

Winchester Fives

David Barnes on the history of Winchester Fives and the Barnes Bridge tournament

Despite being so associated with the school that bears its name, the origins of Winchester Fives actually lie in 19th century Oxford. It was at Worcester College in 1856 that the first court was built with a narrow angled buttress one third of the way back on the left-hand wall. It is recorded that the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, was an early user of the court, as he had permission to play on it in 1860. The first set of indoor courts was built at Winchester College in 1862, and there was actually some initial uncertainty about their shape. As at Rugby School in 1860, advice was sought from Oxford on the construction of the new court. Some Old Rugbeians at Oxford advised their former school to copy the Worcester College court, but the buttress didn't last long and was filled in a year later as the pupils preferred the plain-wall court next door.

Spread of the game

Winchester initially went for the compromise as well, building an enclosed block of two courts with buttresses and two with plain walls. Unlike Rugby, though, this time it was the courts with a buttress that won over the pupils; subsequent courts at Winchester, including the present ones built in 1909, have always had this feature.

More schools followed Winchester's choice than you might think. Players today might easily name Bradfield, Malvern, Radley, Sedbergh and Tonbridge as Winchester Fives schools. However, we know that there were also Winchester-style courts at Glensalmond, Canford, King's Canterbury, King's Worcester, Hereford Cathedral School, Bromsgrove, Liverpool College, Weymouth College, Maidstone Grammar School and the original Perse School site, as well as two halls at Manchester University and

some prep schools such as Aysgarth and Horris Hill. All these courts have disappeared, but King's Bruton and Rossall still have their buttress courts – Rossall's eight courts being unusual in having no back wall.

Winchester adopted the Rules of Fives 'as played at Oxford', and they were published in 'The Wykehamist' in 1885 and again in 1893. They are clearly designed for doubles, although rule 16 states: 'The above rules apply to Single as well as Double Fives'. They deal mainly with serving, scoring and lets, and are archaic rather than eccentric. Nevertheless, some could have been omitted. Rule nine says: 'If a ball strike the roof or gallery it is a hand out'. Rule 10 says that 'Under no circumstances may kicking the ball be allowed'.

Regardless of the adoption of these rules, local customs certainly developed at Winchester and elsewhere, but were never standardised. At some schools either the receiver or his partner could return the service, whether it had hit the buttress or not, while most schools insisted that if the server lost the rally, he should continue until he had served out both opponents. Many pairs played with one player 'under the line'

'The rules, buttress and positioning of opponents baffled visiting sides'



to guard the buttress. And there were no doubt other local practices which disappeared when away matches became more widespread. Not only did the rules baffle visiting sides, so did the buttress itself, the positioning of their opponents, and often the size and speed of the courts.

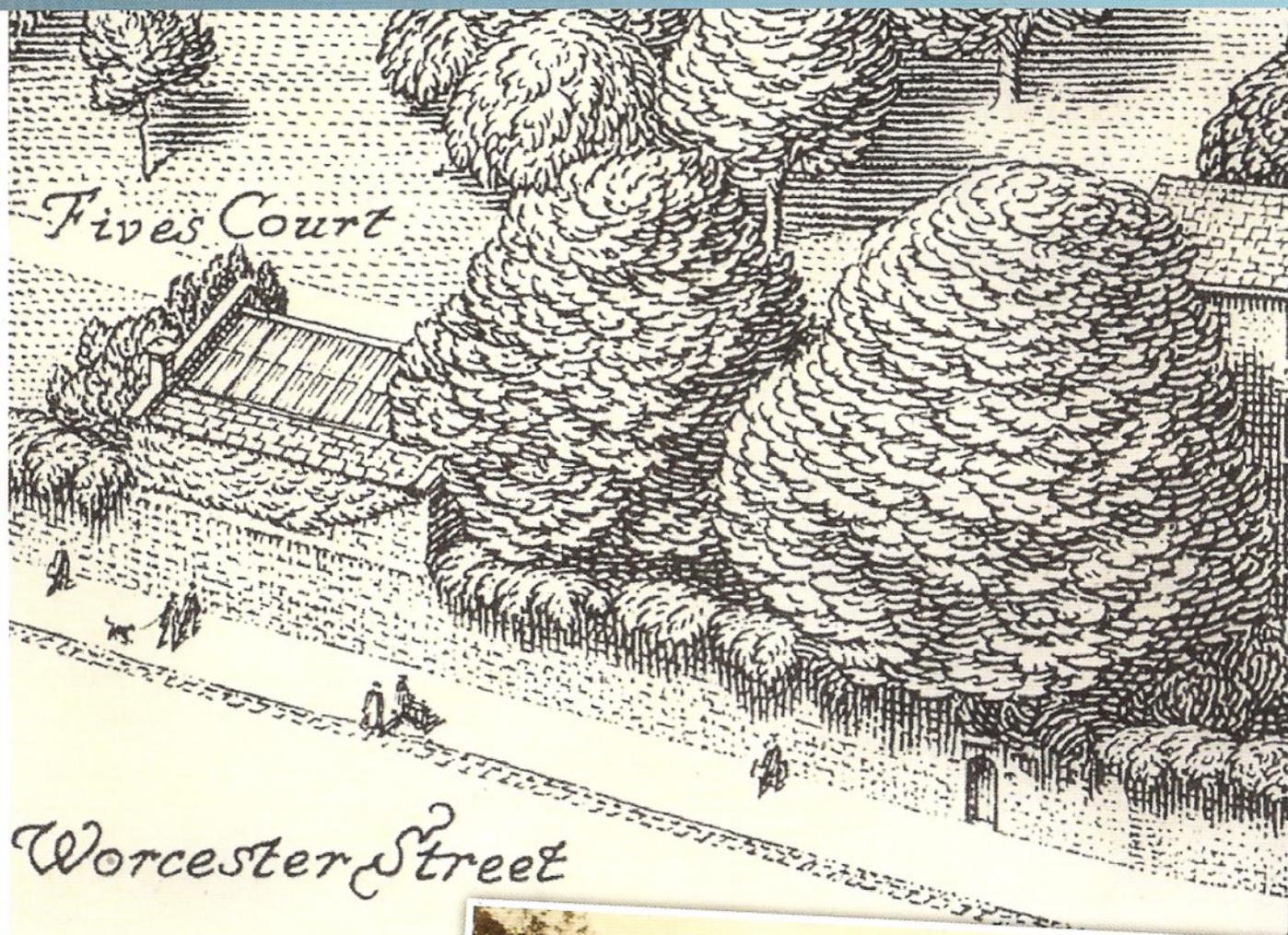
The competition starts

Even though Rugby Fives had managed to get itself organised in the 1930s, a Winchester Fives Championship took longer to emerge. It is an irony, though, that the first winner of the Rugby Fives Singles Championship in 1930 was Roger Winlaw from Winchester College. He won it again the following year and paired up with his brother to win the doubles. They both went on to play Rugby Fives for Cambridge, and Roger became the first honorary member of the Jesters Club, but it took until 1955 for a player from a Winchester Fives school – D Smith of Sedbergh – to win the Jesters Cup.

It was to be more than 50 years until the first Winchester Fives Championship, for several reasons. Firstly, no London schools played the Winchester game: geographical dispersion and the relatively small number of schools where this version of fives was played was a handicap. Next, Winchester Fives players could more easily cope with the demands of the Rugby court than vice-versa. Some of the best London players in the 1930s found the Tonbridge courts, where the buttress (originally in all seven courts) was steep and a long way up the court, too much for them.

Before the 1950s there were very few Rugby Fives competitions on the calendar: the Amateur Singles and

LEFT (from L) Simon Constantine, Dave Hebden, David Barnes, Mike Tremellen and Roger Layton at Bradfield in 1986.



Doubles; the Public Schools' Singles and Doubles; the Heath Old Boys' Open Doubles in Halifax; and the Marchant Cup for London Grammar Schools. Players got their competitive fives in matches against other schools or clubs, and if adults had no home club to play for, they joined the peripatetic Jesters or the newly-founded RFA Club, specifically intended for players whose courts were destroyed during the war.

Fives flourished from the 1950s to 1970s, as seen in the sheer number of matches played by schools and clubs. The tournament and championship schedule also grew inexorably. More than a dozen competitions, mostly involving both singles and doubles, were added to the list by 1979. However, without exception, all these competitions were for Rugby Fives.

Finally, in 1980, an Old Sedberghian fives enthusiast named Mike Haslam took the initiative and formed a 'Winchester Fives Group' within the RFA. With the RFA's blessing, he published a newsletter describing and illustrating the basic Winchester Fives

court and listing a dozen institutions possessing such courts. The newsletter expressed the hope that in due course a tournament might be held 'at some appropriate centre'.

The first Winchester Fives Open Doubles tournament took place at

ABOVE The 1856 court at Worcester College Oxford, illustrated by EH New in 1931. The 1862 courts at Winchester College (on left), photographed in the early 1880s.



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT
Ian Fuller and Dave Hebden at
Malvern in 2001; Paula Smith &
Denise Hall-Wilton with the Bradfield
Bowl at Malvern; Mike Haslam and
Paula Smith with the Crayke Cup
at Sedbergh; Will Ellison and Hal
Mohammed at Malvern in 2013



'The first tournament proved popular, with late entries turned away'

Bradfield on 7 March 1982. The tournament proved popular, attracting 21 pairs, and some late entries had to be turned away. Appropriately an Old Sedberghian, Robbie Barr, and his partner Simon Constantine, an Old Malvernian, won the first final, beating Dave Parlby and Jeremy Schroeter.

Another feature of this day stands out – Joan Wood and RFA Club supremo Tom Wood brought along a scale model of the Barnes Bridge that continues to be presented as the winners' trophy to this day. Some diehard Rugby Fives players hesitated before venturing onto the bridge between the two codes, but many managed the crossing and enjoyed it.

Mike favoured taking the tournament to different schools, so the second year's event was held at Winchester, with a similarly large entry, and it became a regular feature of the March programme. The third event was held at Sedbergh and the fourth at Malvern, before it returned to Bradfield in 1986.

In 1988 the ladies' competition made its first appearance at Sedbergh, competing for the Crayke Cup. Paula Smith from Bradfield was the first winner, and she didn't relinquish her grip on the trophy until 2003. Denise Hall-Wilton started a doubles competition in 1990, donating the

Bradfield Bowl and embarking on a mammoth stint as organiser of the Winchester Fives singles and doubles, which lasts to this day. She and Paula won the trophy as a pair 13 times in all.

Chairmen past and present

Mike Haslam continued to run the men's tournament until he had completed three circuits of the host schools. In those 12 years, the Bridge was won by six different pairs. Simon Constantine was the most successful player, partnering Dave Hebden four times and Robbie Barr twice.

After Mike's twelfth tournament, the Winchester Fives Group recognised his contribution as its founder, first Hon. Sec. and tournament organiser by presenting him with an engraved cut-glass bowl. He was also promoted to Chairman of the Group, with the previous Chairman, David Barnes, taking up the role of Hon. Sec. and tournament organiser. He hands over as organiser to Harry Akerman in 2015.

Notable winners

Roger Layton and Mike Tremellen, brought up on the Bradfield courts, won the Barnes Bridge five times between 1989 and 1995 but failed to

complete the 'Grand Slam' of winning four years running. Their achievement was soon surpassed by Ian Fuller and Dave Hebden, the remarkable duo who had won ten Cyriax Cups at the Rugby Fives National Doubles Championships between 1980 and 1990. They proceeded to win the Bridge eight years running between 1996 and 2003, completing a double Grand Slam.

Dave Hebden won twice more with Dave Fox to bring his total to 14 wins – an achievement which will be hard to surpass. But in 2009 Will Ellison and Hal Mohammed became the youngest pair to win the trophy, and in 2014 they won the Bridge for the sixth consecutive time, so you never know.

There are three other Winchester Fives competitions on the calendar: the Northern Doubles at Sedbergh, initiated by Laurence Catlow in 1993; the mixed doubles at Bradfield, started in 1997 by Paula Smith, who donated the cup and won it twice with her son Sean; and the schools' doubles, held at Winchester each November, started by David Barnes in 2002. This has been won six times St Paul's, four by the hosts and once by Radley and Alleyn's.

Whoever invented, or perhaps bumped into, the small buttress which begun this variant of fives would surely have been pleased that, despite the loss of courts, the game has survived and is still enjoyed well into the 21st century. If it was all just an accident of architecture, it was certainly a happy one.