

RFA Handbook 1998-99

CAMBRIDGE: THE 50th "PAST VERSUS PRESENT"

Large Fives Dinners are hardly common occurrences, but one is an annual event. Every year since February 26th 1949, eight past half-blues from Cambridge University have taken on the current undergraduate VIII in a match and then entertained them for dinner afterwards, initially in a Cambridge eating-house called "The Dorothy", but since the early 1950s at Magdalene College. The man behind those dinners for forty years, until his death in 1989, was Jock Burnet, an Old Pauline who played for Cambridge in the Varsity Match in 1934 and returned to Cambridge after the war to become Fellow and Bursar of Magdalene and, at the invitation of the undergraduates, President of the Cambridge University Rugby Fives Club. As more and more fives players passed through his hands, so the dinner grew in size, until every year now some forty or fifty members of the past attend the event.

This February the Fiftieth Match and the Fiftieth Dinner were held, the one at Oundle (there being no courts at Portugal Place any more), the other in the candle-lit Hall of Magdalene College. Exactly ninety-two members of the Past with wives, partners and guests entertained the Present VIII in sumptuous style. It must have been one of the biggest gatherings ever of fives-playing Jesters, members of the RFA and winners of every kind of fives tournament, singles and doubles, with a representative from virtually every Cambridge side since 1946, when the Varsity Match resumed after the war.

Of the sixteen players in the original match, won by the Present by 245-243, five attended the Dinner fifty years later, and a sixth would have done, had not the door of his Suffolk cottage blown shut and condemned him to an evening of near-hypothermia in the garden shed rather than an evening of conviviality in Cambridge. One of those original players was Barry Trapnell, himself the winner of the Jesters Cup for Singles and the Cyriax Cup for Doubles in 1949, now President of CURFC in succession to Jock Burnet. Another was John Burton, a former President of the RFA. One of the delights of the evening was to see Barry hold up the handsome trophy donated by the Jesters in memory of Jock Burnet, which is to be played for each year from now on by Oxford and Cambridge.

Despite the problems suffered by Cambridge for the past four years since the courts there were torn down for a building development, fives at the university continues, with practices at the Perse School and matches at Bedford.

One day a site should be found for some courts to be built to match those that Oxford waited for so long. Meanwhile the annual Past v Present Match and Dinner will go on, and those who played on February 6th 1999 will, I hope, grace at least the second half of the centenary event in February 2049!



John Burton (left) looks on as Barry Trapnell holds up the Jock Burnet trophy

Bob Dolby