



Tonbridge School in 1851 by C Tattershall Dodd (detail).

Flags flutter from the parapet of the great fives wall, the marquees are ready for business, and everyone who is anyone in Tonbridge is assembled to watch the cricket. That the fives court adorns the centre background of C Tattershall Dodd's 1851 oil painting, *The Cricket Match, Tonbridge School*, considered to be the finest example of this mid-Victorian genre, is symbolic of the importance of fives in the history of sport at Tonbridge. Cricket and fives enjoyed close links in the first half of the 19th century. Similar paintings of the period reveal that a fives court was a popular appendage to prestigious cricket grounds, Brighton and The Oval amongst them. In 1841, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army ordered that all barracks were to be equipped with a cricket ground and fives court. In building its splendid new court in 1849, Tonbridge was not seeking to perpetuate a quirky public school game; it was following the fashion of the day for the best sporting facilities.

Close inspection of the Tattershall Dodd painting reveals an earlier fives court tucked into the corner of the old school buildings, the distinctive buttress supports jutting into the playground. This court was taken down in 1863, the year before the buildings themselves were demolished. Its date of construction is unknown, but it seems likely that fives was played at Tonbridge from the early 1800s.

These one-wall open courts catered for "bat fives". The 1849 wall supported two flagstone courts, front and back, known in the school as "white" and "black", the latter being smaller and used by more junior boys. According to the Tonbridge School historian, Septimus Rivington, who was at the school during the bat fives period: "the bat was smaller, neater, and far more whippy than those used elsewhere..... the ball being fairly fast and about half the size of a racquets ball". A "fives-fagging" roster was posted on the school notice board condemning younger boys to spend an afternoon retrieving balls hit out of the court.



School from front

From a distance

A bat fives court at Tonbridge, fags at the ready.

Doubles was played up to 15 and singles normally to 11. Internal competitions were organised to reach their climax on sports day in the spring, with cups and prizes presented alongside the athletics winners. The advent of the school magazine provides the earliest names of fives players at Tonbridge: in 1859, EH Brown won an "elegant bookstand" for his defeat of E Estridge in the open singles.

Despite the popularity of bat fives at Tonbridge, as early as 1860 a letter to the school magazine fretted that "other large schools have their hand fives courts; why should Tonbridge School be behind?" Such sentiments overwhelmed competing pleas for a gymnasium. A formidable "hand fives court committee" led by the headmaster was set up in 1872 and the whole school assembled to consider the project, "the first time such a meeting has ever been held". On completion in 1873 for an outlay of £833, it was declared that "since the building of the present school, no improvement has been made of such importance as these Fives Courts". There was a covered spectators' gallery and a small changing room, luxuries unavailable to 21st century Tonbridge fives. Somebody made a proposal to write to other schools to find out what were the rules of fives, if any. In 1874, the Le Fleming cup was presented for open hand fives singles, a title which has been contested at Tonbridge every year since.

It is a minor tragedy that enjoyment of the new courts never quite matched the frenzied expectation. Photographs offer painful testament to a building designed by committee.

There were three covered courts, each one different - a large court known as the "buttress" court; a second doubles court without a buttress and a smaller "singles" court. Indeed, the prospect of yet more variety with a fourth "Eton" court was only narrowly avoided when it was deemed "expensive to build and more difficult to play than the ordinary 4-walled Rugby game". This 1872 report is one of the earliest-known references to "Rugby" fives.



The 1873 hand fives courts.

Sloppy construction standards condemned the building to a history of maintenance demands for which funds had to be squeezed from a system of voluntary contributions from masters and boys. Occasional intervention by the governors resulted in the addition of a small open court at one end of the building, compounding its Heath Robinson appearance, and a buttress built into the second doubles court in 1892. But this was never a successful facility and, when superseded by later fives courts, it finished its days converted into non-standard squash courts.

Three courts of suspect quality were never enough for the boys and as early as 1881, subscriptions were opened for new courts. The construction of a new gymnasium in 1886 created the relatively cheap solution of building three uncovered courts alongside and, with this stimulus, by the late 1880s, forty boys were able to play fives regularly. Sadly these new courts soon developed their own catalogue of woes - "the sides are not made of real cement; certainly they play very slow" - and of course they were frequently too wet for use. By 1894 the truth had dawned on The Tonbridgian that "a good deal of money must have been wasted in the past over Fives Courts", lamenting that Tonbridge ought to have "at least ten courts and we have practically only two".

For the greater part of this late 19th century period, bat fives limped along, by now a struggling Neanderthal branch coexisting with its more resilient usurper, the hand fives game. There were sorry reports of grass growing between the uneven flagstones. Nevertheless, such was the force of reputation of this "regular old Tonbridge game" that two new bat fives courts were built on the end walls of the 1886 gymnasium, this building now generously lending three of its walls to prop up fives courts. But these latest bat fives courts were poor cousins of the great original wall, being too small to allow the doubles game to be played. The final sad collapse of the 1849 court in a storm in the Easter holidays of 1893 effectively marked the end of bat fives at Tonbridge.

The early 1900s was therefore a very uncertain period for Tonbridge fives, with the older building in poor repair and the gymnasium courts already marked for demolition by plans to add cloisters to the new chapel built in 1900. "Will rackets swamp fives?" asked The Tonbridgian when the rackets court was opened in 1897 - but such worries were

eventually brushed aside by the headmaster - "Dr. Charles Tancock was especially attracted to fives ... and it is to [him] that we owe the splendid set of new Fives courts ... in providing which he showed himself so indefatigable. The value of these additional Courts to the School is hard to over-estimate".

How true! Equipped from November 1906 with a wonderful set of seven new Winchester courts which the builder boasted as "the best in England", fives was rejuvenated. One report declared that "were there twenty courts they would all be used regularly" while another complained of a "surging kicking fighting mass of humanity ... whose sole object is the securing of a Fives Court".

Alas, things were never quite the same after the First World War. Too many competing sports were on offer to allow fives to flourish in its customary way. Rackets had from the outset enjoyed the luxuries of a paid professional, fixtures against the top schools and the prestigious Public Schools Championships. Hockey and squash also became very popular and never again did fives enjoy first choice of the finest natural athletes in the Lent term, as had always been the case up to 1914. Since then, the importance of fives at Tonbridge has derived more from the numbers of boys who choose to play the sport than its stellar quality.

It was in the 1920s that masters became more actively involved in the administration of individual sports. Here again, fives was at a disadvantage as it was grouped for this purpose together with rackets and squash. The three games were run by the formidable CH Knott, an Old Tonbridgian who had won the open singles fives at school in 1919, but whose sympathies were possibly closer to rackets. Whereas other sports had by then enjoyed regular school fixtures for years, fives was still confined to internal competitions.

Out of the blue, everything changed for a few brief years in the early 1930s. The touchstone was JGW Davies, an inventive player who, despite his outstanding talent at cricket, rugby and rackets, took fives very seriously. He won the Tonbridge open singles in 1930, then blues at Cambridge in 1932-34 before reaching the final of the Amateur Singles Championships in 1935, losing by the narrowest possible margin to PA "Pussy" Malt, then the undisputed champion. Described in *The Times* as "a very quick-sighted player [who] volleyed well with both hands", Davies took the title in the following year, as he did again in 1938 and 1939.



JGW Davies (left) with his opponent JG Richards, at the 'Varsity match 1932.

Jack Davies inspired a great period for Tonbridge fives. School and Club matches at last got under way. Regular defeats of the Rugby Fives Association, Jesters and Alleyn's Old Boys, whose teams included Malt and other leading players of the period, must go down as the finest results for the school on record. In 1934, Tonbridge entered the Public Schools Championships for the first time. Despite the handicap of playing on unfamiliar Rugby courts at Dulwich, the Tonbridge pair, DAS Day and WG Popple, won the tournament. The Squash Rackets Fives Tennis and Rackets magazine tells us that "Day is a delightful player with both hands ... but he is not an unorthodox player like the two other fine exponents of the Tonbridge game, CH Knott and JGW Davies". In over 70 years of subsequent endeavour, Tonbridge has never again reached a senior final in the Public Schools Championships, let alone taken a title.

For school matches, the boys travelled as far afield as Bradfield, Haileybury and Epsom, with more local fixtures against Sutton Valence, King's School Rochester and King's School Canterbury. This 1930s run of success for Tonbridge fives expired as swiftly as it had emerged, when the entire 1st IV left the school in 1935. Part of the problem was the dominance of boys in School House, arising from their geographic proximity to both the court booking system and the courts themselves.

By the post-war period, John Knott had become one of those schoolmasters unbeatable in his own court, driving boys to distraction with his unerring ability to locate the buttress. His stewardship of fives however began to reflect the difficulty of juggling the three sports for which he was responsible. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s there were barely 4 or 5 fixtures per season. In 1960, the courts were declared to be "amongst the most neglected buildings in the school". In the three years 1964-66, the school lost every match except one. The open singles was invariably won by a squash or rackets player.

Such was the state of affairs inherited by MH Bushby, John Knott's chosen successor, a curious choice in the somewhat pressing circumstances given that Mike Bushby had never played fives. By good fortune, two of the most endearing qualities of fives coincided with Bushby's priorities in sport - namely the fun that the game offers even to boys who lack natural ball sense and the traditions of sporting behaviour that enable four players to compete in a confined space without a referee. The consequence was that Mike Bushby invested over 30 years in Tonbridge fives, mostly with the younger boys, and became an increasingly passionate advocate for the sport.



John Knott and Mike Bushby, custodians of Tonbridge fives for over 50 years,

Bushby's star pupil, IP Fuller, arrived at Tonbridge in 1966, the nadir of the fives club. As a local prep-school boy, he had peered into the fives courts during visits to the school to play squash. Filled with curiosity, Ian Fuller lost no time in trying out the game. He credits Richard Brewer, a senior boy from the same house and captain of fives, with providing the necessary determined encouragement in those early terms.

AR Wynn entered the school a year later. Talented at all sports, he broke the mould and stuck with fives. Whilst Fuller went about his business on court with quiet efficiency, low to the ground and always in the right place, Tony Wynn bounced around the court impishly overcoming his lack of physique, the buttress becoming a natural ally. Ian Fuller recalls how in the open singles final, then the best of 5 games with serves to the buttress permitted, it took him hours to see off the upstart Wynn.

Led by these two players, Tonbridge fives enjoyed a much-needed renaissance. The fives "club" was by now separated from squash and rackets, the fixture list doubled, and colts matches were included. Members were more likely to spend their afternoons in organised programmes rather than left to book their own private games. In the three years 1970-72, only 3 out of 30 matches were lost, despite reviving the Allyn's fixture and including Merchant Taylors' and St Dunstan's for the first time; indeed the absence of adequate school opposition became a frustrating problem.



Class of 1969. L to r: Tony Wynn, Bill Gunyon, Fred Montagu, Bill Ryan & Jimmy Wilde. Seated Ian Fuller, Neil de Abrew, Ian Cowdroy & Anthony Buckland.

Ian Fuller and Tony Wynn are the only Tonbridgians of the post-war period to record achievements at the highest level of the game. At Manchester University, Wynn acquired a record four consecutive BUSF singles titles and in successive years 1985-87, was a finalist in the National Singles, losing only to the invincible Wayne Enstone. With his partner David Hebden, Ian Fuller's record in the doubles game has no equal. They were finalists in the National Doubles Cyriax Cup for an astonishing 21 consecutive years 1980-2000 and their ten titles remain a record. In 1997 and again in 1998, Fuller finally claimed the ultimate prize of the National Singles title.

The strength of the fives during the Fuller period, combined with the reluctance of the best London schools to play the Winchester game, led Mike Bushby to take the courageous decision in 1971 to fill in the buttress in two of the seven courts. Two further courts were converted a few years later. Bushby also had lighting fitted in the late 1960s. There were mutterings amongst Old Tonbridgians, but the buttress decision is endorsed by the current master-in-charge, Dr Ian Jackson, as providing a crucial stepping stone for the better

players to compete in the Public Schools Championships. Jackson also points out that the Tonbridge buttresses are in the "wrong place", too close to the front wall and at an acute angle which ensures that rallies are abruptly ended. The Old Tonbridgian Fives Club, founded by Denis Moxon in 1965, plays a regular weekly evening at the courts and, according to Neil Arnott who has now looked after the Club for over 20 years, the players "enjoy a bit of both" forms of the game.

In 1977, Peter Commings took over the running of the 1st IV from Mike Bushby. His successor from 1991, Dr Ian Jackson, won a Cambridge blue in no fewer than six years and enjoyed a personal unbeaten record against the boys for nearly 15 years. He was eventually undone by Chris Jones who had distinguished himself by winning the National Under 16s Schools Championships in 2004, a tremendous achievement against strong opponents.

In a period of astronomic investment by the School in sporting facilities, Jackson has nevertheless increased the number of boys choosing to play fives to the maximum of 70 that he considers to be the capacity of seven courts. Through a sophisticated system of leagues, he takes great pains to ensure that boys play at their appropriate standard. Jumbo block fixtures now feature with Christ's Hospital and St Paul's, the record for these adventures being no fewer than 14 teams. In 2006, 58 boys represented Tonbridge in 51 fives fixtures, the equivalent of over 5 hockey elevens.

By the 1970s, there were too many boys playing fives for a single master to run the club. Many members of staff have subsequently provided critical support for the master-in-charge, often invisible to the archives. Peter McManus stands out for his contribution of over 30 years and more recently the boys have greatly benefited from the coaching of Martin Wilkinson. In these and many other assistants - and in the continuity provided by just 4 masters-in-charge over the last 80 years - Tonbridge has been very fortunate.

As in so many schools, the constant pressure for classroom facilities drew the Tonbridge authorities into plans to remove the fives courts to a more distant location. In an extraordinary twist, this scheme met its comeuppance at the hands of Kent planning officials who clapped a preservation order on the building. Not only was the idea of demolishing the courts out of the question, but also it was unacceptable for their condition to be allowed to deteriorate. To its credit, the School promptly forked out £30,000 in 2005 to repair the roof and to upgrade the lighting, compelled on conservation grounds to use the original slate and glass materials. Now amongst the oldest surviving fives courts in the country, the Tonbridge courts duly completed their centenary season in 2006/07, a little slow in the floor and still very draughty for spectators, but otherwise in remarkably robust health.



The refurbished Tonbridge courts in their centenary season of 2007.

Can the old 19th century Tonbridge game compete with the candy floss attractions of modern facilities? A new sports

centre at Tonbridge, promising a "fitness suite" and "multi-purpose studio", struts its entrance shortly. Yet fives retains the secret ingredient for that boy who, not quite at ease with himself in the business of athletic movement, can enter the court with his fellows where, safe from public gaze, a contest can be played out until he emerges, slightly bewildered by the knowledge that he has competed in a ball game. Talented players will be there too and just occasionally the champions. As a mathematician, Ian Jackson will have spotted the apparent 40 year cycle of the great Tonbridge

players of the 1930s and 1970s. For him, 2010 cannot come too soon.

William Gunyon

Bill Gunyon played fives at Tonbridge School under the captaincy of Ian Fuller. He is now fixtures secretary of the Wessex Club and plays occasionally for Old Tonbridgians.

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Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from The Tonbridgian.