Marshall won the West of England U16 singles and, with Ronan, the doubles. Then, Marshall won the National Colts singles, and he and Ronan narrowly lost an epic doubles final.

The next two seasons were disrupted by injury and illness. Marshall and Ronan reached the final of the first Winchester Schools doubles but lost to Radley. Only Ronan, who went on to play six times for Oxford, entered the Nationals in 2003 and this theme continued into 2004, with key players unavailable for tournaments.

Two quiet years followed, with no entries for any Schools competitions.

2007 saw J.P.Stevenson-Hamilton and A.J.Phelps in the West of England event, while O.Smith reached the knockout section of the National Open singles.

A ladder was introduced in 2008, and a wider range of ages played Fives. The Under 14s showed real promise, three of them – D.T.Butler, S.M.Cummings and S.C.Scott – gaining valuable experience at the Nationals.

Jeremy Ball took over Fives in 2009, and saw respectable performances by the seniors in the Winchester and West of England Schools events. The Under 15s had good results in the Lent term and Butler reached the quarter-finals of the National Colts singles.

In 2010 a champion emerged, as D.T.Butler reached the final of the West of England event and won the National Colts singles. He has done even better in 2012, with victories at Senior level in both events. This makes him only the third Bradfieldian to win the Jesters' Cup and is a tribute to his fitness, skill and determination. Sadly, much of his play has gone unwitnessed at school, as he trained with the Wessex Club and the Executioners. Let us hope that his feat will give Fives at Bradfield the status it deserves. Almost all schools prioritise the 'major' sports, but enlightened ones encourage diversity when such excellent facilities exist.

■ *The author thanks James Wyatt and Tom Robertson of the Bradfield Development Office and the staff of the Bradfield Archives for their help.*