

## The Game of 'Fives'

**Extract from 'Tennis Rackets and Other Ball Games' by Mike Garnett published in Australia in 1986**

"The Little handball whether it be of some softer stuffe, and used by the hand alone, or of some harder, and used with the rackette, whether by tennice play with an other, or against a wall alone, to exercise the bodie with both the handes, in every kinde of motion, that concerneth any, or all the other exercises, is generally noted, to be one of the best exercises and the greatest preservatio of health".

Richard Mulcaster, London 1581

'Fives' has been the description for a variety of ball games for many generations. The game of Long Fives for instance was a game of considerable antiquity, and played with racquets and balls within the confines of a (royal) tennis court, but without the complications of the chase.

The game of Fives as we know it, however, emanated from Eton College when boys would while away their spare time hitting a ball with their hands against the chapel wall. With buttresses forming the side walls and the ballustrade of the chapel steps projecting into the left hand side of the court, the end result was a game of considerable hazards!

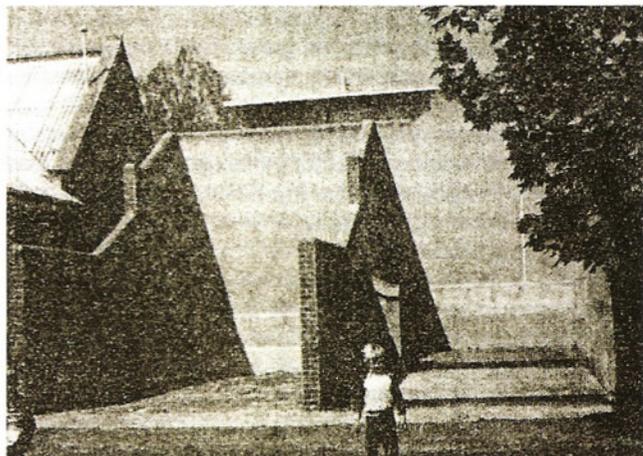
Some sophisticated rules evolved to make it a most interesting game, but the shape of the court changed from school to school according to the availability of space and the hazards that happened to be there at the time. With Eton Fives, the buttress which projects from the left wall is called the "pepper-box" which, with the "step", encloses a small square section of the floor called "dead man's hole". The game is played either singles or doubles with padded gloves and special balls composed of cork, strips of leather and twine and covered in white kid.

Variations of the game became known by the name of the school at which it evolved, thus Rugby Fives, Winchester Fives and others. At Geelong Grammar School, Victoria, the following appeared in their school Annual No. 1 of 1875:

#### "Fives

We believe we are right in saying that we are the first school in Victoria which has made this game one of its regular school amusements. Hitherto we have played on rough ground and against a rough wall, but the new court will be ready for play after Christmas, and we may look for a great improvement in our mode of playing the game. It would be advisable if a keeper of the new court were appointed, and if permission to play were given by him according to priority of application; and a Junior and Senior Fives Cup should be established and played for before the beginning of the cricket season."

Two further fives courts were constructed about 1914 soon after the school moved from Geelong to nearby Corio. Philip Brown, the eminent historian and son of the then Head Master, the Reverend Dr. Francis Brown, remembers the courts in 1914 as being identical. They shared their back wall with a less than half-length tennis court, or hit-up wall-court, north of the original Wilson Hall. These plain courts were after the design of Rugby Fives, but in 1943, the parent of a boy leaving the school donated £100 for the establishment (after the war) of an Eton Fives court. Thus, at this famous school there is now one Eton and one Rugby Fives court sharing the centre wall.



*Geelong Rugby and Eton Courts.*

J.V. Fairbairn, as a pupil at Geelong School, won the Fives Competition Tournament in 1914 – and later became a fine squash player with the Royal Melbourne Tennis Club and donated the Fairbairn trophy for squash racquets. As Air Minister during the Second World War, he was killed in an air crash at Canberra in 1940.

At another prestigious Melbourne school, Scotch College, there are in existence three fives courts after the fashion of 'Rugby Fives', and no doubt other exist at various private schools around Australia.

The old Fives Court at Anglesea Barracks, Hobart – shown on a plan of the Barracks dated about 1860 – still stands, and is now used for squash and other amenities. In its original form, it was said to bear a close resemblance to the fives court at Woolwich Barracks, England, then the home of the Royal Engineers who subsequently built the Anglesea court.

Another fives court existed at historic Kingston, Norfolk Island; it is now demolished although the foundations and one wall are visible. This court too was built by the Royal Engineers and stood within the walls of the old military barracks. It was constructed about 1830. Mention has already been made in "A History of Royal Tennis in Australia" of a 'ball court' (probably similar to the fives courts already mentioned) at Melbourne's Victoria Barracks. This was subsequently demolished to make way for the Staff Corps Mess.