

Rugby School Fives

David Barnes looks at the game in its spiritual home

The opening of the new Fives courts at Rugby School in 2010 brought to an end more than 20 barren years at the School which gave its name to one of the codes of Fives. It was in 1989 that the decision was taken to remove the existing courts, and to build the Design Centre on the site.

It is tempting to assert that Rugby Fives was 'invented' at Rugby School, just as Eton Fives was first played at Eton College. But the plain-court game, with no buttresses or steps, has a history which is harder to trace, because of its very simplicity. We can say, however, that Rugby was among the first – and the most prestigious – schools to play the game on an organised basis, and that its pupils came to prefer its directness to the intricacies of the buttress games of Eton and Winchester, and to any version of the game played with a bat.

The School records 'Fives' being played in the early 19th century with hands and bats in areas not originally intended for such games. In 1900 H.C. Bradby wrote: 'When it first came into existence we do not know, but given a wall, a paved ground and a boy, one may be fairly safe in conjecturing that some sort of Fives will be played. The buildings completed in 1816 afforded, unintentionally no doubt, special facilities for the game. There were two specially suitable places known in the Thirties, at any rate, as the Great and Little Fives Courts.'

In a letter to his father dated October 1st 1813, a young Rugbeian named TJ Churton wrote: 'Our most fashionable game now is Fives, which has been principally brought in by the Quadrangle, where there is good room to play, as also against the end of the School towards the play-ground, and in the great School. I am very fond of it, tho' not yet very expert. It is a very good exercise, and makes one warm without putting one out of breath.'

Thomas Hughes, who went to Rugby in 1834 and himself excelled at sport, refers several times in 'Tom Brown's Schooldays' to Fives and the Fives court. And another early witness to the game was EH Bradby, writing in 1839: 'As to our games here, there are none besides cricket, football and fives. At the first I have played twice, at the third, never.'

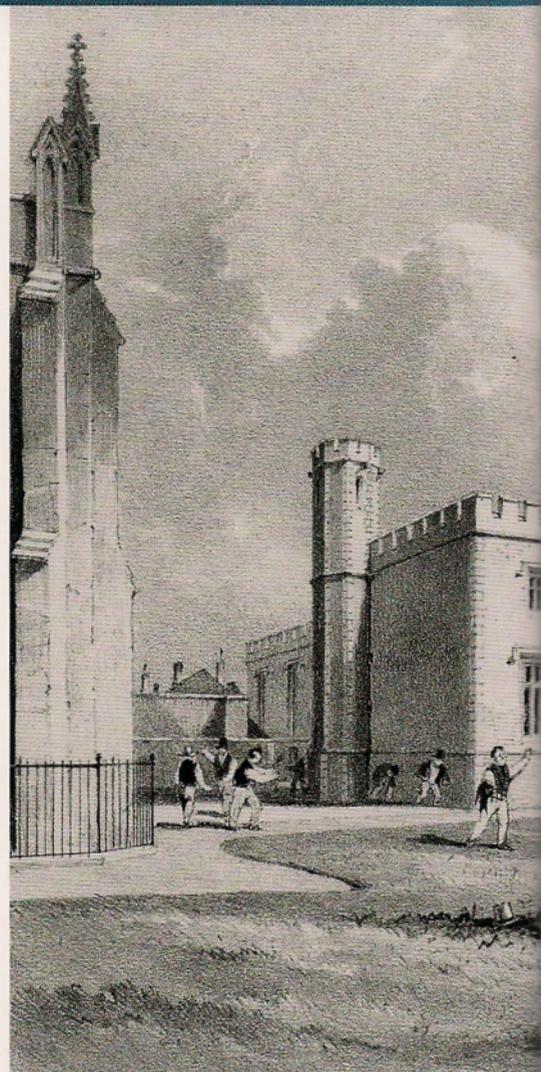
Bat Fives and handball

John Inglis, long-time researcher of Fives at Rugby and master-in-charge from 1957-67, writes of this early period: 'The Fives he (Bradby) notes was Bat Fives played against the west end of School House by senior boys who could afford a new bat when they broke one; and he would have been one of the fags at either side employed to retrieve the ball when it went out of court. More primitive games of handball were played in the cloisters round two sides of the Old Quad and, in particular, in the porch leading in from the street which formed an almost enclosed area with ledges at different heights. To the relief of pedestrians, the reconstruction of the Chapel caused Bat Fives to move to the South side of the Rackets Court where the Rev. LF Burrows had paid for the paving of a court.' Thompson, the local maker of bats; was also no doubt much relieved as this development ensured the continuation of his business.

The first two formal, (uncovered) four-walled Fives courts at Rugby were built in 1860 on the north side of William Butterfield's 1859 Rackets court. They may well have been the first Fives courts to be designed by a famous architect, and they cost £235. On what were they based? Very close by in Rugby, there was already a sizeable four-walled Fives court (34 ft long by 22 ft wide) at Thomas Bloxam's private boarding school. Rugbeians could use that court for hand-Fives, and some masters wanted to copy its

dimensions, but the eventual decision was to experiment. One court was to be much wider, and the narrower court was to have a small buttress on the left-hand wall, based on the advice of Old Rugbeians at Oxford.

It soon became apparent that neither court was particularly suitable for hand-Fives as Rugbeians saw the game. By one of the ironies of sport, and in a very English fashion, it was the space between the two courts that emerged, once paved, as a compromise solution. This court was about as wide as Bloxam's; but the plans, unearthed by historian Ian Roberts in the City of London Metropolitan Archives, show it was 10 feet longer than a modern court. Doubles was probably a better game than singles here, but both were played. The sheer length of the court must have required quite a hit for the ball to reach the back wall; and when it did, the doors in the side walls at the back to permit access from one court to the next must have made the ball even harder to dig out of the corner.





LEFT A view Of Rugby School In 1854 showing Bat Fives being played against the school walls ABOVE The 1860 Courts, as they were in 1900 BELOW Fives Bats In Rugby School Museum

Close inspection of the 1900 picture seems to show that another, slightly higher back wall was built in front of the doors to shorten the court, make the game less exhausting and remove one element of chance.

This court soon had rivals, as two Eton Fives courts, paid for by masters, were built on to the east end of the Rackets court in 1863, and two more went up the next year. Plenty of masters played both games, but a preference emerged for the plain-court version, and in 1875 there was a plan to convert the two partly redundant Butterfield courts – the larger one now dubbed ‘The Wilderness’ – to almost the same size as the centre one. This was vetoed by the Head Master, who felt that a later generation might prefer a mixture of sizes! He soon put matters right, however, by subscribing generously to two new courts built in 1877. An unusual trophy has come down to us from this time, a hip-flask won by FH Bowden Smith, the third son of one of the masters. He was only



‘The School has records of ‘Fives’ being played in the early 19th century’

14 and had apparently come ‘1st in Double Hand Fives’. There is no record in *The Meteor* (the Rugby School magazine) of this, but it is hard to believe that hip-flasks were routinely awarded for house competitions, particularly to boys of his age!

The game’s popularity ebbed and flowed, but more pairs of uncovered four-walled courts were built in 1893 and 1898. The later ones, for unknown reasons, were significantly smaller than previous courts at Rugby, occasioning calls for larger ones! There are reports in *The Meteor* of 1905 and 1906 of more new courts being built, finally giving Fives more status, as the School pair was allowed to wear colours and blazer badges like the Rackets pair. Two further courts, covered this time and with red floors, were given by the Old Rugbeian Society in 1910. These six courts built in the first decade of the century survived and remained playable until 1989.

Eton Fives ‘a last resort’

H.H.Hardy wrote in 1911: ‘There is no lack of Fives players. Of these, the majority play the Rugby game, in the four-walled, un-butressed court, whose latest dimensions are 29 x 19 feet, with the service board at 29 inches. The Eton Courts are used, but a good deal as a pis-aller [a last resort]; the slogging rallies, not unvaried by crafty ‘placing’, having always been far more popular in Rugby than the finesse and surprises of the Eton game.’

The reduced dimensions of the early 20th Century courts demonstrate that

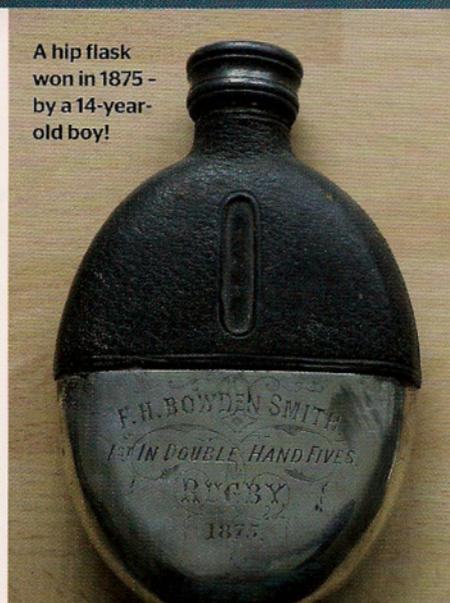
the game had developed a good deal at Rugby since 1860. In fact, they almost matched the 28 x 18 feet (with the bar at 30 inches) to be laid down by the RFA in 1931. In 'foreign' matches against Cheltenham (1903) and Malvern (1904), however, the Rugbeians were dismayed to find that not all courts were the same as theirs, and they duly lost both matches heavily. What was disconcerting was that the Cheltenham courts – possibly based on the original Rugby court – were about ten feet longer than theirs; and the Malvern courts had large Winchester-style buttresses! Another traditional Rackets opponent, Clifton, was also played at Fives in the early 1900s. The pairs sometimes overlapped between the two sports, with the Fives match following the Rackets. In this case, it must have been a long day for all concerned!

Full fixture list for court games

In that golden era before the First World War, the Easter Term was the term for Fives and Rackets, and Hardy said it was 'very full up with a series of School Ties in all the Courts games.'

A feature of the Rugby courts, all uncovered until the 1910 ones, was the slope from front to back, and the gully and drain at the back to dispose of the rainwater. This feature was occasionally found elsewhere. Other schools to build four-walled courts around this time were Christ's Hospital (1901), Oundle and Alleyn's (1905), Tonbridge (1906), Giggleswick (1907), Haileybury (1908), Winchester (1909), Bristol Grammar (1910), Whitgift (1911) and St. Paul's (1912). Not all of them followed the Rugby model, but Giggleswick certainly did, and the Christ's Hospital courts were 34 feet long and had a drain at the back and inter-connecting doors in the side walls, like the old courts at Rugby.

Bat Fives, which had continued as



A hip flask won in 1875 – by a 14-year-old boy!

'Rugbeians were dismayed that not all courts were the same as theirs'

a competitive sport in the 1890s, was no longer played after 1903, and the internal Eton Fives competition, which had continued since 1868 alongside the Rugby ones, ended in 1913. Hockey was fast becoming more dominant, but Rackets and Rugby Fives – the game's title now fully established – were played to a good standard.

The 1st World War limited school Fives matches, but internal competitions continued. When peace returned, there was a general expansion of the game in schools as travel became easier and more courts were built. On the national scene, a short-lived Fives Association was formed in 1923, and four years later the Rugby Fives Association came into existence. Court dimensions and rules became formalised, the Varsity Rugby Fives Match started in 1925 and the Public Schools' Rugby Fives Championships began in 1930.

Rugby slowly built up its Fives fixture list during this period, Oundle being a regular match, starting in 1928. The first fixture, with three pairs per side, was drawn 6 games all, although there was initial uncertainty as to how to score the match. Oundle developed into one of the most successful schools in competitions over the next two decades, while Rugby gave rather less

priority to the game. Match reports during the 1930s often complain of the lack of practice time, and Rugby only rarely entered a pair for the Public Schools' Championships, an exception being 1934, when the School had two very good players, JF Hayley and CM MacLehose, who were both later to represent Oxford.

During the 1930s, matches were also held against Cheltenham, Malvern, Bedford and Denstone; and against such visiting sides as JF Burnet's Jesters, various Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, Old Boy teams from Alleyn's, Dulwich, Malvern and Rugby, and of course the faithful 'Old Guard', or Common Room. Sadly, not only were the matches mostly lost, but also one year, in 1936, the Cheltenham match was cancelled to make way for Hockey house matches! As ever, the relative speed of the different courts and balls was a matter of much post-match discussion. A report in 1932 describes the Rugby courts as being 'very fast and very true' and contrasting them with the ones at Cambridge: 'the difference in speed... is equal to that of a taxi and a four-wheeler'.

The War Years

The 2nd World War years saw plenty of play at Rugby – Clifford 'Bull' Rogers, a good left-hander, was in charge of the game from 1940 on – but there was an understandable reduction in matches. Those that were played were against top opposition (Oundle, Bedford) and the results were as before; but four cups were competed for in internal competitions in 1941 and the frosty winter in 1942 meant that the courts were in high demand.

The same thing occurred in 1947, and on February 21st 1948 a team from the newly-founded RFA Club came to play at Rugby, one of only seven schools selected for the honour. Some fine players went from Rugby to play for

Oxford in the post-war years: GA Cox (1946), P Scanlon (1948), and MS Berthoud (1952/3/4/5). The last-named captained a winning Oxford side in 1955 with some very distinguished players, one of them a freshman called JAE Evans, who was to later have a lasting influence on Rugby Fives!

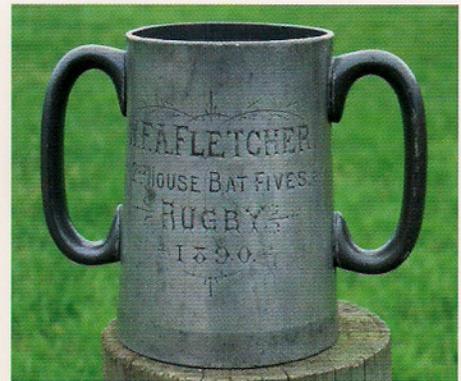
It would be good to report that the 1950s brought greater success in Fives matches and national competitions to Rugby School. But, despite welcome signs of revival at various stages, the old pattern seemed to have reasserted itself. Part of the reason was no doubt the conflict with hockey, and another part the geography: Oundle, Bedford and Denstone were among the very strongest schools at the time. A satisfactory solution was to play 'A' sides from Oundle and Bedford, which brought more balance, and fixtures against Marlborough and Bloxham were also more even. Clubs continued to come from London, Oxford and Cambridge, and Manchester YMCA was also on the guest list from 1960 to '62.

John Inglis modestly recalls his initiation as master-in-charge: 'It was impressed upon me, when I was invited to look after Fives in 1957, that boys ran the game at Rugby, and that beaks only provided help when asked.

This worked well for the next ten years, as keen captains asked me and my much stronger partner John Evans to play on most whole school days through the winter. The only task was to drive four friendly boys to matches at other schools from time to time. The Games Committee in about 1960 decreed that boys could only represent the school in one sport in the Lent term, so a nucleus of dedicated Fives players developed, and there could no longer be claims that hockey prevented fives players from practising. In 1966 a fine reinforcement arrived: John Watkinson, the national singles champion, although bitten seriously by Rackets, would sometimes play Fives to keep his hand – or hands – in.'

The dawn of a golden era

No Rugbeian had entered the Schools Championships for many years, so it was a pioneering move when AF Doulton and JSJ MacLehose travelled to Whitgift School in 1963, reaching the third round of the doubles competition. Encouraged, MacLehose and MJ Hawkins entered the next year, losing narrowly in the third round of the doubles to the eventual winners, Clifton. A barrier had been removed and greater things lay ahead.



ABOVE WFA Fletcher's 1890 Bat Fives Trophy
BELOW Rugby's first match in its new courts was against Bedford School in November 2010

Mike Cleaver, who arrived at Rugby in 1962, remembers playing Fives three or four times a week. 'Fives was not a major sport so had to come after the main team games. We arranged it with the staff and if they were not able to play we played ourselves. There is no doubting the excellence of the coaching – all three masters were only too keen to help us improve and put Rugby back on the Fives map. By playing such hard-hitting players boys are going to improve – and we did!'

Colts events had not begun in the 1960s, and the West of England event was initially reserved for schools from that area, so in 1966 the only open competitions were the National Schools championships. Rugby entered TA Cowie, MJ Cleaver, AF Colver and RCO Skinner, a team which had won five of its six matches during the season. Cowie was beaten in Round 3 by Weston of Bedford Modern, the ultimate winner of the singles, and Colver went one further, losing to Weston's doubles partner. Colver and Cowie reached round 4 of the doubles, losing to eventual winners Clifton.

In 1967, after an unbeaten season, with both Oundle and Bedford defeated at full strength, Colver and Cowie reached the final of the Schools doubles, losing in a two-hour final to



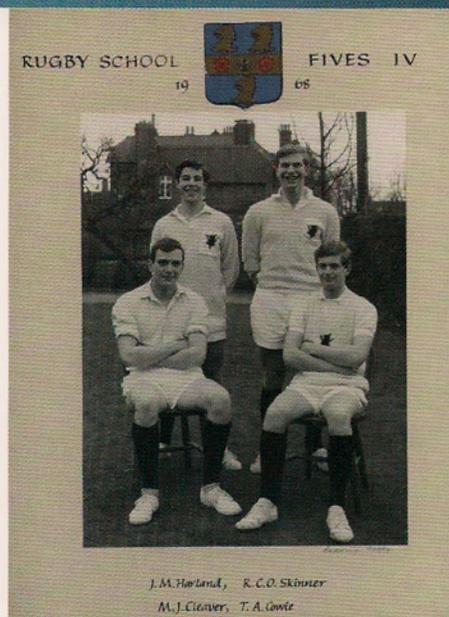
Baker and Hebden of Alleyn's; their second pair (Cleaver and GAJ Sparling) had pushed the Alleyn's boys all the way in the third round. In the singles, Colver reached the semi-finals, losing to Dalzell of Bedford, the eventual winner. The next year was another unbeaten season and saw Cowie and Cleaver win the Schools doubles title, while Cowie reached the semi-final of the singles, losing to Leary of Bristol Grammar School.

By this time, the West of England Schools event had become open to all, and in January 1969 Rugby won both titles. Cowie took the singles, while he and his partner Skinner concluded their school career triumphantly, beating Alleyn's in the doubles final without conceding a point.

Rugbeians make their mark

The great achievements of the late sixties were a hard act to follow, although Rugby had good sides and entered four players for the National Schools in 1969, 1970 and 1971. But while the School had a quieter period in the first half of the new decade, Old Rugbeians were making their mark at University level and beyond. A whole succession of them played for Oxford: GB Colver (1969/70/1/2), JCA Leslie (1971/2), RTW Warner (1971/2/3), DM Harland (1972/3), JD Loake (1973), R Kennedy (1973) and D Urquhart (1984). Cambridge honours were won by AF Colver (1968/70), TA Cowie (1970/1/2/3), JM Harland (1971/2/3) and RCO Skinner (1972). At Durham, MJ Cleaver (1968-70) reached the British Universities Doubles final in 1970.

Of this group, the Cambridge men had the greatest success. TA Cowie was British Universities Singles and Doubles champion in 1970, then National Singles champion in 1971 and 1972 and runner-up in 1973; he was also a National Doubles finalist with MJ Cleaver the same year. AF Colver was



'The School's great achievements of the late sixties were a hard act to follow'

British Universities Doubles champion in 1969, and JM Harland won the Universities Singles in 1972. In that same year's Varsity Match, seven of the sixteen players were Rugbeians.

A word now on Staff changes around that time. John Watkinson, who had won his third National Singles title in 1970, left in 1971, but Tony Tiffin, who had captained Cambridge in 1958 (one of his opponents in the Varsity Match being a certain JAE Evans), came to Rugby in the same year. John Evans, who had been master-in-charge of Fives since 1967, handed over to Tony in 1973 and left Rugby in 1981.

From 1975, Rugby was again participating in Schools competitions, including the newly introduced Under 16 level at the Nationals. PT Yates reached the 3rd Round of the Open singles, while RA Palfreyman went one further in the Colts. Over the next few years, several fine players were to emerge, among them RS Wilson, PE Clayton, RB Irani and IRH Jackson. Palfreyman and Wilson won the North of England Schools Championship in 1978, the last year it was held, and reached the final of the West of England Schools Doubles. Clayton later played a lot of good fives at Manchester University and for the YMCA Club, while Irani and Jackson went on to Cambridge, where between them they

Rugby's 1968 Team had an unbeaten season, with Cowie and Cleaver going on to win the National Schools Doubles title

won eight half-blues. Jackson was also a British Universities Doubles winner in 1987. Their respective brothers, NB Irani and DH Jackson also played to a good standard, Jackson representing Cambridge in 1985.

An end - and a new beginning

In 1983, WJ Hughes-D'Aeth became master-in-charge, and the school continued to play matches and enter a pair for the Nationals; but support gradually fell away, and the valuable site of the courts became the projected, and then actual, location for a new Design Centre. It was hoped that new courts would be built as part of the second phase of the Sports Centre, but as the years went by and funds were spent on other essential projects, no new courts emerged. Letters were written to The Meteor and the Head Master, pressure from past organisers, players and supporters of the game was applied, and in 2008, the Governing Body of Rugby School allocated space for two new courts to be built on to the Sports Centre.

A massive fund-raising effort, spearheaded by John Evans and Dick Warner and unstintingly supported by Old Rugbeians, the RFA and its members, and by Kerry Wilson and the Development Department at the School, achieved its challenging target, and the new courts were opened in October 2010. It is a tribute to Trevor White, the master-in-charge, and his new recruits that Rugbeians have already made an impression in boys' and girls' National Championships in their first season. The future looks bright for Rugby's Fives!

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