

Neil Butterfield revisits Fives in the USA in October 2016

Around 30 years ago I met Tom and Joan Wood for the first time ever at Denstone College. At the post-match tea and cakes at Peter Moore's house, Tom mentioned in passing that he had heard about a Fives court in the USA and was hoping to raise a side to go and play there. Not knowing Tom, I expressed a passing interest. A rookie mistake. Consequently, six months later I found myself on a plane to the USA to play Fives at St Mark's and Groton schools in Massachusetts and in the first ever international match. I had a great time on that and subsequent USA tours – so this year I went back to see the current health of USA Fives and hopefully meet a few old friends for a beer.

St Mark's School, Southborough, Massachusetts

Hard to start with bad news – the eight St Mark's courts have gone, converted into a theatre in 2001, nothing but the shell remains. There is one Fives-playing master at the school who is still teaching: Rick Umiker, who still has his Fives gloves. He has squirreled away the Fives memorabilia – the plaque to John Carey and a small Fives stained-glass window – in storage, safe for a rainy day.



Rick Umiker

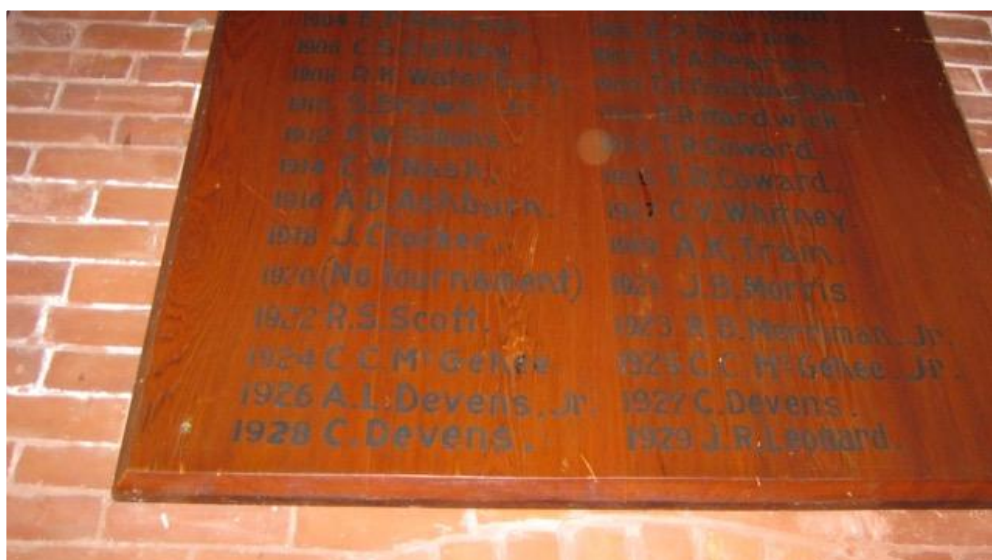
Groton School, Massachusetts

There is much better news at Groton, where the boys have insisted that they get to play Fives as part of the sports programme. Hence 3 courts have been cleared of theatre props and made fit to play. There are 8 courts in all, 4 singles and 4 doubles, in an attractive stand-alone building.



Rick Umiker and I drove across to meet the master-in-charge Jamie Funnel and two lads – Andrew and Aiden. Amazingly the lads had never ever played doubles, being unsure of the rules. Rick and I put an end to that and a good time was had by all. There are green shots of recovery there – Jamie has admirable enthusiasm, but any extra help and encouragement would be good.

A small piece of USA Fives history from Groton is recorded on an honours board: Charlie Devens I winning the singles in 1927 and 1928. I have played his son Charlie Devens II, and indeed his grandson, Charlie Devens III.



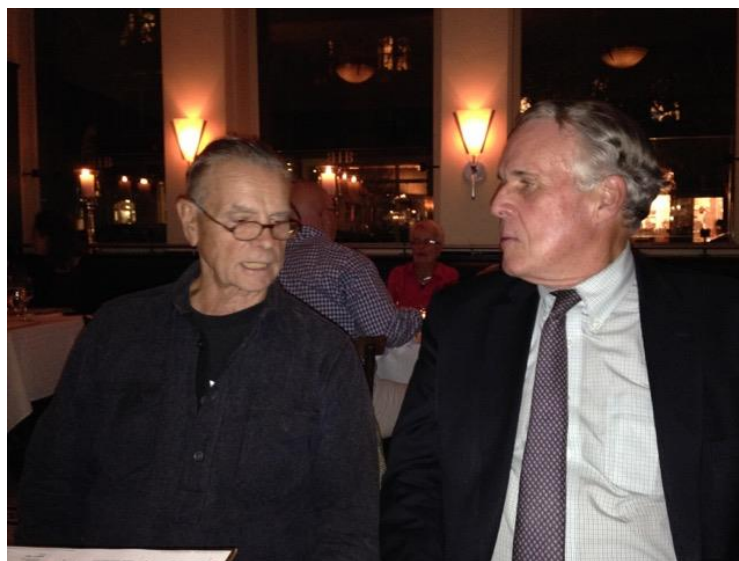
Union Boat Club, Boston

The Union Boat club is a very old and renowned Rowing Club in the centre of Boston. In the basement there is one Fives court – well, you and I would call it a small squash court. The court does take a Fives ball surprisingly well and it gives a good game. I played the younger part of the Devens Fives dynasty – Charlie's sons, Sam and Charlie, plus Matt Iler. The USA won 2 matches to 1. There followed a beer or two.



With only three or four players using them the courts have lost a little of their shine: the centre of gravity at the Club has moved to the new glass-backed squash courts on the third floor, so the Fives profile is rather reduced.

However, Pam and Spike Lingel, and Charlie Devens Senior, now 78 and newly remarried, are still going strong.



Charlie Devens and Spike Lingel

Maine court, Lake Kezar

For years and years there were rumours of a mythical Fives court, like a Marie Celeste, lost in the woods of New Hampshire somewhere near Lake Kezar. To my surprise I found it 25 years ago: just took the only left turn on a very quiet B road and there it was, next to a ten mile lake and 6000 ft. high mountain, and in very good condition.

And it is still there in 2016. The owners have torn up the four hard tennis courts and a tarmac basketball court but have kept the Fives court: the gods of Fives must be smiling on this court. If anything, it is in even better shape than 25 year ago. No news of anybody playing Fives on it; investigations continue as to ownership and future use. Hopefully it is soon to be the scene of the New Hampshire Closed Vintage Singles tournament 2017 – me versus Rick!



Maine court 2016

Passing of old friends

I am at that age that, whenever you go back, you often find sad news as well as good memories, and this was no exception. Sadly I have to report that Peter Devens (below) passed away in June this year after a long illness. As Spike Lingel said, he was the best of us, a great guy with an infectious smile. A sad loss. An obituary is on the RFA website.



Alternative uses for a Fives court USA-style – prop storage, ice hockey practice and softball practice.



Groton courts in alternative use!

For the sake of completion – no news on this trip of the private court in Connecticut, and rumours of courts in New York, New Jersey, San Francisco and Toronto have yet to be substantiated.

More images from my stay:



Andrew, Neil, Aiden and Rick on a Doubles court at Groton



Rick on a Singles court at Groton



Lake Kezar



Black-stained Cliff ball for use at the Boston Union Fives Club