

The second in our series of articles on Fives in schools features Whitgift School in Croydon and is written by Robert Dalman, formerly Hon. Treasurer of the RFA Club and currently organiser of the Old Whitgiftian Fives Club.

2. WHITGIFT

The first Fives courts at Whitgift were built in 1872, soon after new School buildings were opened in North End, Croydon in the previous year. The three uncovered courts were built to the measurements of the courts at Rugby School. The largest, known as the Big Court, measured 30 ft. by 22 ft. and was originally intended for bat-fives. The two smaller courts were 22 ft. by 16 ft. and were intended for hand-fives.

For the first year or so the courts were little used. Although the Head Master, Mr Brodie, played bat-fives occasionally, the game never flourished. From 1879 the Big Court was used principally for hand-fives. Doubles was then the popular game in this court due to its size. The popularity of the Singles game, played in the two smaller courts, increased within a year or two of the courts being opened. The game flourished, certainly up until 1892 and probably well towards the end of the 1890s.

The first recorded competition was held in 1874, and 10 other internal competitions are recorded between then and 1892. Only occasionally did matches take place against other schools. Until 1891 only 8 matches were played, against Ewell School, Epsom College, University College School and St Paul's. Perhaps the small number of fixtures was due to the relatively poor standard of Fives at Whitgift, as the records indicate that all 8 were lost.

Even if the relative standard was poor, the courts were sufficiently well used for a court booking procedure to be included in the rules and regulations drawn up by the Games Committee in 1891. To "engage a court" a player had to "write on the slate legibly the date and the hour of play, and the names of himself and his opponent."

By the late 1890s, however, the popularity of the game had certainly declined. The annual Form Competition had ceased to take place, and it was not until 1902 that the game began to recover. Unfortunately the courts were demolished soon afterwards in the redevelopment of North End. Plans to build new courts were included in the proposed building extensions of 1906, but due to limited resources no new courts were built.

It was not until 1911 that replacement courts were built. They were funded by one of the generous personal gifts made the School by Sir Frederick Edridge, who was Chairman of the Court of Governors of the Whitgift Foundation.

There were three new uncovered Fives courts, all of equal size. The dimensions, of 22 ft. long by 16 ft. wide, mirrored those of the two smaller original courts. It is not known how high the front and back walls were of the original courts, but each of the 1911 courts, which were sunken beneath the ground, had a front wall of 20ft. 6in. and a back wall 15 ft. high.

The School moved from North End to Haling Park in South Croydon in 1931. For the first two years at Haling Park there were no Fives courts. It was the perseverance of both Geoffrey Marks, who was a Governor, and of the Rt. Revd E.S. Woods, Bishop of Croydon, which ensured that new courts were opened in 1933. The courts, with glass roofs, were built in one block, and with viewing platforms for spectators. Apart from replacement roofs and some repair work to the floors necessitated by bomb damage during the War, the courts have remained largely unaltered since that time. The only notable change was the welcome addition of lighting which was installed in the early 1960s.

*The Fives Courts
at Haling Park*



The Head Master at the time the courts were built at Haling Park was Ronald Gurner. He was a keen Fives player and tried to encourage the game, even though his own game was handicapped by a war wound which meant that the effectiveness of his left hand was severely restricted. Apart from Gurner, there was no other master who made any recorded contribution to Fives in the 1930s. This is perhaps not surprising, as before the War it was normal for the School sports to be run by senior boys rather than by masters.

Charles Whyte joined the teaching staff at Whitgift in September 1946, with Bert Parsons arriving the following term in January 1947. Bert Parsons took over the running of Fives until the mid 1950s, when he handed the role on to Charles Whyte. With the exception of a few year in the late 1960s when Tony Tiffin ran the Fives, Charles Whyte was in charge of the game until 1972.

In 1947, Fives at the School had been in a poor state, so Bert Parsons had arranged for the National Schools' Championships to be held at Whitgift to try to encourage a little more interest at the School. The Championships were to remain at Whitgift until 1979-80 before moving to St Paul's the following year.

*Charles Whyte (left)
with Brian Griffiths
and Tom Wood at the
Schools' Championships
at Haling Park in 1975*



I.R.M.Anderson and J.D.Ewart of Whitgift won the National Schools' Doubles Championship in 1955, and Whitgift won the inaugural North of England Schools' Championship in 1960. Other notable players from the School have been Raman Subba Row, J.F.H.Trott, David Mills and David Goodwin, the last-named being the current National Schools' Championship organiser.

Lionel Weston, a Bedford Modernian who had won the National Schools' Singles Championship in 1966, joined the staff at Whitgift in 1972. He immediately took on a prominent role in the coaching of Fives, although Charles Whyte remained involved until his retirement in 1976. The 1970s was a time of great enthusiasm for Fives at the School. In the mid 1970s the enthusiasm was so great that again a booking system was in operation for the courts, both for the lunch hours and after school. One of the strong pairs of this period was Tim Wilson and Ian Curtis.

After Lionel Weston left the School in 1979, there was no obvious successor to take on the coaching role. The 1980s saw a sad period of steady decline for Fives at the School. The role of Master-in-charge of Fives essentially became a caretaker function occupied by a succession of three masters, none of whom had sufficient ability or enthusiasm to arrest the decline. At the end of the decade, the adequacy of the sports facilities at the School was being reviewed, and the long-term future of the Fives courts was being considered. The masters collectively, however, felt very strongly that Fives should remain a sports option, and it was sincerely hoped that a suitable master would soon be recruited to the staff.

Nick Morgan joined the teaching staff in 1990 and was immediately given the role of trying to develop Fives at the School. Under his leadership and enthusiasm the game did recover. The number of boys playing the game remains far lower than it was in the 1970s, but the standard of the players leaving the School in the last few years has generally been higher than in the early 1990s. Chris Jones and Jonathan Down in particular, both of whom left the School in 1996, have become strong players.

The Old Whitgiftian Fives Club was founded in 1961. The Club was active until about 1977, usually playing about a dozen fixtures against other clubs. During those years a Singles competition was held 6 times, and a Doubles competition twice. The Club also initiated an annual tour to the South-West of England, playing at Sherborne, Exeter and Blundell's in Tiverton. Soon after the mid 1970s, the number of regular members began to reduce, and the Club folded in 1978-79.

The O.W.Fives Club reformed in 1986 following a letter sent out by Jim Mon aimed at attracting recent School leavers. The Club has increased in strength considerably from its handful of initial members in 1986, particularly since the mid 1990s. The Club restarted its annual South-West tour in 1989 and reintroduced the annual O.W. Doubles competition in 1994-95. It has been held annually ever since. By 1997-98 the Club had sufficient players to reintroduce the annual O.W.Singles competition. Tony Hamilton won the competition that year, reclaiming the Cup he had won when the Singles competition had last been held two decades previously in 1976-77! Tony's hold on the Cup ended the following year when he lost in the final to Chris Jones, who still retains the title.

The number of fixtures played by the O.W.Fives Club has steadily increased over the years. In the 1999-2000 season the Club played 23 matches, winning 17 of them. The Club is now probably one of the most active Old Boys' Fives Clubs in the country. It has several very committed members who played in many of last season's matches. It was, however, pleasing that no fewer than 12 Old Whitgiftians played in at least one match for the Club during the season, including two members who only left Whitgift in 1999. This high number of members playing in matches is a positive reflection on the standard of some of the recent School leavers, and is an encouraging sign both for Whitgift and Old Whitgiftian Fives.

Robert Dalman
(Old Whitgiftian, 1972-79)

(I am indebted to Messrs C.E.A.Whyte, A.T.Parsons and F.G.H.Percy (School Archivist), all of whom provided information for this contribution. Publications consulted were: *History of Whitgift Grammar School, 1892*; and *Whitgift School: A History* by F.G.H.Percy, 1991.)