

RFA Handbooks and Annual Reviews 1937- 2023

The first RFA Handbook, the only pre-war edition, was published in 1937/38 and was almost certainly put together by John Armitage, the RFA's Honorary Secretary. It was a hardback edition, containing twenty-five pages of information, including an obituary for the great Philip Malt, who had just died at the age of 31. There was also a well-researched and invaluable 'Who's Who' of leading players. Naturally, there were lists of the officers and committee of the Association and the records of the Amateur Doubles and Singles, the North of England Doubles, the Varsity Match and the Public Schools' Doubles and Singles. Club Secretaries were also listed.

John Armitage continued as Hon. Secretary after the war, but the first few RFA Handbooks, starting in 1947/48, were skimpy affairs, and no Handbooks at all were published in 1949/50 and 1951/52. Ron Colville became Hon. Secretary at the 1951 AGM, and he gradually built up the amount of information in the Handbook over the next decade, handing over as Hon. Secretary to David Gardner in 1963/64. By this stage there was an Assistant Secretary, Sid Batrick, reflecting the growing demands of the Secretarial role.

The first specified Handbook Secretary was Peter Scott, appointed in 1966/67. He handed over to John Larter in 1970/71, and the 1970s were to see a succession of changes of personnel, showing what a demanding job it had become. Lionel Lawson was Handbook Secretary for two seasons (1973/75), Dave Hebden for three (1975/8), David Gardner for one (1978/79), and Chris Horrocks and Nick Smith were to share the role from 1979/80 on into the 1980s. The cost of production was becoming an issue, as was the sheer amount of time needed to round up all the material and get it printed in time for the start of the new season. No internet, no email, it all had to be done by post or, in extremis, telephone. Unless you had done the job, you would have had little idea of the difficulties!

Jerry Cooper, a busy schoolmaster, took over in 1984/85 and managed to produce three fat editions over the next four seasons: 1984/85, a double edition for 1985/87 and a final one in 1987/88. By this stage, the cost in both time and money was thought by many to be excessive, and the Handbook was discontinued. It was a sad decision, and the regular postal newsletters (on A4) which replaced the annual Handbook were by their nature not as comprehensive or impressive.

The brutal fact was that the RFA was short of money, and the unpaid job of Hon. Secretary had become too demanding. The cash saved was to be invested in the employment of a part-time General Secretary, and it was not until the mid-1990s that the Association was to be strengthened by the merger with the RFA Club. This would enable it to launch a new Handbook, modest at first but eventually a publication worthy of the reformed Association.

The present writer was editor of the A5 format Handbooks produced from 1995/96 to 2000/2001. These editions contained few photographs (black and white) and were principally designed for information rather than entertainment! One innovation was the start of a series of in-depth articles on Fives in Schools with a piece on Giggleswick School by Ian Roberts in 1998/99.

2001/22 saw the launch of the new A4 Handbook, with a centre-page spread in colour! It contained contributions from a large number of correspondents, reporting on competitions, school and university seasons and club matches.

A change of editor, as Ian Roberts took over in 2005/06, saw the first combined edition of the publication, now called just 'Fives', with the Eton Fives Association. This was, for five years, a complex and substantial production of 100 or more pages, covering the events of the season and with many articles of general interest.

Ian Roberts died unexpectedly in 2011, by which time the RFA had decided to continue with its own 32-page Annual Review in a new design by Michele Hall. The colourful photographic content and lively presentation of the contributions from schools and clubs, along with articles summarising the events of the season, have made the Annual Review both entertaining and informative. The history of the game has also featured in the form of in-depth articles on schools with long Fives traditions.

The RFA Annual Review has been published every year since the 2010/11 edition, and huge credit is due to the efforts of Tom Webster (editor for 9 of these years) and Michele Hall (designer from 2010 to 2022). Others who have helped with various editions have been Andy Pringle, Ian Fuller, Alex Smith, Philip Atkinson and Chris Blakeley. Leo Gehlcken has designed the latest edition and maintained the high standards of his predecessor. Last but not least, Bob Dolby has beavered away in the years since his presidency by assembling, coordinating and (re)writing material for the Review.

David Barnes, 27th October 2023

