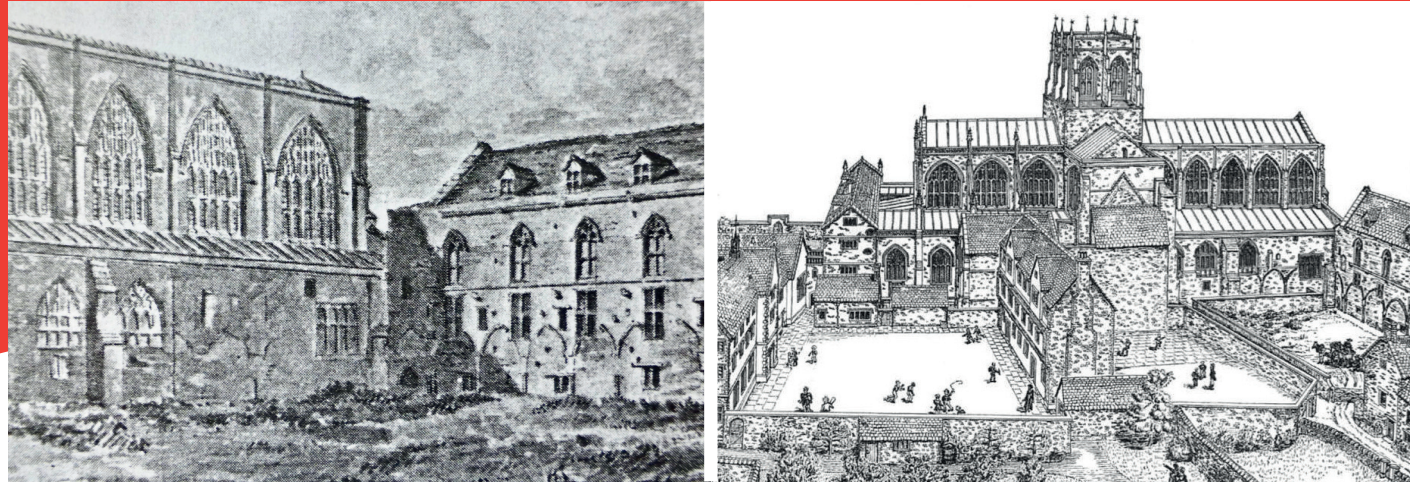


The history of Fives at Sherborne School

David Barnes looks at the school's unusually long history of Fives



ABOVE LEFT:
The Ball Court
in 1802 by
J.C.Buckler

ABOVE RIGHT:
Sherborne
School and
Abbey c.1850.
(Fives court
just right of
centre)

Fives has a long history at Sherborne, where a 'fives place' was recorded close to the north wall of the Abbey in the 1670s. W.B. Wildman, writing in 1896, provides some detail: "In the year 1840 a new Fives Court was made in the Ball Court west of the Box Buildings, probably on the site of an older one...mentioned in the School Accounts as early as 1674."

Play on the Ball Court is shown by a view of the School and Abbey in about 1850. It shows bat-fives in play on the paved area in front of 'The Slype', a "lean-to building against the north transept of the Abbey". The other wall of the Court was the west wall of the Box Building, a sick-house built in 1697 and demolished in 1855.

In his "History of Sherborne School", A.B. Gourlay writes: "In 1859, an individual fives cup was presented by the masters...which suggests that the old style game played against the Abbey wall still had both a science and a following." In 1861, two three-walled open courts were built, for £200, the cost partly met by George Wingfield Digby, a local landowner and benefactor of the school.

The Shirburnian of April 1865 records: A "series of Fives Matches were played on the School Courts. Single-handed, E.L. Tuson. Double-handed, A.N. Malan, E.C. Malan".

MORE COURTS BUILT

Fives was so popular that two more courts alongside the others were opened in November 1869, and large crowds of boys and masters watched the finals of the competitions. Gourlay describes a curious rule applying to the doubles:

"Double-handed matches carried on for two terms; if one member of a pair left, his surviving partner continued alone and in some recorded cases even won single-handed."

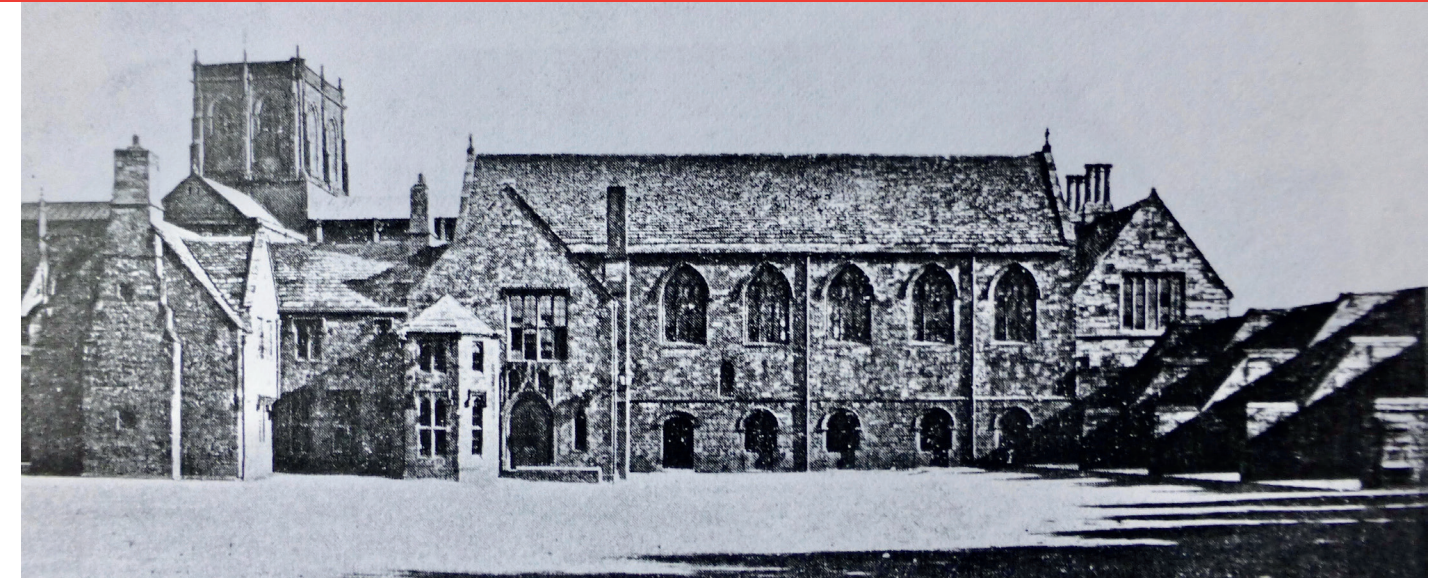
In 1874, the four courts were moved to where they now stand. Two more courts, one of them with a Winchester-style buttress (later filled-in), were added, but none had a roof or a back wall.

The later 1880s were not a good time for the school. A court case resulting from a violent incident between the Headmaster E.M. Young and the aforementioned E.C. Malan brought bad publicity and a dramatic fall in numbers. When Young resigned in 1892, there were just 124 pupils, and it took more than a decade to get numbers back up to 200.

The new regime took steps to improve the Fives facilities. One court was refurbished in 1893 and two more in 1896, the funding provided by a master, H.R.King, and the Headmaster F.B. Westcott, who had taught at Rugby.

The Shirburnian records the results of Senior and Junior Singles and Doubles, plus the House Challenge Cup, for the period up to 1905.

A 'Fives Courts' Improvement Fund' was launched in 1906. Only £216 of the £500 needed had been raised by June, but the work went ahead and the opening ceremony took place in October. Three of the courts had been covered and enclosed, with galleries, and three left open. The benefactor, then and 4 years later, was a parent, J.B. Carrington. In 1910, the other three courts were roofed and given a back wall. Competitions continued as usual, but the War years have few references to the



**'IN 1874, THE FOUR COURTS
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game. In 1918 there came a request for a Captain of Fives to be appointed and for fixtures against other schools.

When Sherborne played its first school match in March 1919 against King's School, Bruton, three pairs including one master represented each school. The Sherborne master was M.B. Elderton, described later as "a horribly good Fives player, with an exasperating skill with his left hand".

Home matches against Weymouth College were held in 1920 and 1921. Weymouth had a top-class player both years in D.G. Mackenzie, a finalist in the first Amateur Singles of 1932 and in the Amateur Doubles of 1935.

March 1921 saw hockey replace rugby during the second half of the Lent Term, and *The Shirburnian* approved: "Competitors for the Fives cups and medals have had opportunity to practise, and as a consequence the various ties have been more evenly contested and scientifically fought out."

INCREASED STATUS

The first match against the Masters was held in 1922. The Masters won 91-82, but the School IV won by 202-167 the next year.

Colours were awarded to H.S. Storrs, Captain of Fives in 1923, giving Fives added status.

In 1927, a letter asked for Squash courts. Squash was permitted in three of the Fives courts, but the official position was that Fives was the school game and that Squash courts could only be built through the generosity of benefactors. As if to emphasise this, two more Fives courts were built in 1928, the gift of W.J. Bensly, a Housemaster.

The first *Shirburnian* to make a mark in University Fives, A.E.S. Charles, was Captain in 1929. He won a Scholarship to Worcester College and represented Oxford from 1930 to 1933.

ABOVE (R-L):
Sherborne's
first three-
walled courts
c.1870 (far right
of photo)

BELOW: Three
of the courts
roofed and
enclosed in
1906



In the 1930s, Sherborne's Fives moved ahead, probably in response to the encouragement of the Headmaster, A.R. Wallace, himself a player, who arrived from Blundell's in 1934.

WARTIME DAMAGE

A player of note in 1935 was L.A.B. Pilkington, later to play three times for Cambridge and to share in a win of the Amateur Doubles in 1947. Leaving Sherborne in 1938, he won a place in the 1939 Cambridge team. After the War, he played in the 1946 and 1947 teams.

Lighting was installed in some courts in 1936, and they were levelled and resurfaced in 1938. An outer wall enclosing the galleries was also built during the 1930s. The first away match at Clifton (1940) was a disaster. The Clifton courts were 'very different', and their players hit the ball too hard! A member of the Sherborne 2nd pair was M.R. Ricketts, who was to play for Oxford from 1948-50 and reach the final of the Amateur Doubles in 1952 and 1953.

Bombs fell on Sherborne in 1940, shattering the glass roofs. The only matches possible in 1941 were against King's College, London (evacuated to Bristol) and the Masters. Those at Sherborne when peace returned were luckier. The 1946 team played Bristol University, Crewkerne School, the Clifton

◀ Masters (away) and the Sherborne Masters, only losing at Clifton.

The first joint Captain of Fives and Squash was D.S. Sheppard, in 1947, destined for fame as an England cricketer. There was a shortage of Fives balls in the late 1940s, but the numbers playing held up, and the 1949/50 team was a strong one, winning all but one match.

In 1953, T.R. Thomas became the first Shirburnian to reach the final of the Schools Singles, losing to D.T. Sparrow from Denstone. The 1955 team “suffered from the demands of hockey”, but they won five out of eight matches. Kelly and Blundell’s had been added to the list by 1956.

The RFA Club started to visit in 1957, and one of the Sherborne team was R.M. Morgan, who was to play for Cambridge from 1959 to 1961, captaining the team in his last year. Bristol GS and Dauntsey’s were added to the fixture list. J.W. Major reached the semi-finals of the inaugural West of England Schools event at Bristol in 1959.

Hockey was growing in strength in the early 1960s, but boys could now choose between it and Fives. In bad weather this suited Fives, but the standard was still variable. J.P. Riley had been an efficient master-in-charge since the mid 1950s, but when an experienced player, C.J. Harvey, took over in 1967, the standard improved. The Captain in 1969 and 1970 was J.S. Schroeter, later a leading player in the game. Schroeter was a finalist in the 1973 British Universities Singles and a triple finalist in the National Doubles (1987-89).

1972 was a good year, with a 1st VI all winning colours. The coaching team was joined by P.M. Whelan, his contribution acknowledged by Schroeter in his Captain’s report as ‘having a direct bearing on the team’s results’. A new arrival in the Common Room that autumn was M.J. Cleaver, a 1968 Schools Doubles winner and Cyriax Cup finalist in 1970. His influence on Sherborne’s Fives over the next three and a half decades was to be incalculable.

1973 and 1974 had a good crop of players, the best being R.D. Knight. In the Schools Championships of 1974, he became the second Shirburnian to reach the Singles final, losing to a Bedfordian.

Two fine players of that time who went on to play for Oxford were M.A. Hopkins (1978/79), and R.H. Green (1978-80). And no account of Sherborne

‘1980 SAW THE ARRIVAL OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND SCHOOLS AT SHERBORNE’



ABOVE:
Jeremy
Schroeter
(right) with his
partner David
Parlbay in 1990

BELOW:
The 1st IV
in 1994,
including
Mappin Cup
winners Nick
MacIver
(seated
centre) and
Nick Hyde
(seated left)

Fives would be complete without a mention for M. Alexander, a keen RFA Club player and a President’s Cup winner in 1980.

SUCCESSFUL TIMES

A great shock came in 1980, when Paddy Whelan died at the age of 43. Into the breach stepped another Fives enthusiast, Paul Carling.

1980 also saw the arrival of the West of England Schools competition at Sherborne, to be run for the next 8 years by Mike Cleaver. Another major Fives competition, the British Universities, visited Sherborne for the first time in 1979 and was to return a further 10 times between 1982 and 2014.

The 1980s brought improving standards and good team spirit. Blundell’s were finally beaten away in 1984, and the team entered the West of England and National Schools competitions. In 1986, J.W. Fussell and I. Groom reached the semi-finals of the National Schools Doubles. The loss of Sherborne’s two 1928 courts to classroom development in 1988 was sad, as they were excellent courts when dry – but they sweated at the least opportunity.

1994 was an unbeaten season for all four teams: 1st IV, 2nd IV, Colts and Junior Colts. And even better, it brought Sherborne’s first win in the National Schools Championships in the 64 years of the competition. The appropriately named ‘two Nicks’, MacIver and Hyde, played brilliantly to win the Doubles. Overcome by this, assistant coach Paul Carling called it a day at Sherborne after 15 years and left to run a school in Assam.

The standard remained high in the second half of the 1990s, with T.J. Ambrose winning the Singles plate at the West of England in 1995. And there was the exciting prospect of four glass-backed courts.

Subsequent reports were positive about players



ABOVE:
David Kirk and
David Park
with Mike
Cleaver and
the Marchant
Cup in 2003

such as T.D.H. Morgan, T.C. Dean, A.D. Mosse and C.C. Warren, but they made no mention of new courts. A.R.W. Peck was the outstanding player in 1999, and one of the 1st IV in 2000 was N.C. Scorer, who was to return to teach at Sherborne. By 2000, however, two of the regular courts were out of action with dangerous roofs, and an appeal was started to provide funds for their repair.

COURT MODERNISATION

A thorough refurbishment of five courts was completed by November 2001, making them among the best on the circuit. 2003 saw Sherborne’s second National title, with Davids Kirk and Park winning the National Colts Doubles at St Paul’s. The West of England Open was held on them from 2002-2005, and the West of England Schools competition returned in 2007. The School has hosted the British Universities event 4 times since the refurbishment.

Numbers surged after this success, and the 1st IV started to beat adult sides. In the 2004 National Colts, M.R.J. Oates-Wormer and E.F. Leahey reached the Doubles final. A highly successful season followed in 2005, the 1st IV winning all

‘145 YEARS’ PLAY ON THE SAME COURTS MUST SURELY BE A RECORD’

but one of their 11 matches. Further trophies escaped them, however.

A rebuilding season followed in 2006. The 1st IV enjoyed positive results but St Paul’s proved once again to be their nemesis in the Nationals.

The introduction of Soccer into the Third Form in 2005 was beginning to impact on the numbers playing Fives in 2007/08, and the young Senior squad struggled to compete.

In 2009, Mike Cleaver’s long reign came to an end. His example, as player and coach, was to be seen in his players’ tenacity, skill and conduct. The lack of a National Schools Singles title for Sherborne remains his one regret, but there is plenty to offset that, specifically the large numbers of Shirburnians who enjoyed their Fives during his time in charge. The refurbished courts stand as a lasting tribute to his devotion to Fives.

Fives has since kept a steady pace under Nick Scorer. H. Newman reached successive Colquhoun Singles finals, in 2013 and ‘14. In 2016 the 1st IV fielded two players who were to play in the Varsity Match: E.C.S.Pyman and W.J.R.Shardlow. Recently, the most successful players have been B.S.J.A. Mercer, twice a Colquhoun Colts winner, and H.R. Harvey, Colquhoun Senior Singles finalist.

145 years’ play on the same courts must surely be a record and it calls for a huge party, if not now then in five years. All O.S. Fives players take note!

Many of the photos are provided courtesy of Sherborne School. Special thanks to Rachel Hassall, School Archivist, for all her help, and to Mike Cleaver for his memories of 36 years in charge.

■ A longer, fully illustrated version of this history, can be found on the RFA website at rugbyfives.com

