

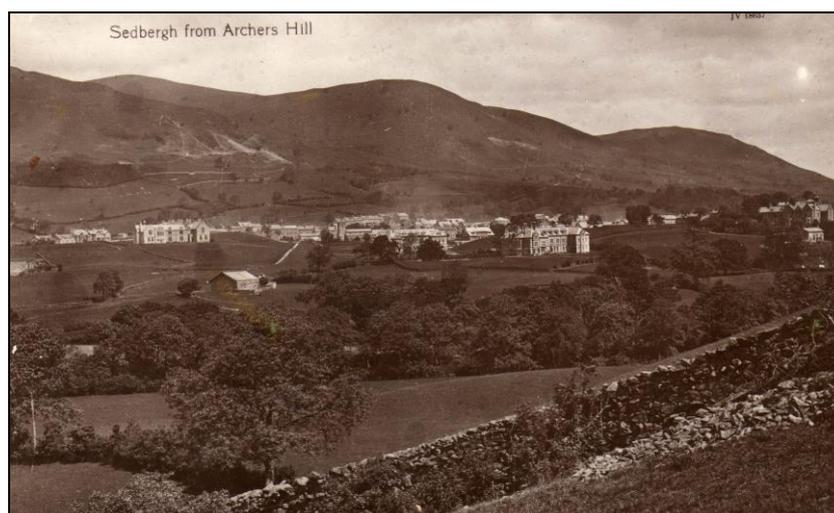
The History of Fives at Sedbergh School by David Barnes (July 2016)



Sedbergh School is a co-educational independent boarding school in the town of Sedbergh in Cumbria, in North West England. It comprises a junior school for children aged 4 to 13 and the main school. It was established in 1525.

From the School's website: Sedbergh School has an international reputation for its sporting achievements and the School also takes great pride in offering a broad range of sporting opportunities for all pupils, whatever their aptitudes and abilities. Both boys' and girls' sport embraces 'Excellence' and 'Sport for All' – the two are not mutually exclusive and co-exist comfortably, enabling Sedbergh pupils to benefit from a huge variety of sporting opportunities.

Almost all sports are open to both boys and girls, all utilise excellent facilities and a knowledgeable and enthusiastic coaching team work tirelessly with pupils to ensure that they enjoy their sport and fulfil their potential.



Sedbergh from Archers Hill c.1900

It took a while for Sedbergh School to make up its mind which variety of Fives to adopt. For example, School House in 1880 had one court without a 'pepper-box' and one court with. A correspondent in *The Sedberghian* in 1904 pointed out that the custom for counting marks for Fives towards the Sports Cup had been discontinued in 1890, since 'there were different kinds of courts in different Houses, and ... one House had no court at all. Until every House has at least one court with a back wall, it seems difficult to find a satisfactory solution'.

Sedbergh has always taken sport seriously. Fives, originally a recreational game ideal for occupying pupils in their leisure time, was clearly competitive at Sedbergh in late Victorian times. In the 1880s, Fives challenges and ties were played both within and between Houses, and in 1880 there was a challenge match between a pair of housemasters, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Hutt, and two boys representing the School, C Toppin and RA Shepherd. Surprisingly, the result is not recorded, nor the court on which the match was played. Soon, School singles competitions were arranged for seniors and juniors, and HG Hart, Headmaster from 1880, gave a Challenge Cup, won in 1882 by School House. Soon Old Sedberghians were playing competitive Fives, too: in 1896 AG Wilkins won the Fives Challenge Cup at Owen's College, Manchester – the first affiliate College of what is now Manchester University.



House Fives Trophies 1903-1918

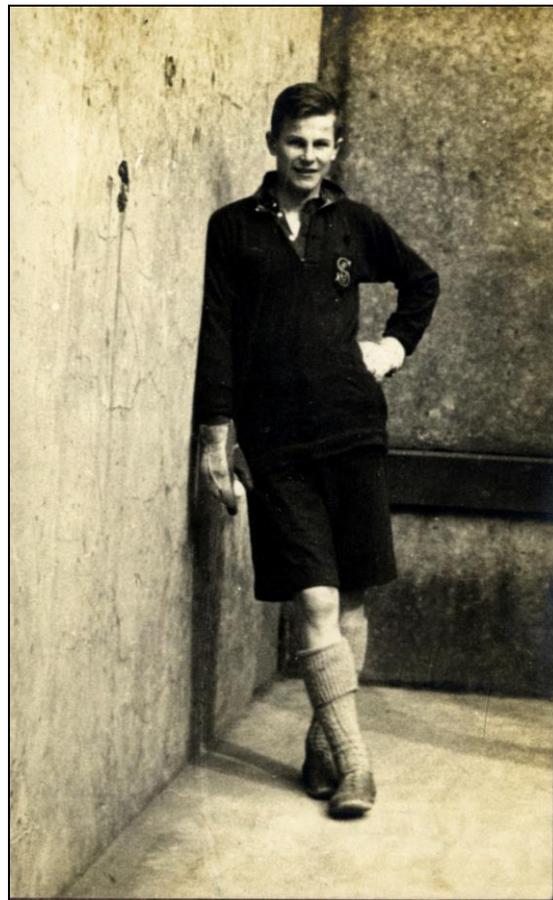


House Fives Ties Open 1903

But the issue of which courts were the right ones for Sedbergh persisted. We have been unable to establish whether the covered court built in 1903 and reserved for the use of masters and members of Mr. Lemarchand's House (the only House without at least one court of its own) had a buttress or a back wall. It was certainly popular with its intended

users since play was possible come rain or snow, but the only possible hint of its shape comes from the fact that CW Gooch, an Old Blundellian cricketer and assistant master at Sedbergh, was the moving force behind its construction. Two of the Blundell's three-walled courts built in 1885 during his time at the Devon school had since acquired a back wall and were probably closer to the Rugby pattern than the Eton – despite the ledge round the walls! Reports and letters in *The Sedberghian* emphasize that House Fives flourished in the early years of the new century, and perhaps unsurprisingly Mr. Lemarchand's was one of the leading lights. Boys in other Houses must have envied them, as their own open courts were ramshackle by comparison and needed constant repair.

Finally, in 1922, two new courts were built 'on the Winchester pattern' immediately to the south of the football pavilion. William Weech, the headmaster of Sedbergh from 1912 to 1926, was a Wykehamist and no doubt influenced the choice. *The Sedberghian* reported in its March 1923 editorial: 'An innovation has been made in the shape of a Fives-match between the Staff and the School. In the absence of knowledge of the play of the School, each House was represented by one player. The Staff won by seven games to two. This is another step in the direction started by the New Fives Courts and the House Cups. In a few years we shall have Fives Colours and School matches.'



An unidentified Fives Player
poses on the Evans House Court in the early 1920s

A further decisive move came in 1925, when four good covered Winchester Fives courts were built in a block. These are the present courts, now enclosed. Now at last House competitions could be held on a level Fives court! And it was no surprise that Sedgwick House, just across the road from the new courts, became rather keen on Fives and started

winning the Challenge Cup. Fives nationally was waking up in the 1920s, too, with the foundation of the Rugby Fives Association in 1927 and the circulation of approved court dimensions and rules in 1930. The Sedbergh courts have much the same dimensions as the 1910 courts at Winchester, although built back to back and with the back walls six feet high rather than ten.

It is hard to establish how long the various House courts lasted at Sedbergh alongside the School ones. Sedgwick, School, Hart and Evans Houses certainly invested some energy and money in improving their courts in the early 1920s, and I have trawled through *The Sedberghian* in search of any lament for their eventual passing, but unsuccessfully. The one at Evans House is, I suspect, the last one standing in 2016.

Another dilemma that confronts the historian of Fives is the identity of masters-in-charge in the early days. The fact is that in many schools, the boys ran the Fives with perhaps a benevolent master, who played the game with his Common Room friends, coaching from time to time and making sure that competitions were run properly. Masters at Sedbergh were certainly involved in umpiring inter-House matches, for example. A name that has come down to us as one who played a great deal of Fives at Sedbergh is that of GH Todd, who retired in 1929. *The Sedberghian* wrote in tribute that he was 'a prime mover in all the improvements and additions to our Fives-courts'; and Todd himself had written in his 1918 tribute to another master, Brian 'Puggy' Harrison, that he had been his Fives partner for fifteen years. This takes Todd back to 1903, so he was no doubt one of those who enjoyed the masters' court opened in that year. He was Housemaster of Sedgwick House from 1917 on and must surely have had a say in the choice of location for the four 1925 courts!

Soon, Sedberghians were making their mark at University. AMcA Robertson and JA Steven were in the Fives Eight at Glasgow as early as 1925, while GA Bell played for Cambridge in the 1927 and 1929 Varsity Matches. The first time Sedbergh took on a University was in a Rugby Fives match at Leeds in 1930, an encounter which became a regular home and away fixture despite the differing codes and the fact that Leeds only had one court, which made matches twice as long. The scoring system used in those days allowed setting from 13-13 (first to 18) and 14-14 (first to 17), which could prolong a match as well. The usual pattern of results (home win, away loss) emerged even more strongly in the matches with Leeds because of the difference between Winchester and Rugby Fives.

In the 1930s, a period when Rugby Fives was expanding in schools as a result of the standardisation of rules and court dimensions, plus the introduction of the Public Schools Championships in 1930, Sedbergh's remote location inevitably meant that almost all of its Fives was played within the School. The Senior and Junior Fives, both of them doubles knock-out competitions, were keenly fought each year, with Sedgwick winning the Senior trophy every year between 1932 and 1938. In 1939, *The Sedberghian* reported: 'The two old courts near Lupton House have been pulled down and are being rebuilt on more modern lines.' The work was completed by November, the builders being GH Carter Ltd, specialists in the construction of Fives and squash courts, and the cost coming in at £550.

Apart from matches versus Leeds, where three Rugby Fives courts had been built at Devonshire Hall in 1930, the occasional encounter with the Common Room was the only opportunity to play adult opposition. When the Masters were played in 1940, the School lost but gave a good account of themselves. *The Sedberghian* reported: 'The selection of the School team was naturally difficult, as Senior Fives had not yet begun, and it is to be doubted if it was really a representative Team.' In other words, no individual master had

his hand on the tiller at this stage, although some were called upon to umpire house matches. One of these was a recent arrival in the Common Room, ATI Boggis, who had played for Oxford in two Varsity Matches (1930-31) and was to stay at Sedbergh for the rest of his teaching career, devoting hours of coaching to the School's Fives players.

The War brought shortages, and suitable shoes for Fives, squash and yard soccer were unobtainable, removing a valuable source of recreation. House matches had mostly to be discontinued, and the general level of activity in the courts was unavoidably restricted.

GM Brearley, an Old Sedberghian at Cambridge, played in a winning team for the University against Oxford in an unofficial Varsity Match in 1941, but no half-blues were awarded and no further Varsity Matches played until 1946. DE Mount, still at school at the start of the War, made the Oxford team in 1947. Back at Sedbergh, the Senior Fives competition (with three pairs per team) was revived in 1948, and *The Sedberghian* reported in 1949: 'Interest in the game is spreading, and Houses are beginning to take considerable trouble over the training of their Fives teams.' The Junior competition was revived the next year after an interval of eight years and produced an exciting series of matches. Fives was back with a vengeance!

The 1950s was the decade in which Sedberghians made a mark in National Rugby Fives competitions. The Smith brothers, JNHS and DS, emerged as top-class singles players. In 1955, D Smith won the Public Schools' Singles Championship at Whitgift, beating the holder, RG Freebairn of Oundle, in the final. The slightly older JNH Smith, who had left Sedbergh the previous autumn, won the 1955 Scottish Open Singles in Edinburgh. JNHS went on to win the North of England Open Singles in 1956 and 1958, and in 1959 became the first (and so far only) Sedberghian to win the National Singles title. In the meantime, DS had repeated his Public Schools triumph and won again in 1956. You would have thought that between them they might have won a Doubles title, but it was not to be. JNH Smith played top for Cambridge in his one year at University (1958), and another Old Sedberghian, BWJG Wilson, was in the same side and the next two as well, becoming captain in 1960. All three years saw Cambridge victories.



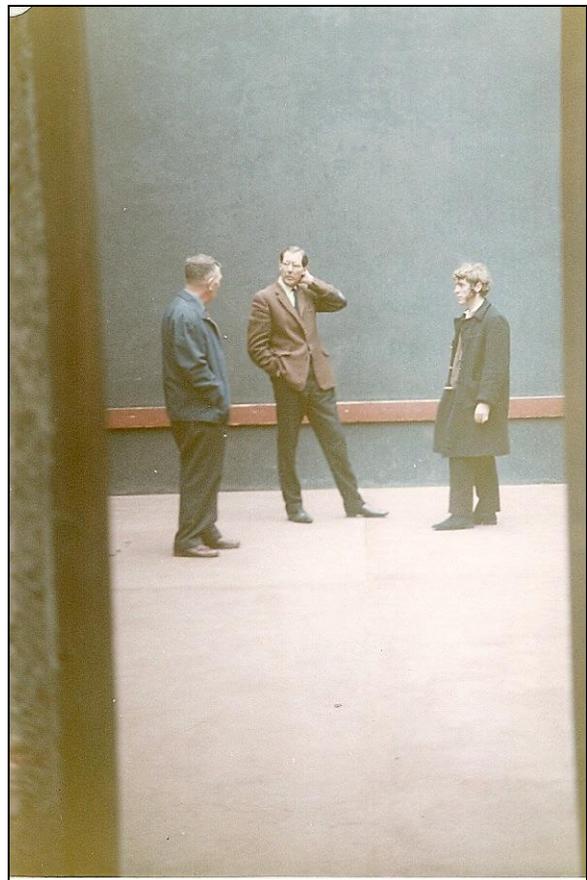
Cambridge University VIII 1958
with JNH Smith (back right) and BWJG Wilson

UCS Old Boy and modern linguist RJ Lyon arrived to teach at Sedbergh in 1960 and was to take on the Fives in 1964. In 1962, his predecessor, RWW Dawe, had arranged the first inter-school match to give the boys some practice at Rugby Fives before entering the Public Schools event; it was against Giggleswick, and Sedbergh did well to win by 24 points. The six boys who went to Whitgift that year had a tough time, however: none of them got beyond the second round in either Singles or Doubles.

Despite the achievements of Sedberghians in the later 1950s, the School had a long way to go before they could master Rugby Fives Doubles, and this is where Dick Lyon's coaching came in. 'Mr. Lyon is patiently teaching us the rudiments of Rugby Fives', read one captain's report. It was inevitably a slow process, as there were very few suitable schools to play against, Giggleswick being the only relatively reachable one. Leeds University were useful opponents to play away, but the other regular school opponents were Rossall, with their open-backed Winchester-style courts. The Northumbria Club and Edinburgh University sent sides in the later 1960s, and these matches were helpful. A loss to the Northumbrians in 1968 meant, in the captain's words, 'that we must focus more on avoiding mistakes and dominating the court'.



Dick Lyon (tallest of the three) discussing matters with Tom Wood and Chris Heron 1970



The concentration on Rugby Fives brought some success for Sedberghians at University. SP Berry, a fine games player, played for winning Cambridge sides in 1969, 1970 and 1972, while AF Rees represented Oxford in 1971. Such was the desire for success at Rugby Fives at Sedbergh that it led to the unusual practice of playing a let on the buttress when visiting sides were unused to it. It was well-meant, but it looked like a vote of no confidence in Winchester Fives – understandable perhaps in singles but regrettable in doubles, where the buttress can play such an interesting part in the tactics of the game.

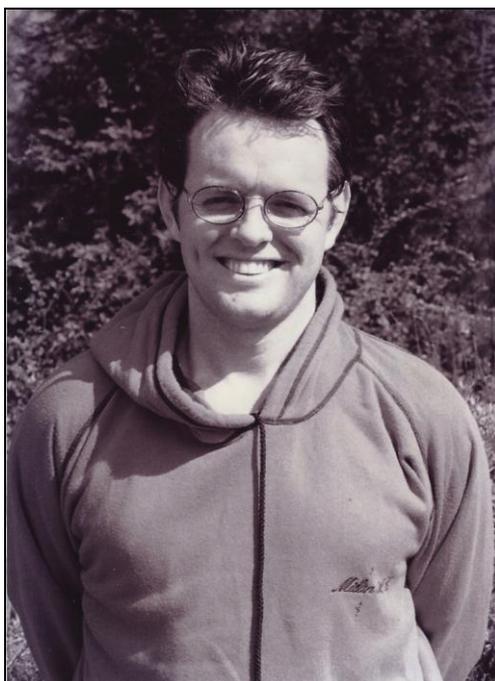
Fortunately, Winchester Fives was still played internally in House matches and other competitions, and 1970 brought the first-ever tie (107-107) in final of the Senior House Competition between Sedgwick and Evans Houses. Amusingly, from 1972 onwards, there were to be two annual Fives reports in *The Sedberghian*: one for Rugby Fives (School matches) and one for Winchester (House matches)!

1970 also saw visits from Durham University, the renamed 'White Rose Club' from Halifax and the widely-travelled UCS Old Boys. The School team that year was the best for several years, but none of them came to the Nationals. The next year, three of the best players were back, and the team was undefeated in all matches, managing to beat not only the RFA and the UCS Old Boys, but also the Masters, who 'were forced ruefully to acknowledge that they had finally met their match.' The top Sedbergh pair (AWA Outhwaite & MTD Budge) won the North Of England Schools' Doubles at Durham School that year, and four players went to Whitgift, where Outhwaite and FJM Carr reached the Doubles semi-final, losing narrowly to Merchant Taylors', the top seeds.

The policy of training the top players for Rugby Fives meant that a wider range of teams featured on Sedbergh's fixture list in the 1970s: Merchiston Castle, Durham School and the Manchester YMCA could all provide good opposition in preparation for the Nationals. The middle of the decade saw the rise of RN Barr, who went increasingly far in the National Schools Singles, reaching the semi-final in 1975 and the final in 1976. He and DHW Mount also got to the Doubles semi-finals in 1975. NT Wright (OS) played in a winning team for Oxford in the Varsity Match that year, so all in all one could say that Sedbergh was making its mark in Rugby Fives. Barr and his fellow Old Sedberghian JJ Rogers went on to play Fives at Oxford and were both selected for the Varsity Matches in 1978, 1979 and 1980, with Rogers staying on for a fourth half-blue in 1981.

The last five years of RJ Lyon's long stint as master-in-charge continued to produce good players: he had instilled in his players the desire to compete at both Rugby and Winchester Fives, and this they did despite Sedbergh's relative remoteness, the vagaries of the weather and the inconvenience of playing a let on the buttress in home matches. Fives was established as a sport the School played as a matter of course – not taking precedence over major sports but having a place of respect alongside them. The fixture list remained predictable: Durham, Loretto, Giggleswick, UCS Old Boys, Manchester YMCA, Jesters, RFA Club, Masters. The 1983 report pointed out that there was only moderate opposition for matches, ('not enough stretching'!), but there was enough talent to keep the show on the road, and Sedberghians were not to be disregarded in National competitions.

RD Middleton won the Senior Singles plate at the National Schools in 1982 and had a two-hour-long battle the next year against the top seed in the quarter-finals, losing 12-10, 11-12, 9-11! He was an impressive player and was selected for Oxford three years running (1985-87), while his Sedbergh contemporary, WH Stoddart, was in the Cambridge side for the first two of those years. DA Fox, Sedbergh captain in 1984, was later to become a stalwart of the Rugby Fives scene and a Winchester Fives Doubles champion – and is still playing to a high standard thirty years later. He co-founded the Executioners Rugby Fives Club with AG Wilson. The name was imaginatively derived from Exeter University (which Fox attended), but with a cutting edge! Despite some mutterings from the RFA, it stuck.



Dave Fox, Sedbergh captain 1984

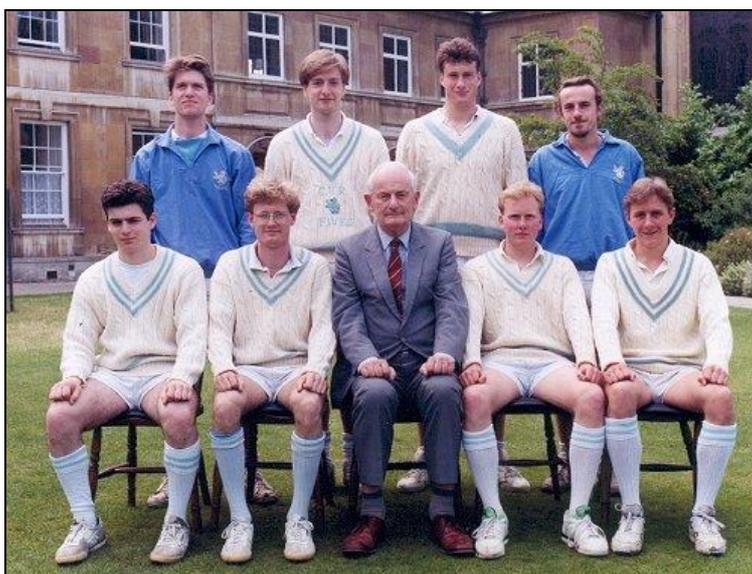
1986/87 was the year when Sedbergh's name was again inscribed on the National Schools' Singles trophy, and it was quite a story. MA Mellor had reached the National Colts' Singles semi-finals in 1985 and the fourth round of the 1986 Senior Singles, but nobody expected him to perform quite so dramatically well as he did in the 1987 Singles, where he lost only twelve points in his five matches, ending by defeating a very good player from St Dunstan's 11-3, 11-2. It was a remarkable performance. Mellor sadly made no further mark upon the game, but another Sedberghian who was captain of Fives the next year, JW Gribble, certainly did, although more in the Universities' than in the Schools' arena. Cambridge, where another Sedberghian, DH Bennett, had been selected to play in the 1989 Varsity Match, turned out to be Gribble's stage. He hit the ground running in 1990, playing good singles and top-pair doubles in a narrow victory for the Light Blues, repeated the act with the same partner in 1991 and then, as captain in 1992, led the last Cambridge side to win the Varsity match for a decade. He also had a hand in winning the British Universities Doubles title in 1991 with his Cambridge partner PD d'Ancona.



Mark Mellor, Schools champion 1987



Joe Gribble, Sedbergh captain 1988



1992 Cambridge University with captain Joe Gribble
(second from left, front row)

RJ Lyon's successor as master-in-charge at Sedbergh was LW Catlow, under whose unassumingly humorous leadership Fives continued to flourish. In 1990, J Lamb and F Stoddart were reported to be the best first pair for some time, with Lamb making it to the semi-final of the Schools Singles. By now, the two Fives reports had become one again, although I am not sure if matches against visiting Rugby Fives players were still played with a ban on the buttress. Manchester YMCA, the White Rose Club, the Jesters, the RFA Club and the newly-formed Executioners all enjoyed coming to Sedbergh, where they were guaranteed a warm welcome and a good match. Giggleswick, Durham School and Loretto were the regular school opponents, with both of the latter having strong sides in

1992. S Lewis and J Brown, the top Sedbergh pair, reached the final of the National Winchester Doubles (at Sedbergh) and then the final of the National Schools as well, losing in the latter case to the outstanding Loretto duo, Fraser and Purvis.



Laurence Catlow at St. Paul's in 2009, the year of his retirement

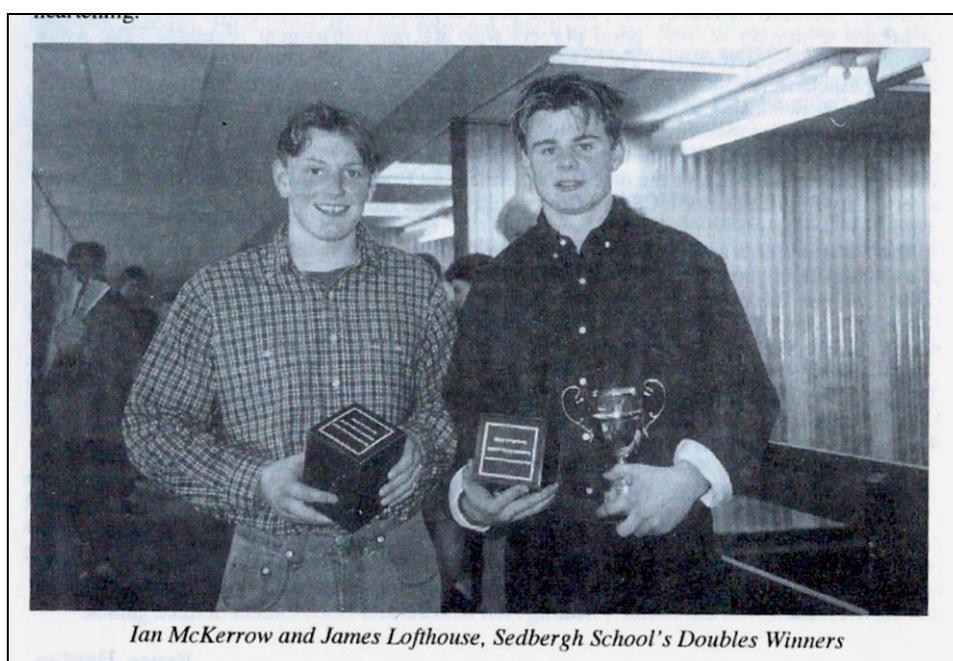
In 1993, it was Sedbergh's turn to win the National Schools Doubles title – for the first time in the School's history – when Brown and J Lancaster made up for Brown's loss in the morning of the Singles final and confirmed their quality and resilience. They had also played beautifully to reach the National Winchester Doubles final three weeks earlier, this time at Malvern, a very different prospect to the Sedbergh courts. The next year, 1994, JM Edington became the third Sedberghian to win the National Schools Singles title, and had he not sustained a serious bruise in doing so, he and his partner T Barraclough would have had a chance of winning the Doubles final that afternoon against Sherborne.



Ed Hickey and James Brown (right), National Schools finalists 1993

Meanwhile, back on the University scene, Sedberghians had continued to feature, and whether by choice or by chance it was Oxford which mainly benefitted. While MD Latham played for Cambridge in 1993, MJS Booth was selected for Oxford three years running (1992-94) and his brother AHS Booth likewise (1995-97), each of them captaining his last year and between them collecting five Varsity Match victories.

By now, the only 'local' school opponents for Sedbergh were Giggleswick and the two Edinburgh schools, Merchiston Castle and Loretto, Durham School having given up the game in 1993. The visiting clubs, containing many top players, thus became an ever more important part of the fixture list if Sedbergh were to keep up its challenge for National Schools honours at St. Paul's in April. 1996 proved that this was the case, when Sedbergh's top pair, J Lofthouse and I McKerrow, won the National Schools Doubles, beating Merchiston Castle in a scintillating first-round match and going on to defeat Bradfield in the final.



National Schools Doubles champions 1996

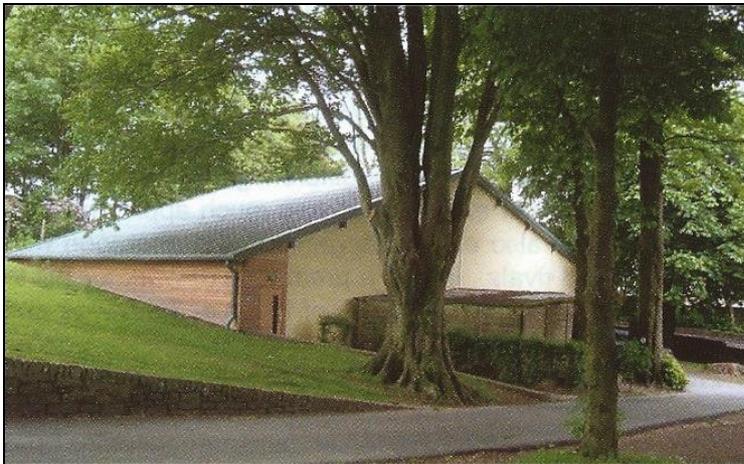
As is often the case, the successes of the early to mid 1990s were followed by a few quieter years. The enthusiasm among the team players remained the same – how could it not under such dedicated leadership? – but the competition prizes went elsewhere, very often to St. Paul's, who were starting on a whole series of excellent results. The courts at Sedbergh seemed increasingly prone to sweating at the first sign of moist air, of which there was plenty, and the younger players suffered from the lack of suitable school matches to give them experience. 'A season with dry courts would be an incomparable blessing', wrote Laurence Catlow in 2002. In 2004 the National Winchester Doubles, scheduled for Sedbergh in March, had to be postponed because of damp courts, but it was played successfully later that year.

In 2007, a generous gift from John Guthrie, OS, saw the four Sedbergh courts enclosed, with heaters installed in an effort to reduce the sweating which had bedevilled the play of the previous decade. This has not been entirely successful, alas, as the interruptions to play in subsequent competitions have shown. The courts do not at present stand up to a

whole day's continuous play by competitors who, however fit they are, inevitably exude a lot of perspiration!



Dave Fox & Dave Hebden win the 'Barnes Bridge' in 2005



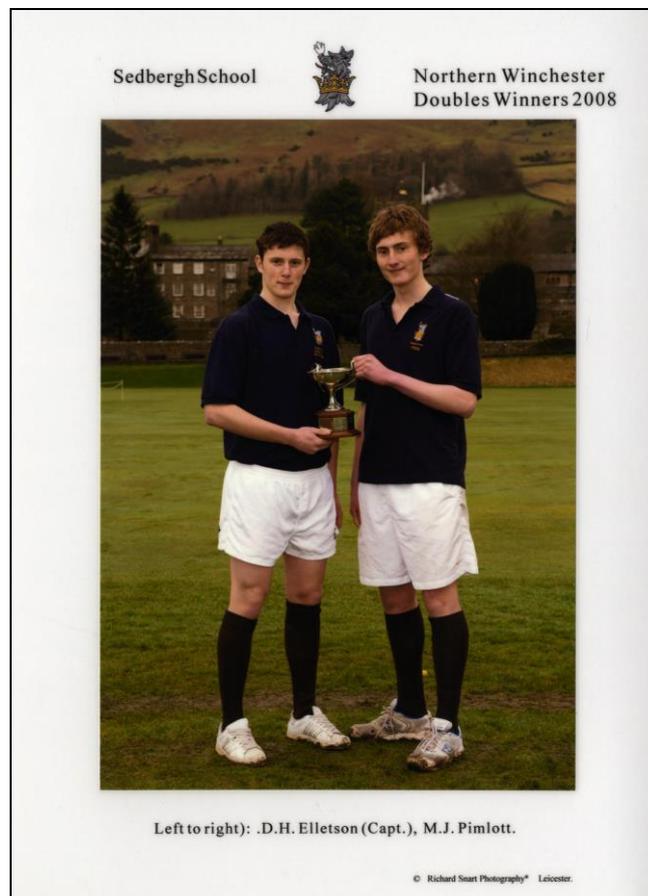
Courts enclosed in 2007-08

No doubt partly in response to the enclosure of the courts, the numbers of Sedberghians playing Fives increased in 2008. No school matches were lost to the weather, and there were no periods when practice was impossible owing to sweating courts. More young players came to persevere with the game, and the fixture with Rossall was reinstated after many years, making a considerable difference to the variety of the list.



Headmaster Chris Hirst, a former Cambridge captain of Fives, thanking John Guthrie for his generosity in 2008

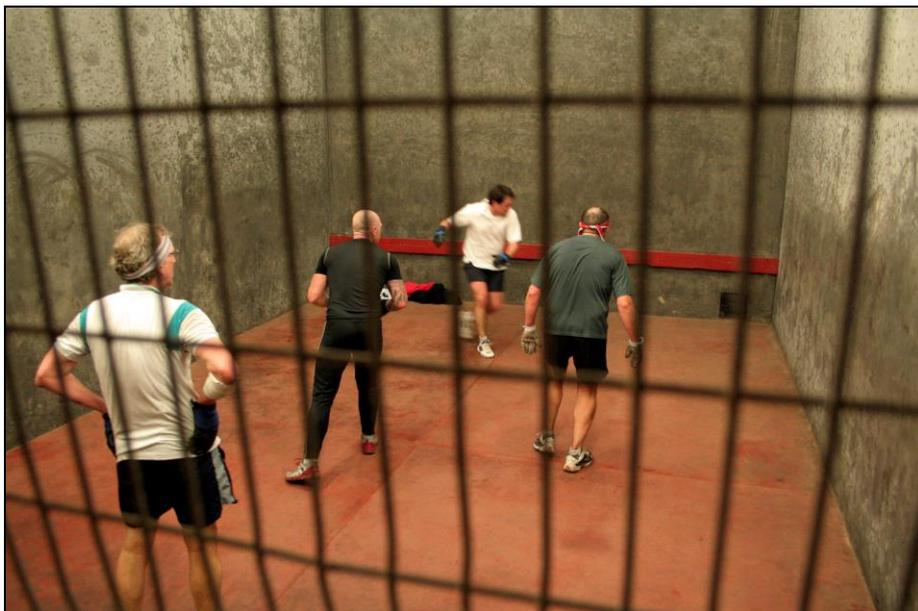
In 2008/09, A Elletson and M Pimlott, the top Sedbergh pair, won the Winchester Fives Northern Doubles, the first schoolboy pair to do so; and Elletson went on to win the Singles plate at the National Schools Championships. These achievements were important given the context of a number of relatively fallow years after the heady days of the 1990s. Fittingly, Laurence Catlow bowed out at the end of the season to hand on the Fives to his former pupil Jonathan Lidiard. Since 1964, there had only been two men in charge of Fives at Sedbergh, and in their very different ways (but united by their love of Fives and red wine) they had served the game and the School magnificently.



In the last six years, JD Lidiard has already made his mark. He has brought good young players to the Schools Winchester Fives Doubles and to the National Schools, and Sedbergh girls have also entered their Nationals and the Ladies Winchester Fives event.



Ben Lawry and Jonathan Lidiard,
winners of the Northern Winchester Fives Doubles 2008



Dave Fox (with Dave Hebden) serving to John Minta (with Hamish Buchanan) 2012



Sedbergh Girls at the Ladies Winchester Fives championships 2016



Sedbergh's Girls squad at the National Championships 2016

The latest achievement came in 2015 when Taylor McGuire won the National Schools Under 14 Boys' Singles title, a fine achievement for a player brought up on a Winchester Fives court.



Taylor Maguire 2015

To sum up, the Sedbergh courts still need a bit of attention to the condensation issue, but the Fives is in good hands. This coming season (2016/17) sees the Winchester National Doubles return to the school, which will give Sedberghians a chance to play against or watch top players. And for all you Southern schools planning a Fives tour, Sedbergh is a leading contender by virtue of the quality of its Fives and its tradition of hospitality.

David Barnes.
July 2016

My thanks to all who helped contribute to this article, particularly Katy de la Rivière (Sedbergh School archivist), John Guthrie, Laurence Catlow and Jon Lidiard.