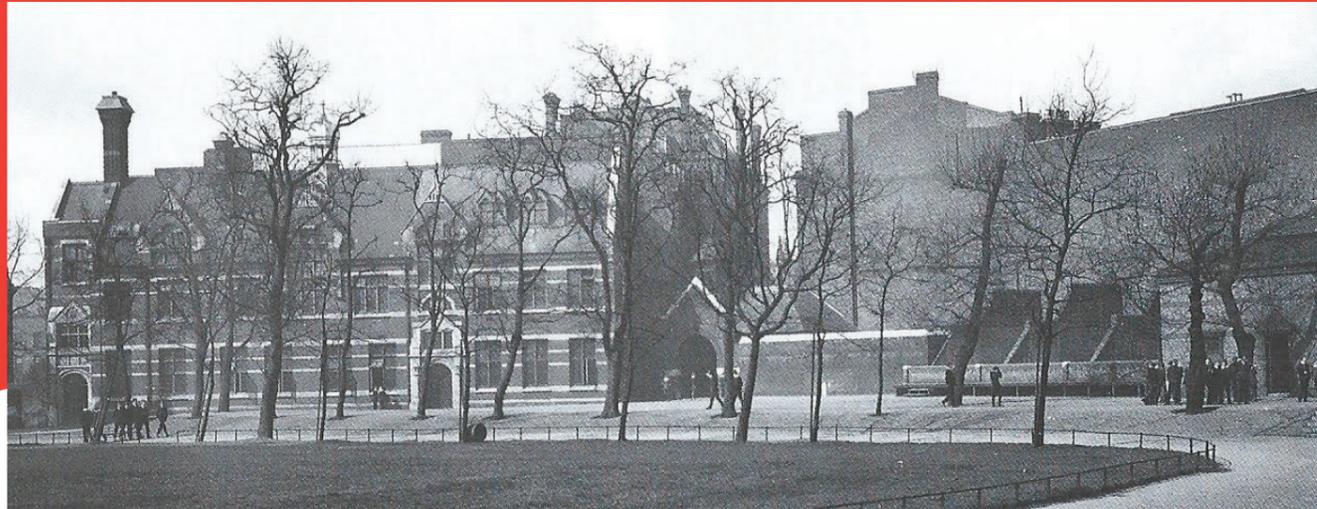


The history of Fives at Merchant Taylors' School

Owen Toller reports on a school that's enjoyed success despite court challenges



ABOVE
The unroofed
1875 courts

It took just a few short years for the game of Fives to become established at Merchant Taylors' School. The new school buildings opened at Charterhouse Square in 1875 by the Merchant Taylors' Company included some open courts on the north side of the quadrangle. By the time of the first volume of *The Taylorian*, published in 1878, the game had taken off: "The reaction in favour of Fives has been so strong that our wildest hopes have been more than fulfilled... The number of scratch Fives gangs going on is bewildering in the extreme."

The first mention of matches came just a couple of years later in 1880, with encounters home and away against Christ's College, Finchley. 1881 saw a schools' Fives Championship, contested by Epsom, Mill Hill, Godolphin, UCS and Merchant Taylors' School (MTS), also on the basis of matches home and away. MTS fought out an epic final against Epsom, taking a one-point lead after the home leg only to lose by the same margin in the return match: the championship was shared. Epsom and UCS remained on the Taylors' fixture list for many years. They were soon joined by what was then Bedford Grammar School, a fixture which continues to this day. Almost as long-standing is the rivalry with St Paul's, which began in 1891 with an MTS two-point victory at Charterhouse Square.

A second set of covered courts at Charterhouse Square were brought into use in 1898, commemorating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the first match being against St John's Hall, Highbury. The old 1875 courts, unroofed and unlit, continued in use and in subsequent years there

were several examples of matches being abandoned because of rain or bad light.

GOOD RESULTS AND A BIG MOVE

The early years of the 20th century were good ones for the game at Charterhouse Square. OC White (1897-1900) and CL Parker (1902-06) were outstanding players. 1905 was "the third year in which no matches were lost, even against the OMTs, who included the last three school captains". Then, between 1906 and 1909, few matches were played and the results were poor – all four 1909 matches were lost. Nevertheless 1911 was an unbeaten season for both 1st and 2nd IVs, with St Paul's defeated both at home and away.

The First World War years saw a lack of practice time due to the demands of the Officers' Training Corps, but otherwise sport seemed to continue at school much as usual. 1919 was a very satisfactory season (played six, won five) but issues about practice time remained. In 1921 there was "no interval between Football and Fives"; no Wednesday or Saturday practices could be arranged either, "all half holidays being taken up with house games".

In 1926 the old open courts were demolished to make way for a new science building and were replaced by covered ones notable for their excellent artificial lighting. A typical fixture list at this time would include matches with Dulwich, St Paul's, Haileybury, Bedford and Christ's Hospital and often with the Universities.

1933 saw the move of the school from the City to Sandy Lodge, with "increased facilities, in the

shape of four excellent courts". That year DJ Mallagh and D Mitchell became the first Merchant Taylors' pair to reach the semi-finals of the doubles in the National Schools' Championships. In the 1930s there were notably many good players among the masters, but the school teams were adequate rather than strong, as rugby prevented younger boys attending coaching sessions. In 1936 "the lack of young players has been more apparent each season".

On another note, captain's reports were often critical of individuals: "lobs too much, doesn't hit the ball hard enough, tries to push it"; "would gain many points by using his brains more"; and "is eight or nine points down before he has warmed up". However, of one outstanding player in the 1930s it was noted that he did well at Christ's Hospital "once he discovered how to hit the light switches and irregularities on the doors".

POST-WAR HALCYON DAYS

The Second World War, like its predecessor, seems not to have affected the game much; the 1941 season was "one of the most successful of recent years". 1942 also was a good year, but in 1943 fewer boys appeared to be playing, and in 1944 there was difficulty in finding time for practice. A problem emerged after the war, as for all schools and clubs: the ball supply. Only by 1948 was this resolved.

As post-war normality set in, Fives flourished under the care of Mr Hodgetts. JGK Ingram was unbeaten in school matches in 1949 and 1950. Although an outbreak of measles curtailed the 1951 season, the identical Whatmoor twins caused problems for their opponents, being distinguishable only by one being left-handed. PM Smith won six matches out of seven at home in 1954 and was to be a National Singles finalist in 1956. In 1957 the fixture list for the 1st IV again stood at 13 matches, and in 1959 RT Bulgin, in the first of his four seasons, was unbeaten in school matches. He, PM Whitcombe and DA Sharp were



ABOVE
1st IV in 1929

'THE EARLY YEARS OF THE 20TH CENTURY WERE GOOD ONES FOR THE GAME'

the nucleus of a most successful team in 1961. Mr Beynon took over as master-in-charge in 1964; this was the time of the excellent Cameron brothers, David and Peter (captains in 1963 and 1964 respectively).

When by 1967 standards had fallen somewhat, the Captain was referring to the "halcyon days of Bulgin, Whitcombe and Cameron". Nevertheless in 1968 no fewer than 16 matches were played.

As the quality of Fives at the school improved in the two decades after the war, so the Old Merchant Taylors' Fives Club grew in numbers and became one of the most active clubs in the country. In 1964/65, the OMTs played 23 matches and won 20 of them; and in 1967/68, 21 matches were played and 17 won. The "halcyon days" referred to in the School report of 1967 carried on into OMT Fives. Apart from those who went on to distinguish themselves at University, there were several older local players of talent such as Graham Prodger, Paul Coker, Ted and Richard Wiles, and Paul Smith.

Dick Bulgin's stunning victory in the British Universities singles in 1961, fresh from school, was a sign that the standard of OMT Fives was on the up. Several OMTs played in the Varsity Match, mainly for Cambridge, during the 1960s and 1970s; in 1972 David Cameron and Dick Bulgin were runners-up in the National Doubles; Guy Whiting twice won the British Universities Doubles; and in 1975 the Club won the National Club Knock-out. The Club remained strong, and its members were present in competitions right through until the demolition of the courts at the end of the 2016-17 season, which has temporarily ended activities.

PLAYING HOST TO THE PRESIDENT

The school courts at Sandy Lodge have also played an important part in the RFA Club's story. In



BELOW
The 1950 1st
IV with Mr
Hodgetts and
John Ingram
(front row, left)



ABOVE
The OMTs
- David
Cameron, Guy
Whiting, Dick
Bulgin and
Bob Peters -
win the Wood
Cup in 1975



LEFT
Photograph of
Peter Ingram
hanging in the
old courts

BELOW
The 1986
squad for the
tour of the
USA, including
future Oxford
players John
Hayes and
John Hampel



CHASING MAJOR TROPHIES

There were many occasions on which plate trophies came to Sandy Lodge, but the disadvantages under which the sport laboured meant that, though the school continued to produce good individual players and some very effective pairs, the cupboard remained bare of major trophies until 1997, when Steffan James won the National U13 singles, and, with Asheesh Kaul, the doubles. Peter Ingram's retirement in 1996 was marked by a dinner at which many former pupils and colleagues from the world of Fives paid tribute to his achievements and personality.

Owen Toller took over as master-in-charge from 1996; he was an experienced coach but was unable to devote as much time to the game as he would have liked. Essential assistance was provided by Simon Stott and Crispin Collier. It was Crispin who taught James and Kaul the game and did so with great success: they won the National U14 Doubles in 1998 and ended their school career by winning the Open Doubles Plate in 2002.

That year, 2002, the National Schools' Championships were played at Sandy Lodge, but the four courts meant timings were too compressed and the championships subsequently returned to St Paul's six courts. However, there was an omen in that Daniel Grant, in the Lower Sixth, was the only non-Pauline to make the last four of the Open Singles, and the next year he fulfilled the huge promise he had long shown by becoming the first, and so far only, Taylorian to win the National Schools' Singles Championship.

EXPERTISE AT THE HELM

Owen Toller handed over to James Clifford in 2003, and when James left, the appointment of former Oxford captain Nick Hillier in 2005 was a welcome injection of new blood and expertise. Nick was to run Fives until Simon Hardman took over in 2015.

Nick Hillier's 10 years in charge marked a successful continuation of the work done by his predecessors. Nick's own background in the game gave him a keen understanding of the issues in



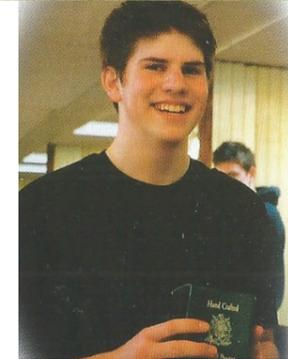
promoting a minor sport. Nick was deeply committed to coaching his charges, setting up extra after-school clubs and promoting Fives as a three-term games option. He entered his players in national and regional competitions, where they consistently reached the latter stages of the main draws and figured prominently in Plate competitions in all age-groups. He also ensured MTS generally won the Centenary Cup against Bedford School.

Nick wrote appreciatively of his young players each year in his report for the RFA Annual Review. Names that recur are Elliott Tebboth who went from success in the Colts Doubles Plate in 2012 to playing for Cambridge in the Varsity Match in 2017; U18 Plate winners Ethan Taberham and Joe Savage; Emrys Thursfield and Sarthak Garella, respectively secretary and captain of Cambridge University 2020-21; and Charlie Barnett, who won the Love Mug at the President's Cup in 2016.

Simon Hardman inherited some very promising young players in 2015. In his first report for the RFA Simon was able to say that he was "immensely impressed with the... dedication and commitment of all players." He had in his squad some able youngsters in Taberham, Savage and Garella, plus Anikait Garella, Jamie Graham, and Ewan Townshend, a left-handed Colt, who reached the quarter-final of the Colts Singles in 2017. Ironically, in the same season as a potentially title-winning group of players was coming together the School took the decision to demolish the block of four Fives courts to redevelop the site as a Geography teaching block.

FIVES CONTINUES REGARDLESS

Fives did not come to an end with the demise of the courts. The boys took to playing on squash courts, coached by OMT Gareth Price. Simon Hardman declared himself hopeful of success to



ABOVE
1st IV 1997
with Messrs
Stott and
Toller

LEFT
Daniel Grant
wins the
National
Schools
Singles in
2003

BELOW
Jamie Graham
and Ewan
Townshend
holding the
Mappin Cup
with Daniel
Tristao



'FIVES DID NOT COME TO AN END WITH THE DEMISE OF THE COURTS'

come. He had reason to express such hopes.

For the 2018-19 season Jamie Graham and Ewan Townshend paired up to win the National Schools Winchester Fives Doubles Championship in November, beating the Winchester 1st pair in the final, a striking achievement for players brought up on a Rugby Fives court. Two months later they reached the final of the West of England Schools' U18 Doubles but lost to the Alleyn's 1st pair. With pairs from Alleyn's, St Paul's, Winchester and Merchant Taylors' in contention there was great interest to see who could win the U18 Doubles at the National Schools Championships in April 2019. Once more Graham and Townshend faced Alleyn's in the final and the result from January was reversed, just the third time a pair from the School had won this title. It was an achievement hailed by National Singles champion, Daniel Tristao, presenting the trophy, as astonishing for a pair who had practised all season on squash courts.

The most recent season has been the one affected by the coronavirus. Until all schools were closed the MTS Fives players continued to practise on squash courts in Watford and to play their matches on away courts. The Club, together with the rest of the Fives-playing community, now waits to see what plans the school has to replace its former courts and to take forward the long and proud tradition of Fives at Merchant Taylors'.

Thanks to Geoffrey Brown, David Cameron, Daniel Grant and Graham Proddger, and previous research by Peter Ingram, and to Bob Dolby and David Barnes for updating and illustrating the 2010 version.

■ A longer, fully illustrated version of this history, can be found on the RFA website at rugbyfives.com

'THE EARLY 1980S REPRESENT A PEAK IN THE HISTORY OF MERCHANT TAYLORS' FIVES'