

JOHN ARMITAGE

The game of Rugby Fives will not be the same without the presence of John Armitage who died in February. He was 69. The beginning of John's outstanding book "Man at Play" (Nine Centuries of Pleasure Making), published by Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd., reads: "Samuel Johnson defined play in his dictionary as 'to do something not as task, but for a pleasure'. It is not a complete description but it is a useful one for it goes to the heart of the matter. Playing is for pleasure or, better perhaps, for fun". Thus John played his Rugby Fives.

He was the game's greatest authority and historian. He was also one of the great players of his time as his record shows: Bedford School IV, 1927-29 (Capt. 1929), Cambridge University, 1930-32 (Capt. 1932), Singles champion, 1938, finalist 1933, Doubles finalist 1935 and 1938. He gave much more to the game, on the Jesters' committee, 1933-6, on the R.F.A. committee from 1932-3 and then as Hon. Secretary of the Association from 1934-51 in the days when meetings were held at Dr. Cyriax's home in Welbeck Street.

From Cambridge to Fleet Street, whence John launched his own publication, "Squash Rackets and Fives", wrote for "The Cricketer", reported on cricket for the BBC and was tennis, rackets and squash correspondent of "The Manchester Guardian". In 1934 began his happy marriage to Margaret. He somehow found time to write "A History of Ball Games and Rugby Fives" for the Lonsdale Library.

John's literary and journalistic abilities were also concerned with 'sterner subjects' as he became Editor of The Fortnightly Review (1939-54). After war service in the R.A.F. as a Squadron leader and, inter alia, a period as a Councillor in Surbiton, he joined "The Times Educational Supplement" until in 1949 he was appointed London Editor of the "Encyclopaedia Britannica", a post he filled with distinction until 1967.

When John and his family moved to Letchworth, many local organisations were fortunate to enjoy his enthusiasm, devotion and influence on their activities. He was Chairman of Governors of Norton School for 12 years, Chairman of Letchworth Settlement and a founder of the 25 Club, an association of retired business and professional men who meet for discussions at the Settlement. Meanwhile he opened David's Bookshop and his three sons continue the family business which is a lasting tribute to John's enterprise and judgement.

John gave a great example of how to live and play to Rugby Fives players and countless others. The R.F.A. has been lucky to have such a man as President from 1955–60 during an extremely busy period of his life. He always had time to listen and advise, if necessary. These brief comments cannot hope to do justice to a wonderful companion and a much loved friend. More than 300 people attended a thanksgiving service for John's life at St. George's Church, Letchworth on February 8th. After the service, a collection was taken for blind children in Bangladesh, a fund which John had helped to initiate as President of his local branch of the United Nations Association.

"He was a verray parfit gentil knight."