

## FIVES IN SCHOOLS

Our fourth article in the series is about Winchester College, and is written by our editor, David Barnes, an Old Wykehamist and past President of the R.F.A.

### 4. Winchester

Winchester College was founded in 1382 and its first three centuries were recently the subject of a thesis investigating the educational use of physical activity at the school. Dr Stephen Bailey, now a housemaster at Winchester, writes: "Handball was a game considered to be of great benefit to children, but seems at its simplest to have had no greater formality than a game of 'catch'. This could then easily become a game like fives, where the ball is struck with the palm. Sometimes the hand was supported by a brace, or was gloved. The Latin name often used derives exactly from this striking of the ball with the open hand - 'pila palmaria'. It is this game that is certainly played by Wykehamists on St Catherine's Hill in 1647, and without doubt earlier."

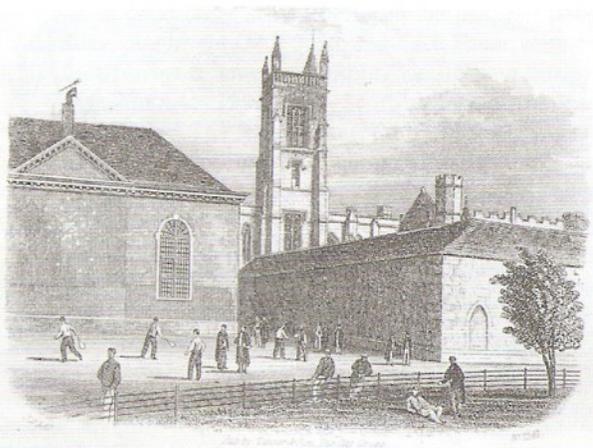
From the early 17th Century on, there are references in College records to a Ball Court or 'Area Pilaris' being provided for the boys within the College grounds. For example, the Bursar's Account Rolls of 1640 record payment of 2 shillings and eight pence to "Harding for preparing the ditch around the Sphaeristerium, where ball games are played". Alas, no records have come down to us in the form of personal correspondence or diaries to describe exactly what games were played on this early Ball Court. James Woodforde, who was at Winchester from 1752 to 1757, tells in his "Diary of a Country Parson" of a bet lost on a game of fives in Babcary churchyard in Somerset while he was curate there in 1764: did he learn his fives at Winchester?

The authorities disagree as to when the later Ball Court, which still survives today behind the building known as 'School', was built. The most reliable states: "A resolution was passed in December 1768 that a new Ball Court be made behind the School". The accounts for 1769 show that it was floored with chalk and gravel and that an expensive net was purchased for at least one of the games played on it. We have a first-hand account from a schoolboy of the 1830s, Robert Mansfield, to confirm that bat-fives was one of those games.

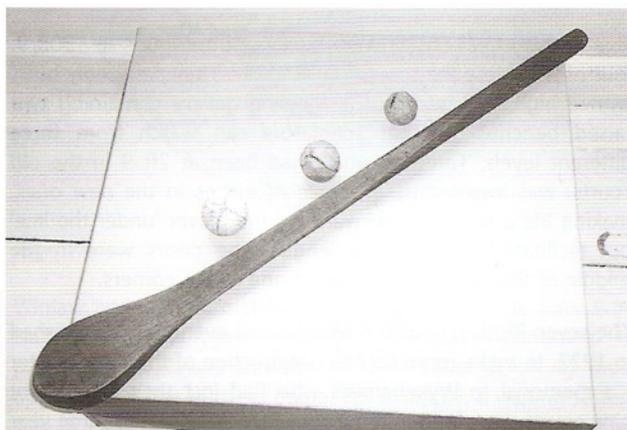
The fives bat was "about two feet and a half in length, the part with which the ball was struck expanding to about the size of

a small lady's hand, and immediately above it the wood was planed thin, thus forming a powerful spring. With this instrument the ball could be driven with great force; and I have known it used for other purposes, for which it was very effectual, though not very agreeable to one of the parties in that game... The balls used were small, about the size of a large grape-shot, and cost sixpence a piece, which made the game an expensive one; as, if the ball passed to the right or to the left of the school wall against which we played, it vanished altogether from our ken."

This early form of rackets was not the only 'fives' played at Winchester. We know that juniors were permitted to play another variety of bat-fives with a shorter, broader bat on either side of Ball Court, and that hand-fives and improvised forms of cricket and football were played there as well. Commoner Court - where the non-scholars were housed in the 18th and 19th Centuries - was described in a survey as a "dingy quadrangle... rendered still more uncongenial by indiscriminate fives-playing against the surrounding walls". In a letter to his mother dated April 26th 1824, the young Commoner Charles Lefroy wrote: "They are making a new fives court in Commoners like the one in College, Williams [the Second Master] is to pay for it all..." In the late 1830s, a fives ball larger than the one used for bat-fives was obtainable from Poole, the College Head Porter, and known in the local slang as a 'tizzy Poole', a tizzy being sixpence.



Print of c.1850 showing the back of School being used for bat-fives.



Picture: David Barnes

A surviving fives bat, with balls found behind the cornice of School.

The 1860s were a time of change at Winchester, with the introduction of separate boys' boarding-houses to enable the school to expand by taking in more Commoners. Chernock House, the first of these, established in 1859 in St Thomas Street, had a court specially intended for hand-fives. But although several of the boarding-houses were to have their own court, at least two of them being of good quality, these were essentially for private recreation. Official recognition of the game came in 1862 when the Rev.C.H.Ridding, a former Second Master, presented four indoor courts, which were built in Meads, not far from the Ball Court behind School.

They were in a red-brick building, described in 'Winchester College Notions' of 1910 as being "divided into two parts by a passage, at the end of which is a staircase leading to a gallery above for spectators. To the left of the door, on entering, are Senior and Junior College; to the right, Junior and Senior Commoner. Senior Courts are distinguished from the Junior by having a buttress." Where the idea of this original feature of Winchester Fives came from is not clear, and it is all the stranger that only two of the four Ridding Courts - those for Senior pupils - were so designed. Was it meant to be a privilege to play on a buttress court, the plain court being considered more suitable for beginners? (Alas, nobody had the idea of designating the plain courts for singles and the buttress courts for doubles.)

Covered-court fives soon became a recognised part of school life. The first edition of 'The Wykehamist', dated October 1866, carries results of competitions for 'Single Fives' and 'Junior Pewters' (for doubles). In March 1867, fives is described as 'the only game which is played during this quarter' and a letter complains that the courts are unequally distributed between College (representing a quarter of the school) and Commoners (the rest). The writer adds: "The two courts in Houses are hardly worth taking into account, as, though one of them boasts a gallery, neither of them has attained to a plastered back wall."

The demand was such that three more courts were presented in 1882 by the Headmaster George Ridding, the father of the donor of the original courts. The new courts were built alongside the old ones but were not fully enclosed and must have suffered even more from condensation in adverse weather conditions. They were unlovely and were soon given the nickname 'Bear Cages'. It is not known whether these courts had a buttress, but it seems likely.

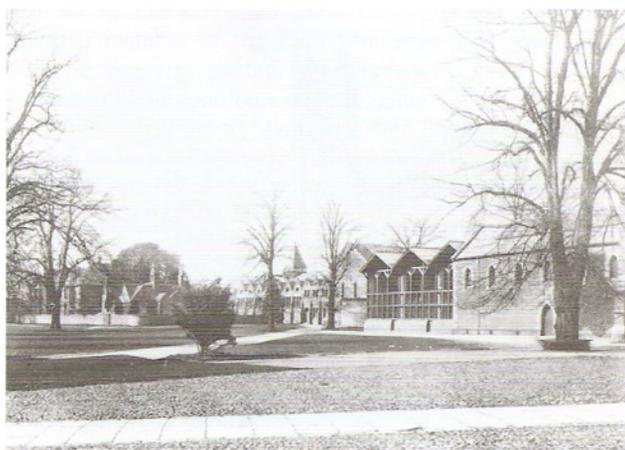


Photo of 1885, showing 1862 courts (right) and 'Bear Cages' next to them.

In 1885, 'The Wykehamist' was requested to publish the rules of the game "in view of the present laxity observable in the School Fives playing". Apart from the distinction between the 'server' (who throws the ball up) and the 'returner' (who hits what we would now call the service), the most noticeable divergence from today is in the scoring, where games at 13-13 may be played up to 18 (set to 5) and at 14-14 up to 17 (set to 3), or simply to 15. Rule 14 states: "In all matches the bench ball shall be used", but what this may mean is unclear. Exactly the same set of rules was published again in 1893, with an introduction including: "as played at Oxford".

The 1880s and 1890s see regular reports on the four competitions (Senior and Junior Singles and Doubles) held in Common Time (Lent Term). A sample from a Junior Doubles final played on Junior Commoner (a Rugby Fives court) in 1889: "Berger certainly deserved to win the match: he played very well, being especially good off the back wall; Bateman was not allowed by his partner to do anything, so his powers are an unknown quantity." Can it have been that, following the example of their elders, who for Winchester Fives put the weaker player under the bar 'watching the buttress' and the stronger out in the court, the smaller boys played Rugby Fives this way too? More likely poor Bateman was just relegated to the back right-hand corner...

Inevitably, two or three houses tended to specialize, often the ones with a good house court. College, having at least two sound courts close at hand, produced many fine players. Two of the very best around the turn of the century were R.L.G.Irving, described by one writer as "Winchester's Cavanagh", who came back to teach at the College and wrote a pamphlet on Winchester Fives; and F.D.H.Joy, a left-hander who with Graham Irving won Thornton Cups for Senior Doubles in 1896 without loss of a game over four rounds. Joy was only 15 at the time. Two years older, he played a decisive role in a close doubles final. "Throughout all three games Joy played magnificently," wrote the correspondent, "and for one man, practically, to defeat two players like Williams and Hope in three long games is quite a marvellous performance." His partner clearly spent most of the match 'under the line'!

Graham Irving, who spent more than 40 years teaching at Winchester, was also a great mountaineer, and it was he who introduced George Leigh Mallory, who arrived at Winchester as a scholar in 1900, to the sport that was to claim his life during the attempt on Everest in 1924. Touchingly, when a search party found Mallory's body on the mountainside 75 years later, one of his pockets contained an unpaid bill from Gamages for fives gloves and balls.

Matches against other schools began in the early years of the new century. Irving recalled:

"In 1905 we had a splendid pair, who gave Cheltenham no chance at all, though the latter were playing at home in an unbuttressed court, considerably larger than our own." Bradfield were beaten 3-0 in 1908 at home, while the 4-2 victory over Radley away the next year was harder to achieve, because of the slower court and lower line. A rule variation was noted with suspicion: "... In hitting round, a stroke which hits the buttress is counted by the Radleians to be in play."

Five new buttress courts were built by subscription in 1908/9, four of which are the courts in use today. They are solidly built, with a high back wall and a viewing gallery containing two raised benches, so that spectators can watch from three different levels. The bar, which had been at 2ft 9 in the old courts, was lowered by a couple of inches in the new ones, making life a bit more awkward for the player 'under the line' but facilitating hitting to a length. The doors were in the middle of the back wall instead of one of the corners.

The seven Ridding courts in Meads were eventually demolished in 1922, to make room for the construction of the War Cloister - a memorial to Wykehamists who had lost their lives. Eight new courts were built in Kingsgate Park in 1922, the same year that the foundation stone of the War Cloister was laid. When the Cloister was opened in 1924, 'The Wykehamist' noted: "In

place of a ragged and untidy corner we have order, dignity and beauty." The old courts had served their purpose, though, as two of them had been the original buttress courts.

With thirteen 'modern' courts now available, Wykehamists of all standards were at last able to book courts and play fives regularly, although play was only possible during daylight - it was not until 1950 that proper lighting was to be installed. It took a while after the disruption of the Great War for external matches to be re-established. Gradually a small 'circuit' of matches was built up, including by the end of the 1920s Oxford University (Worcester College had a Winchester court in those days), Bradfield, Radley, and the newly founded Jesters Club and Rugby Fives Association, who brought sides down on a regular basis.

The best player of the inter-war period at Winchester was R.deW.K.Winlaw, who won the inaugural Public Schools Rugby Fives Singles Championship at Roehampton in 1930 and then went one better the next year, repeating his singles success and sharing in a doubles victory with H.J.H.Lamb. Roger Winlaw was a remarkable sportsman, who scored 977 runs for Cambridge University in 1934, including 5 centuries. He won 6 Blues (3 for cricket, 3 for soccer) at Cambridge, and was to be described in his obituary in 'The Wykehamist' as "a man of exceptional simplicity, modesty and charm". Sadly, he was killed in a night flying accident during the war.



Roger Winlaw

Winlaw and Lamb are still the only Wykehamists to have won National Schools open titles, but Winchester continued to produce fine players throughout the 1930s, defeating most opponents at the buttress game. For example, a visiting Jesters side in 1932 consisting of J.G.W.Davies (later to be three-times Amateur Singles Champion), J.F.Burnet (founder of the Jesters Club), G.A.Goodban and R.G.Tindall was beaten by 117 points

to 99. H.D.Wrench was runner-up in the Public Schools Singles in 1934, and other good players of the thirties were A.W.E.Winlaw, L.C.Pitman, J.D.Eggar, R.B.Proud and R.A.Henley. Many of these were also top-class schoolboy cricketers.

When war came again, sporting encounters were inevitably curtailed, although matches continued against Radley and Bradfield, and there were even visiting teams from Eastbourne and Sandhurst. G.H.G.Doggart, who was to play cricket for England, was one of Winchester's best players during the war years; he and his brother, A.P.Doggart, between them won Watney Cup, the internal singles competition, each year from 1943-45. Another fine player was D.R.Guard, of whom the 'Wykehamist' correspondent wrote: 'In a now rather long experience of School fives your reporter can think of but two School players whom he would care to match against him ...'. Who was this correspondent? The best bet seems to be H.S.Altham, that great schoolmaster and cricket historian, who had taught at Winchester since the 1920s, but reports in 'The Wykehamist' were always unsigned.

A quick word here on adult involvement in fives at Winchester. It is not recorded which, if any, member of Dons' Common Room was 'in charge' of fives in the early years, as all the duties fell to the captain in office, including arranging matches. The Common Room of the 1930s could raise four pairs to give the School a good game, and this tradition continued after the War, when A.H. 'Podge' Brodhurst joined the staff and became 'don-in-charge' in 1946. As with rackets, which he also supervised, his period of office was to last for nigh on thirty years, although W.D.M.Lutyens took over for six years in the 1950s before moving to America. Graham Parry and Henry Thompson were in charge in the early 1980s, and then Nick Mackinnon assumed control in 1987. James Hodgins arrived in 1998, and he has just acquired a skilled assistant in Jamie McManus.

Fives was in good order at Winchester in the post-war period. J.V.Bardsley, T.L.Wright, M.D.Scott and F.F.R.Fisher were four of the best players to emerge: Bardsley was to be a finalist in the Cyriax Cup in 1952, and Scott achieved the same distinction in 1956. The Jesters and Oxford University were the only visiting sides likely to overcome the School in those days, although Bradfield could be a problem away! Cricketers were interested in fives as a winter game for keeping the eye in and sharpening the reflexes, so it is no surprise to find B.L.Reed, G.W.Richardson and R.I.Jefferson in the fives teams of the fifties. There were intermittent attempts to conquer the Rugby fives world by entering the Schools Championships at Whitgift, where the doubles semi-finals were reached in 1959 and 1960.

Despite a refurbishment in 1953, the eight Kingsgate Park courts were less and less used in succeeding years and were eventually converted into workshops - a familiar story, but less sad than many, because the four 'old' courts of 1909 were still in good use and playing well. The fifth court, standing apart, had never been so popular and is now used as a theatre scenery and prop store - although the demand for courts nowadays within the School and from the Wessex Club is such that there is a case for it to be reconverted.

The 1960s saw a change of culture in schools, and Winchester was no exception. Games players lost their status, hair was grown longer and it became fashionable to 'drop out'. This hit sport hard, and smaller games like fives hardest of all. J.R.Davidson, captain of fives in 1965, complained: 'The Senior part of the School has few keen players... A large number of

potentially useful players regard the game with something approaching contempt.' Harry Altham had died the same year, and 'The Wykehamist' wrote: 'Mr Altham's death was a sad blow for the School's Fives. Many generations of Wykehamists have appreciated his friendly interest and advice. He seldom failed to watch a match ... and his absence at the finals of the School competitions was regretted by us all.'

Very few of the top cricketers now played fives, and rackets was the only court game to continue successfully. Modest fives revivals were staged in the 1970s under the captaincies of N.J.W.Parsons, J.C.Horrocks and J.R.Crawford, but the game no longer carried the kudos to attract significant numbers of games players, and most matches were lost. 'The Wykehamist' also changed in focus and format, and fives reporting effectively ceased.

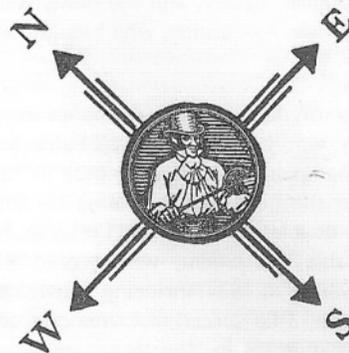
The 1980s saw a succession of captains from Furley's - the house with the longest fives tradition - who kept the game going with the vital support of their housemaster, Henry Thompson, until the arrival of N.I.P.Mackinnon in 1987. Nick Mackinnon threw himself with characteristic enthusiasm into learning and teaching the game, and the numbers playing to a reasonable standard slowly increased. The Wessex Club helped by issuing an open invitation to members of the School to join their Tuesday night practices. Wykehamists started entering Schools Championships again. The courts were re-roofed and rewired in 1997 - a vital step.

All this bore fruit. O.R.Twinch represented Cambridge in 1998, the first Wykehamist for some years to make the Light Blue side. Even better, J.A.O.Bristow emerged as a top-class schoolboy player and won the West of England Schools singles in 2000. By this time, James Hodgins had taken over the running of the game, and he now has further assistance from the newly arrived Jamie McManus. With good coaching, a full programme of matches and many keen young players in the School, some of them top cricketers, the future for Winchester fives looks brighter than it has for several decades.

David Barnes

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*Author's postscript. My thanks to all those who helped, directly or indirectly, with this article, especially Roger Custance, Suzanne Foster, Podge Brodhurst, Henry Thompson, James Sabben-Clare, Steve Bailey and James Hodgins.*