

Fives at Merchant Taylors' by Owen Toller

The new School buildings opened at Charterhouse Square in 1875 by the Merchant Taylors' Company included some open Fives courts in the north side of the quadrangle. The game was well established when the first volume of *The Taylorian* was published in 1878, as the following anonymous item testifies:

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. We have examined our reporter's book carefully ... but we are quite unable to make head or tail of it. We venture to submit that "Dennis gang – 13 to 5; new ball taken on" is something more than shorthand. As far as we can gather, there are the Head Form, the Sixth Form, and Lower Fifth Form scratch Fives going on. In the Head Form, Mr Bampfyld and Barton, Boyer and Phillips, Dennis and Heppel are left to fight out the last round ... in the Lower Fifth there is much rising talent.

Something more comprehensible appears in 1880, with matches both home and away against Christ's College, Finchley, Merchant Taylors' winning by 16 games to 9. This fixture was the most important one; 1883 brought "the first time we have succeeded in beating Finchley in their own courts", which had a buttress and no back wall. 1881 saw a schools' Fives Championship, competed by Epsom, Mill Hill, Godolphin, UCS and MTS, on the basis of matches both home and away. MTS beat Godolphin easily, then took on UCS. MTS won all three games at Gower Street, but all by 15–14, although they won the return fixture more easily. The final against Epsom was an epic. At Charterhouse Square the scores were 15–8, 15–9, 14–15 in favour of MTS, but the first two return games went 7–15, 12–15. Taylors' were still one point to the good, but the final game was won 14–15 by Epsom and the championship was shared. The commentator (illogically) adds, "thus proving the fallacy of the 16-point game, which was supposed to preclude the possibility of a tie". Epsom and UCS remained on the Taylors' fixture list for many years, with UCS fading out of the picture only from about 1980. In 1890 MTS beat a UCS team that included the great Cyriax by 69 points, still on the Gower Street courts; UCS did not move to Frognal until 1907.

The first reference to the fixtures against what was then Bedford Grammar School were in 1884, but clearly this fixture was already well established as, although the away fixture was being played "for the first time", MTS lost at home "for about the first time on record". Bedford "play only two games and count by points, whereas we play three". The long-standing nature of the MTS/Bedford fixture was recognised by the award of a cup for the annual winner of the conflict, fittingly initiated when Old Bedfordian Peter Ingram was master-in-charge. For many years Bedford held the upper hand in this fixture – they were the game's powerhouse in the 1970's – but a policy decision there led to a one-sided focus on hockey and by 1990 it was unusual for Merchant Taylors' to lose to them.

Almost as long-standing is the rivalry with St Paul's. In 1891 MTS beat St Paul's at Charterhouse Square by 2 points, and ever since then the two great London schools regularly played several matches a season, often both home and away, with 2nd IV matches just as frequent, although the first MTS 2nd IV game was against UCS in 1892. That year a letter to *The Taylorian* gives an interesting light on the game. There were "daily disputes in the Courts", and it was traditionally the duty of the Captain of Fives to resolve them. These disputes seem to have

been over which Form has use of courts when, as the Editor responds in a footnote that “A board in the Hall states the rotation in which several Forms enjoy the use of the Fives Courts.” Some years earlier there had been an injury to a boy who was hit in the eye with a racquet ball, *The Taylorian* commenting that “Racquets and Fives ... when played side by side at the old courts are apt to be dangerous.” Another unusual note is struck when following the victory over St Paul’s at West Kensington in 1903, “we should like to thank the enthusiastic crowd who cheered us to victory”. Two new covered courts at Charterhouse Square were brought into use in 1898, commemorating Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee of the previous year, the first match being against St John’s Hall, Highbury; but the old 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. The usual format for a school match was two games of singles against one’s opposite number, then two pairs of doubles as today, all games being played to 15, so unless the length of rallies has notably increased since then the matches would have lasted longer than they do now. A further problem was contagious infection, which is reported to have spoilt the season on several occasions (such as 1939).

The early years of the twentieth century were good ones for the game at Charterhouse Square. O.C.White (colours 1897, 1898, 1899 and 1900) and C.L.Parker (1902–1906 inclusive) 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”. It was also good to notice many younger players joining. But there was a swift fall. 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. This was the first of T.E.Andrews’s four seasons. Records written by Captains of Fives regularly refer to the difficulty of playing on away courts; neither the size of courts nor their playing characteristics were at all standardised. The First World War years saw a lack of practice time due to the demands of the OTC, but otherwise sport seemed to continue at school much as usual. 1919 was a very satisfactory season (played 6, won 5), the last of three dominated by J.R.Illingworth.

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 1925 players and OMTs came regularly during the Christmas holidays to train the juniors, the staff presumably having no role or aptitude for this. Next year the old open courts were demolished to make way for a new Science Building, being replaced by covered ones notable for excellent artificial lighting. A typical fixture list at this time would include six matches for the 1st IV, three for the 2nd IV and two for the Colts, with Dulwich (very strong at this time), St Paul’s, Haileybury, Bedford and Christ’s Hospital being the usual school opponents and often with fixtures against the Universities. House matches had been incorporated into the House Championship in 1922, and in 1929 there was an increase in the number of house matches, now including “Little Side”.

1933 of course saw the all-encompassing move of the School from the City to Sandy Lodge, with “increased facilities, in the shape of four excellent courts”. That year D.J.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, such as Messrs March, Hodgetts, Mahler, Rider, Gardner and Towns, but the school teams were adequate rather than strong, as younger boys could not attend coaching sessions because of the demands of rugby. Repeatedly Captains beseech more young players to take up the game. In 1936 “the lack of young players has been more apparent each season. Boys play for

the teams without sufficient experience”, though there were 13 1st IV fixture that year, opponents including Cambridge University, King’s College London, UCL and the Masters. In 1939 there were “insufficient players of high standard, doubtless due to the enthusiasm prevailing for Athletics”. On a different note, Captain’s reports were often be 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 8 or 9 points down before he has warmed up”. Two outstanding players in the 1930s were J.M.C.Barnes (1932–34) and A.Roper (1936–38); at Christ’s Hospital the latter had a close game against a good opponent “once he discovered how to hit the light switches and irregularities on the doors”.

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. The benefit of the coaching scheme introduced last year is becoming apparent”. 1942 also was a good year, despite the growing enthusiasm for boxing and athletics, but in 1943 fewer boys appeared to be playing, and in 1944 there was difficulty in finding time for practice. Fives gloves, youngsters were reminded, could be hired from the Monitors’ and Prompters’ Common Room at 2d per pair. A different problem emerged after the war. “We have been unable to obtain any new balls for some time and the present ones are all worn out”. Only by 1948 did the supply of balls permit a complete programme to be resumed. Once again other sports were perceived as more important during the Spring term, and this problem would continue to hamper the sport throughout the years ahead.

Once post-war normality had begun to return, there were some good results, under the leadership of Mr Hodgetts. J.G.K.Ingram was unbeaten by any schoolboy in matches in both 1949 and 1950. Although an outbreak of measles curtailed the 1951 season, the identical twins D.J. and P.H.Whatmoor caused problems for their opponents in 1951 and 1952, being distinguishable only by the former being left-handed. P.M.Smith won six matches out of seven at home in 1954 and reached the semi-finals of the Schools’ Singles. In 1957 the fixture list for the 1st IV again stood at 13 matches, and in 1959 R.T.Bulgin, in the first of his four seasons, was unbeaten in school matches. He, P.M.Whitcombe and D.A.Sharp were the nucleus of a most successful team in 1961, despite the absence of any regular coaching. T.G.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 sixteen matches were played.

In 1970 Peter Ingram took over as Master-in-Charge, and for many of us today he *was* Merchant Taylors’ Fives. He brought an unflappable mixture of down-to-earth sense and plain niceness to the game. For many years there was a feeling that it was always pleasant to play against Merchant Taylors’, and this was largely due to Peter. He was fortunate to start with some outstanding players, such as Guy Whiting (captain in both 1970 and 1971), Geoff Bunting, and Simon Brown, the latter pair winning the West of England Doubles in 1973 and reaching the final of the Schools’ Doubles in both 1972 and 1973. Geoff Bunting also reached the singles semi-final. In 1970 the Colts and Under-15 were unbeaten; in 1971 the 1st IV beat Oxford University, the RFA and the very strong St Dunstan’s, and in 1972 both Oxford and Cambridge were defeated. Other outstanding players from this period included H.G.Green, D.L.Daniels, N.D.Eckert, R.J.N.Christie and M.A.Horn. By now a typical block fixture would include 1st, 2nd and 3rd senior IVs, Colts, Under-15 and sometimes Under-14 A and Bs.

The early 1980’s represent a peak in the history of Merchant Taylors’ Fives. 1980 was the most successful season ever, the 1st IV beating all the leading Fives schools, and Simon Burrows and

Neil Eckert winning the National Schools' Doubles. This achievement was repeated by Anthony Morris and Howard Thompson in 1984. Howard had previously won the Colts singles in 1982 and Simon Mee and Anthony Morris the Colts doubles in 1983. A further highlight was the tour to the USA by a squad of eight in 1986. John Hampel, who had won the Colts singles that year, became Massachusetts Open Singles and Doubles, and Connecticut Open Singles, Champion! However, there was a major cloud on the horizon, in the form of a systematic threat from another Spring term sport. Since then the game has had to rely on scraps – an enthusiastic youngster or two who can encourage some friends to take it up, a committed master-in-charge, lunchtime sessions. The facts that Taylors' continued to produce good players and to compete at national level is testimony to Peter's mixture of tact and enthusiasm. There were many occasions in which plate trophies came to Sandy Lodge, but the disadvantages under which the sport laboured meant that no national championships were won for 13 years. Nevertheless the School continued to produce good individual players and, in particular, pairs. Charlie Marsh was an open semi-finalist in 1991. The Chopra brothers, Amit and Prashant, were both good captains; Ed Hikmet and James Harrison, James Hamman and Jonathan Davies, and perhaps best of all Richard Price and Christian Hale were all pairs who could challenge the best in the country. But the cupboard remained bare of major trophies until 1997, when Steffan James won the National Under-13 singles, and, with Asheesh Kaul, the doubles, conceding very few points in the process. 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 Peter's achievements and personality. It was hugely sad that he was able to enjoy only a couple of years of retirement.

Owen Toller took over as Master-in-Charge; he was an experienced coach but with other commitments he 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. Simon Stott took up the game from scratch when he arrived at Sandy Lodge and rapidly proved invaluable, not least as driver for away matches and championships. Neither he nor his team will forget the time when they set off to drive to Clifton for the West of England Championships and got halfway down the East Drive before discovering that the minibus had no brakes. It was Crispin who taught Steffan and Asheesh the game and although both were required for hockey (Steffan in particular being one of the most outstanding all-round sportsmen produced by Merchant Taylors'), both kept playing Fives when they could, not least in house matches where they were always impressive. They won the National Under-14 Doubles in 1998, Steffan losing in the singles final, and they ended their school career by winning the Open Doubles Plate in 2002, beating the 2nd IV pair of Jonathan Pinkus and Daniel Bartlett in the final. Jonathan and Daniel, with a combined height of about 13 feet, must have been one of the tallest regular pairs ever.

That year the National Schools' Championships were played at Sandy Lodge, thanks to the suggestion of Owen Toller, and the organisation was widely held to have been a success, but the fact that there are only four courts meant that timings were too compressed and the championships subsequently returned to the six courts at St Paul's. However, there was an augury in that Daniel Grant, in the Lower Sixth, was the only non-Pauline in the Open Singles semi-finals, and the next year he duly fulfilled the huge promise he had shown ever since the fourth form by becoming the first, and so far only, Tylorian to win the National Schools' Singles Championship. He was a classic example of an individual who enthused friends around him, and he and his team-mates of Sam Sandford, John Livesey and Kiran Karia formed one of the best 1st IVs that Merchant Taylors' has ever had. Dan has gone on to be one of the leading adult players and at the time of writing has a national ranking of 8th.

By now several things had changed. The Fives courts had been repainted and central heating installed, to the huge gratitude of the players and, particularly, the supporters who had regularly frozen on the first Sunday of December each year in the President's Cup. The G6 ball had replaced the Cliff, making the game faster, more consistent and more enjoyable for the majority. Good players continued to be produced: Ian Roberts and John Martin, who won the Doubles plate in 1997; Will Carter (Open Singles plate in 1998); Jamie Lillywhite and David Sims, and the splendid trio of Richard Wise, Nick Faith and Ravi Shah who graced the courts with fine play and outstanding sportsmanship in 1999 and 2000. Owen Toller handed over to James Clifford in 2003, and when James moved on, the appointment of the former Oxford captain Nick Hillier was an injection of new blood and expertise just when it was needed. Keir Sloane and Shaun Miller have continued the tradition of good Merchant Taylors' Fives players.

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