

History of Fives at Marlborough

David Barnes delves into Marlborough's past

Marlborough College was founded in 1843, and only six years later the first basic Fives courts had been built. These two free-standing walls didn't last long, though – one was demolished in 1863 and the other became the side wall of a covered rackets court.

In fact the early days of Fives at Marlborough saw a lot of change. Two three-walled Fives courts were built in 1853 – although one was removed in 1863 to make way for the Bradleian building – and three courts were erected against the south wall of the rackets court. The first singles prize was given in 1863, and Fives gloves, previously scorned – and on one legendary occasion even ceremonially burned – started to be accepted.

Increase in interest

In 1869, The Marlburian carried an article entitled 'Fives Playing,' which said the following on the game: "It is true that we have no covered courts, no court with a back wall, or with a buttress... but of courts adapted for plain, good, honest play we have a fair supply." Part of this honest play included doubles, which at Marlborough consisted of two players playing the rally, while their partners stood back. The writer said: "By this system a match is often lost which might have been won; the interest of the two out-players is lost, and the game is robbed of half its variety and charm." Perhaps unsurprisingly the system was soon abandoned.

The Bradleian building was extended in 1873, bringing the destruction of the three 1863 courts. In compensation, six courts were built between the gates to the College and the rackets court. Competitions proliferated and games were played to 11 or 15, with no deuces. A boy who learnt his Fives on these

courts, AF Winnington-Ingram, was destined to become the first President of the Rugby Fives Association in 1927.

In 1877, four courts were built in the Field, on the north side of the Bath Road. One of the 1873 courts was removed to make way for the new Porter's Lodge, but with nine courts in all, plus some house courts, Fives was well catered for. When the College celebrated its 50th birthday in 1893 by building the North Classroom Block, the remaining 1873 courts were demolished, but in compensation, six more were built in the Field adjacent to the other four.

These 10 courts grouped together should have stimulated interest, but little change was recorded in The



Marlborough College 'Court' c.1890. 1873 Fives courts on right.

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Marlburian. Internal competitions chugged along, with entries small and details erratic. A team played a Common Room IV in 1901, and the masters won every game. Things picked up in 1907, however: there were 27 entries for the Open Singles and 13 pairs for the Doubles, plus Junior and House competitions.

Courts brought in line

The first school match was in 1908 against Cheltenham. "As our opponents were accustomed to a larger court with a back wall, they were considerably handicapped," said The Marlburian. "The doubles resulted in a draw, but we won both the singles matches."

The First World War interrupted matters, and although the Cheltenham fixture (usually won by Marlborough) had been played regularly, it was 1923 before Clifton was added to the list. The standard at Marlborough in the 1920s seems to have declined. Both matches against Cheltenham and Clifton in 1927 were lost.

By now, the courts were showing their age. A letter to The Marlburian in 1929 asked for back walls, "to make the game as we play it here conform to the Rugby rules, instead of existing in the nature of a bastard half-caste, as it does at present".

The appeal was not in vain. That same year, the Martineau family gave the College eight four-walled Rugby and four Eton courts, built on the site

ABOVE Marlborough College 1853, Fives courts on left RIGHT House Fives Doubles Champions 1876



of the old courts. For the first time in Marlborough's history Fives could be played on covered courts.

The benefits of coaching

No Fives reports were published from 1933 to 1938, leaving us to guess at the level of activity. The RFA sent sides in 1937 and 1938, but no results appeared. The College lost heavily to an Oxford IV in 1938, and three pairs suffered a big defeat at Clifton the next spring. Fives was clearly stronger in the Common Room, for, when a five-pair match took place that year, the masters won by almost 100 points.

During World War Two, games of both codes were played against boys from the City of London School, evacuated to Marlborough in 1939. In 1945, RJ Knight joined the staff, and

Marlburians now had a first-class player to learn from. Knight was runner-up in the Amateur Singles in 1936, and on its resumption in 1948 he became champion.

The effect on Marlborough's Fives was immediate. A match against Oxford in 1948 was won easily. That same year PC Clemmow became the first Marlburian to represent Cambridge at Rugby Fives. The 1948-49 captain, AMB Salmon, was later to play two successive years for Cambridge. No fewer than seven pairs played the Common Room, and the school won 370-290. >>

School matches return

Inter-school matches started again in 1949. Over the next decade Canford, Bradfield, Rugby, Sherborne, Clifton, Malvern and Winchester became regular opponents; and the Jesters, Oxford Beavers, Bristol University and Alleyn Old Boys brought sides to Marlborough. Names which stand out from this period are CC Simpson, who represented Oxford in 1953, and CJ Harvey, the first captain under AF Elliot, the master-in-charge from 1956. In 1957, Clifton were beaten for the first time, and a strong pair of Harvey and MG Harrison reached the fourth round of the Schools' Doubles, losing to the eventual winners from St. Dunstan's.

The 1st IV were unbeaten in school matches in 1958, and the next season

'Plenty of boys were playing, among them one CDA Martin-Jenkins'

Bristol Grammar and Dauntsey's were added to the list of opponents. The Marlborough side was led by a future National Doubles champion, MJ Elliott, destined to win the Cyriax Cup in partnership with JT Watkinson (BGS and Oxford) three times from 1962-64. Elliott played three times for Oxford (1960-62), was captain in the latter two years and had the pleasure of selecting two other Marlburians, RL Ormond (1961) and PG Howard (1962) to represent the University.

DRW Silk, winner of the Cyriax Cup with JF Pretlove from 1956 to 1959, came to teach at Marlborough in 1955. Consequently such players as Pretlove and R Birmingham, both winners of National Singles and Doubles titles, came to play for the Jesters or Alleyn Old Boys against the College. After losing one of those matches by the respectable score of 64-110, CRN Clark, Fives captain in 1960, wrote in his report: "Afterwards the opposition, at our request, criticised our game and, without being asked, our courts! They recommended the use of the soft shot at the front of the court, the

lob, and the use of the side wall for carefully placed shots. They also advised us to get some new courts."

The fact such men were coming to Marlborough was praise enough, though. AF Elliot was an enthusiastic coach, and the occasional appearance by the resident Amateur Doubles champion did no harm. As well as new lighting in four courts in 1963, two floors were relaid in 1964, and plenty of boys were playing, among them one who was to play Fives twice for Cambridge and become famous in cricketing circles, CDA Martin-Jenkins.

Repairs and demolitions

The courts were re-roofed in 1970, and when AF Elliot's long spell as master-in-charge ended in 1974, Gordon Woods took over. The courts were repainted, and three masters, Woods, John Osborne and Martin Harrison played a big part in keeping Fives on the road in the mid 1970s. The response was good, with four teams playing Radley in 1977.

Fives reports took on a literary flavour from 1977, when JD Byrom became master-in-charge. "If the welkin did not often ring to the whoops of victory, the games were conducted in an enjoyable and gentlemanly fashion. One asks for little more," being one entry. "The world of Fives is a quiet one, being, in every sense of the word, courteous. Rackets are left to other games," read another.

In winter 1979, four of the eight



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW

Tom Kiggell, co-winner of the Veterans' Doubles Plate 2015; Marlborough courts in October 1970; A Montagu-Pollock and J Davies with the Winchester Plate in 2004; The Martineau Plaque



courts were demolished to make way for squash courts. Even so, matches were won against the RFA Club and UCS Old Boys, one Marlburian being the one-armed Richard Olver, a future RFA Club stalwart.

Modernisation

In 1981, John Byrom reported another accident-free season. "Recently released statistics reveal that proportionally more actuaries play Fives than any other professional class, so the chances of survival must be encouraging."

Byrom's final report in 1984 was heartfelt, albeit with a twist in the tail: "Michael Payne, Lucas Dawe, Adrian Rees and Alan Leong, abetted by Matthew Edwards, were good enough to beat all comers this term with a fine mixture of strength and subtlety. The Common Room, who lost to them in an amazingly close match, will be glad to see them go, and wish them well."

Rodney Harris, who took over as master-in-charge, reported in 1987 that the courts were in poor condition, sweating badly and unplayable for long periods. Nonetheless two senior fixtures were played, while matches at lower levels took place against Clifton, Bloxham, Bradfield and Radley.

No further reports appear for more than a decade. John Osborne, who took on Fives despite being a Housemaster and then Senior Master, coached juniors and arranged matches. As in

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
S Rolls and K Bowyer-Knight with the Winchester Plate in 2009; The Marlborough College Boys' Fives squad in 2012; S Smith and C Bugel, 2014 U14 Girls' National Champions



many schools, the pressure of a range of sports and activities had begun to tell on some of the smaller games.

As John Osborne said: "Edward Gould saw an enormous improvement was needed to revive the game; thanks to his initiative and the RFA's advice, we entered the era of enclosed courts." Sealing the area behind the courts in 2000 made a big difference to comfort and transformed playing conditions.

The present day

The next step was suggested by Howard Wiseman of the Rugby and Eton Fives Coaching Agency and, as a result, Matthew Arnott was appointed as a graduate assistant for 2000-01 to coach Rugby and Eton Fives.

Boys' matches had been re-established with Malvern, Sherborne, Radley, Clifton and Bradfield, while some girls had entered the Ladies' Winchester Fives Tournament. In 2001-02, 15 matches were played, all junior levels being represented, and the Under 15s won six out of eight. When Tom Kiggell joined the Common Room in 2002, there were some competent young players to work with.

Space precludes a detailed account of the 12 most recent seasons, all of them under Kiggell's patient and expert leadership.

More Marlburians played for the College in 2006-07 than in any of the previous four seasons and first matches were held with Wessex, St. Olave's and King's Bruton.

The girls managed Marlborough's first win in a National Championship, when Louisa Treadwell and Laura Jardine Paterson won the Under 18 Girls' Doubles in 2011.

In 2014 C Bugel won the National Under 14 Girls' Singles and the doubles with S Smith. Lastly, in 2015 JSW Godding represented Oxford in the Varsity Match, the first Marlburian to do so for 30 years.