

## Fives at Alleyn's School

In 1882, Royal Assent was given for the reorganisation of Edward Alleyn's Foundation established in 1619. The Upper School of Alleyn's College of God's Gift became Dulwich College. The Lower School moved to its present site in Townley Road and was renamed Alleyn's School. Though it was the express intention of the first Headmaster to widen the differences between Alleyn's and the College, in 1905 three Fives courts were erected, hardly competition to the clutch of courts at the College, but nevertheless an inspired innovation. These courts were smaller at 17' by 24'6" than today's standard, but ideal on which to learn the game.

One of the founder Housemasters in 1907 was JF Spurgeon. It was he who promoted Fives in its early days. It is no surprise that when the inter-house Fives competition was introduced in 1908, Spurgeon's was to win it for the first two years. The role of inter-house rivalry in the development of Fives in those early days cannot be over-estimated. In the house notes in the School Magazine, the house captains would regularly exhort juniors to greater efforts. Such was the strength of the house system and the allegiances that it fostered, that when the Old Boys Fives Club was formed, it was proposed to introduce a house competition within its programme. When Spurgeon left in 1909, he presented a fine silver cup to be played for in the Open Singles. Spurgeon's role was taken over by another Fives-playing master, WR Morgan, who looked after Fives until his retirement in 1936.

Even before the inter-house competition was introduced, fixtures against schools began. The first fixture was played in the same year as the courts were erected, at home against Eton Fives-playing St Olave's and was lost 8-12. The existence of three courts encouraged the formation of a 1st VI who played six games of singles and six lots of two doubles, the result of the match being decided on games and not points. This pattern prevailed for some years until the School started to play predominantly against Rugby Fives-playing schools and points scored became the deciding factor. In the earliest reports of away matches against St Olave's, St Mark's College, Eltham College, Bancroft's, St John's College and Sir Walter St John School, there were frequent references to the difficulties of playing in larger courts, courts with flag-stone floors, or courts with no back wall. Such grumbles ceased as success came. No doubt opponents found the small Alleyn's courts a bit tricky too!

The standard of play at Alleyn's was not high in the initial years, judging by some results. Two stand out: a loss of 60-234 against Merchant Taylors' 2nd IV in 1909 and a heavy defeat on the Dulwich College courts by 149-403 the following year. Progress was made swiftly however, because in 1911 the School defeated the College on its courts by 392-265. The significance of this win was such that the Headmaster declared himself "proud that [we have] at last defeated the best Fives team which the College could send against [us]". The game was clearly becoming popular among the younger boys: a Junior Singles and Doubles competition was introduced in 1913. By the time the Great War broke out, the School had an increasingly good record against its opponents and even, in 1911, one unbeaten season. Progress was halted by the War: for a number of years, fixtures were restricted largely to matches against old boys and masters.

The School took time to recover from the ill effects of the War. 264 names of the dead are recorded on the memorial

boards. Some young men returned to School from active service to resume their education. In 1920, the School was fortunate in its appointment as Headmaster of RB Henderson, apparently no mean Fives player. Though there is no evidence of Henderson playing in the matches between boys and masters, for twenty years he exercised an enormously positive influence on all aspects of School life, not least upon the burgeoning sixth form. Oxford and Cambridge became places to aspire to. Fives players from Alleyn's played a significant role in the early days of the Varsity Match.

In the first two years after the War, Fives was largely restricted to inter-house games; few school matches were played. But there were significant numbers of people playing at the School and there was a need for improvements to the courts: in 1921, electric light was installed. An Old Boys Fives Club was formed, boasting nearly 60 members within a year. Old Boys played at Cambridge: for example Leonard Soar (St John's) was the University Doubles champion in 1922. It is likely that more Alleyn Old Boys figure in the history of Cambridge Fives from 1892-1925 and that of Oxford, too. The Club started to play fixtures against such clubs as University College, London and the Bank of England, whose team is likely to have contained Alleyn Old Boys, as banking was a popular destination for leavers.

At School, the game flourished throughout the 1920s. The fixture list took on a more contemporary look with opponents such as Bedford Modern, Christ's Hospital, St Paul's and Whitgift replacing the exponents of Eton Fives. As old boys' and university clubs began to form around the country, they too joined the fixture list, as did the Jesters and the RFA. The School introduced an Intermediate Singles competition and a 2nd IV in 1924. So completely was the School permeated by Fives-playing, that in 1925 the School Captain and his three senior prefects were Fives colours. How the younger boys must have looked up to them!

The first golden age of Alleyn's Fives had arrived. While Philip Malt bestrode the ranks of the Old Boys Fives Club, Alfred Dearsley and the young Edward Bailey (then known as Ted but after the Second World War as 'Bill') went to up to Cambridge where they played in the first official Varsity Match in 1926. In his third Varsity Match, Bailey partnered Hugh Prout (AOB). After Cambridge, Prout teamed up with the left-handed "Pussy" Malt, for the Amateur Doubles, where they beat Bailey and his Cambridge partner in the 1930 final. This marked the beginning of four years of dominance by the Old Boys Fives Club.

Alleyn's School, from whose ranks these fine players emerged, was likewise beginning to threaten the pre-eminence of such schools as St Paul's, Oundle, Winchester and Tonbridge. The fixture list comprised 17 matches in 1930. Among the opponents were several adult teams: Jesters, Old Paulines, Old Sinjuns, Old Blues and Oxford University. The experience of playing such tough opposition must have benefited the youngsters who now began to make a mark in the Public Schools Championships. In 1930, the School 1st pair reached the semi-final of the Doubles; two years later Basil Hope & JW Somerville were runners-up to St Paul's, whilst in 1933 Somerville lost the final of the Singles to RJ Knight of Dulwich, later Amateur Champion. The same year, the School 1st IV recorded victories over the RFA, Tonbridge and the Old Alleynians. Among their number



*The only known photograph of Philip "Pussy" Malt – from the May 1934 edition of the short-lived magazine 'Squash Rackets, Fives, Tennis and Rackets'.*

was Frank Malpress, who was the first Alleyn Old Boy to represent Oxford in the Varsity Match, four times in 1934-37.

During the early 1930s, the 100-strong Old Boys Club must have been a considerable inspiration to the pupils. The lighting in the courts had improved, and a sixpenny slot-machine was installed to dispense balls! Some AOB players undertook a "northern tour" in 1932, playing Mirfield College, Heath Old Boys and Leeds University – perhaps their first ever Fives tour? Various members represented Surrey, Kent and Essex in the short-lived County Championships. Having once won the Cyriax Cup with Prout, Malt now partnered Bailey – 'Malt and Barley' as they once appeared in the press – to win the Cyriax Cup three years in a row, the last of these in 1933 in an all-Alleyn's final. Only Bailey's illness in 1934 prevented them from winning it again. In ten years, the Old Boys had become the most formidable club in the land.

Sadly, Philip Malt was to die, aged 31, in July 1937 from tuberculosis. He was a founder member of the RFA and a stalwart of the Jesters and of King's College, London, where he trained. His one known photograph bears out the description in John Armitage's obituary: "... boyish in appearance, easy in style, a lion in defence, famous for his running commentaries on his own matches". In his Fives memoirs, *A Septuagenarian Remembers*, Bill Bailey wrote about Malt's nickname, Pussy: "His style of play was indeed feline: not robust, his skill lay in accurate placing and lightning reaction; and his left hand was as deft and deadly as a cat's paw." His death robbed Fives of an outstanding talent.

Bill Bailey, on the other hand, was to play on for many years, winning the Amateur Doubles twice more before the Second World War, both times with the left-handed Cecil Mitchell, and then in 1952, with John Pretlove. Though a fine singles player, Bill never won the Amateur Singles, but he was runner-up to Barry Trapnell in 1949. Apparently a ferocious striker of the ball as a young man, in his later years

he was renowned for the subtlety of his cross-courts shots – which he claimed to have invented – and also for insisting, in his gruff way, that the receiver of service throw the ball up for him at the beginning of the rally as had been the practice before the RFA formalised the rules in the mid-thirties. One of the abiding images of Club evenings was of Bill climbing nimbly over the spiked railings that separated the courts from his house in Townley Road. Countless Alleyn's Fives players owe him a debt of gratitude for the example he set, quite literally from another age.

With so much success for the School and the AOBs, it is no surprise that the governors built two new courts in 1934. They were constructed to the standard dimensions recently established by the RFA. These excellent courts released the old courts for use by the Junior School, which gave a new impetus to the game that level. In 1935, a Colts IV was established; in its ranks George Riddell, a future champion, and Tom Jones, a future Hon Sec of the AOBs. As luck would have it, the standard of the School 1st IV in 1934 and 1935 was rather poor: almost the only team they managed to beat was Oxford University (210-71) in 1935! Philip Malt carried the flag for the AOBs that year, winning the Jesters' Cup for Amateur Singles for the third and last time. Such was Malt's fame that in 1935, Frank Bryan Ltd produced a glove bearing his name – the "PA Malt", price 12/- per pair, with "a special rubber and leather palm, giving better protection and greater comfort than the ordinary glove". Philip Malt was never beaten in championship play, though Bill Bailey defeated him consistently on the small Alleyn's courts.

1936 saw another significant death, that of WR Morgan, "... a dear friend to the Club". The Club presented the Morgan Cup to be played for annually between the School and the Old Boys. In the year Morgan, died there was a real sense of improvement in the air. The School successfully took on new fixtures with Haberdashers' Aske's and UCS. Cecil Mitchell & JW Dowlen won the inaugural North of England Doubles Championship. Sadly, the School had no success in the Public Schools tournament and the AOBs had the galling experience of seeing the final of the Cyriax Cup fought out by two pairs from Dulwich College! But in November 1936 there was a very good omen in the top singles game in the Morgan Cup match: George Riddell lost to Bailey 13-15. No schoolboy had ever got that near to victory against Bailey in his prime. It was unsurprising therefore, that a few months later, Riddell won the Public Schools Singles, the School's first victory in the eight years of that competition. Bailey & Mitchell compounded the general joy by winning the Cyriax Cup, the first of three consecutive appearances in the final for them.

As the decade drew on, the School expanded its fixture list to include the formidable Oundle School. The standard of play among the juniors was such that a Colts house competition was introduced in 1938. Riddell once more got to the final of the Public Schools Singles, where Eric Conradi turned the tables on him. RE Fisher, who had been captain of School Fives only two years before, was runner-up to John Armitage in the Amateur Singles. Bailey & Mitchell lost the final of the Cyriax Cup that year, but won it back in 1939, the sixth victory for the AOBs in 10 years. Then in September, war broke out, and by the time hostilities ended, 2nd Lieutenant Cecil Mitchell had been killed on active service in France and Squadron Leader George Riddell was missing over Germany, presumed dead, along with 122 other Old Boys who gave their lives.

The day before war was declared, Alleyn's Senior School moved temporarily to Maidstone, where boys were able to continue playing Fives on the Winchester courts of



*The Alleyn's School 1st team squad of 1951 with John Pretlove (centre) and Bob Smith (far right).*

Maidstone Grammar School. In January 1941, Alleyn's decamped to Rossall, where it stayed until the end of the War. While there, boys learnt 'Rossall Fives', and took on fixtures with Manchester University, Leeds University and Heath Old Boys. By 1943, house leagues were in full swing, "almost everyone in the School played Fives" and the Headmaster was able to report on Speech Day that "the standard of School Fives is as good as ever". The only problems seem to have been an increasing shortage of house shirts and gloves and the need to cancel Friday afternoon practices to carry out Home Guard duties! Back in London, the Alleyn's buildings were taken over by the South London Emergency Secondary School where those pupils who had not gone to Rossall, among them Terry Garrett, were able to introduce a whole new cohort of boys to the game, though with a necessarily much reduced set of fixtures. In an area of London subject to constant bomb and rocket attacks, Old Boys Fives dwindled to negligible proportions, though Terry Garrett went on to play for Cambridge.

When Alleyn's returned to Dulwich in March 1945, Fives was just one area that faced major problems. There was blast damage to the glass roofs of all courts and no functioning lighting. It took some years before the damage was made good and games could be played other than in daylight. Aid with gloves and balls came from old boys and members of the RFA Club, who were allowed to use the courts one evening a week. Bill Bailey set about resurrecting the Old Boys and provided coaching for the boys, who included Roy Birmingham, Jeff Orchard and Len Walker. In 1947, a new master, Geoff Charnley was appointed. He took an immediate interest in Fives and was instrumental in restoring a challenging fixture list and providing a convivial mix of coffee and buns in his rooms after matches, which set the tone for what has always been a sociable game.

As Birmingham, Orchard and Walker matured as players, each going on to play for Oxford or Cambridge, there appeared in the ranks of the Colts two youngsters of enormous sporting talent: Mickey Stewart and the left-handed John Pretlove. Stewart went on to become a major figure in English cricket. Pretlove excelled in cricket, football and Fives and became the most successful of all Alleyn's Fives players. Following hard on the footsteps of these fine players, were John Fletcher and Bob Smith, huge young men and brutal hitters of the ball. With such talent in the School, it was no surprise that Alleyn's once more became a dominant force nationally. When the Public Schools competition was revived, it was held at Alleyn's. In school Fives, Oundle and Bedford reigned supreme before and immediately after the

War. But in 1949, the 16 year-old Pretlove and Birmingham, in singles and as a doubles pair, both ran the eventual winners close. A year later, Pretlove, who possessed the deadliest left-hand in the game and an ability to kill a stitched ball like no other player, duly won his first championship, the Public Schools Singles of 1950. John & Jeff Orchard were runners-up in the doubles. Had the School champion Roy Birmingham not left in mid-term to do National Service, John and Roy might have contested the singles final and won the doubles together. As it was, John went on to win the Schools singles for a second time in 1951 and, with John Fletcher, the doubles. Both of them put their success down to Geoff Charnley coming on court with a box of balls and a tennis racquet and thwacking the ball around the court to improve their retrieval skills.

Four years before, Sidney Batrick left the fifth form of Alleyn's. Sid had made no particular mark at School as a games player, but Terry Garrett and John Pretlove remember him playing Fives with his customary verve. In 1949, he joined the ranks of the Old Boys. For over fifty years, Sid was to be a mainstay of the Club, as player and as Secretary, an ever-present figure at Club practices, a vocal presence in countless matches, ever ready for a game of singles, and in his later years, an unpaid, inspirational coach at Alleyn's in times of decline. On Sid's death in 2002, John Pretlove wrote a generous tribute praising the major role Sid played in the revival of Alleyn's Fives in the 1980s and 90s and the School named the refurbished old courts in Sid's honour. Fives owed a great debt to Sid Batrick, not a champion on the court, but a great champion of the game.

After the War, the Old Boys Fives Club presented the George Clark Cup in honour of its pre-War President, to be awarded for Intermediate Singles. It was won by Bob Smith. It also presented the Old Boys' Challenge Cup for house doubles and gloves for the winners of these competitions. At the RFA Dinner in 1949, Club President, John Nye, arranged for a IV consisting of himself, LA Coles, Sid Jones and Dr Cyriax to play a friendly against Birmingham, Orchard, Pretlove and Howard King. The youngsters (combined age 68) beat the oldies (combined age 189) 107-102 – the score card still exists. John Pretlove remembers how, after the match, the 75 year-old Cyriax took his customary cold shower, dressed while still dripping wet, cycled to John Nye's house in the Village for tea, then left to cycle back into town for an appointment at his surgery.

Bill Bailey reckoned that the Alleyn's 1st IV of 1950 was the best the School had ever produced. It consisted of Birmingham, Pretlove, Orchard and Bob Bedford. Yet still it lost to Oundle away. In 1951, the IV of Pretlove, JR Robinson, Fletcher and Bob Smith finally managed to beat Oundle at home. Whichever was the better IV, that result marked the end of an ever-improving situation for Alleyn's School Fives. So weak was the School in 1952-55, that no Fives-playing boy was senior enough to be appointed Captain. Eventually in 1957, the silky left-handed Bob Dorey won the Public Schools Singles but he lacked a partner. The situation at the School might best be described as patchy.

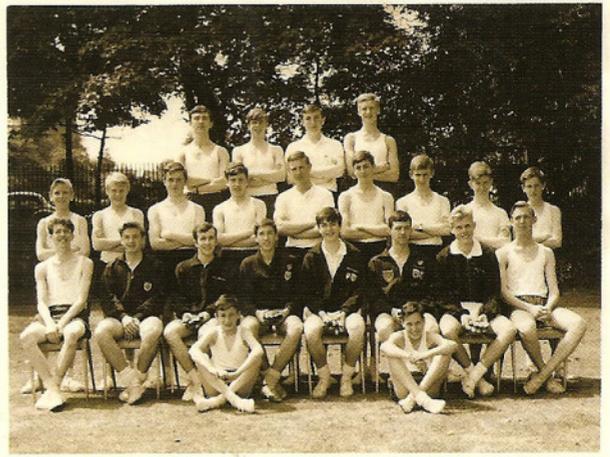
The position with the Old Boys was very different. In Bailey, Birmingham, Pretlove and Smith, the Club had the dominant players of the day, yet many School leavers were not joining. Never again was the Club to boast a membership or fixture list the like of which it had enjoyed pre-War. Nevertheless, the roll of honour for the AOBs in those years is formidable: Between 1952 and 1961, John Pretlove won the Amateur Singles four times, first while on National Service ("Five days' leave? You'd better win it or you won't get any more!"), then as an undergraduate. He won the

Amateur Doubles seven times (four times in a row with Dennis Silk, once each with Bailey, Birmingham and Smith). Roy Birmingham won the Amateur Singles in 1954 when Pretlove was on tour and unable to defend, and the Doubles with Bob Smith in 1955. Smith won the Singles in 1957. Pat Badmin & Bob Dorey nearly joined the list in 1960: they were runners-up to David Gardner & Stan Holt. The Dunstonians were on the march! Indeed it was Eric Marsh who three times denied John Pretlove a further singles title. The Varsity Matches of that period were full of AOBs. When Charnley left Alleyn's in 1958, he could look back on a second golden age and a job well done.

Alleyn's was very fortunate in Charnley's replacement. In September 1958, a gifted young games player, Barry Banson, joined the staff. Barry maintained good relations with the Old Boys and encouraged them to pass on their skills to the boys. The writer of this article was one who benefited enormously from the chance to play regularly with the finest in the game. Barry had the pleasure of seeing two new courts added on to the back of the existing ones in 1960.

Throughout the early 1960s, the School lacked a strong and balanced IV. There were a number of good individual players: Mike Edwards, who went on to a distinguished career in county cricket; Bob Davies, who played for Oxford in 1963 and acts under the name of Robert East; Peter Carlile, who won the University Doubles twice; and Bob Dolby, who went on to be President of Cambridge and played a decent game into his early sixties. In 1966, the ex-Amateur Champion Eric Marsh joined the staff of the School and Barry Banson handed the reins over to him. Under Eric, a really strong IV emerged, unbeaten for two seasons in 1965-1967. It consisted of George Baker, Les Smith, Barry Ware-Lane and a young man called David Hebden. David won his first national title in 1967, the Public Schools Doubles, with the ambidextrous George Baker. The same year, playing for Cambridge, George won the Universities Singles. He and David also won the Doubles. A forty year parade of titles won all over the country by David had begun.

In the 1960s, the number of tournaments began to expand and players started to travel out of London in pursuit of silverware. Alleyn's followed suit. In 1969 players from Alleyn's competed in the West of England Schools championships: Martin Grant & John Gibbons got to the final of the U18 Doubles; David Saward won the U16 Singles and, with his partner Paul Westwood, won the U16 Doubles. Over



*The Alleyn's School squad of 1963.*

the next three years, the West Country proved a happy hunting ground: in 1970 Gordon Blair & Rod Davis won the U16 doubles; Gibbons & Saward duly won the U18 title in 1971 and Blair & Davis in 1972. It was no surprise that in 1970 Gibbons & Saward won the Public Schools Doubles, and Blair & Davis did the same in 1972. Had this group of players gone on to play serious Fives after School, Alleyn's might have been looking at a third golden age. In fact only David Hebden went on, pairing up with several non-AOBs to win scores of regional and national titles in doubles and a hatful of singles titles too, over a hundred in all so far. His career warrants an article of its own!

The Alleyn Old Boys played on for the next 25 years with reduced numbers, but with undiminished enthusiasm and an emphasis on the social aspect of Fives. Sid Batrick, Joe Botwright, Roy Birmingham, John Davies, Bobby Brown, Bill Bailey and Rick Wilson (OA) were ever-present members of any AOB IV, supplemented by John Pretlove, Bob Smith and Dave Hebden for some of the tougher matches.

At the School however, the story was one of less stability. Once Eric Marsh left in 1972, Fives was run by a succession of masters in charge: Mr JE Brand, Trevor Tindale, Chris Chivers, Justin Shepherd, the Headmaster Colin Niven, Paolo Duran and John Lofthouse. Despite their efforts, the standard fluctuated and success became less frequent. In the mid-seventies, the School went fully independent and co-educational, switching to a five-day week. Boys' numbers dropped and other sports and activities attracted the games players who might have excelled at Fives. John Pretlove offered his services as a coach and helped a number of individuals to realise their potential: Angus Hanton played for Oxford University in 1981 and 1982; Paul Reeder, Captain in 1976, went on to captain Cambridge University; 'Jumbo' Jennings & Chris Stendall won the West of England U16 Doubles in 1978; and John Angeli & John Bochsler who won the short-lived Greater Manchester U16 Youth Doubles the same year. At the end of the 1970s, when David Hebden beat Wayne Enstone to win the National Singles title (1979), the School enjoyed a crop of good players once more: Bruce Hanton & Nick Geere at 1st IV level, Paul Davey & Stephen Geere at Colts. Bruce Hanton won the West of England Singles in 1981; Davey & Geere won the West of England Doubles the following year and were runners-up in the National Schools Doubles. At this time a young man called Hamish Buchanan gets a fleeting mention: as a member of the 2nd IV ("lacking in a certain mobility at times") and as an occasional Number 4 in the 1st IV ("a gritty competitor"). Davey & Geere retained their West of England Doubles title



*At the 1961 AOBs versus The Rest match to celebrate the opening of the new courts: L to R Dave Sharman; Bill Bailey; Roy Birmingham; Alastair Mackenzie.*



*Author Bob Dolby outside The John Pretlove Courts in 2008, as they are before their proposed enclosure. © R Dolby.*

in 1983 and Davey went on to play for Oxford in four Varsity matches.

Then, once more, a decline set in from which it took many years to recover. Teams won fewer matches, the fixture list diminished, the old courts suffered neglect. The School found it hard to raise teams, suffered resounding defeats, stopped entering competitions, and produced no players at university level. In 1993, the 1st IV's record read: played 9, lost 9. Colin Niven was pleased to accept an offer from Batrick, Birmingham and Pretlove to help rebuild the game at Alleyn's. They targeted the youngest members of the School: by 1996, Tom Hunt was good enough to reach the final of the U13 Singles and the following year the final of the U14 competition. By 1998, there were sufficient players to reinstate the three internal singles competitions. In 2000, Lambert reached the final of the U13 Singles and the final of the U13 Doubles with Cullen. The next year, Lambert & Rocco Sulkin were runners-up in the U14 Doubles. Now a Governor, John Pretlove pushed the School to refurbish the old courts and replace the back wall which had been removed to house the CCF lorry, and at a Festival of Fives in June 2002, they were unveiled as The Sid Batrick Courts,

each court bearing the name of a past champion. At the same time, in a fitting tribute to John's contribution to Alleyn's Fives, the main courts were renamed The John Pretlove Courts, the doors bearing the names of Birmingham, Smith, Hebden and Buchanan.

There still remained the problem of how best to run the game at the School with no Fives-playing master or mistress available. The School wisely turned to Rick Wilson and Ian Fuller: Rick to coach in the Junior School, where he introduced the RFA Certificate of Proficiency in Fives, and from 2002, Ian to coach in the Main School. The rest of the story is in the record books: a succession of finalists, starting with Inigo Ackland reaching the final of the U13 Singles in 2003 and ending, for the moment, with Inigo this year winning the National Schools Singles and with Jacob Brubert, the Doubles. Meanwhile Peter Hanton, Adam George, Ben Hemingway Stephens, Sam Redmayne, Wim Geberbauer, Zach Brubert, Richard Lowe, Oliver Brenman, David Bowden and Adam Senn have been sporting the red shirt in finals at all levels. With Hamish Buchanan & Robin Perry winning the National Doubles for the past five years and the AOBs winning the Wood Cup four times since 2000 and the Owers Cup three times since its inception in 2004, Alleyn's Fives is enjoying a third golden age.

Success in Fives is due to many factors, which include talent, determination, coaching and courts. Alleyn's has had many players of great natural talent; they have mostly had considerable determination to succeed, they have often enjoyed effective coaching; and they have benefited from fine courts. Successful players have learned from each other, been inspired by their elders and passed on their skills to younger players. Some AOBs have coached as much as they have played: Basil Hope at Rutlish, Colin Shearer at Denstone, Bob Dolby at Berkhamsted, Radley and Derby Moor, Spencer Beal at Highgate and Eastbourne. As long as the courts survive - and indeed, the current plan to enclose the Alleyn's courts virtually guarantees this - coaching skills are maintained and and somebody makes decent balls, Fives at Alleyn's should flourish for another century.

*Bob Dolby*