

A ball in the compost pit and other tales

A look into the history of the College courts of Cambridge

Many Fives players have memories of playing matches for and against Cambridge University at Portugal Place, which was for years the focus of the game in Cambridge, with its two flagstone-floored Eton Fives courts, its tatty armchairs and the unmistakable aroma lingering from generations of sweaty leather gloves. More recently, since the demolition of Portugal Place in the mid 1990s and the conversion of the Leys School courts to a climbing wall, the University club has had to rely on the single court in Magdalene College to keep the game alive.

It is less well-known that Magdalene was not the only Cambridge College to have its own Fives court(s). David Egerton, in his 1935 book "Eton & Rugby Fives" states that "At Cambridge over a dozen courts were built between 1890 and



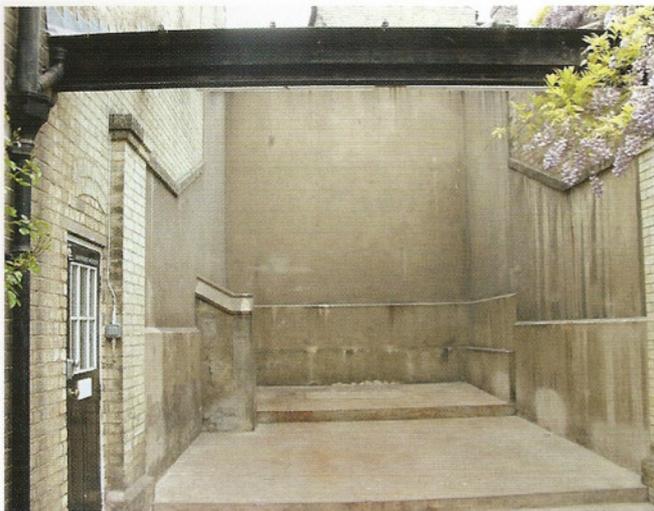
The Selwyn College court seen from Sidgwick Avenue

1900" and some of these still exist, albeit in various guises and states of repair.

My interest was first piqued when, as an undergraduate in the early 1990s, I noticed a familiar shaped building backing onto Sidgwick Avenue right next to the Languages Faculty, which occasionally had the misfortune to be graced by my presence. When I investigated, an Eton Fives court was revealed, crumbling and in a poor condition, and standing alone in the gardens of Selwyn College. It was full of wheelbarrows, plant pots and other gardening paraphernalia. Returning to Cambridge some 15 years later to research this article, the court is still clearly there but has now been bricked up at the back and a roof put on.

The Selwyn College archives contain a scrapbook/album compiled by Selwyn student and later Fellow Frank Woodward, which he gave to the college in 1969. In a section relating to the College gardens he mentions the Fives court and conjures up a picture that introduces a whole new hazard into the game: "*Between the Masters' garden and the Bachelors' Walk (was) an Eton Fives court. The compost pit was one of the hazards of a game of Fives. A lofted shot which just cleared the right-hand wall usually ended up in the pit. The player responsible was required to retrieve the ball and for much of the year this meant dropping several feet and ending up in a sort of primeval odiferous ooze.*"

Woodward also mentions that the court was there in the mid 1920s, although the exact date of construction is unknown, and it was certainly being used in 1961, when the Selwyn College Eton Fives Club was formed by Old Edwardian and Selwyn undergraduate David Arthur. David modestly describes himself as "*a rather mediocre player, never good enough for the University side*", but set himself the task of resuscitating the sport at Selwyn. He found a fellow Selwyn



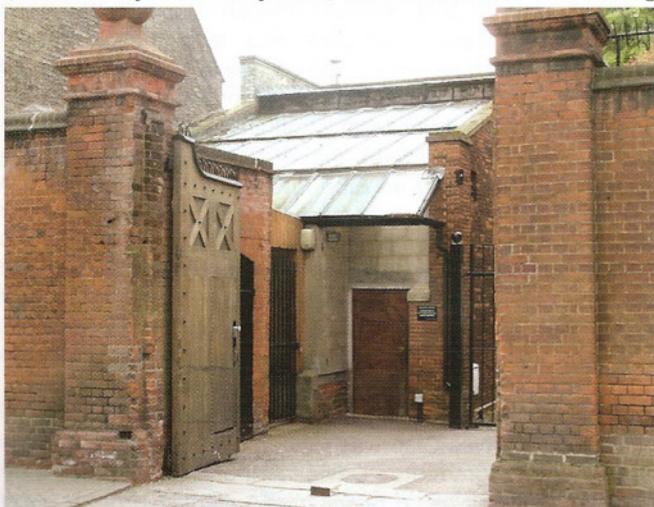
The court at Magdalene College

Fives player and organised fixtures against other colleges, even awarding himself and his partner College half-colours and recruiting a couple of beginners to their cause. David remembers the court at the time as being *"in perfectly good condition"*.

The Magdalene College court is now the only playable Eton Fives court in Cambridge. It was built in 1924 and in recent years has had a new roof and new lighting put in. In the latter days of Portugal Place it was always used as the third court when three pair matches were played, but this was not always the case. Peter Reynolds, doyen of Cambridge Fives and who has been at Magdalene since 1957 as undergraduate, research graduate and then Fellow, recalls that in the late 1950s the preferred third court was the black court in Emmanuel College.

The Emmanuel College archives provide an interesting insight. The original court was in a small building erected in the 1870s, but this was demolished in 1933 to make room for a much bigger building containing an Eton Fives court, a Rugby Fives court, and a Squash court (labelled "Rackets court" on the 1933 plans). The 1952-53 College Magazine reports that *"The membership and the strength of the Rugby Fives and Eton Fives Clubs are subject to fluctuations"* and in 1955-56 a revival of the Eton Fives club is reported; only 10 people joined, however, which *"regrettably low number is the more surprising since Emmanuel undoubtedly possesses one of the best courts in Cambridge"*. The situation clearly failed to improve, as after 1965-66 there is no further mention of the sport in the magazine.

The subsequent fate of Emmanuel College Fives is described by Peter Reynolds, who recalls the court being



The Rugby Fives court at Emmanuel College



The outside of the Cambridge University Real Tennis building

rendered unplayable during a rag week activity in which students threw glass bottles against the walls as hard as possible and pitted them beyond repair. After that the court was used for storage; by the time future ten-times Kinnaird Cup winner Brian Matthews arrived as an undergraduate at Emmanuel in 1975 the court was no longer in use and the increasingly popular College Squash club had taken over. The court underwent a *"complete refurbishment"* in 1977 and was turned into a second squash court. The Rugby Fives court is still there, although it is now bricked up and used for storage.

It wasn't only colleges who built Fives courts. The University Real Tennis Club on Grange Road still has very clear markings on the outside of the building that come from an Eton court. Jeremy Fairbrother, former Bursar of Trinity College and President of the Real Tennis Club, has looked into the archives at the Tennis Club, which reveal that the Fives court was built by W.Bell & Sons in 1876 for the sum of £117-15-0. There is no record of when it was demolished, but Jeremy's best guess is that it would have been pulled down when the Air Ministry requisitioned the building during the Second World War to provide space for car-parking, a function that the area still fulfils today.

Even the sharpest-eyed Fives player, happening to be playing a cricket fixture or a football match on the Gonville and Caius College sports ground on Barton Road, would most likely not give a second glance to the pair of unprepossessing garages next to the squash courts in the corner of the field. A look inside the garage doors, however, would reveal a remarkable sight – two Eton Fives courts, still in excellent condition but with the front walls greatly reduced in height.

The Caius College archives are a fascinating source of information about the history of the Barton Road courts (which are incidentally only a few hundred yards away from the former courts at the Leys School) and prove that there really is nothing new under the sun; many of the challenges faced today by the EFA, by Fives clubs and by Fives-playing schools have been around for a very long time indeed.

The first mention of Fives courts at Caius is in the minutes of a College meeting in October 1865, where *"it was agreed . . . to empower the Bursar to get plans and estimates for Fives Courts"*. Plans and a detailed specification of works were then produced in January 1866 for two Fives courts and a Rackets court with a view to knocking down two existing cottages, stables and a Coach House and replacing them with the Fives and Rackets building. A committee was then formed in March 1866 consisting of the *"Master, Bursar, Tutors and Steward"* to oversee this and other projects including additional student accommodation.

What went wrong with this project is not clear but the college records go quiet on the subject of Fives until early



The Caius College courts

1892, when the Editorial Notes of the College Magazine "The Caiian" report that "we have much pleasure in announcing that there will be built on the Caius Ground two Fives courts to provide a means of amusement and exercise for those who are not fortunate enough to get into the college teams or boats..." Even then Fives was obviously having to fight hard to assert itself in the sporting pecking order!

The courts were completed before the end of 1892, but before the cement was even dry, rumblings of discontent could be heard and cross-code cracks were beginning to appear. In those far off pre-Fives Federation days, there was no-one around to mediate when the Caiian's Editorial Notes from the 1892 Michaelmas Term stated "The Fives Courts...will form a valuable addition to the athletic outfit of the College, and will doubtless be much used and appreciated. While thanking the authorities for them, we hope we may without discourtesy express the wish that one court had been built of the Rugby pattern. There are many enthusiasts in Fives at Caius, and most of them unfortunately play the Rugby game." They were at it again in the Lent Term of 1894: "The latest addition to the Caius ground is two Eton Fives Courts; why they were both built for Eton Fives no one knows...we hope that before long we shall be able to build two Rugby Courts." The same edition of the Caiian also offers up the information that the courts were paid for by profits made by the College kitchens.

Even at that early stage, the optimistic reference to "many enthusiasts" a couple of years earlier does not seem to be reflected in the amount of use the courts were getting, as "up to the present there has been no very great rush on the Courts, but in time we hope to see the game taken up more."



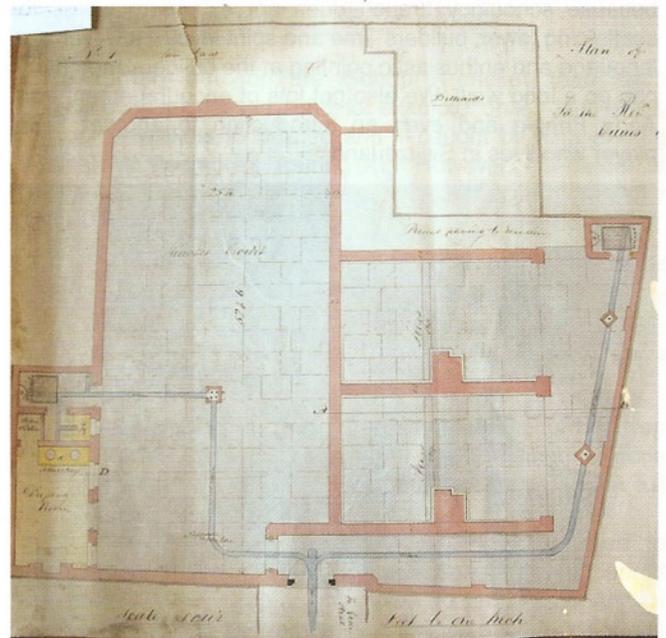
The inside of the Caius College courts

A cynical reader might detect more of the 1894 Caiian's Rugby Fives propaganda, but the comment will more likely strike a chord with all those who have at one time or another suffered the frustration of seeing under-used courts.

The need for a Victorian Peter Cohen to drum up some enthusiasm for the Caius courts becomes apparent as no further mention of Fives is made in the college records until 1903 when another age old Fives court problem surfaces, once again in the pages of the Caiian: "We are fortunate in the possession of two Eton Fives Courts on the Caius ground, but they would be far more valuable if they had a roof. The addition of a glass roof would enable the courts to be used on wet days, when other forms of exercise are impracticable. Incidentally the apparent extravagance would be a real economy, as the courts are rapidly deteriorating from exposure to the weather." Maybe a Cohen-like Fives manager did appear on the scene shortly after, as the College accounts for 1906 reveal that £4 was received for two years' rent from King's College for the courts.

Taking the references in the College magazine as an indication, there were two subsequent periods of significant Fives activity at Caius. In 1930 the College team played and lost fixtures against Highgate and Aldenham. A more ambitious fixture list was arranged for the following season but results didn't appear to improve; captain HA Hamilton noted that "victories have been scarce!" Harking back to the original desire of some students to build Rugby Fives courts, the college also played Rugby Fives fixtures against Felsted and Oundle (there is no record of where these matches were played) and entered two teams in the University Rugby Fives College competition.

The high point of the Caius courts' existence came in the early 1950s and coincided with the arrival at Caius of two students who would both go on to great things in the world of Fives: Martin Shortland-Jones from Harrow and John Pretlove from Alleyn's, both of whom later became champions in their respective codes and then Presidents of the EFA and RFA respectively. The college at that time had an active Eton and Rugby Fives fixture list and indeed Martin represented the college at both codes in the inter-college competition. This proved to be something of a final hurrah for the Caius courts, however, as they were beginning to fall into a state of disrepair. College club secretary John Preston-Bell notes in the 1954 Caiian that they were "hoping to repair and cover the courts" and a final mention in 1956 informs us that "(the



The 1866 plans for building Fives courts and a Rackets court at Caius College

2 courts at last became serviceable at the end of the Lent Term". At some stage after that, the top of the front wall was removed and the garage doors put on. Ironically it was only after going out of use that the courts finally acquired the roof that they had needed for so long and that they have today.

As always in the world of Fives, the history of the college courts of Cambridge shows that the game and its courts can establish themselves, survive and flourish, despite the vagaries of sporting fashion, finance, weather and war, when enthusiastic individuals happen to be in the right place at the right time. The current buoyant state of Cambridge University Eton Fives Club, with just the Magdalene court to play on, is

ample proof of this. We can only hope that the next chapter in the history of the Fives courts of Cambridge begins soon with the construction of new Eton and Rugby Fives courts in the long-awaited and long-delayed University Sports Centre in West Cambridge.

Gareth Hoskins

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