

Denstone College Fives

The history of Fives at a school where it is being brought back to life. **By David Barnes**

Denstone College opened in 1873, and four years later two fives courts were in regular use. They were plain-wall courts with no back wall or roof, and the surfaces were rough enough to warrant the complaint that boys 'could not afford sixpence for a ball which would not last an hour'. This, together with the lack of internal matches, led to a falling-off of interest in the 1880s, remedied by a thorough repair of the courts in 1893 and the presentation by the Chaplain of a 'Flag for Dormitory Competition' a year later. A Handicap Tournament was also started at this time, attracting a large entry.

A letter to 'The Denstonian' of 1886 had pointed out that the game's popularity was being affected by play only being possible in dry weather, but the plea for some sort of covering produced no tangible result; covered courts were not to come for many years. Nonetheless the standard of play was high enough for the newly-instituted Fives IV to play and beat the Masters in 1887. A set of rules for the game was published at this stage, among which was the stipulation that 'under no circumstances may kicking the ball be allowed'.

Matches took place against the Old Denstonians in 1893, 1896 and 1897, and in 1898 the Chaplain, clearly a keen supporter of the game, presented a Cup 'to be played for by the different dormitories by boys under 15'.

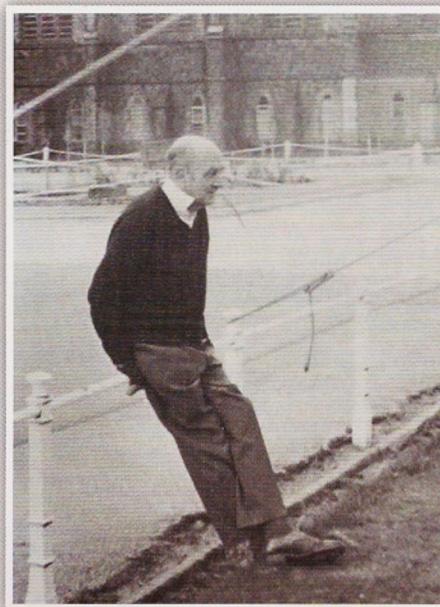
New century, new courts

The new century brought two new courts, similarly uncovered but 'a great improvement on their predecessors in appearance'. A Fives blazer, a mark of status, was awarded in 1903. The Masters were again played in 1906, but a fixture at Uttoxeter Grammar School in the same year provided an insuperable challenge as the courts turned out to be Eton Fives courts! Sadly, this experience seems to have

dissuaded the Denstone authorities from playing any more 'foreign' matches for quite a while.

Wire netting was eventually set up at the back of the Denstone courts 'so that the would-be player will not now have to spend the greater part of his game hunting for lost balls amid the collection of old drainpipes and timber'; but the courts deteriorated quite badly in the War years and no more external matches were held until 1928, when the Heath Grammar School (Halifax) Old Boys and the Manchester YMCA were played. In 1930 the Mancunians were played both home and away. Home court advantage told in both cases. 'Our players were entirely unused to singles, for which their small covered courts had been built,' lamented 'The Denstonian'. Revenge was sweet back at Denstone,

'John Adamson remembered the open courts with little affection'



however, as the Mancunians were 'unused to doubles'.

Adamson's arrival

The source of the above information, John Adamson, arrived to teach at Denstone in 1932 and remembered the open courts with little affection. 'The floors and side walls were rough and cracked,' he wrote, 'and as there were no back walls (or even wire netting), there was a constant risk of colliding with passing cars or pedestrians when the ball was hit out of the back of the court and had to be retrieved.'

Adamson, who had learnt his fives at Durham School and represented Oxford in 1930 and 1932, was instrumental in raising money, mainly from Old Denstonians, to build two new covered, four-walled courts in 1938. The Lent Term of 1939 saw four matches played, including one against the RFA and another against the Masters, who turned out six pairs. That same year a cup was presented by A.Christmas, an Old Denstonian, for the best individual player.

Adamson, described by one of his ex-pupils as 'a towering figure as far as sport was concerned', also ran the cricket and rugby at Denstone. He and J.L.Brear, his fives partner for many years, undertook the coaching, teaching the boys to take the ball off the back wall – a new experience! – and to develop skills equally with both hands. The outbreak of war put a stop to the building of any further courts (two more had been planned), but matches were played against teams from Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield Universities, and later against Oundle and Bedford. Inter-house competitions at senior and junior levels flourished, and Old Denstonian fives players began to make their mark at Oxford and Cambridge. D.A.A.Beardsmore was

LEFT John Adamson in 1982



Secretary of Rugby Fives at Cambridge for the 1944/45 season, although no official Varsity Matches were played during the War years, and D.M.Haynes is also recorded at Denstone as having played for Cambridge during those years. L.D.Ashcroft won selection for Oxford in 1950 (a particularly strong side) and 1952.

A great decade

In 1950, S.D.Hignell and W.G.Tobias won the Mappin Cup for Public Schools' Doubles. This heralded a great decade for fives at the College, which improved its facilities by building two more courts in 1952. The following year saw a clean sweep in the Schools' Championships, D.T.Sparrow winning the Singles (the first Denstonian to do so) and with A.C.Dracup, the Doubles as well, defeating their second pair, E.H.Miller and A.W.Seddon, in the final. Miller and Seddon were good enough to win the North of England Open Doubles in 1954, a title which Dracup and Sparrow took, along with the Scottish Open Doubles, in 1956. Also in 1956, to emphasise Denstone's expertise at Doubles, R.S.D.Jones and N.H.Wood became the third pair from the College to win the Mappin Cup.

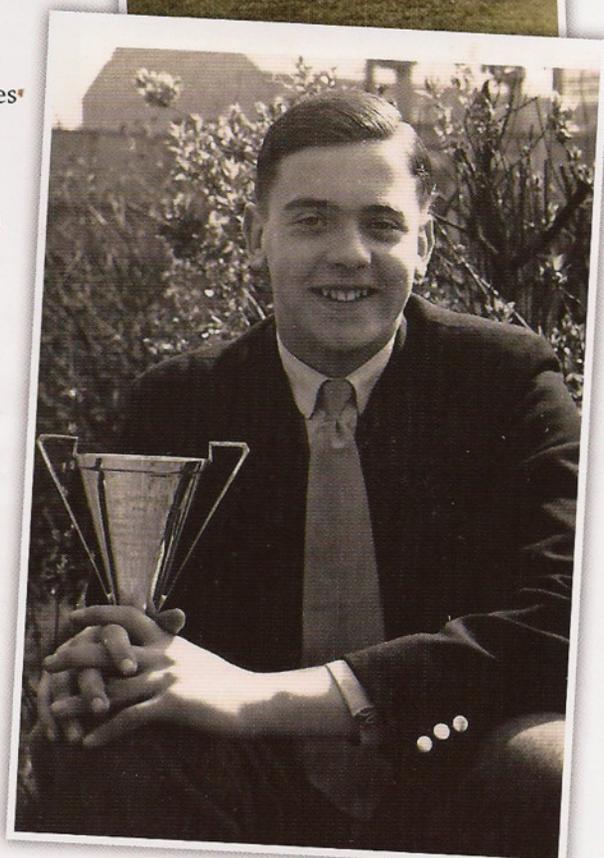
ABOVE Bill Tobias playing on court at Denstone in 1950
 RIGHT SD Hignell & WG Tobias with the Mappin Cup in 1950
 BELOW DT Sparrow with the Jesters' Cup in 1953



Three of these players were to feature heavily in Varsity Matches and to be team captain in their final year: Tobias (1954-56) and Sparrow (1956-58), both left-handers, for Oxford; and Dracup for Cambridge (1957-59). Bill Tobias still remembers one of Derek Sparrow's favourite shots, 'a high lob dropping nearly dead in the back left corner'!

End of Adamson's reign

In 1958, John Adamson's long and dedicated reign as master-in-charge came to an end. He and Jim Brear had encouraged the best games players, especially cricketers, to invest in fives as a winter sport, and this policy had brought its due reward. Fives was not just for the experts, however: house matches were keenly contested, and a large number



FIVES.

Denstone v. Rugby Fives Assoc.

A.C. Oramp and D.T. Sparrow vs. R.A. Whittle and J.F. Redlove
5-15, 15-4.

A.C. Oramp and D.T. Sparrow vs. G.P. Lutterbourn and G. Dawd.
15-11, 15-5.

Miller and Seddon vs. G.P. Lutterbourn and G. Dawd.
15-4, 7-15.

Miller and Seddon vs. R.A. Whittle and J.F. Redlove.
15-3, 15-12.

Denstone Won 87-84.

2/3/53.

D.T. Sparrow.

of boys were involved in the internal senior and junior singles competitions. So, when Adamson's assistant Colin Shearer took over as master-in-charge, things were in good shape. And when he was joined the next year by Tony Tiffin, fresh from captaining a winning Cambridge side in 1958, Denstone's fives future was assured.

Denstone's improved facilities and tournament successes meant that the season soon expanded to include some Michaelmas Term fixtures. There was an Under 16 team as well as 1st and 2nd IVs, and for several years in the 1960s the Denstone Staff could provide exceptionally strong opposition for the better pupils to practise against. The Headmaster from 1957 to 1968 was B.M.W. Trapnell, a former National Singles champion; assistant Chaplain M.P. Skliros had captained Cambridge at fives; and D.A. Norman had also won three half-blues for Cambridge. Add to them G.A. Tiffin, and you had a four of the highest quality.

Further success in the Mappin Cup came in 1963, when D.D. Braithwaite and T.J.A. Newey (another right- and left-handed pair) were the winners without losing a game, and two more Denstonians played in the Varsity Match, T.H. Peake (Oxford) in 1964 and



'Braithwaite and Newey won the 1963 Mappin Cup without losing a game'

LEFT A match card from 1953: Denstone beat the RFA by three points
BELOW Trevor Newey's trophy in 1963

R.L. Short (Cambridge) from 1968-70, captaining the light-blues in his final year. Tony Tiffin had taken over as master-in-charge in 1962, staying until 1968, when he moved to Rugby. A thoughtful and skilled player and coach, he made a great contribution to Fives at Denstone. Bob Short, one of the best players produced in Tony's time, writes: 'He had a very deft touch and was always hitting the nick. He taught me length rather than power, but I should have heeded him more than I did!'

'The Midland Circuit'

What one might call the 'Midland Circuit' was in full swing in the 1960s. Denstone played school matches against Oundle, Bedford, Bedford Modern, Nottingham High, Bloxham and, towards the end of the decade, Rugby and King's Worcester. Visiting clubs were the Universities of Loughborough, Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield, the Old Denstonians, Old Oundelians and Old Haberdashers, the Jesters and occasionally teams from Durham and Edinburgh. Then there was the annual clash with the Masters, who usually lived up to their name.

During the 1960s, various Old Denstonian teams, usually fours but occasionally an eight, had come to play a weekend's fives against the Common Room and the College. In the early 1970s, the team began to be described as the 'Derby Old Denstonians' or just the 'Derby Fives Club' and in the 1972/73 season as the 'Derby Mercia Club'. As the club grew, although it soon attracted members who were not Old Denstonians, the connection with the College became even closer. As it turned out, the club was to hold its practices and home matches there for three decades before returning to Derby and changing its name to Derby Moor Fives Club in 2003.

When Tony Tiffin left Denstone and Colin Shearer took over the reins again in 1968, he introduced matches for Under 15s to provide an incentive to

'The Christmas Cup was contested, although the actual trophy had been lost'

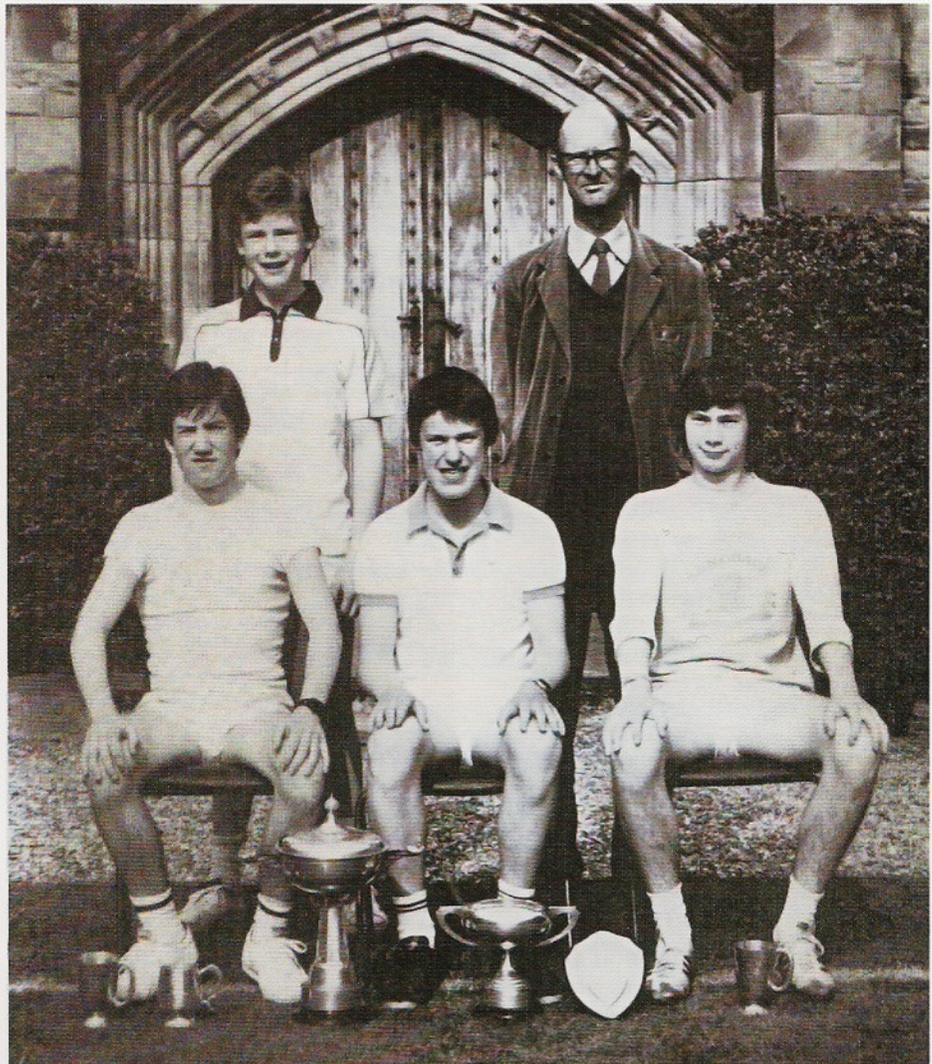
younger players. The College had a particularly good season in 1971, winning 13 out of 15 matches and tying one of the others. S.A. de Belder and Michael Morgan won the Northumbria Shield, a Schools' competition held in Durham, and then capped it by taking the Mappin Cup in the Nationals. Morgan also reached the final of the Schools' Singles, losing to a very good Bedfordian, while de Belder was to play three times for Oxford, captaining the team in 1974. A.C.Palmer, also a part of that superb 1971 Denstone team, played in the same three years for Cambridge and also captained his side.

Quieter period

A quieter period followed these successes, despite the assistance of J.D.Bassett, A.E.Marsden and R.B.Jackson, all masters involved in the coaching of fives at various levels. When Colin Shearer was unable to continue through injury, Richard Jackson took over as master-in-charge in 1975, and it was not long before reward came in the form of more successes at the National Schools at Whitgift. A.Daryani and G.Morgan won the Mappin Cup in 1977, followed by a Singles success for Morgan the next year, only the second time a boy from Denstone had won the Jesters' Cup.

Internal competitions between houses and individuals were still keenly contested at this time. In 1972 the Old Haberdashers, a London Club which had been coming on tour to Denstone since the mid-sixties, gave a cup for Colts Singles 'to mark all the matches over many happy years'. The Derby Mercia Club gave a cup for first-year competition in 1977, and in 1981 the Christmas Cup, still contested although the actual trophy had been lost for more than a decade, was replaced by a trophy from Joan Wood.

A quarter of the school was playing the game regularly in 1980, and the pressure on courts was so great in 1981 that Richard Jackson reported that 'we may have to be more selective in



The Colts' Fives Team — 1982

*Standing: T. J. Norris, R. B. Jackson, Esq.,
Seated: (L to R) M. A. Bollard, J. F. Bradbury, J. C. G. Moss.*

ABOVE Denstone's Colts in 1982, winners of both the National Schools' Singles and Doubles titles

future'. 1982 brought further success in the National Schools, when J.F.Bradbury and M.A.Bollard won the Colts Doubles, and Bradbury beat J.C.G.Moss, another Denstonian, in the Colts Singles final. This would have augured well for the future, but sadly Bollard left in July 1982 and Bradbury in February the next year.

Although there were to be no further wins in championships, the game retained good support over the next few years, with well over a hundred boys playing, an outstanding master-in-charge in Richard Jackson and valuable coaching assistance from Colin Shearer, David Dexter and David

Horn. Major repair work was done on the courts in 1985, and matches were played against opponents such as Bloxham, Bedford Modern, Radley and the far-distant Sedbergh and Giggleswick. Some girls were starting to play, as well.

Two crucial losses

In February 1988, disaster struck: Richard Jackson died from a heart attack. Colin Shearer was to retire that same year, and thus two of the men who had put most into Fives at Denstone since John Adamson's day were taken from the College. And sadly, John Adamson himself died that year

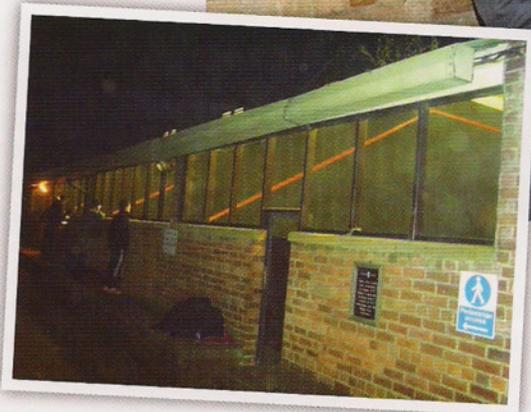
'There are plans to run inter-house competitions again at both Senior and Colts levels'

too. David Dexter took over next season, but with academic and other sporting commitments he and his team could not maintain the popularity of Fives, and the game faltered, with other higher-profile sports taking priority.

The Derby Mercia Club continued to provide opportunities for practice against good quality opposition for another decade, but fewer pupils responded. The courts became less of a focal point, and their condition began to deteriorate. The Mercia Club moved to Derby Moor in 2003, and at the same time the courts at Denstone were refurbished, thanks to generous donations from a number of Old Denstonians and the RFA.

The good news now is that a recent initiative has brought life back to the game, and with an enthusiastic master-in-charge, Tony Pearson, and a visiting coach, Anthony Goodwin, prospects are much brighter for Denstone's Fives. The Michaelmas term is the most popular at the moment, and there are plans to run inter-House competitions again at Senior and Colts level. Smaller numbers play in the Lent, which limits the chances for

matches and entries to regional and national competitions, but Fives coaching continues into the Summer term, making Denstone one of the few schools playing throughout the year. So far there have been matches against Oundle and Derby Moor, and the reappearance of Denstonians in RFA competitions is eagerly awaited. The newly instituted Midlands Regional would be a good target for a first venture in 2014.



TOP A young Denstone team from 2013
CENTRE Geoff Sherratt (RFA President) with Judy Teather and David Dexter at the reopening of the courts in 2003
BOTTOM The Denstone courts in 2012

■ The author would like to thank all those who have helped with this article, particularly Denstone Alumni Co-ordinator Fiona Atkinson, Tony Pearson, Anthony Goodwin, Derek Sparrow, Bill Tobias, Trevor Newey, Bob Short, Gordon Morgan, Stuart Kirby and Geoff Smith. John Adamson's handwritten researches into the early years were also indispensable.