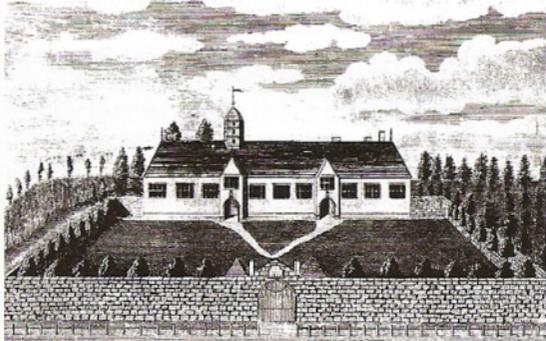


Fives at Blundell's School

The eighth article in this series covers Blundell's School, Tiverton and is written by Douglas Rice, who taught English at Blundell's for 28 years, serving as master in charge of Fives for 17 years.

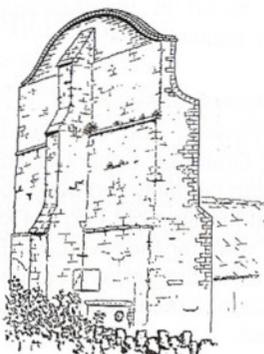
Fives seems to have been recorded earlier at Blundell's than at any other school in the country. Of course boys had been playing games involving hitting a ball with their hands for hundreds of years, long before Peter Blundell, cloth merchant, founded a new free grammar school in 1604 at his native Tiverton in Devon. But the first definite reference to the game by name occurs comparatively soon after the foundation, in the time of the Commonwealth: "this summer 1649 assizes were held at Mr Blundell's School, in Tiverton. The judges names were the Lord Chief Baron Wild and Mr Justice Rigby: the former sat in the fives-place, in the school-house green, and the latter in the desk of the higher school."



Blundell's School in the early years. Engraving taken from Martin Dunsford, "Historical Memoirs of the Town and Parish of Tiverton, Exeter" 1790.

Several points are worth noting: first, these words were written only 13 years after the first literary reference to Fives given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in an obscure anonymous play dated 1636. Secondly, the game was evidently played outside, but as the judges sat there the court must have been enclosed to some extent. Thirdly, we should not be surprised to find early reference to the game at a school in the West Country, for there Fives was a popular village pastime. It required only the wall of a house or church, and at around this time several churchyards in the area reported nuisances caused by players of handball games: in 1648, for instance, the churchwardens of Wington in Somerset, the county next-door to Devon, had to pay 1s 6d "to hinder the Fives playing."

The continued local enthusiasm for the game led in the eighteenth century to the erection of the well-known Fives walls, usually associated with pubs, that are still a feature of Somerset. The game the boys played at school was probably closely related to the village sport they played at home.



The Fives Wall at Bishop's Lydeard, Somerset (from a booklet by Graham White)

During its long history, Blundell's experienced some ups and downs: at one point in the nineteenth century, masters were not allowed to take boarders, so that the building which was intended to house 150 pupils held only 31. But evidently Fives continued; at the start of this low time, in 1841, the Governors' Minute Book records that "The boys having been deprived of playing the game of Fives in consequence of the Building of the new Buttresses resolved that the Committee of Management be requested to expend not exceeding £20 in forming a Fives Court for the Boys in the South Eastern Angle of the Green."

It was at this period, in the 1840s, that in schools further east Fives became more formalised, with three or four-walled courts and rules of some kind. It took a while for the new style to reach the West Country, but in 1879 it was thought that Blundell's as a whole should join the modern age; the old school in the town, having done good service for 275 years, was now too small. A new building was to be erected a mile out of Tiverton.

An Old Blundellian seized the opportunity, suggesting that the proposed school should include a Fives court. The new teaching and boarding facilities opened in 1882, and three Fives courts were completed in 1885, situated roughly where the Modern Languages block stands now. They were evidently rather odd, being "large enough for more than four boys to play and perhaps for bat fives. The usual ledge on the front wall has been carried around the side ones also so as to bring the balls off the wall, an improvement which will be much appreciated by our finger-tips." Nine years later, in 1894, it is reported that back walls were added to two of the courts, so it appears that the game then played was a compromise between the modern Eton and Rugby games.

Trouble arose early about booking the courts. The school magazine, *The Blundellian*, complains that people cannot get courts "because they are not strong enough or quick enough to appropriate one;" the courts were always obtained by the forms nearest to them. The inter-house Fives cup (only the cricket cup is of older foundation as an inter-house team competition) was presented in 1885 and, with very few exceptions, has been competed for every year since.

The school archive possesses a pair of Fives gloves used before 1915, still in good condition, found by an Old Blundellian on turning out his father's attic. At this time repeated requests appeared in *The Blundellian* that the courts should be covered, and even lit, but this was never done, and in 1917 we find a lament that the courts are in "appalling condition." There were also perennial complaints about the cost of balls: a correspondent wrote in 1921 that "a ball costs 9d and lasts barely one game." The cost of a ball was still 9d in 1939.

The game must still have had its supporters, however, for in February 1923 it was announced that new Fives courts were to be built. In March 1924 they were "at last ready to be played in," and the six new covered courts evidently caused a renaissance of enthusiasm. They are still a marvellous asset, much enjoyed by everyone who plays in them. The first inter-house competition on the new courts was won by School House.

The first outside match on record was played at home against Kelly College in 1934. There were two pairs on each side, and Kelly won by 167 points to 125. Later in the same year, matches were also played, and won, against Exeter University College. The game continued in this quiet way, the standard being reported in 1936 as "fair," but must have

been given a lift by the visit in 1938 of John Armitage, the reigning amateur singles champion, who played some exhibition games. By a curious coincidence, the present writer, then in his teens, met John Armitage at Bedford several times during the 1950s, knowing him as a family friend and English Editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but unfortunately having no idea of his eminence in Fives.

In 1938, Blundell's beat Kelly College, probably for the first time ever, and there was a match against the masters, won convincingly by the School. The School team was HJ Parsons, D Chapman, RWS Bell and JA Jones. The masters were represented by TRK Jones, AWW Roberts and two others. In 1939, there was an entry of 3 players in the Public Schools Championships at Dulwich.

It appears that from 1942 until 1955, Fives declined sadly. There is no record of any school match in this period, and from the spasmodic accounts in *The Blundellian*, it seems that sometimes the game was in danger of dying out completely. Ted Crowe tells me that as a pupil during the war years, it was difficult to learn the game—no one knew the rules or how to score. However, house matches of some kind were usually played: in 1946 they were won by North Close "after some very lucky games. No one was more surprised than the 2 players." In 1951 there were 48 in the Fives Activity, "more through lack of alternatives than any pronounced enthusiasm for the game." Permission was given for the courts to be used for squash. The office of School captain of Fives was said to be "a sinecure."

In 1955, however, everything changed with the appointment to the staff of Chris Reichwald, who after Oundle, Oxford and a serious leg wound during the war, had nevertheless won the National Amateur Doubles Championship in 1948. He was a true enthusiast who set about organising Fives seriously and resolved to improve the very low existing standard of play. The courts began to be played in much more frequently, their use for other purposes was forbidden, existing competitions were enlarged in scope and new ones were added. In a senior singles competition in this year, the winner was PS Watts (P), the Captain of Fives. In the junior competition AT Littlewood (P) narrowly beat FM Akerman (P). Petergate dominated the House competitions. No external matches were played, but the report of the Masters match of 16 February 1955 presents some familiar names: the school was represented by PS Watts, RAW Sharp, JV Rew and MJ Currie, and the masters by CT Reichwald, MEC Comer, CHP Silk and SC Pyne.

In Easter 1956, the captain was RAW Sharp, later the famous Rugby international, who remembers a match he played with Chris Reichwald against Ted Crowe and Colin Beale: "it was rather crowded with the four of us in the court. Whatever the result, I do remember that we had a great many laughs as you can imagine." A Jesters IV played an exhibition match in the school courts—the first outside school fixture since the revival. The boys who played were FM Akerman, RAW Sharp, AT Littlewood and CJA Clarke.

It was noted that in this season "although all matches were lost, the progress of Fives in the school has been very great. Improvements on all courts have been made and there are now stands and lights for three courts. Also, for the first time, Blundell's became affiliated to the Rugby Fives Association."

In May 1957, the first half-colour was awarded and Fives was "well and truly launched." Akerman was the outstanding player in singles, "though he must learn to vary his game more." The following year, the School notched up its first win against Kelly "or indeed in any other foreign court." The



The Blundell's 1st IV, 1957: Back row, Chris Clark, CT Reichwald, Arthur Littlewood. Front row, Richard Sharp, Frank Akerman.

major focus of the practices at this time was the National Schools Competition at Whitgift, to which all the major Fives schools sent two pairs. The West Country boys often needed accommodation in London for the event, which lasted a week, and Ted Crowe, whose home was not far away, looked after them. It was a big occasion for the boys, particularly as in his usual generous style, Ted would take them in the evenings up to town, often for a show. In 1959, Richard White and James McLachlan were doing well in the Doubles Competition, and the apparently risqué *Irma La Douce* was on. Naturally the boys desperately wanted to go to it, but Ted told them they must get into the final first. The moment the pair had won their semi-final, "now we can go to *Irma La Douce!*" chirped McLachlan, and Ted had to keep his word. He says that fortunately the show was not too bad and the boys won their final: Blundell's became only the tenth name to be inscribed on the Cup.

In this year too, Frank Akerman initiated matches between the boys and the Old Blundellians.

In the early 1960s, CM Clapp, along with SJ Fisher and HVH Williams, featured strongly. Cedric remembers as a



James McLachlan and Richard White, Doubles Winners, Schools Nationals Championships, 1959.

new boy the frightening sight of Chris Reichwald on court with blood dripping from his gloves - he really did believe that raw steak was the best thing for a bruise. "And those wet Saturdays when the courts needed drying out for a match and blow heaters like jet engines would be brought in with huge boxes of sawdust and the boys were all press-ganged into sweeping the sawdust around the courts. Balls in 1960 were 1s 6d at the Tuck Shop, with 6d back on the used ball." A slightly ungenerous comment in *The Blundellian* a little later observes that "Despite many hours of practice, Clapp has not improved but has been a keen and effective captain." Nevertheless in 1965 at the West of England Championships, he and AG Parker won the Doubles Competition; the following year Parker won the Singles, and with RJ Summerfield the Doubles. The following year, the Blundell's 1st IV won all its singles games against Sherborne without conceding a point—an "astonishing performance." In 1964, Chris had put forward the idea of a Devon and Somerset Schools Fives Meeting at Blundell's, and for four years the schools represented included Crewkerne, Grenville, Kelly, King's Bruton, King's Taunton, Queen Elizabeth's College, Crediton, Taunton and West Buckland, as well as BRNC and Exeter University.

The 1970s saw a regular run of very successful teams: in 1972, for instance, Charles Colquhoun, Vic Marks (then 15) Tony Beddoe and Simon Wright won all their school matches; this happened again in 1976 and 1978.



The Blundell's 1st IV, 1972: Tony Beddoe, Vic Marks, Charles Colquhoun, Simon Wright

In 1973, Marks lost in the final of the West of England for the third year running. In 1974, there were 3 IVs and a Colts IV. In 1975, the School played Exeter Fives Club, run by Cedric Clapp. In 1979, snow cancelled the West of England Championships, and Lawrence Sail and Vic Marks came in to help coach fives. Chris Reichwald died, aged only 57, in 1980; he had himself compiled an account of Blundell's Fives from the mid-nineteenth century on which I have drawn heavily.

Lawrence Sail taught Modern Languages at Blundell's and was in charge of Fives for a year, the experience inspiring 'Fives Courts', one of his many published poems (in *The World Returning*, Bloodaxe 2002): "In every place the courts were set apart, / hidden behind the armoury or the bike sheds;" empty, they seemed "banal as a torturer's cellar," like "a row of sties that didn't smell quite right." They were just "blank walls, with a toy door, four large lights / in metal shades with grilles, shining onto / slabbed stone." Even the gloves were unbeautiful, "limp as exhausted fish," "the colour / of dried blood" or "a dull grey."

But by contrast:

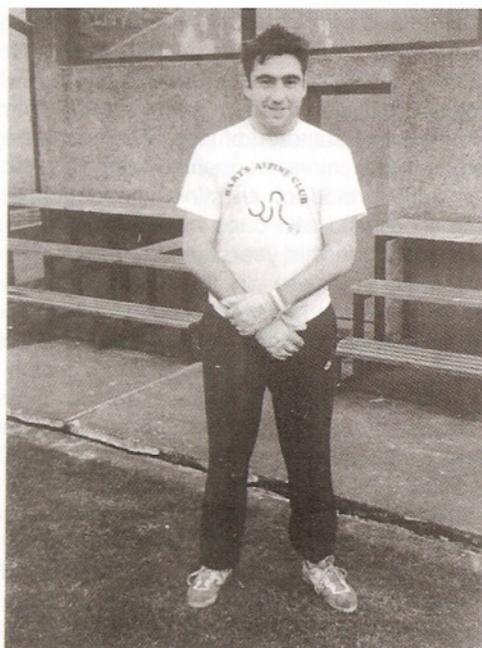
"The play's the thing, pure ingenuity – the crack of a service rocketing out from the corner, the ball hammered off the back wall, the sly lob, the boast that ricochets madly off one or both side-walls and dies irretrievably by the bar."

"Enter the ghost of Hazlitt*, himself a player, who wrote that 'poetry puts a spirit of life and motion into the universe'—and knew how much depended on the playful imagination, on keeping warm in the coldest places on earth."

[*William Hazlitt, the essayist, wrote in 1819 the marvellous obituary of the legendary Fives player John Cavanagh, published in *Table Talk*, 1821-2].

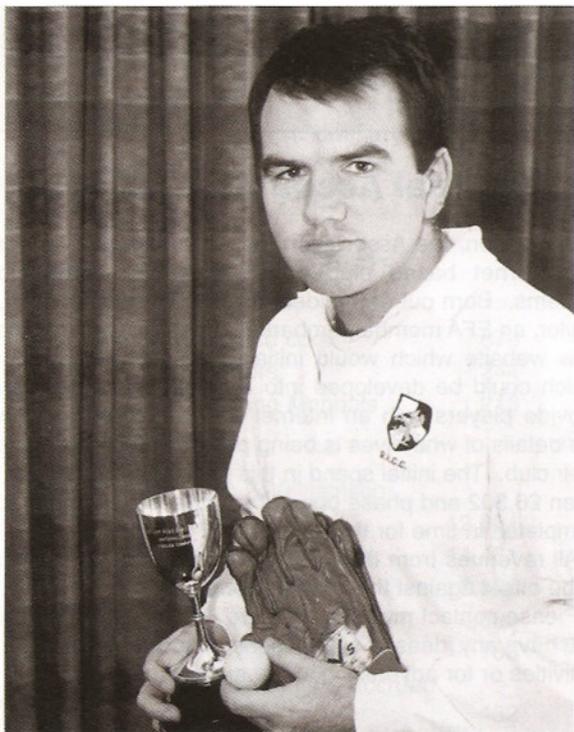
In 1981, Fives was taken over by the writer, who ran it for 17 years with a great deal of help from colleagues, particularly Paul Rivett, and excellent support from OBs David Chattey, Cedric Clapp and Vic Marks. During that time, the aim was to encourage large numbers of boys, and latterly girls, to enjoy Fives whether they were natural games-players or not. It seemed to me that Fives often provided an opportunity for those who did not shine in the big team games. Nevertheless it was most gratifying when in 1987 Douglas Hay won the Colts Singles in the National Schools' Championships and William Akerman won the Open Plate.

Hay was very unlucky to be injured in rugby, which affected his Fives as a senior.



Douglas Hay, Colts Singles Winner, Schools National Championships, 1987

In 1988, new stands were built, two more internal school singles competitions were introduced, and a first Girls' fixture was held, against Exeter University. It was at Exeter, in the 1980s, that Wayne Enstone started his summer school for Fives; the week culminated in the West of England Championships, which brought top players from all over the country to our six courts. Many Blundell's teams now took part in school matches: we could field four Senior IVs as well as Under 16, Under 15, Under 14 and a girls' pair. Francis House was dominant. In 1989, 52 Under 14s took part in a singles competition.



Harry Akerman, Singles Winner, National Student and British Universities Championships, 1993 & 1994.

The following year, 41 boys and girls represented the School. In 1992, a curiosity occurred, when the Senior house match was won by the Petergate team of S Clapp and R Evetts: the Petergate junior team, which also won, consisted of R Clapp and J Evetts. In 1993, Harry Akerman (OB) won the British Universities Singles Championships, and retained it the following year, beating his brother Will in

the Final. Steve Clapp and Ed Whitefield were semi-finalists in the Doubles, and James Hughes won the Singles Plate.

A feature of these years was the very strong showing of OBs coming back to play against or with the School on OB Day: in 1995, for instance 17 OBs returned. Not only OBs: in 1997 the Masters managed to raise 8 players against the School.

On my retirement in 1998, Chris Thomas took over as master in charge, and the tradition of full involvement of vast numbers was continued with great energy. Two years was all, but during this time Chris joined forces with pupil Sarah Franklin to win the National Mixed Doubles Competition. After a year with Paul Rivett, in 2002 Bertie Matthew took over; he introduced an annual Tour of the North, and with the assistance of Melanie Whitehead produced a highly successful group of 10 girl players. Two girls used Fives as the physical component in their Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme Bronze Certificates.

To me, it has been very gratifying to see several OB players continuing to enjoy the game at a high level, and fitting that they are organised by Alex Rew, whose father John was one of Chris Reichwald's first players. Alex, James Hughes and John Savery have featured in the rankings for some years.

To conclude, the 2006 National Winchester Doubles competition at Bradfield in March 2006 was very strongly contested by 24 pairs, including some extremely experienced players; in the final, Harry Akerman and his partner beat Alex Rew and James Hughes: not a bad showing for Fives at Blundell's at least 350 years after it began.

Douglas Rice

With thanks particularly to Frank Akerman, Cedric Clapp, Ted Crowe and the Blundell's School archivist, Mike Sampson.