

Winchester College's Fives Courts

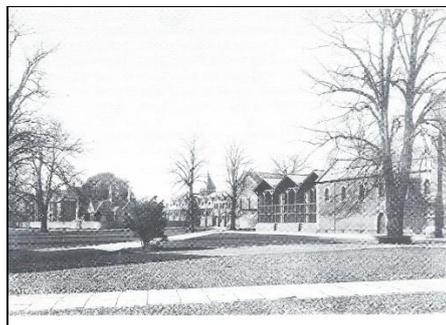
David Barnes reviews the history of the many courts built at the College

The magnificent new Fives courts in the Sports Centre at Winchester are the fifth set of courts built at the College. Four of the six new courts have the classic slanting buttress of the Winchester game, while the other two are 'plain-wall' Rugby-style courts.

This mixture is an intriguing echo of Winchester's earliest courts, built in 1862. Of those four courts, two had buttresses, and two not. The decision to have different styles of court at that time arose from uncertainty on the part of the authorities. They had taken advice from Old Wykehamists at Oxford, some of whom thought that the 1856 Worcester College court, the most popular court in Oxford at the time, was the way to go. The Worcester court had a buttress. No doubt other voices favoured the plain-wall style of other courts in Oxford. 'Two of each' was Winchester's decision.

At the same time, Rugby School, having also consulted Oxford, was faced with the same uncertainty. Their 1860 courts, built onto the side of a large Rackets court, were three in number: two plain-wall and one with a buttress.

Fate decreed that the pupils at the two schools would be of different opinions. At Rugby, the buttress court was little used, and the offending feature was soon filled in, while at Winchester, the buttress game was the more popular, so much so that a further set of three courts, built in 1882, had a buttress in each court.



1885 Winchester's early Fives courts (on right)

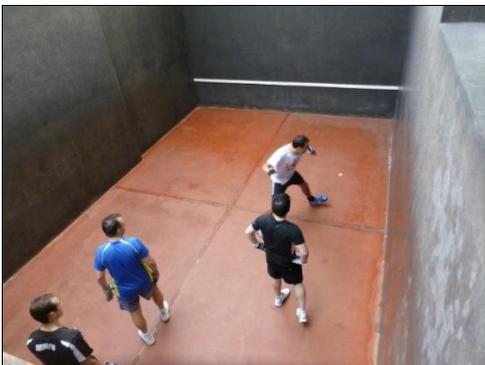


Winchester College from Meads, 1891

Those early courts at Winchester were slow and suffered from condensation, but they were well-used according to the reports in *The Wykehamist*. Many of the boarding houses had their own small court, but they were of modest construction. A game played with wooden bats (unsurprisingly known as ‘bat-fives’) had also been played informally at the College for many years. It took place mainly on the one-wall court behind the building called ‘School’, but it died out in the early part of the 20th century.

The big moment for Winchester Fives came in 1909, with the opening of five excellent courts at the same time as a new rackets court. H.M.Burge, Headmaster from 1901 to 1911 and a keen sportsman, had taken the initiative in 1907 with a letter to all Old Wykehamists, appealing for financial support for the new scheme. More than 560 people responded to the appeal, and the final cost of the Fives courts was £2,300.

Four of the 1909 courts, well maintained by the College, were to remain in use until 2024. They were the standard by which other Winchester Fives courts were judged. Over the 115 years of their use, they were enjoyed by generations of Wykehamists and by visiting school and adult teams.



Action on the 1909 courts as seen from the gallery



.... almost as busy in the gallery as on the courts

There was one further set of 20th century courts. Plans to build War Cloister in 1922 necessitated the demolition of the first two blocks of Fives courts in Meads. In compensation, the College built eight courts in Kingsgate Park, now on part of the site of the new Sports Centre. These courts were never a great success, and the 1909 courts were so good in comparison that most if not all of the serious Fives activity took place on them. The 1922 courts became workshops and have now disappeared, to nobody’s regret.

“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes”, Mark Twain is reputed to have said. The new Sports Centre’s mixture of courts accords with the College’s choice in 1862, but this time the decision was born of clear thinking, not of uncertainty. It’s a welcome feature of the Sports Centre

courts that two of them provide a practice and match venue for the singles game. Beginners can find it easier to learn Fives on a plain-wall court, too.

Does this mean that the four new buttress courts will be underused? Certainly not! A great many players, including top Rugby Fives stars, love the buttress game for doubles. It's a superb spectacle when played at a high level, as we saw in the recent Winchester Fives Doubles final, and enormous fun to play on in sociable Club evenings as well as in more serious encounters.

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A full history of Fives at Winchester College, also by David Barnes, can be found at **<https://therfa.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2014/10/2002-Winchester-College.pdf>**