

After taking his degree at York University, Charles Lamb took a gap year touring the World, primarily by bicycle. Learning that he was scheduled to visit New Zealand, the suggestion was made to him that he might visit a Fives court that was known to exist. The outcome is this rather more comprehensive overview of a little known cluster of Fives courts in the former British Empire.

## INTRODUCTION

Whilst one may not initially associate New Zealand with being home to many Fives courts, it should be little surprise that the game proliferated at the height of Empire in one of the most Anglo-Saxon of Britain's colonies. The greatest concentration of courts is on the South Island, especially around Invercargill, Dunedin and Christchurch, an area that experienced significant colonisation in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

A feature of many New Zealand courts is their lack of a back wall. In all other aspects, they are not too dissimilar to Rugby Fives courts - smooth walls and floors - it is just the back wall that is missing. In researching the courts, only two four-wall courts were discovered; those at Nelson Boys' College on the South Island. Another defining feature of every single court is the lack of roofing. This may help explain why the courts are, for the most part, three-walled - it enables the prodigious amount of rain that falls on New Zealand to flow out.

## NORTH ISLAND

In contrast to the South Island, the North Island has a paucity of courts or former locations. The only confirmed location is at Auckland Grammar School (AGS), though there were rumours of courts lurking amongst the tree ferns in Rotorua and Tauranga. However, no evidence was found to support these claims.

## SOUTH ISLAND

The South Island, by contrast, has considerably more courts and former locations.

### Nelson Boys' College

Amongst Nelson's collection of ten courts, there is the only pair of four-walled courts that were discovered in researching this article. These are, however, relatively fraudulent Fives courts, converted from their original three-walled status to four walls to facilitate the playing of squash. All the courts, however, are in a relative state of disrepair, and one has been converted into a climbing wall.



A "fraudulent" Fives court at Nelson College - the site of the only 4 walled courts in New Zealand.



An historic aerial view of the Auckland Grammar School courts.

According to the school archives, the Fives Championship was instituted in 1914, with a challenge cup being presented by DWP Evans, an old boy of Nelson College, for the annual competition. The first winner of this was FA Hamilton, who won the championship in 1914. It is not clear where this was played, but it is certain that the College had its first two Fives courts early in 1915, the old boys having contributed the money for the purpose.

The game was strange to the boys, but after demonstrations by masters, it soon became popular. However, these courts were demolished in 1941 to make way for a new driveway past the gymnasium. Consequently, when ten new courts were opened in 1950 (costing approximately £5,500), the boys had little idea how the game worked. Yet by 1956, Fives was considered a main school sport along with cricket and rugby, but the conversion of two of the Fives courts to squash courts (by adding a back wall) signalled the start of the demise of Fives at the College. Indeed, it is these two courts that are the only four-walled courts (albeit due to squash) in New Zealand.

With the increase in the range of sporting activities in recent years, the sport of Fives has continued to decline at Nelson, although it remains a popular interval and lunchtime



The serried ranks of open backed courts at Nelson College.

activity. According to the School, Fives balls are not only rarely seen but also difficult to obtain. As with many other locations of Fives courts, tennis balls are substituted for play. Despite this, a small group of boys contest the annual Fives championships, and it is said that there is generally a high standard of play.

### Auckland Grammar School

Where there had been courts, at AGS, the game flourished. AGS was founded in 1869, and after several temporary premises, it moved into a new location in 1880.

Here "...fives courts were in constant use with semi-official competitions held throughout the year...boys played from early morning till dark, in the blazing sun and even in their raincoats in the pouring rain...it is impossible to exaggerate the popularity of fives among Grammar boys of all ages...results of the 1907 Championship...list two boys who played in singles, doubles and three-a-side."

The plans for the new 1916 School building had provision for 22 Fives courts, although in the event only 15 were built. Despite only having 15 courts to play on, "School Fives championships, with their complicated arrangement of preliminaries and finals, were still a major event...H.O. Ingram, Upper 6th's player for 1923, won Championship in Fives that year, later became an AGS Master and took a young Edmund Hillary on tramping and skiing parties to Mount Ruapehu in the mid-1930s." No doubt through fitness obtained on-court and perhaps a yardstick for all of us to aim for . . . .

By 1970, there were no longer Fives championships, but when the boys were released for morning interval and lunchtime there was a rush to claim one of the courts. However, it is doubted whether the true game of Fives was ever really played much during the period, with most courts being used for a variation of cricket.

Eventually, the Fives courts were demolished in 1990 "much to the consternation and even incredulity of Old Boys" to make way for a new English block. They were replaced nearby by a few courts built of concrete block as meagre compensation, but these too were demolished in 2005 to make way for the building of the Sports Centre.

### Dunedin

What is relatively unusual is the high concentration of courts (or historic concentration of courts) in the town of Dunedin. With four confirmed different court locations in the town, this represents a far higher concentration than anywhere else in New Zealand, and even rivals concentrations of courts in the UK.

### John McGlashan College, Dunedin

With six courts until 1993, each year group at the school had their own court in which to play. Though the building of the new library reduced this number to three, the game still remains very popular with the boys, especially at break-time and lunch. In the most successful example of a resurgence of interest in New Zealand, the annual Fives singles competition for seniors, juniors and year 7 and 8 boys was re-instated in 2006 by Stewart McDonald, a master at the school. The ball used is not a Fives ball, but a tennis ball, and the rules have had a touch of local flavour added – you can have as many people on court at once as you like, and can kick the ball should all else fail! Perhaps more free-for-all than Fives? Despite this, it eventually comes to resemble a

regular game of Fives (once the majority of people have vacated the court) and the standard of play is pretty good.

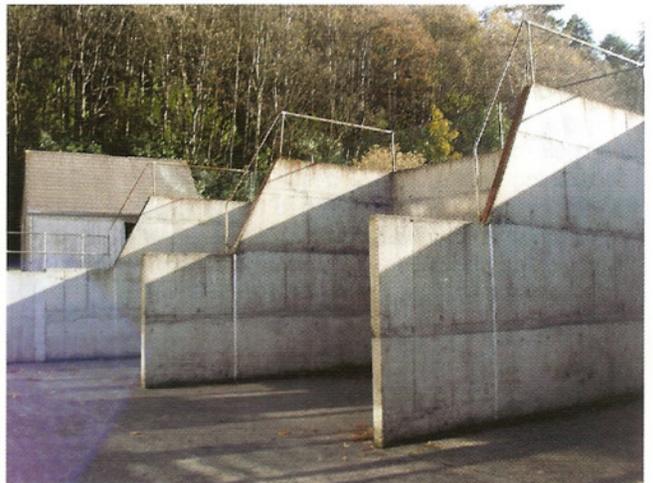
The current courts were built in 1973 when the new gymnasium was completed. Though this is ear-marked for redevelopment at some point, it is felt by the school that the Fives courts are an integral part of the atmosphere and, should they be demolished, replacements would be necessary.



*Play at John McGlashan College's three courts*

### Otago Boys' High School, Dunedin

Unfortunately, information is lacking for Otago. There are several courts at the School, following the common three-walled design. They are used by the boys at break and lunch and there's an annual School championship, but any sense of them being an integral part of sport at the School disappeared many years ago.



*The Courts at Otago Boys High School.*



### **Knox College, Dunedin**

There is a great deal of information on the courts that existed at Knox College, an affiliated residential college of the University of Otago.

The Fives courts were built in 1913 at the south-east corner of the College site. A Dunedin solicitor, Frederick Zwingle Moore, gave money for the project when the College was founded in 1909. However, as it was not quite enough, residents assisted with the excavation to keep down costs. It was in this excavation that a medical student, Rutherford Nichol, tragically lost his life when a bank of earth collapsed on top of him.

The courts gave many hours of pleasure to Knox residents and theological hall students, who often popped out for a game between classes. The College magazine, the *Knox Collegian*, reported in 1915: "With the approaching examinations, and the depressing influence of dull swot, the facilities to be obtained on the Fives Court for healthy exercise of body and mind will no doubt be more eagerly sought." In 1927, the *Collegian* reported that "Fives still continues to be one of the most popular pastimes at the College. The two courts are in use nearly all day." By 1924, the College was holding regular Fives matches with its great rival, Selwyn College, and in 1932 when the Cameron Shield began as an annual sports competition between the two Colleges, Fives was one of the sports contested.

However, interest in the game was declining by the late 1940s, when there was a suggestion that golf be added to the Cameron Shield as it was "now a more popular sport in the university than Fives or billiards." However, Fives remained part of the Shield competition until 1958 when it was abandoned because of problems with the courts. In 1952, the College Master, Hubert Ryburn, expressed concern about the stability of the courts and in 1957 part of the wall collapsed. After three years of delay, during which the courts bore warning signs, the Council finally managed to have them filled in; the area eventually became a car park, as it remains today.

### **Selwyn College, Dunedin**

Adding to the proliferation of courts in Dunedin, Selwyn College (the first University College in Dunedin) was one of the first locations in Dunedin to have a court. A reference to the court comes from *Selwyn College's First Century 1893-1993*, which states: "At the commencement of the College in 1893, a Fives court had been built to provide the few students with an opportunity for relaxation. It had a long life, being repaired in 1968." As already mentioned, Knox College and Selwyn College contested the Cameron Shield, where Fives was a feature. However, it is not known what happened to Fives or the courts at Selwyn.

### **Dunedin Bowling, Lawn Tennis & Fives Club**

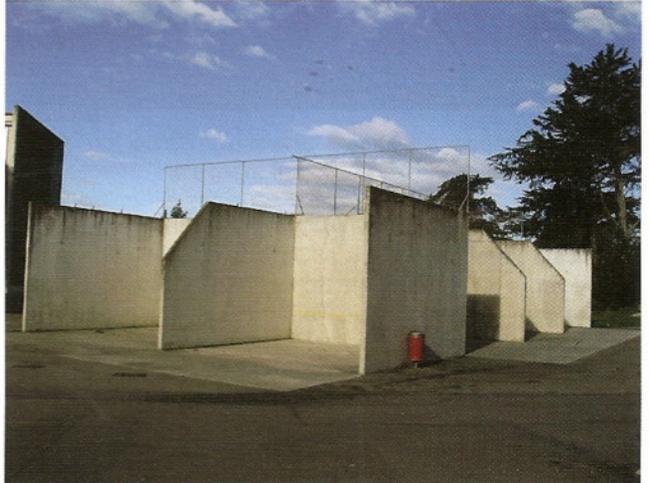
The final entry for Dunedin comes from the Dunedin Bowling, Lawn Tennis and Fives Club. Starting life as the Dunedin Bowling and Quoiting Club (formed in December 1870), the Dunedin Bowling, Lawn Tennis and Fives Club emerged in September 1882. This in turn became the Dunedin Bowling Club in August 1941, and was disbanded in June 1972. The question this raises, is where the club played. It is not clear when some of the courts in Dunedin were constructed, but the majority were after the 1882 formation of the club. It is possible that there were courts at the club's location, or that they utilised ones at a local school. However, without any more information readily available, these avenues remain uncertain.

### **Christ's College, Christchurch**

Whilst it was confirmed that in the early 1960s there were still Fives courts at Christ's College in Christchurch, that is all the information that was forthcoming on the courts at this site.

There were also rumours from knowledgeable South Island Kiwis that a fudge shop now resides in the Fives courts in Christchurch. However, no evidence was available to support this claim.

### **Waitaki Boys High School, Oamaru**



*The impressive block of courts at Waitaki School*

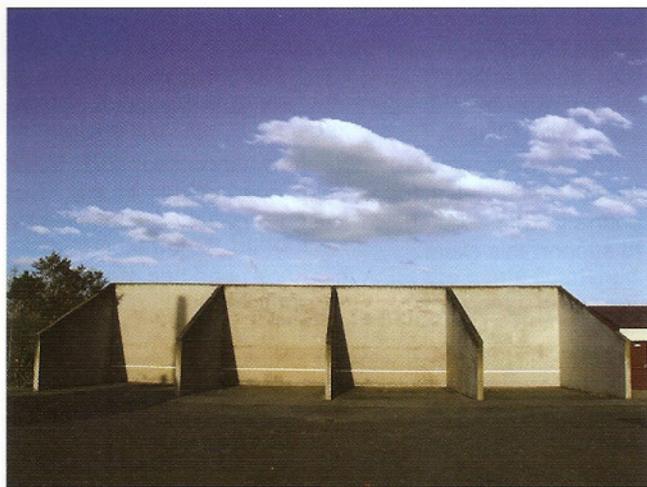
Waitaki possesses eight Fives courts and Fives at the School was particularly popular up until the 1970s, when as many people who now watch the rugby matches would be watching the Fives matches. However, the popularity of the game started to diminish, and though modified Fives competitions continued to be organised, they came to an end around 2003.

### **St Kevin's College, Oamaru**

Though it has no Fives courts, St Kevin's College possesses hand ball courts. The College was established in 1927, and in 1966 new courts were built to replace an old red brick structure that was used for hand ball. However, they have not been used for hand ball for approximately twenty years.

### **Waimate High School, South Canterbury**

Waimate High School has four courts, though they are not the original courts at the School. They were constructed in the early 1980s, when the old courts were demolished to make way for classrooms. Fives was still a popular game in the 1970s but, as is a theme with other schools, it no longer holds the standing it once did. There is, however, still a 'Cups' competition for the sport every year.



*The four courts at Waimate High School*

### Southland Boys' High School, Invercargill

The first reference to Fives at Southland Boys' High School comes from 1906, when the School had "energetically taken up the game of Fives or, as we like to call it, hand-ball." The practical benefits of playing were also noted: "[Fives] hardens the skin of the hands, and makes them less susceptible to blistering when required to do manual labour." It's reassuring to know that playing Fives prepares you for something in life!

Playing space had become such a premium commodity that the School walls were used, though this resulted in balls "continually going on the roof and through the windows," much to the consternation of the masters. It had been expressed that "once the girls had moved to their commodious new quarters", more Fives courts could be built at the School to cater for demand.

This led to two more being erected in September 1907 at a cost of £180. However, the new courts did not fulfil the incessant demand, and in 1908 the courts were said to "seldom be idle" and busy "from 8.30am till dark." The popularity of the game at the School in the early twentieth century cannot be underestimated, and a handicap tournament in 1908 attracted 68 entries.

Commenting on the Fives Championship of 1912, the match report suggested that the Juniors "keep the ball low, not sky it, and cultivate the use of both hands." Some pieces of advice never change!

By 1934 there were two more courts, but the popularity was not to last. In 1951, it was lamented that "the science of Fives as [the "giants"] applied it, is no longer seen on our courts. Enthusiasm is sadly lacking among our School Fives players." This blip, however, was temporary and by 1953 it was deemed that, "if sports were rated by the numbers playing them, Fives could probably rank as a major sport in the School." There were only two courts in existence at the time, and so through a sponsorship from the parents' association of the School, funding was granted for three new courts. The construction of the new courts was entrusted to the schoolboys, using equipment supplied by friends of the School. Whilst the physical education classes undertook the excavation work and levelling of the site, the actual building was left to the senior boys. Through such economical use of paid labour, the cost of the three new courts was £500.

In 1986, the familiar story of court construction returned, with three new courts built and a further two planned. It is unclear whether the previous sets of courts had been demol-

ished, but it seems likely. However, the construction of the new courts was not along the relatively simple lines of previous projects. In what may be a familiar scenario to many, the Rector of Southland Boys' berated the chief architect at the Ministry of Works in "frustration and despair" that "after eighteen months of procrastination, misunderstanding, what seems like ineptitude and cost escalation, we are no nearer getting three Fives courts built, but further away." However, the new courts were built, and stood until 2006, when they made way for a new gymnasium.

### CONCLUSION

Whilst Fives may no longer flourish as it once did in New Zealand, it remained a popular sport until the mid twentieth century. The concentration of courts in the Invercargill, Dunedin and Christchurch triangle on the South Island is quite intriguing, as such a concentration does not occur anywhere else in New Zealand. An explanation for this could be due to the popularity of the game back in Britain at the time the South Island was heavily colonised from the mid-nineteenth century. Whatever the reason, Fives flourished in New Zealand, both on the North and South Islands in various locations. The stage is now set for a revival, utilising the surviving courts to enthuse a new generation, enabling them to rediscover the game of their grandfathers.

*Charles Lamb*

#### Notes:

1. For Auckland Grammar School, see Trembath, KA, *Ad Augusta; A Centennial History of AGS 1869 to 1969*, published in 1969.
2. For Selwyn College, see Hargreaves, R. *Selwyn College's First Century 1893-1993: A History and List of Residents* (Dunedin: Centennial Committee, Selwyn College Board of Governors, 1993) p. 34.
3. For the information on Southland Boys' High School, I owe great thanks to Lynley Dear, the School's Archivist.
4. I owe a great debt to Dr Alison Clarke, who is writing the centenary history of Knox College, Dunedin for the information supplied about Fives there.

