

The Railing Tennis Collection Sale

It is likely that many fives players failed to spot the small but select sale of sporting memorabilia held at Christie's South Kensington saleroom on 17 November 2005. Believed to have been the first ever sale devoted to real tennis material,

it also included some items of interest to rackets players and the fives fraternity. The artefacts featured demonstrated the common early heritage of these sports.

The collection was the life's work of Wykehamist Norman Railing (1897-1973) who won the Public Schools Rackets Handicap Championship at School and took up real tennis subsequently whilst at Oriel College, Oxford after the First World War. His sporting contemporaries – like Eton fives player Lord Aberdare with whom he won the Bathurst Cup in 1916 – would have known him under his original German name as Freudenthal. Nevertheless, he retained this name throughout his service in the Great War, despite a letter from George V to his commanding officer complaining "Please ask this young officer to change his name. After all, we have!" He only adopted his wife's surname of Railing as the Second World War loomed in 1936.

A faded and poorly conserved copy of T Blake's celebrated print of "Randall & Turner sparring at the Fives Court" was the first lot of the sale and failed to hit its estimate, let down by its poor condition, but the second lot "Fives played at the Tennis Court, Leicester Fields" dating from September 1788 set the tone for the sale, when the low estimate of £120-180 was shattered with a winning bid of £504 including premium.



*"Fives played at the Tennis Court, Leicester Fields"
September 1788.*

Similarly noteworthy for fives players was lot 9, a diminutive woodcut print measuring only 7 by 5 inches and dating from about 1780, entitled "The Great M Play" which illustrated a brief poem entitled "Fives:"



The Great M Play.

"Fives:"

With what great Force the little Ball
Rebounds, when struck against the Wall!
See how intent each Gamester stands;
Mark well his Eyes, his Feet, his Hands!

Rule of Life

Know this (which is enough to know)

Virtue is happiness below.

This print would have set you back £360 including commission!

Christie's is now holding regular sales of sporting material and it may repay keeping an eye on its website at www.Christies.com. The accompanying illustrations are taken from Christie's catalogue for the Railing sale.

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Ian Roberts



Norman Railing - sportsman and collector.