

Question: When and where, to our knowledge, was the term 'Rugby Fives' first used?

16th July 2020

David Hebden writes: Well, I will defer to David Barnes on this but in terms of a timeline ...

1856 The first (?) "Winchester"-type court is built at Worcester College, Oxford

1860s The first trophies for fives that we know about start to appear at schools (Sherborne 1861) and universities (Worcester College, Oxford 1861)

1860 The first 2 purpose-built courts at Rugby; the space between these two courts was later paved and became used as a third court

- The Rugbeians seemed to prefer the direct play of RF with the hand (rather than bat), and without hazards

1862 Reference to "The rules of the Oxford and Rugby courts" in a letter discussing the new courts being built at Winchester

- "Oxford" being based on the Worcester College court, which was of the style we now know of as "Winchester" Fives

So, in my view the reference to the "rules of the Rugby courts" is tantamount to talking about "Rugby Fives".

So, my suggestion would be 1860-1862.

David Barnes writes: I can't do better than [Dave Hebden's] timeline, and I agree with [his] conclusion.

The fact was that the authorities at both Rugby and Winchester were uncertain as to what size and shape a fives court should be.

Rugby took advice from former pupils at Oxford and went for one with a Worcester-type buttress and one without. As [Dave says], the boys soon voted with their feet for the plain-walled space between the two! The buttress in the right-hand court was filled in almost immediately, and Rugby had decided on the shape of their courts. (cf. Football.)

Winchester also took advice from Oxford. The outcome was the compromise we know about: two plain-wall courts and two with a buttress. I won't go into the characters who participated in this decision – it's a bit involved – but the letter [Dave refers] to written by the Winchester College Tutor is evidence that Winchester asked for both sets of rules: those 'of the Oxford and Rugby Courts'.

I think we can take this as the first mention of 'Rugby Fives', but what about 'Oxford Fives'?

It must have taken longer for Wykehamists to decide between the two shapes of court, but when three more courts were added in the 1880s, they had buttresses.

We know that the sons of Wykeham like to be different, but I think there is another reason for their decision. Doubles was the game in those days, and even die-hard Rugby Fives players have been known to admit that WF is quite a good doubles game. Not the case with singles, I hasten to add.

I wish we knew who designed the Worcester College court, but we don't. I am not going to lead a campaign to have Winchester Fives rechristened as 'Oxford Fives' or 'Worcester Fives' – you may be sure of that!

P.S. If anyone wants to know when the first mention of 'Winchester Fives' occurred, refer them to the excellent Winchester College archivist.