

Census of Fives Courts

Dr Cyriax's Survey of 1930

In late 1930 and early 1931, Dr Edgar Cyriax, the then Chairman of the newly formed Rugby Fives Association, sent postcards to a large number of institutions, mainly schools, enquiring about their fives courts. The purpose of this exercise was to decide upon the dimensions and colours that would constitute a "standard Rugby Fives Court". The exercise resulted in a list of **62 institutions** having courts with diverse and often peculiar sets of dimensions. This list was used by the RFA to formulate recommended standard dimensions which we still use today.

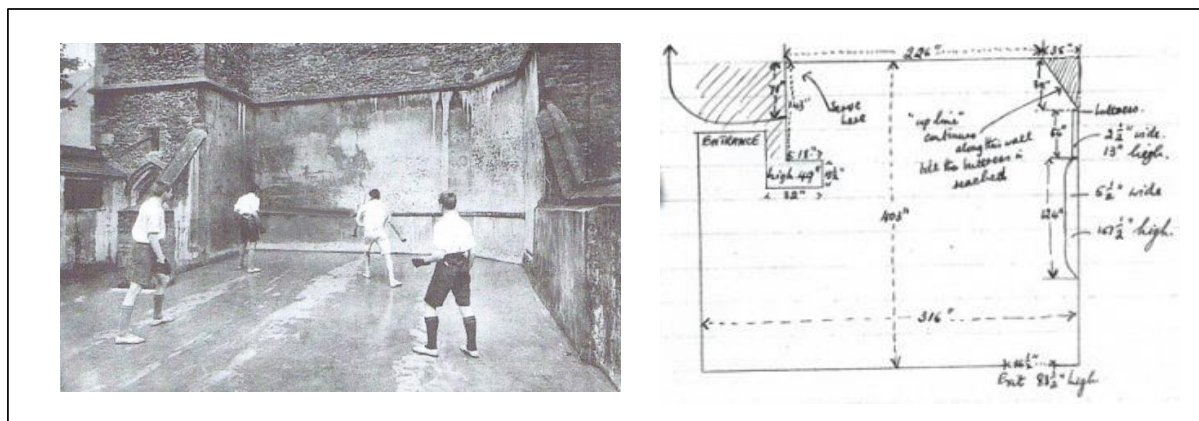


Dr Cyriax on court in 1938

Prior to this, courts had sprung up and evolved based on local preferences and quirks, and in the absence of any governing body, there was no real motivation to gravitate towards a more uniform approach for the game. The results we have from the Cyriax survey show that existing courts at the time were of a wide range of sizes:

	Smallest	Largest	Standard court
Length of court	18ft	34ft	28ft
Breadth of court	12ft	22ft	18ft
Height of bar	1.5ft	4ft	2.5ft

Moreover, some courts had buttresses and other oddities. A rather extreme example of this is a court at King's School, Ely. A photo and floor plan is shown below.



The court at King's School, Ely (built in 1873)

Some might argue that this variety provided something of an attraction. but I think on balance we should agree that Dr Cyriax did the game a great service by his standardisation initiative.

David Gardner's Survey of 1961

In 1961 David Gardner conducted a "Survey of Rugby Fives in Great Britain". This included a "Census of Courts" and provides us with valuable information about the profile of the game at that time. In total, David identified **85 schools and 16 clubs** possessing courts, so 101 institutions in total. David extended the Cyriax information with more comprehensive details describing the nature of each court - e.g. date built, dimensions, type of gallery, lighting etc.

RFA Google Map 2008

In 2008 Andy Pringle produced an excellent piece of work documenting a large number of fives courts and fives walls which he made accessible via Google Map. This provides a world-wide perspective and the list includes for example, courts in the USA, New Zealand and Australia, as well as those in the UK. The map has been extended over the last few years and **110 fives locations** are now recorded. The link to the Google Map can be found in the “Archives” section of the RFA website.

New Fives Court Census 2015

RFA Archivist David Barnes and others have continued to build on and extend the above efforts to understand our heritage of Fives Courts. There is a fund of information in the Archives and a number of comprehensive histories of various institutions can be found in past RFA Handbooks and Reviews.

But in early 2013, Dave Hebden and David Barnes agreed that it would be useful to create a new Census of Fives Courts, to include past and present locations. The main objective has been to achieve an improved historical perspective of the development (and disappearance) of courts wherever the game has been played. The scope of this Census is wider in some respects than any work done previously:

- **Time line:** We have included courts (or *fives places*) both past and present, dating back to the 17th century and earlier
- **Types of Court:** Various types of court have been included: e.g. 1-wall, 3-wall, Winchester Fives, Rugby Fives. It is interesting to track the transition from 1-wall, to 3-wall, and on to 4-wall. Currently excluded are:
 - Eton Fives: mainly because these courts are documented elsewhere by our friends in the EFA, but also we feel that our priority should be to trace the evolution of the Rugby and Winchester forms of the game
 - Church Fives: we have a separate list of Churches where we know that Fives was played against the church walls (usually the Western tower); this list currently comprises some 75 churches, mostly in Somerset and the West Country
- **Geography:** We have included all courts world-wide in the Census; it has been surprising how many we have found outside the UK – the current total of non-UK courts is 44 and growing. For example we have 16 fives institutions in New Zealand, interestingly all of the 3-wall variety

Current Status

The new Census is very much work in progress. With the benefit of the web and other research sources, we are still day by day discovering more locations where fives was played. The current total in the Census is **416 fives places**.

For each establishment we are collecting:

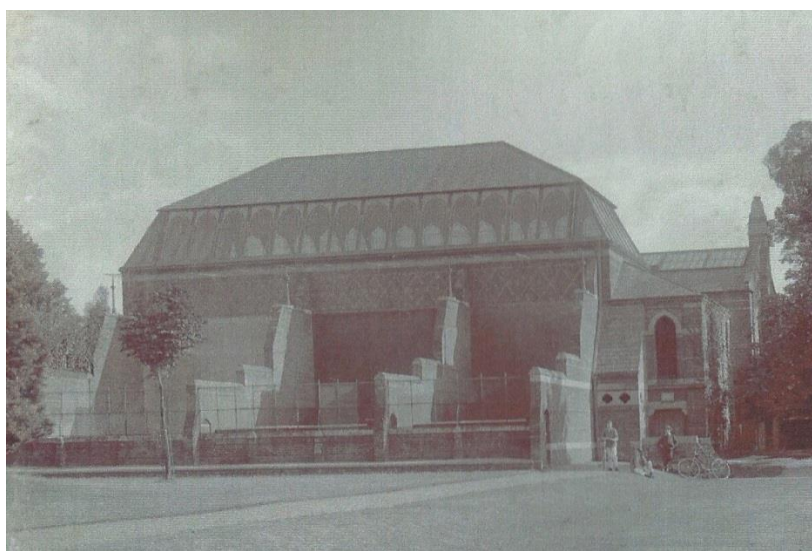
- **Basic information:** Name, type of institution (School, University etc.), location, “In Use?”
- **Court details:** Type of court, date built and other relevant dates; note that many establishments have had several sets of courts developed over time
- **Court dimensions:** where available
- **Photos:** The Census indicates if we have photos; Bob Dolby has led the work to create a photo archive, and the collection is building up

A breakdown of the 416 fives places by type of establishment is shown below:

Type		#
School		237
University	or College (e.g. Teachers training), Seminary (priests), Theological	43
Pub	i.e. at the time of building. Pub, Hotel	42
Club	Club	27
Services	Barracks, Navy	13
House	House, Castle, Grounds	27
Other	Community facility, Church, Monastery, Hospital, Unknown	27
	Total	416

Example Courts

An important milestone of course is the building of the 1860 old courts at **Rugby School**, shown below. This provides a good example of the improvisatory origin of Rugby Fives. Which court did the Rugby pupils choose? Not the left-hand one (a massive bat-fives court), nor the right-hand one (originally a Worcester College Oxford design with a buttress), but the middle one, which wasn't even paved when it was constructed!



The courts at Rugby School, built in 1860

Some schools, **Giggleswick** for example, copied the Rugby School court dimensions and design exactly, even down to the sloping floors. Others built courts on a different scale, maybe squeezing them into a space in the playground or using a previous single wall and extending the side walls back into whatever space was available. The amazing variety of courts exhibited in the responses to Dr Cyriax's questionnaire was the result, but by 1930 it was too late for many schools to reshape or "standardise", except perhaps by moving the bar up or down a bit or building a back wall or two.

Courts existed in most parts of the UK although the Census shows a particularly high density in the **South West**, perhaps because of the background there of Church fives.

Some of our more recent research has resulted in a number of additions to the Census in the **North East of England** where there was a thriving fives community in the second half of the 19th century through to the 1930s. This was largely colliery based, where the game had enormous support. A newspaper article from 1880 records crowds of thousands going to watch fives matches at Tudhoe Park, Spennymoor, with purses of £100 (worth about £5,000 in today's money). So far we have about 15 fives walls (or "ball alleys") identified in Durham County but there were probably more.



"The Ball Alley" at Seaham Colliery, Durham

A split of the 416 fives places by geographic area is shown in the table below. Fives was exported outside the UK to an extent, mostly in Victorian times, and the 44 non-UK fives places we have identified (so far) are also shown:

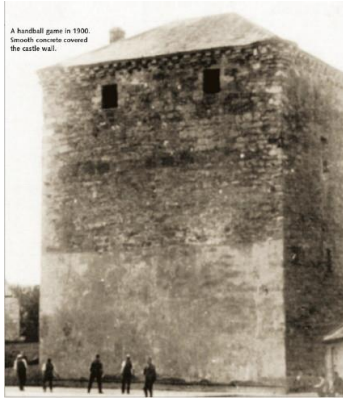
Region	#
London	60
SE	37
East	19
Midlands	50
SW	94
Wales	14
NW	29
NE	53
Scotland	16
Other - worldwide	44

Europe	IOM	1
	Ireland	1
	Channel I	3
	Switz	2
Asia	China	2
	Hong Kong	1
	India	1
	Malaysia	1
	Nepal	1
	Sri Lanka	1
Australasia	Aus	5
	NZ	16
Africa	SA	2
America	USA	5
	Brazil	2

For each institution, there are often a series of developments over time. For example at Winchester College we have recorded 8 instances of separate court development, starting with early 17th and 18th century walls used for handball and bat-fives, an interim period when there were both Rugby and Winchester courts, and culminating with the present Winchester courts still in use today. For the 416 fives places we have 578 court building instances recorded, split as below:

Type of Fives		#
Rugby	Including 4-wall courts used for Bat Fives	227
Winchr	Winchester Fives	56
Eton		2
Hybrid	e.g. Rossall	28
3-Wall		89
Wall	Wall, tower, courtyard, side of building	96
<i>Not known</i>		80
	Total	578

Examples of different types of fives place (Tower, 3-Wall, 1-Wall) around the world are shown below:



Tower at Barr Castle, Ayrshire



3-Wall courts at Otago HS, New Zealand



Fives Wall at North Cheriton, Somerset

Summary

So what have we learnt from the Census? The work is continuing, but we can make a few remarks at this stage:

1. It is certainly surprising how prevalent the game was in the 19th and early 20th century. Fives was a major sport. Many Schools and Universities had courts, but the game was also popular in the services, and quite a few private houses had a court. In earlier times we have evidence of the game being played outside many pubs as well as against church walls and towers.
2. Sadly a lot of the courts recorded in the Census have long since disappeared, and there are others which lie dormant. We currently have 57 establishments in the list which have a status of "In Use", but it is encouraging that we have been able to add some recent court builds, e.g. at Oundle, Rugby and Cambridge.
3. The reduction of courts, particularly in the mid 20th century, is perhaps the subject of another article, but there are a number of factors that came into play. These include: the demise of the Grammar School (more than 60 Grammar Schools had fives courts); the growth of other sports (e.g. squash); and lack of money to enhance existing and build new facilities.

The work to populate the Census continues, and our feeling is that there are quite a lot of courts out there which have so far escaped us. We keep looking!

Dave Hebden & David Barnes