

A history of Fives at Eastbourne College

David Barnes chronicles the history of Eastbourne College's forays into Fives



ABOVE
Eastbourne
College's 1874
fives court

RIGHT
HL Haynes
and PH East,
winners of the
1896 House
Challenge Cup

BELOW
The three
1890 courts

When The Times announced in March 1867 that Eastbourne College would open later that year, Fives courts were listed as one of the attractions of the new school. The first court, actually built in 1874, immediately attracted a letter to The Eastbournian from 'An Old Hand' about its size – "quite an apology for a court" – and the need to cement the walls. It took further letters before the walls were attended to. A back wall was added in 1879, although it remained unroofed.

In 1880 two open courts were built south of the Gymnasium, and four in the grounds of Blackwater House. There are no photos of these courts, but one assumes that they were similar to the first one. A notable name won the Fives singles competition that year: E.H. Miles, later amateur world champion in Real Tennis and Rackets. He went on to Marlborough after Eastbourne, so both schools can claim him.

Early competitions are reported intermittently in The Eastbournian, and Blackwater House had a tournament of its own. Support for Fives was variable, and an 1886 letter about the state of the courts read: "They are a disgrace to the College... It is all very well to say that it is no good having them done up because nobody uses them. On the contrary, nobody uses them because they are not fit to play on."

BOOST IN PLAYER NUMBERS

The College experienced a period of financial difficulty in the 1880s, the roll falling to just 60 boys. Numbers increased in 1888 with the arrival from Cranbrook School of a new Headmaster, Dr Charles Crowden, who brought 90 boys with him from that school. Cranbrook had built Fives courts under Crowden's leadership, so it was no surprise when three new open courts "without hazards of any kind" were built in 1890. At first they had no back walls, but these were added a few years later. The old 1874 court also came down in 1890.

To celebrate the new courts, a captain of Fives was elected, an open scratch competition for doubles pairs organised and a set of rules and regulations published. The competition was divided into two classes, over and under 15. Each match to be the best of three games, except for the final, which was best of five, and "The Rugby rules should be followed as far as possible". Masters were allowed to enter the senior competition, held in the Michaelmas term, but the Lent term would bring House and Challenge Cup competitions for boys only.

LGC Laughton was the winner of the first open singles in 1891. "Towards the end of the first game Laughton's hands went bad, and compelled him to wear gloves in the second and third games. Though thus handicapped, he won easily."

The bare-handed technique, still practised by a recent master-in-charge, has deep roots at Eastbourne!

THE IMPACT OF WAR

A new headmaster arrived in March 1906, and the Fives courts had some much needed repairs. The first match against another school was a junior fixture in 1907 against St Andrew's, a local prep school where a court survives to this day.

No reports appear in The Eastbournian between 1915 and 1922. Obviously the War had a lot to do with this, but the 1890 courts were still there in 1919, when a proposal was made to erect a Memorial Building in honour of Old Eastbournians killed in the hostilities. This involved demolishing various buildings including the Fives courts, but in 1922 three new covered courts were built in the grounds of Blackwater House and are still in use today.

They are described as being "20ft long, 18ft wide and 15ft high, with a roof of quarter-inch plate glass on stout rafters and purlins protected on the



underside with wire netting. The inside is well rendered with cement and sand trowelled smooth, and the floor is left rough to give grip to the feet. The centre court has been finished as an Eton Court."

The length of these courts was too short for either Rugby (28ft) or Eton (24ft) Fives. From 1927, matches were being played against the Old Boys and the Staff with three pairs per side, possibly indicating that the centre court had already been converted to Rugby specifications. The 1961 survey carried out by David Gardner describes three Rugby courts, each with a length of 24ft, but it is not clear when the lengthening (or conversion) took place.

The first awarding of Fives colours came in 1928, as did the first mention of coaching by a master, a Mr Morres. It was said of him: "[He] has done much to make the game popular as it is today in the School; he has always been ready to offer advice and, better still, example by playing in fours."

A match at Christ's Hospital in 1930 brought defeat, with the report recording: "Their courts being at least twice as long as ours, we were totally unable to settle down." Despite this reverse, an Eastbourne pair, JM Drower and NW Cundy, played in the inaugural Public Schools' Doubles Competition at Roehampton. They had a tough draw: after defeating Bishop's Stortford in the first round, they were beaten by the eventual winners from St. Paul's.

A STAR IS BORN

1932 saw matches against St Paul's, Christ's Hospital, the RFA and the Jesters, all lost by 30 points or fewer. The Jesters fielded four top-class Cambridge players, so Eastbourne were already competing against some of the best players in the country; and the next season brought victories over both RFA and Jesters. Eight boys represented the College that year, among them a youngster named JDG Craib, destined for stardom.

The first win against St Paul's (176-175!) came in 1935, although the Alleyn Old Boys, the strongest club in the country, brought the College team (without Craib) down to earth, winning 270-75. 1936 was Craib's year: he won the Public Schools' Singles title, the first, and so far only, Eastbournian to do so. He went on to play for Cambridge from 1937-39, captaining the University in his final year.

Eastbourne won a new fixture against King's Canterbury in 1937, but lost heavily to St Paul's, the Alleyn Old Boys and the Jesters, this lost by 55-180 – bravely described in The Eastbournian as "an instructive and enjoyable match".



ABOVE
1933 (Back
row) JGD
Craib, HEB
Pilbrow, SH
Foot, Esq.,
HMF Langley.
(Front row)
DC Horton, GF
Hepburn, CP
Bomford.

BELOW
The 1949
squad (Back)
MJ Partridge,
ACJ Burton,
Esq., GR
Langton.
(On bench)
GC Lucas, PB
S-Johnson, AG
Fisher (Capt.),
IJ Lizaso, JC
Robbins.
(On ground)
HD Lucas,
RV Stone

'MEASLES SPOILT THE 1938 SEASON AND INFLUENZA AFFECTED THE 1939 TEAM'

Measles spoilt the 1938 season and influenza affected the 1939 team; matches against St Paul's, Sutton Valence, Whitgift and the Alleyn Old Boys were lost, and only King's Canterbury beaten. DM Man and DJ Stinson entered the Public Schools' Competition, beating Felsted but losing to Oundle, the holders.

REGULAR FIXTURES

The Second World War brought disruption, although an OE side came in March 1940. The College was evacuated to Radley in June 1940, where Eastbourne were permitted to use the Fives courts three days a week. The buttress meant they were "rather lost" initially, but there were matches against Radley and Malvern in 1942.

Back at Eastbourne in 1947, matches against the Masters started again. Master-in-charge, ACJ Burton, worked hard on coaching the pupils and getting the courts into a playable condition, even painting a court in the 1948 Easter holidays. KE Norman-Smith took over in 1950, by which time all three courts were in playing order, and an exceptional singles player emerged, IJ Lizaso.

A regular fixture list was established during the 1950s: four schools (St Paul's, Sutton Valence, Christ's Hospital and Whitgift) and visitors such as the Jesters, the RFAC and the OEs.

"Ruthless coaching" helped the 1953 team, although the Sutton Valence match was the only victory. Christ's Hospital were beaten in 1955 for the first time since the war, and likewise St Paul's in 1956. An "intolerably exciting" three-hour match against Whitgift in 1957 was lost by one point.





ABOVE
The 1950 squad (Back) R Worsley, JH Wilson, WJ Armstrong, JD Nicholson, KE Norman-Smith, Esq. (On bench) RV Stone, MJ Partridge, IJ Lizaso (capt.), HD Lucas, GR Langton

LEFT
1966's DG Smith, WJ Hastie, KE Norman-Smith, Esq, DR Bryant, RAD Perkins

BELOW
The Cambridge team of 1995 with Chris and Tim Caroe



The picture that emerges is one of undimmed enthusiasm in the face of a majority of defeats. "We lost matches we should have won," was the cry in 1960. "Our courts are small and the ceilings low," lamented the 1962 report, pointing out that it was difficult to learn to lob and vary pace, making away games a test.

CHANGE IN MASTERSHIP

A Novices' Cup was given in 1964, leading to a general improvement in play. Tonbridge were added to the fixture list in 1965, and more Colts and Junior Colts matches introduced. Four intrepid souls entered



the 1965 Schools' Championships at Whitgift. They got no further than the third round but appreciated playing on larger courts

against better players. 1966 was a good season, with seven out of eight matches won, but the IV had disappointing results in the Schools' Championships. However, the old pattern of losses outweighing victories returned, and by 1970 the 1st IV were glad to win a match and there were no junior teams or competitions.

This temporary decline may have stemmed from a lack of interest among younger members of staff. The 1970 report even reads: "It seems that Fives, one of the College's oldest-established sports, must become a thing of the past."

There was no immediate obvious successor to Norman-Smith, but in 1974, one was found in DJ Bowles. His report speaks of a revival, with matches for 1st IV, 2nd pair, Colts and Under 15s. All but one were lost, but the game was on the up again. Fixtures doubled in 1975, and a Colts pair entered the first U16 Nationals at Whitgift. "Although we are still not getting the results, the

game is in a healthy state", Bowles wrote in 1976.

VARSITY REPRESENTATION ONCE AGAIN

Fives was given a boost by the arrival of NL Wheeler, a Lancing Old Boy who revelled in the opportunities to volley the ball in the small Eastbourne courts. Before long the 1st IV were beating Tonbridge, Sutton Valence, Rutlish, Whitgift, touring to Bedford and Felsted and entering tournaments with a will. The spirit was good, with impromptu games between boys of all houses and ages reported.

The reports throughout the 1980s show a rich pattern of matches at all levels. Team-building tours and plenty of away fixtures, including entries to the West of England Schools and the Nationals, enabled experience to be gained on bigger courts, and the recruitment to the Common Room of SJ Beal, who had learnt his Fives at Alleyn's, added to the quality of the coaching in singles and doubles. "Mr Wheeler and Mr Beal make a good team!" concluded the 1985 report.

AB Pringle, a member of a good 1986 Eastbourne team, played for Cambridge in the 1989 Varsity Match, the first Old Eastbournian to do so since Craib in 1936. Since Pringle's selection, 12 OEs have made a total of 41 Varsity appearances.

Duncan Bowles, master-in-charge for two decades, who had fought so hard for the status of Fives at Eastbourne, retired from the fray in 1991.

STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

The 1990s put Eastbourne Fives firmly on the map. The 1st IV won all eight school matches in 1992, and there was strength at every level. TD and CW Caroe won all their doubles matches and went on to represent Cambridge nine times between them – Tim from 1993-97 and Chris from 1995-98. While at school, they each won the West of England singles plate in 1992 and 1993.

Things were going so well by 1994 that the report read: "We are hoping to expand the sport once the courts at Memorial become operational. Cosmetic improvements to the main courts have also helped." Sadly, the two Memorial Ground courts proved impossible to resurrect, but the three 1922 courts have soldiered on to this day and look like making their centenary despite their less than ideal size and condition, and their tendency to sweat in damp weather.

'THE PICTURE THAT EMERGES IS ONE OF UNDIMMED ENTHUSIASM'



Spencer Beal 2016 outside the courts

'THE THREE 1922 COURTS HAVE SOLDIERED ON TO THIS DAY'

Considering these deficiencies, Eastbourne's Fives in recent years has been admirable. Spencer Beal's annual reports reveal enthusiasm and achievement at a time when St Paul's were dominating. Eastbourne travelled far and wide (even to America in 1998) and won a great number of inter-school matches, but just failed to win any schools' titles despite reaching a number of finals. There was something outstanding to report most seasons. "Some marvellous individual performances" (1995); "Under 16s unbeaten in school matches over three years" (1996); "Standard at the senior end is very high" (1997); and in 1998: "This has been the best season the Fives Club has enjoyed as far back as memory goes. The 1st IV and U15s won all their matches."

A number of Eastbournians went on to play in the Varsity Match in the 1990s and 2000s, with EW Brooke, MS Bate, AC Down and SJ Adcock all representing Oxford, while PM Shipley, ES Jones, JAT Richardson, PJ Caroe, SE Beal and CK Compton all appeared for Cambridge.

Four of these won British Universities' titles, while six U25 titles also came their way between 2001 and 2005. Back at Eastbourne, Spencer Beal's 2001 report ended on a wry note: "As Mr Wheeler observed, it is interesting to see how well the OEs have done now that they are no longer being coached by us."

A FEMALE FUTURE

Eastbourne continued to produce good sides, and the numbers playing were high. In 2004, the 1st IV won all six school matches and contained a future Cambridge captain in Charles Compton. Michael Sands won the Open plate at the Nationals the next year. 2006 saw the departure of Nigel Wheeler, coach, motivator, tour organiser and morale booster after three decades of service.

In 2007, Sam Adcock won the West of England Singles plate. Simon Beal came to teach at his old school in 2008, and the Common Room was strengthened in 2009 by the arrival of Alex Smith.

It was pride of place to the girls in 2010, as Tessa Mills won the first National Girls' Singles title, while Charlie Dodds won the Under 16 Singles and partnered Tessa to victory in the Senior Doubles. Tessa dominated the Girls' Singles for three more years, also partnering Izzy Why to victory in the 2013 Girls' Doubles. Tessa has now risen to the top of the Women's National Rankings, just pipping her former teacher Kathleen Briedenhann.

The courts were replastered in 2013, and it was the most successful season for 15 years



ABOVE
1998 (back) P Caroe, J Richardson, M Bate, S Beal (all 1st IV). (middle) D Bain (U15), NL Wheeler, SJ Beal, D Hussain (U15). (front) E Pigott, L Kwon (U15)

RIGHT
2003/04 (standing) S Beal, E Selvadurai, J Partridge, N Wheeler; (kneeling) M Sands, C Compton

RIGHT
Girls 2010 Championship squad including a young Tessa Mills



BELOW
Tessa Mills in 2013 after her 4th win in the National Girls' Singles



for the boys, with the 1st IV winning all 10 matches. Chay Kent and Dom Barnes took the prizes at the South-East event and the Senior Doubles Plate at the Nationals.

Spencer Beal retired in 2015 after 23 years in charge. His son Simon has taken over Fives at Eastbourne and his 2017 report tells of continuing inter-house contests, regular school fixtures and entries into the South-East regionals, the West of England and the Nationals. Girls' Fives at Eastbourne is also in good hands with Kathleen Briedenhann, and the courts are in regular use by Tony Hamilton's Tuesday Club.