

# FIVES IN SCHOOLS

*The fifth article in this series is about Christ's Hospital and is written by John Denison, five times National Vintage Singles Champion, who taught Classics at the school for 37 years*

RFA Handbook 2002-03

## 5. Christ's Hospital

The need for fives to be played at Christ's Hospital in London was established in 1865 on the advice of Mr D.C. Fearon, Assistant Commissioner to the Taunton Commission on Education. In March 1871, an outlay of £40 or £50 was approved for the "formation of two Fives Courts against the South Wall, still standing, of the late Giltspur Street Compter". The plan was apparently revised, for 'The Blue' (the School magazine) of May 1871 records: "We, as boys of C.H., owe a great debt of gratitude to the Governors for the valuable addition made to our playgrounds. The four Fives Courts, which are now being built by Mr. Renton, are constructed from the plans of James Noon, Esq., our new Mathematical Master, and will provide a great source of attraction to The School." Rules were drawn up for their use, allowing the lion's share to the Grecians (Sixth Form), and in 1872 a doubles competition was played with 14 entries.

However, as ever, space was valuable, and in 1874 these courts were demolished for development. Loud were the lamentations in 'The Blue' of May that year: "After uselessly depriving us of our Fives Courts for a month, the labourers have at last begun to pull down the old Compter-Prison wall. Meanwhile the summer months are coming on, and what we are going to do for exercise without Fives, only those ingenious persons who are directing the operations can say. The Grecians' lot is especially hard. The only time when they can get exercise at all is during those sweet evening hours which are fondly believed by sanguine authority to be devoted to a preparation of the next morning's work, and even then it requires an imaginative intellect to find anything but monotony in a protracted course of back presses. Perambulation of the Thames Embankment is apt to tire, and the exercise required to scale our Alpine landings is more exhausting than satisfactory."

Spirits recovered, however, when it was rumoured that four new courts were to be erected on the opposite side of the gymnasium area. The rumour was well-founded, and the work proceeded with surprising speed. Two were ready for use by the end of June 1874, and two remained by design unplastered. Of this unfinished condition there was outspoken criticism, to which in 1875 the Treasurer yielded. The design of the courts was also slightly amended: "Besides the stuccoing of the two middle courts, the angle of the right hand buttress is to be reduced, so as to give more scope to play and diminish the number of dead balls which are possible at present." Despite protests against boys playing in shoes and destroying the pavement, 'The Blue' of June 1875 strikes a dithyrambic note: "Thanks to the kindness of our Treasurer, this noble game is proceeding with a vigour that surpasses any former season we have known."

In the years immediately following, there are frequent references in 'The Blue' to internal competitions, marked improvements in standards, and crowded courts. In 1891 a new court "similar to and adjoining the one built a year or two back" was built, "to compensate for the virtual loss of the favourite pepper-pot". In the following decade internal competitions continued to flourish until, as the time for the move of the School in May 1902 from London to Horsham approached, the courts fell into disrepair: in February 1900, a letter to the editor of 'The Blue' complains: "The Fives Courts are in decomposition – one dab of mortar

would transform an uninteresting game of chance into an interesting game of skill". The reply was brief: "Dabs are worse than useless. Repairs are a harder task than you imagine".

However, the popularity of Fives on the London site certainly assured its continuation as recreation for the boys on the Horsham site, where obviously there was now room for rugby, football, cricket and athletics on site. The architects of the Horsham buildings, Aston Webb and E. Ingress Bell, drew up plans for two identical blocks of courts, one for each end of the back avenue (behind Middleton /Thornton and Barnes/Maine houses), which can only be described as unique. The drawings of the plans can still be viewed in the C.H. Museum: each of the two blocks contained three open courts and opposite to them three covered courts. The open and covered courts were separated from each other by a raised gallery for spectators, which had its own entrance. John Burton, a C.H. pupil 1936-43 and subsequently Cambridge captain, Jesters fives representative, National Championship Secretary, and President of the R.F.A. 1979-81, has his own recollection of the courts and his introduction to them:

"In September 1936 a House Captain named George Mason led his 6 new 11-year-olds to the Fives Courts. He made one conversion for life. Entry into what appeared to be a triple giraffe house was from the end, and up a few steps. To the left were three pits with coarse wire netting through which a small boy would peer painfully onto three-quarters of a court. Opposite were three open courts which were rough on balls and feet, and were patronised only by small squits banished there by their seniors".

He goes on: "Many readers will know that the C.H. courts were exuberantly weird. They were one-and-a-half times larger than the standard, and passage from court to court was through a handsome recessed arch containing a wooden door inset 8 to 10 inches. Facilities included a large and dangerous doorknob".

All C.H. players from 1902 to 1964 remember with affection the old courts. It is not known from what Aston Webb and Ingress Bell devised the plans. Though there were pleasing architectural features of pillars and rounded arches, each of the two buildings was vast. An interesting entry in the site manager's notebook of 12.04.00 queries whether "the Fives Courts are to be built for Eton or Rugby Fives – Eton is considered the better", but Rugby Fives courts were built and their measurements show their size compared to those of the quite large modern C.H. courts (in brackets): length 34 ft (28ft), width 18 ft (17 ft), ht of front wall 24 ft (15 ft + 5 ft tin at top), ht of back wall 12 ft (6 ft + 6 ft). In addition, the bar was much higher.

These courts bred an individual type of C.H. player – a hard-hitter, who had brawn and stamina running over the vast area of the court. The home player also had the advantage of knowledge of the recessed door and its knob! 'The Blue' of May 1911 records the visit of the captain of fives of the previous year, H.C. Pennington, who showed us "the same uncanny reach and aggravating accuracy in finding the door, to say nothing of the handle". However, undoubtedly the finest exponent of the game at C.H. in these early decades was the master i/c for many years and himself an Old Blue, Hector Buck. He was quite simply

invincible on the C.H. courts. Dennis Silk (C.H. 1942-50, Cambridge Blue 1952-5, National Doubles Champion 1956-9 partnering John Pretlove, and probably C.H.'s best ever player) recalls: "Buckie' was a tireless coach and almost impossible to beat on the huge C.H. courts. He served unerringly into the recess of the doors and lobbed brilliantly into the tiny drain in the middle of the very back of the court".

Once built, the courts were undoubtedly popular with the boys coming to the Horsham site for the first time. In 'The Blue' of April/May 1901, L.D. Baker is ecstatic: "Those Fives Courts! The Science School! The showers! Everything was spiffing!!" Two more pairs of courts (one open, one covered) were built at the back of the Preparatory block and Peele house, competitions were held, and the first School matches played in 1908, against Epsom, Lancing and Marlborough. Not all was well, however: the architect-designed courts had their flaws, not least with their glass-paned roofs, always apt to get broken, especially when schoolboys are around! By 1905, protective wire-netting was necessary, but to little effect: major repairs were done in 1911, but leaking roofs and condensation remained a perennial problem throughout the life of the courts. 'The Blue' of December 1927: "We continue to receive letters, regretful, despairing, even abusive, concerning our fives courts, which to judge by the majority of the letters have degenerated into dark and flooded pits."

In the 1920s the popularity of the game continued, with internal competitions and more matches, against Alleyn's, U.C.S., Dulwich, Hurstpierpoint, Merchant Taylors', St Paul's, Bank of England and Old Boy sides. In December 1924 an 8-pairs-a-side match was played against the masters; in April 1925 Hector Buck made his debut for the Old Blues; in March 1926 the renowned Dr Cyriax came with U.C.S. Old Boys, and again in April 1927, when he lost "in a Homeric struggle" 13-15 to Farnes; in December 1926 the School side recorded its victory over Common Room; and in February 1927 C.M.E.Seaman, later to become Head Master of Bedford and of C.H., made his debut for the School. In April 1930 Eastbourne "played their first ever match in our foreign courts: it was a very dismal game, they were completely at sea and could not settle down at all. Detailed criticism of such a game is unnecessary. Score: C.H. 180, Eastbourne 32". (Spencer Beal and Nigel Wheeler please note!)

By 1929 the Old Blues Fives Club was thriving, playing 20 or 30 matches a season, largely in London, and with an A IV playing as

many matches too. With the 1930s we have the personal reminiscences of players of that time, responding splendidly to an appeal for information and recollections which I put in last term's 'Blue'. Frank Terry (C.H. 1928-36, a self-confessed "notable fives addict" and captain from 1934-6) recalls the excitement of away matches at St Paul's (Baron's Court tube station), where he got "soundly trounced by a lad with the unforgettable name of Pulvermacher" (in fact, he lost 2-15, 15-13 and C.H. won the match 217-153), and at Dulwich. Such matches were the only times boys escaped from the cloistered boarding school life (and they usually enjoyed liquid refreshments at the hostelry at Victoria Station on the return journey!). He also played at Dulwich against "a large but nimble opponent called S.C.Silkin, afterwards a prominent member of Harold Wilson's government". His playing contemporaries included A.L.B.Thompson, who eventually grew up to win a D.S.O. in Burma and afterwards became a popular novelist using the pen name of Francis Clifford. Other players were P.E.Letts, T.W.B.Middleton (later Bursar at Marlborough) and F.M.McRae, a Somerset cricketer, subsequently a doctor, who died heroically after the sinking of H.M.S. Glorious off Norway in 1940 by giving up his place on a float to a non-swimmer.

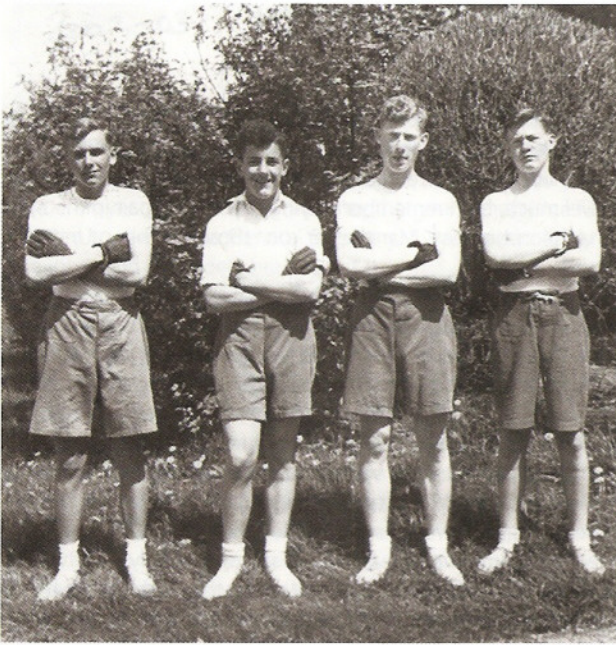
There are the memories of others too of this era: Tom McCombie (C.H. 1928-36) recalls the test of loyalty playing in matches for the Old Blues 2nd IV, travelling across London to St Dunstan's and Charterhouse Square (where the changing facilities were very limited – and cold – and damp!), and Ray Jacques (C.H. 1930-35) remembers winning the C.H. singles in 1935 beating J.S.Walenn, and also playing against Dr Cyriax ("quite portly and no chicken!"), and later playing for the Old Blues, especially on the Haberdashers' courts at Hackney. Bill Pearson, now living in Ontario, was also a fives enthusiast, introduced to the game by his Junior House Master Mr Waddams ("who was not one to be gainsaid!"). He was captain from 1938-40 (and first string for Oxford in the year after), and "to try and increase the prestige of fives in the School", instituted fives colours. So "somebody went into Horsham and bought a number of yards of that 2in diameter ribbon that School girls wore around their hats – coloured navy blue and old gold", and this was sewn on to the singlets. The custom certainly continued into the 1950s, before a school badge replaced it.

In the war years, both John Burton (see above) and Mike Gibson (C.H. 1936-43) recall the prowess of John Rogers, who sadly died recently, and fives continued under the enthusiasm of the legendary Hector Buck, despite the problems with courts, balls and gloves. Roy Boxer (1942-47) recalls that only a few boys with suitable aptitude were allowed to play because of shortage of gym shoe rubber, but he too continued the game with the Bank of England after leaving School. In the post-war years the school teams became very strong, with outstanding players in Dennis Silk (see above) and A.P. Jackson (1942-48), both of whom went on to play for Cambridge. Dennis, after paying tribute to "Buckie", goes on: "I love the game of fives above all others and wish every child in the land could play. I only ever met one cheat in all the time I played, a contrast to most other games. It was a model game for teaching good sportsmanship." Bill Stevens (1942-49) was a member of the teams of this era, and sends a photograph. He too was on court when "Buckie's" fives career came to a temporary end with the snapping of his Achilles tendon. Even so, he recovered, and until his retirement in 1956, he continued to coach and retain his invincibility. His retirement truly was the end of an era: for more than 30 years C.H. boys had crowded the gallery of the courts at 4.30 on a Saturday to watch the masters play.



Picture supplied by Elizabeth Bridges of Christ's Hospital Museum

The 1929 Old Blues team. Left to right, back to front: G Goobey, PA Matthews, R Potter, JL Graydon, PW Reynolds, NC Goodman, AH Buck, GK Cooper, KW Millage (Hon. Sec.), AE Alexander, S Bloomfield, GH Walker, CR Black (Hon. Treas.) Absent: TL Scott, CS Farnes.



The 1947 team. From left: Parsons, DRW Silk, AP Jackson, WH Stevens

In the early 1950s the game continued with regular matches and competitions, but the number of enthusiasts began to dwindle to those in boarding houses near the block of courts in good condition. P.A.K.Naylor (now in Australia, but with warm recollections of the game), M.D.Fuller and J.J.McInerney were leading players. David Bawtree (1947-55) is the oldest Old Blue currently playing and is one of the regulars at C.H. on a Wednesday at 5.00, cheerfully describing any of the boys' short services or drop shots as "a sh\*\*\*y little shot". He has recently organised the National Masters' Championships (over 65s), and was disappointed that there was no opposition for Tim Alexander (see below) and himself to become the first winners of the title. Bernard Atkinson (1951-59) too remains an enthusiast, still moving around the courts with incredible speed and vigour, and winner of the Vintage Doubles in 1996, 1998 and 2001. Chris Arnold (1953-60, perennial fives enthusiast and winner of the Vintage Doubles in 1997), Mervyn Jeffery and Donald Payne went on playing for the Old Blues, and Tim Bryant (1951-61) is another keen member of the 5.00-on-a-Wednesday club.

By the early 1960s, however, the game was declining: the old courts leaked more than ever, there were no staff playing, and enthusiasm was waning. Two things happened to revive it: firstly, thanks to the generosity of an Old Blue, Peter Clay, new courts were built in 1965, and they are amongst the best in the country to play in; and secondly, your correspondent joined the staff in 1964, and he still believes that the only reason he got the job was that his three main interests (cricket, fives and Classics) coincided exactly with those of the Head Master, C.M.E.Seaman (see above). He paired up with Tom Keeley (Eton Fives player, not swift around the court (!) but brilliant volleyer), and the game then flourished for a decade with some useful teams, headed by Michael Beare, Chris Eldridge, William Payne, Clive Walters, James Ockwell, and Paul Middlemiss (who wrote to me from Germany, saying how proud he was to receive his colours). John Hillier and Kent Chapman reached the final of the Schools' West of England Doubles in 1973, and Chris Holmes went on to get a half-blue at Cambridge. The Old Blues fives club also flourished.

In 1975 there was a double blow to hit fives at C.H.: firstly, there was the advent of School football – and that took all the fives players, and secondly, your correspondent was promoted to

Head of Department and no longer had the time to be on court five afternoons a week. However, fives was revived in 1980 by the arrival of Richard Youdale (currently Head Master of King's Ely, and by a pleasing coincidence godfather to next year's C.H. captain, Richard Lebon) and Tim Alexander on to the Staff. They inaugurated the 'Fives at five on a Wednesday' club, and this has grown and flourished ever since. It meets 52 Wednesdays a year and includes Old Blues, members of Staff, outsiders and senior boys.

A number of Staff have begun the game and have continued to play – notably Bill Avenell, Ross Stuart, Steve Walsh and Andy Lewis – but by far the most important early initiate was Ian Torkington, who quickly became master-in-charge. It has been under his enthusiasm, patience and energy that boys have been encouraged and coached. In the subsequent years successive generations of boys have passed through, including the Schools' National Champion of 1998 Ben Lovett, and Oxford and Cambridge half-blues of 2002, Edward Hatton (Oxford captain for 2003/4) and Matthew Burman. John Keyes is currently in the National rankings, and Tom Curtin and Paul Rider won the Schools' National Doubles this year, the first C.H. pair ever to do so. For the last few seasons about 120 boys have been playing at all levels in the Lent Term, and their enjoyment of the game is manifest. For this and for all the organisation, Ian Torkington must take the credit, and long may it continue (but young members of Staff are needed!).

I have perhaps drawn two conclusions from this survey: firstly, there always seem to be misguided killjoys who either seek to demolish courts in the name of development or fail to repair them; secondly – and happily – such is the enjoyment, the enthusiasm and the loyalty of the players that they have triumphed over these dark forces. All the old records in 'The Blue' from 1871, all the personal testimonies of those who have got in touch with me – from the oldest octogenarian to the current Under 13 National Champion Nick Simpson – emphasise the sheer fun which they have derived from the game. Hazlitt's comment is indeed true: the fives player is not the Roman knight behind whom 'sedet atra Cura'.

John Denison

*The author acknowledges his debt of gratitude to C.M.E.Seaman's 'Christ's Hospital – The Last Years in London', to the Old Blues mentioned above who got in touch with him, to the staff at Christ's Hospital Museum, to Bill Avenell for helping him thumb through early issues of 'The Blue' and to Bob Rae.*



From left: John Denison, Paul Rider, Tom Curtin, Ian Torkington.