

Without schools, modern Fives would not exist, as the great majority of courts are on school premises, and most players first encounter the game at school. The editor intends to commission a series of articles on Fives in schools for future handbooks and is grateful to Ian Roberts for setting the ball rolling with an article on the history of Fives at Giggleswick School in Settle, North Yorkshire.

1. GIGGLESWICK

Following the 1851 rebuilding of Giggleswick School, the Governors wished to erect a shed for use as an indoor playing area. The estimate of £80 caused them to halt the project. It only proceeded when additional money was offered to build the "shed" in a more ornamental style, and in 1864 it was suggested that it could be converted into Fives courts. This then is the first mention of Fives at Giggleswick. We do not know what type of Fives was played here or for how long the courts survived.

In 1869, the School "went public". New buildings were erected on the outskirts of the village, where the School is today. In 1878, Fives courts were built there, and early photographs of the building show the sloping side walls of courts with no back wall and no roof. They were very popular. In winter 1915, an article was published in the School Chronicle looking back to the game in the early 1880s, when more than a quarter of the School entered the Fives competitions. However, it was noted that playing with tennis bats and soft balls was now extremely popular. One Old Boy wrote to complain that "the Giggleswick boy of today has forgotten how to play Fives".

In 1890, £75 5s 0d was raised for a complete renovation of the courts. Sadly, in 1899 they were demolished to make way for science labs. We know that the 1878 courts were Eton courts, and the Chronicle refers to their pepper-pot.

The popularity of the game remained such that there was a demand for new courts. As a result, in 1907 the Vice-Chairman of the School Governors, J G Robinson, built two new courts and gave them to the School to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the original lease of the School. A photograph of these courts, which still stand today at Brookside, midway between the old and the new School sites, accompanies this article.

Since the new courts were built before the determination of the size of the standard Rugby Fives court, their dimensions are somewhat eccentric, and they are some of the biggest Rugby Fives courts known. Tradition has it that when Robinson specified that Rugby courts were to be built, he sent his architect to Rugby School to see what the authentic dimensions were. As well as copying the 30 foot by 20 foot playing area, the architect apparently duplicated the backwards slope on the floor at Rugby which assisted the drainage of water out at the back of their roofless courts. The Giggleswick courts were roofed from the start, so a slope in the floor was unnecessary, but still included. This means that a ball travelling round the back of the court tends to cling to the back wall much more than it would on a court where the floor meets the back wall at a true right angle. A 1912 photograph of the Brookside courts shows the players inside clearly visible from ground level outside. The back wall was originally only 4 feet high and was raised to the required RFA 6 feet later. Otherwise, the courts remain substantially as they were in 1907.

Another pair of courts existed in the back quad of the new School buildings, which presumably enabled Fives to survive the demolition of the 1878 courts until the construction of the Brookside courts. These enjoyed a varied history, starting life as Winchester courts, before having the defining narrow left hand buttress removed. They then appear to have served a dual role as Squash courts after the Brookside courts were built, even though they had a stone floor and a low back wall. The School

Chronicle records Squash tournaments taking place on them during the First World War.

Their biggest disadvantage was having no roof. A ball that went out over the front wall landed in a field at the rear of the School and required a lengthy trek round the School buildings to retrieve it. Repeated complaints by the boys failed to secure even the erection of netting to prevent the problem.

Following the Second World War, it was felt that there was little demand for Squash. The back quad courts were demolished and replaced by a toilet block. Squash did not re-emerge at Giggleswick until the late 1970s, when two courts were built back-to-back with the Fives courts at Brookside. Anyone who feels that the decline in popularity of Fives need be anything more than temporary should take heart from the history of Squash at Giggleswick!

The Brookside courts generated their own rules of play. Each court has a roof truss running centrally down the court from front to back, within the height of the front wall. Local rules permit a let if the ball hits the beam after hitting the front wall, but not if it hits the beam before. Play is commenced not by serving for service, but by the server throwing the ball round so that it hits three walls before bouncing on the floor. Visiting players who try to start a game by rolling a ball to see whose ball stays nearest to the front wall always fall foul of the backwards-sloping floor.

Old issues of the School Chronicle show that local rules must also have applied in relation to the scoring of matches. The 1913 Open Singles Tournament was won by Alan Angus whose scores in the semi-final and final were (17-16; 17-15) and (18-14; 18-17). Similar eccentricities are discernible in the 1914 Singles, where two of the three semi-finalists (sic - this is Giggleswick) won over three games with scores of (18-19; 15-7; 15-3) and (14-15; 17-15; 15-8). It looks as though there was a choice in those days of playing first to 15; playing 2 up; or playing first to a nominated score not exceeding 19.



The 1907 "Brookside" Courts at Giggleswick School

Today, the Brookside courts are the only ones which remain at Giggleswick, but they are still a delight to play upon, even though some (small) expenditure is needed on the roof to prevent water leaking in which can cause the floor to become slippery. As at all schools, the popularity of the game depends upon the presence of a master willing to invest time and effort in the game. The recent appointment of an Old Giggleswickian as Master-in-charge will hopefully restore the popularity of the game. Indeed, now that the School is co-educational at all levels, there is considerable interest amongst the girls. If any touring teams wish to challenge Giggleswick to a fixture, that master is Ross Barrand.

In the 1960s and 70s, Giggleswick was home to one of the true eccentrics of the Fives world. John ("Gabber") Dean was the Master-in-charge for many years and one of the few players in recent memory capable of continuing a rally in the belief that his shot had actually hit the front wall, in the teeth of the opposition of his partner and two opponents, who were quite clear that it had not. I have a treasured memory of being taken by Gabber on my first away fixture to play Jeremy Schroeter and his henchmen at Durham University, when the Fives IV was driven by Gabber in his trademark Renault 4 full of camping gear, Bruno his dog and an open-topped pot of stew which was precariously balanced between the feet of the front-seat passenger. Space was at a premium, and Bruno travelled perched on the chest of the front-seat passenger and leaning over his shoulder, dribbling into the back seat. Gabber abandoned the squad at a Durham pub, leaving it to find its own way back to Giggleswick whilst he took the Renault, Bruno and the stew to attend his son's passing-out parade at Sandhurst, camping overnight en route.

Giggleswick players are noted for their ability to hit the ball hard (they have to, on courts that size), and for an effective lobbing shot making full use of the roof space of the court and the angle of the floor, which leaves a correctly targeted ball clinging to the back wall. For the connoisseurs of Fives courts, an outing to Giggleswick is essential. But few who visit today will realise that Giggleswick is one of those rare schools which have boasted Eton, Rugby and Winchester courts, although not unfortunately all at the same time.

T Ian Roberts.
(Old Giggleswickian 1969-74)