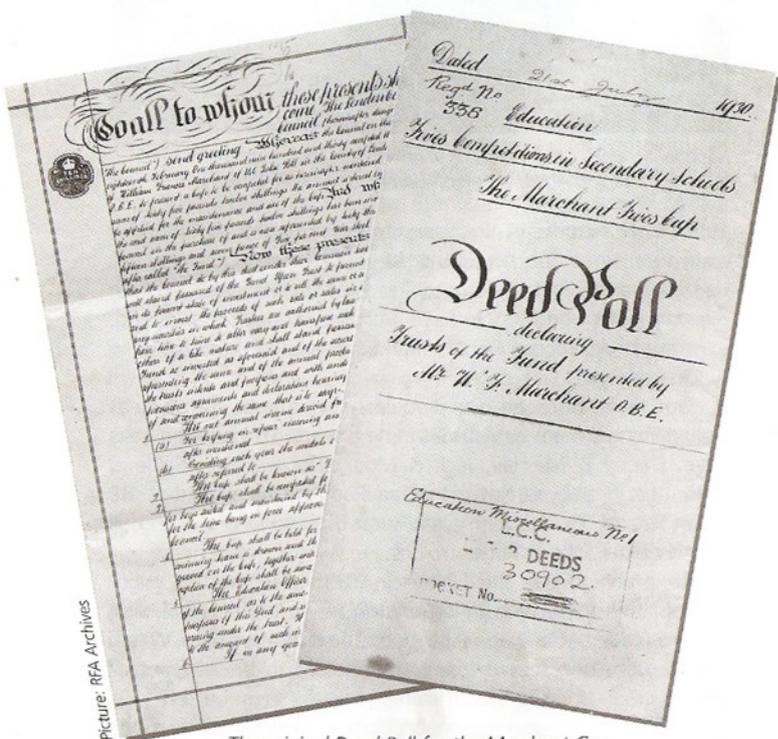


## MEMORIES OF THE MARCHANT CUP



The original Deed Poll for the Marchant Cup.

The Marchant Fives Cup was originally donated by William Francis Marchant, O.B.E. (together with the sum of sixty-five pounds twelve shillings for its maintenance), to be competed for by the London Grammar Schools. It was contested every year between 1929 and 1966, with the exception of the period 1939-48. Eventually, as the number of London schools playing fives decreased in the 1960s, the competition was abandoned and the magnificent silver trophy was transferred to the National Schools' Colts Doubles in 1975.

Today there are, to the best of my knowledge, four original Marchant Cup players still enjoying the tussle on the court: namely John Robertson (Sir Walter St. John's, Battersea), Keith Love (Wandsworth) and Keith and Ian Puckle (Hackney Downs).

The competition comprised home and away fixtures involving two pairs from each school playing a maximum of eight doubles games up to 15, following the rules set down by the RFA. Schools participating were Strand, Sir Walter St. John's, Henry Thornton, St. Marylebone, Wandsworth, Sloane and Hackney Downs. The only standard courts were at Wandsworth and, in later years, Henry Thornton, and each individual non-standard court had its own peculiarities: buttresses in odd places, sub-standard doors, unusual dimensions of height, width and length. It was the norm to play the match on just one court, so total playing time could exceed the normal idea of a fives match. Nevertheless, it was a competition which over the years gave plenty of enjoyment to many boys who were introduced to a new sport out of pure choice and curiosity.

John Robertson recalls that football was his main sport, and when he passed his entrance examination to Sir Walter St. John's (Sinjuns, as it was known) in 1949, he was looking forward to playing his beloved game on good grass pitches with the luxury of proper changing rooms and showers. He was playing football with a tennis ball during the break when he heard strange noises coming from a building adjacent to the toilets. Having strolled over, he stepped up onto a raised viewing platform and peered in through a metal mesh at boys hitting a ball against walls with a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. The game struck him as a



One of the 2005 holders of the Marchant Cup, Daniel Tristão (St. Paul's School).

good way of keeping fit for football, so he approached the fives master, borrowed some gloves and was soon completely hooked on this new sport. The rules were relatively simple – no offsidés, bad tackles, pitch invasions – just pure enjoyment from day one.

The Sinjuns court had a low ceiling of mesh, about 15 to 16 feet high, with a small buttress on the left-hand wall near the entry door, and this was John's fives domain for three to four years. The master-in-charge of fives left, and John found himself in charge! However, another master eventually arrived and brought encouragement to compete in the Marchant Cup.

This was a real eye-opener. The boys were used to their own court, with its odd dimensions and peculiarities. John had found the rules easy to understand, but such rules applied to courts of all shapes and sizes: narrow courts, high courts, courts with a 'dodgy' door; low back walls, no back walls, super-slow walls; slippery floors and varying heights of the front-wall bar. In their first year of competition, more matches were lost than won, but it was a tremendous challenge to adapt to the court you were playing on; visiting sides to Sinjuns would look aghast at the low ceiling. John recalls that the mode of transport to away fixtures was by way of the Ford Popular car belonging to the master-in-charge.

Over on the north side of the Thames, I was beginning my schooling in 1954 at Hackney Downs. I had gained a little



'Adjacent to the railway line': The Hackney Downs open courts

knowledge of the game from my father, who was an Old Boy and an avid player. The school had one closed court of similar dimensions to the renovated 'small' courts at Alleyn's. It stood well away from the main buildings, in complete isolation from the normal activities of the school. Some fifty yards away, adjacent to the railway line to Cambridge, stood two open back-to-back courts.

My initial introduction to the game, or a version thereof, was hitting a ball onto the roof of the boiler-room, which had a front wall and a lateral buttress where the ball could become lodged as out of play, and worth a point or two. Graduation to the open courts was in Year 2. The game had an odd scoring system similar to that of table tennis – the target being twenty-one points, with a change of serve every five points. Only tennis balls were used, and strictly no gloves. Being open, it was common for balls to find their way onto the railway line. Boys used to arrive early at the courts to retrieve 'lost' balls returned by the line workers, who were probably bemused by this form of sport.

Through the Old Boys' Club, I was fortunate to gain early access to the closed court. Club afternoons on Saturday would see around sixteen people turn up for just a couple of games. There were no showers – just the use of a small room where the tea was constantly brewed.

Thus I progressed to represent the school in the Marchant Cup in my third year, often missing lessons on odd afternoons to appear in matches. Our master-in-charge never had the least idea of the game – he merely ordered the equipment – and it was the responsibility of the captain to arrange fixtures, order teas for visiting opponents and organize travel across London by public transport. Our Marchant Cup IV certainly became streetwise. I can recall trips to the heart of the capital, tracing the whereabouts of Sloane and St. Marylebone Schools by the kind assistance of the cockney conductors on the buses. My colleagues were amazed at the various courts, but at least the scoring system was now standard, although the toss for service/receiving had alarming differences from venue to venue. The most standard method seemed to be rolling the ball to the front wall – the winner for choice being the ball stopping nearest to the back wall on the return journey.

In my last year, 1960, Hackney Downs had a strong IV, and at times it was embarrassing to record scores of 120-3 over eight games. Some opponents had little basic knowledge of the game but were no doubt thankful for an afternoon off lessons, a decent tea and a few pence on the expenses.

Our solitary court closed court had a non-slip floor but was prone to sweating. Being of small dimensions, perhaps designed more for singles than doubles, the game was especially fast. With a low back wall, the ball would often disappear across the playground and could not be retrieved on a dark winter's evening.

They were pleasurable times and certainly, for me, the grass roots of our game. Both John Robertson and I can recall many memories from those early days, with the Marchant Cup introducing the excitement and comradeship of playing this beloved game.

Keith Puckle

*Editor's Note: Of the 28 times the Marchant Cup was contested, Hackney Downs won six times; Sir Walter St. John's, Henry Thornton and St. Marylebone five times each; Wandsworth four times; Sloane twice; and Strand once only, in the inaugural year of the competition.*



Picture: Joan Wood

*Their finest hour: The Clove Club (Hackney Downs Old Boys) IV, winners of the inaugural Wood Cup in 1974. (from left) Norman Elson, Ian Puckle, John Darby, Keith Puckle.*