

GEOFFREY RIMMER 1905-1997



Geoffrey Rimmer with Joan Wood at the RFA Celebration Dinner in September 1997

One of the great men in the history of Rugby Fives, Geoffrey Rimmer died on the penultimate day of last year. He was 92, and so, as John Battersby, his friend of many years, pointed out in a moving tribute at Geoffrey's funeral, his life was only a few years short of spanning the whole of the twentieth century. With his death, Fives loses the last of the men who created the Rugby Fives Association 70 years ago.

The youngest of three brothers, Geoffrey was educated at Dulwich College, where he first played Fives in 1918, almost a decade before the formation of the Rugby Fives Association and the subsequent standardisation of courts and rules. At the age of 17, Geoffrey was sent to Germany to learn the language and study the market for surgical instruments, his father's business. While the eldest brother, Robin, joined the family firm, Geoffrey and middle brother Ramsey were helped by their father in 1923 to set up their own business, Rimmer Brothers, specialising in the illumination of medical instruments.

Many Old Boys' Fives Clubs sprang up in the 1920s, and Geoffrey played in one of the first Old Alleynian fixtures against the newly-formed Clove Club from Hackney Downs in 1926. One of his opponents that day, Bill Pett, later introduced Geoffrey to the renowned Dr Edgar Cyriax, who invited him to bring an O.A. side to play the U.C.S. Old Boys at Hampstead. Dr Cyriax's idea of forming a Rugby Fives Association came to fruition in June 1927, when representatives of four clubs (U.C.S. Old Boys, Old Sinjuns, Alleyn Old Boys and Clove Club) met at King's College. Old Alleynians had no official club as yet, but at the first A.G.M. of the R.F.A. in October of that year, Geoffrey Rimmer was elected to the Committee.

Two years later, Dulwich College built three new Fives courts, and Geoffrey was instrumental in persuading the Head Master that they should be built to the new R.F.A. specifications and that lighting should be installed in the six old courts at the same time. This meant that the Old Alleynian Fives and Squash Club, officially formed in 1930, had perhaps the best Fives facilities in London to play on. Geoffrey gave a silver trophy, the Open Fives Cup, in 1932. The club soon had over 100 members, many of them such fine Fives players that in 1936 all four finalists in the Cyriax Cup were Old Alleynians. The O.A. 1st IV played about 25 matches each season, the most prominent fixtures being against Alleyn Old Boys, Old Blues, Jesters, Old Paulines, Old Merchant Taylors, Bank of England and R.F.A.; and there was a second IV list of about a dozen matches annually.

The 1930s were a golden era for Rugby Fives, especially in and around

London. As Geoffrey recalled in a tape-recorded interview some fifty years later: "The Association had a big fixture list, including tours to the Midlands, county games, hospital games; there were even inter-bank matches." He went on: "The desire of all of us in the Association was to provide Fives for players after leaving school. In 1930, if you belonged to your own club or the Jesters or the Association, you had plenty of opportunity of keeping up your Fives." The enthusiasm was typical of Geoffrey; being by his own admission a keen rather than an expert player, he saw Fives as a game for all, and he put his organisational abilities at the service of that game and its players.

An even more special feature of the 1930s for Geoffrey was his marriage to Kathleen in 1933, a union which was to produce 3 children, Angela, Peter and Wendy, and to last for 63 years. The firm of Rimmer Brothers had survived after a tough first few years, and in 1937 it became a limited company and moved to the address in Clerkenwell Green from which it still operates in 1998. In old age, Geoffrey was very proud of the fact that his son Peter and grandsons Paul and James were still carrying on the family business he and his brother had founded before the war. During the war, the manufacture of medical instruments had been designated essential work, so Geoffrey was prevented from joining the armed forces; he became a section leader in the Auxiliary Fire Service - a hazardous occupation during the Blitz - while the rest of the family was evacuated to the country.

Although his working life was focussed on London, Geoffrey was a countryman at heart. A highly skilled fisherman of trout and salmon, he loved to walk and shoot in the country and adored gardening. Generous as ever, he liked nothing better than to give away his catch or his produce, but late in life, he developed an interest in cooking, an even more satisfying way of complementing his other skills.

Being a sport dependent on specialised buildings and on a smallish pool of players, some of whom did not return from battle, Fives was cruelly hit by the war. Dulwich provided a sad example of this, all the courts being destroyed in a bombing raid. Geoffrey's reaction was a typically practical one: seeing that there were many other priorities before schools such as Dulwich might get round to building Fives courts again, he agreed to become the Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of a Rugby Fives Association club, formed after the A.G.M. of the Association in June 1947 'to provide opportunities for those without club courts to continue to play Fives'. The first annual subscription was 10 shillings (50p.), and by September that year there were 14 members, and 12 different schools and clubs had been approached for away matches. Having at first used the courts at the College of St Mark and St John for practice, the club was then offered the use of the old courts at Alleyn's School, the start of a welcome and long-lived arrangement.

Geoffrey built up the R.F.A. Club fixture list to 18 matches by 1954, when he was elected its first President. In 1957 he presented a fine silver trophy for the President's Cup, to be competed for annually by drawn pairs. Solid pewter tankards, funded by Geoffrey himself, were also provided for the winners, and these generous gifts were to continue for the rest of his life and beyond, since he ensured that the supply would last until the turn of the century. The President's Cup is very much Geoffrey's sort of competition: any member may enter, regardless of standard; it is a social as well as a sporting occasion; and the day offers something for everyone.

Geoffrey succeeded John Armitage as President of the R.F.A. itself in 1960, remaining as President of both Association and Club until 1965. Then, aged 60, he withdrew with typical modesty, handing the torch on to others, but always retaining a special affection for the R.F.A. Club. He was made its first Honorary Life Member in recognition of his unequalled role in the Club's history, and when the Club and the Association rejoined forces in 1996, he was similarly honoured by the R.F.A.. Even past the age of ninety, he remained deeply interested in Rugby Fives, and one of the high points of the last year of his life was being able to attend the Celebration Dinner at the Bank of England Club in September.

**David Barnes**