

The Hampstead Squash and Rugby Fives Club

The Club, with two Rugby Fives courts and two Squash, was opened by J. Rowland Robinson M.P. on Saturday December 14th 1935. There were exhibition matches for both sports. Those playing Fives were BC Gough, RJ Knight, J McGregor-Cheers, J Armitage, BR Griffiths, FA Vogler, FK Truman and EC Hanson. The day's play was filmed, and a large crowd of spectators came to watch. If only the film had survived, some of the great names of Rugby Fives would be more than just names to us.

The two Hampstead courts were immediately booked by the RFA for the 1936 Cyriax Cup, and 32 pairs entered; the competition started on Monday 5th January and ended on Wednesday 15th! It was a magnificent championship, with J Battersby and FK Truman winning the final 13-15, 15-16, 15-12, having successfully defended 6 match points in the second game. The Varsity Match was held at Hampstead on March 3rd 1936, resulting in Cambridge's 10th win (to Oxford's 2) in the series; and the Amateur Singles took place there from March 16th until March 25th, with JGW Davies winning the first of his three titles. The final big competition of 1936, the Public Schools' Championships, formerly held at Roehampton, came to Hampstead from April 2nd to April 11th. Oundle dominated the Doubles competition, with four pairs in the semi-finals and their first pair (JHL Brittain and PS Cowen) duly winning; and the Singles was won by JDG Craib of Eastbourne, the first Eastbournian to win the title. Thirty-five pairs entered the Doubles, and fifty-six players the Singles – a huge competition to play on two courts! No wonder it took ten days to complete.

The Club organised a ladder for all members and a Club Doubles draw-for-partners competition, both attracting between 30 and 40 entries. Sixteen pairs entered the Doubles, which was won by J Armitage and HR Jacobs, who beat GR East and JS Hughes 16-14, 16-15 in the final. One lady took part in the competition, Miss U. Griffin, partnering BR Griffiths. The winners had met EF Cyriax and W Schlund in a previous round, winning 16-14, 15-16, 15-13. This event sounds not unlike the RFA Club President's Cup, started by GR Rimmer 22 years later.

On October 13th 1936, the Hampstead Club played its first Fives match, against the Clove Club, losing by 72 points to 105. The team was GR East, WC Lewis, J McGregor-Cheers and MH Donohoe. The first match the Club won – by one point! – was later that season against a London University IV. The Club team then consisted of J Armitage, JAC Robertson, JAR Van Gelder and MH Donohoe. 'Some good games and conversation were enjoyed' wrote the reporter, almost certainly John Armitage himself.

In 1937, the two Amateur Championships were again played at the Club in their entirety. The Doubles in January saw EL Bailey and CLE Mitchell win a disappointingly one-sided final against FK Truman and RJ Knight; while the Singles in March witnessed a great performance by JGW Davies, who came through desperately close three-game matches in the fourth round, the semi-final and the final in a successful defence of his title. The 1937 Varsity Match, also played at Hampstead, saw Cambridge win again by a margin. Unsurprisingly, it was impossible to find dates to suit everyone for the Public Schools' Championships, which were scheduled for the first week in April. We have no account of the event, but the winners were GHM Riddell of Alleyn's, the first boy from that school to win the Singles, and the Oundle first pair, ER Conradi and PB Nicholls, who formed the middle of a five-year sandwich of Oundelians to win the Doubles.

Despite all this activity, one of the Hampstead Fives courts was unexpectedly closed later in 1937, making it impossible to hold the whole of a large competition there. The result was that for 1938 and 1939 St. Dunstan's became the venue for the first three rounds of the Doubles, and Alleyn's likewise for the Singles, with only the semi-final and final rounds held at Hampstead. The 1938 Varsity Match was played at Oundle School, and it could clearly never return to Hampstead. The closure was a cruel blow to Rugby Fives.

It was reportedly the lack of demand for Rugby Fives which led the owners to close or convert the second court so soon after the opening of the Club. The rise of squash had already caused them to consider building two more squash courts. We have not managed to establish whether the fives court was converted to squash or used for other purposes. Tom Wood wrote in a note preserved in the RFA Archives that it had been 'demolished'.

After the War, the Club survived and the one remaining court was available to Rugby Fives players in London. The semi-finals and final of the National Doubles were duly played there every year between 1950 and 1967, and the Singles likewise, from 1951 on. Over those years, some of the multiple champions won at Hampstead: in Singles, ADR Dawes, who won three consecutive titles immediately after leaving Bedford School; JF Pretlove and E Marsh, who each won the Singles four times; and JT Watkinson who won twice. In doubles, Pretlove won the Cyriax Cup seven times at Hampstead with various partners, notably DRW Silk (four wins); JT Watkinson and MJ Elliott won three consecutive titles; and DE Gardner recorded three wins with different partners.

David Gardner's 1961 survey of Rugby Fives described the Hampstead court as 'the only public court in existence as far as is known'. He noted that the roof at the front of the court was low, 'extending several feet into the centre of the court', that the door was in the back wall at the right-hand side, about 2 feet from the corner, and that there was a raised gallery behind the back wall to accommodate 20 to 30 spectators. Apart from slight reservations about the roof and the door, it was a sound and standard court.

Despite the existence in London of this non-school court on which one could play at very reasonable cost, plus a welcoming bar to relax in after the game, not enough Fives players came to make it truly popular. Part of the problem was that it was not a suitable venue, with only one court, for a full four-a-side match or a club evening. The 1958/59 RFA Handbook carried a notice advertising the Club: 'The Association has been informed that facilities for play are available at the Hampstead Squash and Rugby Fives Club, 81, Belsize Park Gardens, N.W.3. The annual subscription is two guineas and the court fee 4/- per hour, plus lights if used. There is no entrance fee.'

The RFA Club's President's Cup competition, inaugurated in 1958, was initially played by arrangement over several evenings, with a grand final and social evening at Hampstead. This did something to put Hampstead more firmly on the map, but entries for the competition and attendance at the final inevitably varied, and what the Club needed was regular fives-playing members. The RFA Club also started to hold its AGMs and Committee meetings there from 1959, and for the best part of a decade it became the RFAC's second home after Alleyn's School, where it had previously held meetings and continued to play its home matches and practices.

Despite these efforts to ensure the survival of the court at Hampstead, it was not used to anything like its full capacity in the 1960s and was obviously not a profit-making concern. When, in 1967, the Club was sold to new owners, they took the immediate and irrevocable decision to close the court, and there was nothing the RFA or RFAC could do to persuade

them to change their mind. Thus the only 'public' court in London came to a sad end, despite having hosted many memorable matches since the 1930s.

D.B.

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<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol9/pp81-91>

Hampstead squash and rugby fives club opened c. 1935 at no. 81 Belsize Park Gardens, in purpose-built premises, with social facilities, which were taken over in 1967, 1983, and by Ragdale health club in 1985. ([fn. 210](#))

And now...

Spring Health

81 Belsize Park Gardens
London NW3 4NJ
+44 (0) 20 7483 6800

Spring Health boasts a swimming pool, two saunas, a steam room, a solarium and a whirlpool as well as a fitness room, free weights area and a dance studio. They also have a cafe and bar area.

The question is: Which are the old fives courts?