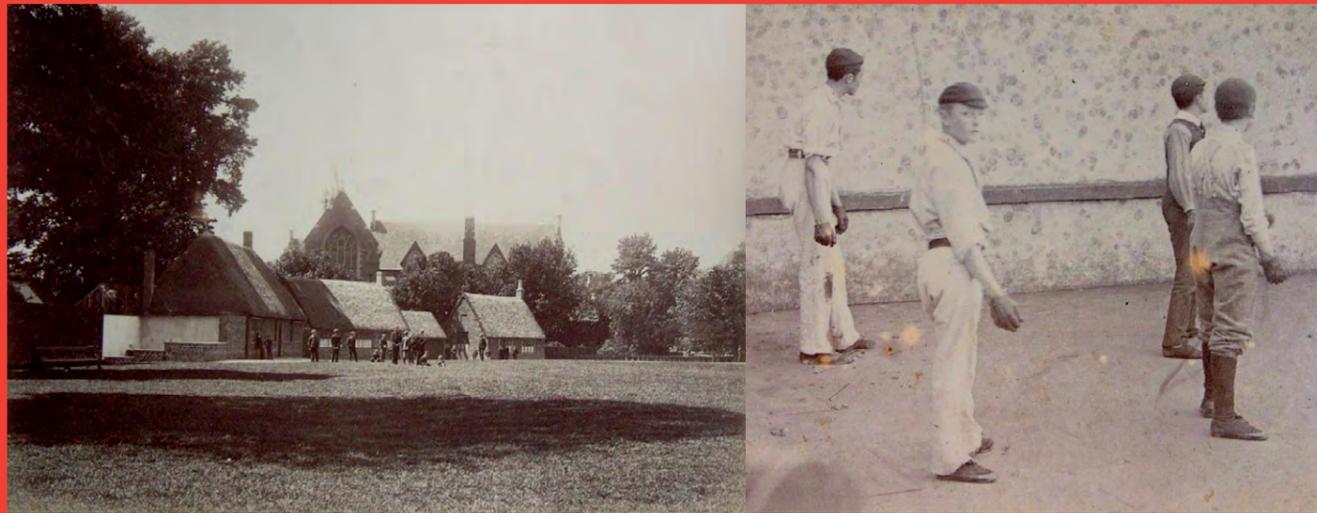


The history of Fives at Bloxham School

Simon Batten takes a look through the archives of the school that can lay claim to being the first to lay down the rules of Fives



Bloxham has been playing Fives since shortly after the school's foundation by the Revd. Philip Reginald Egerton in 1860. Although Egerton introduced the strange form of football played at his old school, Winchester, to Bloxham, he did not bring Winchester's version of Fives with him. Bloxham plays Rugby Fives, which is the most commonly played variant of the game (probably because the court, a plain rectangle with no buttress or step, was easier to construct).

There have been three locations for the playing of Fives since the school was founded. The first court was located in the building known as Botany Bay (now the Art School). When built in 1868 the part downstairs was open to the air – the building was not enclosed until converted to a laboratory in 1898.

No photographs exist of this court, but it obviously had a ceiling, and the editor of The Bloxhamist observed in November 1880 that it

'THESE RULES ARE THOUGHT TO BE AMONG THE EARLIEST ANYWHERE IN EXISTENCE'

ABOVE LEFT: Fives Courts at Bloxham School 1890 with the Arkell court left

ABOVE RIGHT: Fives being played at Bloxham School 1891

“was hardly a success as a Fives Court, on account of the frequent interruptions from the Box-room frequenters, and also the limited height and the darkness of the place”. In 1879 a new court was built on the end of the Pavilion with the money left over from a memorial fund for the Matron, Mrs Arkell, who died in 1875 – for this reason it was known as the Arkell Fives Court. This court was open to the sky and had a back wall which was stepped down from right to left thanks to the slope of the land; it was in use until it collapsed in 1929.

EARLY RULEMAKERS

The earliest set of rules we have, set out in the Bloxhamist magazine in October 1881, make it clear that this was a Rugby Fives court. These rules are thought to be among the earliest anywhere in existence – indeed, they even may be the oldest. The rules of Rugby Fives would not be codified until the establishment of the RFA in the late 1920s, and even then some schools would persist with their own variations. The last vestige of the serving system described in the Bloxham rules – the ability of the server (as we would call him) to request the receiver to throw the ball up to him –

was only removed from the official Rules in 1995.

The game was run by the Fives Club, set up in 1875 with a termly subscription of 1 shilling, with annual singles and doubles tournaments (between 1881 and 1898 there was a bat fives tournament as well as hand fives) as well as matches between the dormitories (forerunners of the boarding houses).

Boys were fined 3d if caught playing in boots or in wet weather and 2d if caught sitting on the court wall, and a Lower School boy was exempted from compulsory football in order to sweep the court.

Perhaps the outstanding player of this period was EA Ostrehan, champion in 1888 at singles (winning the final 15-8, 15-6) and doubles with his partner Wilkinson (15-6, 15-6 in the final). Although undated, the photograph showing a game in progress on this court must date from 1891. Fives was played in the Lent Term, and of the four boys shown, William Stowell only arrived at Bloxham in September 1890 and John Selfe left the school in July 1891. The Bloxhamist shows that all four players – the other two were Arthur Rye and Charles Smith – were involved in the school doubles competition in 1891 but all with different partners (Smith reached the semi-finals).

Selfe would go on to fight in both the Boer War

and Great War, Rye was wounded on the Western Front and Stowell ended up as a newspaper editor in Bulawayo.

FLUCTUATING INTEREST

In 1909 two new Fives courts were constructed next to the school's new Gymnasium (now the Music School), and they are still there to this day. They are Rugby Fives courts and are said to be on the large side with a high ceiling and were “airy and suitable for lobbing”, according to the Rugby Fives Association.

With three courts now in operation, the game received a new impetus, but interest fluctuated, with the Bloxhamist for 1922 commenting that “Fives as a sport is gradually taking its place among the School games, but enthusiasts are still few and far between”.

This was not uncommon – at Rugby School, the game was said to be “very popular” in 1868, but by 1883 a writer in the Meteor could claim that “not

BELOW: 1st VI 1945 (L-R): DC Thomas, HT Woolnough, JW Butler, RE Langhorne, JR Badham, TMO Morris

'BOYS WERE FINED 3D IF CAUGHT PLAYING IN BOOTS'





above 20 fellows in the School play Fives.” Bloxham’s first school match was played in 1909 – against an invitational team organised by a Dr Wilson of Hook Norton – and the first match against another school in 1922, when Warwick School were beaten 7-3. For the next five decades House matches provided the main focus of the season along with a small number of fixtures against the RFA (from 1951) and the likes of King’s School, Worcester and Eastbourne College.

CHALLENGES AWAY FROM HOME

With away fixtures came the challenge of adjusting to strange courts very unlike Bloxham’s own large ones, especially when Winchester or Eton Fives courts were encountered. Against Eastbourne in 1943 the team reported that, “we were hindered greatly by the presence of a buttress in the middle of the back wall”.

Wartime shortages affected fixtures in 1944, when the Bloxhamist reported that “owing to the shortage of Fives balls, we have been unable to bring off any School matches this season.”

In the next decade the fixture list was expanded with the addition of Denstone College (1955) and Radley College (1956) and from 1948 the school sent players to the Public Schools tournament. The captain in 1954, CJ Hanbury, reached the third round at Whitgift and lost to the eventual champion.

Standards were raised in the late 1960s by the arrival of a new member of staff, Philip Howard, an Oxford Fives Blue, who announced his arrival by the introduction of circuit training for the players. It was under Howard’s successor as Master-in-charge of Fives that Bloxham reached the peak of its success as a fives-playing school. Colin Stewart, who himself represented Great Britain at Rugby Fives, presided over a strengthening of the fixture

‘BLOXHAM’S FIRST SCHOOL MATCH WAS PLAYED IN 1909’

ABOVE: A 30ft x 19ft court; built in 1909

BELOW: Iain de Weymarn wins the President’s Cup 2003



list, which by the mid-1970s included three of the strongest schools in the country – Denstone, St. Dunstan’s College and Bedford Modern School.

SEVENTIES SUCCESS

The peak of Bloxham’s success was reached in 1976, when the 1st IV went unbeaten through a season of 13 fixtures against schools as far afield as Blundell’s, Merchant Taylors’ and Sherborne. For the first time, success was achieved on an individual level, with as many as eight Bloxham players heading to Whitgift or St Paul’s each year for the annual schools championships.

In 1975 David Bell and Stuart Smart reached the quarter-finals of the Nationals at Colts (Under 16) level, with Jolyon Griffiths getting to the semi-finals in 1977. The next year Ian Davenport (later to become Headmaster of another illustrious Fives school, Blundell’s) reached the quarter-finals of both the senior doubles (with Griffiths) and singles at the Nationals, as did Mike Thompson in the Colts singles.

Griffiths’ finest hour came in 1979, when he reached the semi-finals of the senior singles; in what the RFA described as “the outstanding match of the whole week”, he came back from 6-10 in the first game to win it 12-10 and lead 6-2 in the second, before Kemp of St Paul’s rallied to win 10-12, 11-7, 11-1 (Kemp would go on to win the final).

The 1979 1st IV won eight out of nine fixtures and in 1982 Bloxham still had a strong fixture list against the likes of Loretto and Denstone, but the first warning signs can be detected in Stewart’s report in the 1983 Bloxhamist, which lamented the unavailability of many of the better players due to hockey commitments.

By 1986 he was admitting that “Fives is rather in the doldrums at present. This is perhaps more a reflection of the strength of the hockey than the weakness of Fives, for there is a lot of good Fives played and when hockey players are available the junior teams, in particular, are quite strong”.

INDIVIDUAL TALENT

Bloxham continued to produce some talented individuals. Wahab Adejumo won the Plate at the 1990 National Schools Championships and reached the quarter-finals of the main competition the following year, while Matthias Lentz, surely Luxembourg’s leading exponent of the game, reached two finals in 2000. Although the 1999 side went without a win in seven matches,



the captain, Tor Humpherston, enjoyed excellent singles wins in the fixtures against Blundell’s and St Paul’s. The outstanding player of recent years was probably Iain de Weymarn (St John’s College, Cambridge), a Blue in Rugby Fives in 1999 and 2000.

MODERN RESURGENCE

The 1996 Bloxhamist identified the central problem for a small school with limited numbers of players: “we do have difficulty in putting out competitive teams at all levels as other sports make increasing demands on the talent available”.

Following the retirement of Colin Stewart in 2012 after a remarkable 41 years of teaching Economics and running Bloxham Fives, the last few years have seen something of a resurgence of interest in the game with as many as 104 pupils, a quarter of the school, playing the game at some point in the week in 2017, the bulk of them opting for Fives as an activity rather than a games option.

Faced with the fact that the best seniors tended also to be in demand as hockey and rugby sevens players, the decision was taken to rebuild from the bottom up. As a result, the focus was on boys and girls in the youngest years. Plans were also made to change the fixture day for minor sports – always a key issue in a school with limited playing resources – as well as to renovate the courts, which are in need of some TLC. The goal is to get a proper list of home and away fixtures up and running once more.

Bloxham has been fortunate to secure good fixtures against the likes of Malvern, Blundell’s and Pilgrims’ in recent years, and an important step was taken in 2017 with a promising group of Under

ABOVE: The 2000 1st IV, captained by Matthias Lentz

BELOW: Simon Batten and Colin Stewart on court July 2018

‘PLANS WERE MADE TO RENOVATE THE COURTS, WHICH ARE IN NEED OF TLC’

13 players attending the National Schools for the first time. Another very hopeful sign has been the recruitment of Bertie Matthew onto the staff from Blundell’s.

The game of Fives, one of the most historic and iconic of the games given to the world by the Victorian public school, continues to be an important part of Bloxham School life over 150 years after it was first played on the site.

■ A fully illustrated version of this history, with the Bloxham Fives Rules, can be found on the RFA website at rugbyfivesassociation.net

