



Past and Present Nr. 12 - 2003

Readers may have been following the long-running correspondence in the national press about the disappearance of the common sparrow from our cities and the speculation about the breeding habits of that beloved bird. Like the African hunting dog, the saiga antelope of Central Asia and, particularly, the North American passenger pigeon, which numbered many millions in the nineteenth century but became extinct by 1914, the house sparrow is apparently suffering a collapse in its population due to the Allee effect. The American biologist Warder Allee suggested some 50 years ago that “undercrowding” can tip the balance towards extinction for species that need to gather in large groups to breed. Sparrows breed in colonies and need to produce two or three colonies a year to maintain their numbers. With falling numbers the colonies dissolve and the bird may become extinct.

What has this to do with the uncommon CU Sparrow, you may ask? Well, since somewhere around 1992, when Joe Gribble was Captain of CURFC, there appears to have been a collapse in the number of young Sparrows available for the Past versus Present. This year’s Past team was the oldest in the history of the fixture, with one Grand Master (over 65), two in the Vintage bracket (over 55) and all other players - except for the ever-youthful Joe - in or approaching the Veterans category (over 45). Indeed, in the fourth pair the combined age of the Past was 129 (surely a trivia item for the future that!). Not surprisingly the Past lost. So, come on, young Sparrows from the 90s and 2000s! Where are you? We need you for next year.

Ranking Trivia: *Who is the first Sparrow ever to have been officially ranked by the RFA (under the system devised by David Hebden) at Number One? This happy news was first posted on the RFA website in May 2002. (Clue: Think Irish.)*

The Singles produced heartening performances from the Present. Brian Elfick, an ex-Captain of Oxford now studying at Ridley Hall, had a long, hard-fought but victorious tussle with Rob Cleave; James Paul also beat his man, Martin Robinson, who couldn’t remember when he last played Singles. Joe Gribble and Simon Maskell slugged it out at Number Four, but the man with the contract was always going to win. The most exciting match was David Hebden against James Birch, definitely a match of three halves, with Dave winning the first and third passages of play but James looking in the middle section as if he was going to beat his mighty opponent. That would have been some scalp. As it was, the Present repaired to the pub sixteen points in the lead.

Housemastering Trivia: *Is Ferox Hall at Tonbridge the only independent school Boarding House to have been run by two former Cambridge captains of Rugby Fives, and can you name them? (Clue: The current Housemaster is a regular member of the Past team.)*

The first round of Doubles gave the Present the chance to increase that lead. In the front courts Elfick & Paul and Maskell & Birch just hit the ball too hard for Rob & Martin and Alan Matthews & Ian Jackson. It was only round the back that the Past were gathering points in decent quantities. Court Three saw the reunion of Hebden and Colver. Allan hadn't played in this fixture for 25 years but rolled back the years with ease. Next door a unique event took place as John Pretlove played in the match in his seventh consecutive decade, having first played as a nineteen year-old and now playing for the final time. As John served his young opponents out and creamed the ball into the nick they must have realised they were on court with a very special player. The Match Manager watched from the right-hand side with admiration (and a little trepidation, especially when John slipped and fell heavily soon after winning the first game to 8.)

Fourth Pair Trivia: *Which of this year's VIII has played in five consecutive Varsity matches, always in the Fourth Pair, with four different partners. His record is 226 points for, 222 points against. (Clue: In his first Varsity match he was meant to play with Ben Thomas, the Cambridge Number One, but Ben broke his wrist in practice and a Sparrow stepped in.)*

A forty plus points lead at the turn for the Present looked unassailable, but the Manager summoned fresh troops for the final round of doubles: Joe Gribble, Rod Oscroft, Martin Wilkinson and Richard Kemp stepped in, while David Hebden moved up to pair Ian Jackson. Six games out of eight were won by the Past, but James Birch and Simon Maskell did enough to maintain the Present's advantage. For Jeremy Dickens, Simon Williams, Niraj Patel and James Stevens there was a lot of useful experience gained from playing so many old hands, even if they were often out-foxed or simply out-lasted. The Present came off court with an 18-point victory, a good preparation for a difficult Varsity Match the following week.

The Dinner: After the customary refreshments in The Pickerel the players joined the following in the Parlour: Barry Trapnell, Michael Mills, John Holroyd, John Ingram, Alan Taylor, David Barnes, David Cameron, Don Ellwood, Peter Cameron and David Arnold, the latter having flown in from Australia in time to dine, though too late to play. On the tables were not only the new-style Magdalene menus, bearing though one familiar item (guess what?!), but also a list of Cambridge Champions since 1926. That massive list is a gratifying record of excellence achieved throughout the past century and continuing today.

Criminal Trivia: *Which Sparrow was arrested after the BUSF championships in Durham in 1974 and spent 1½ hours 'helping the police with their enquiries'? David Arnold was successful in persuading the police that the Sparrow in question was photographing the Cathedral and not the Prison, where some high-profile IRA prisoners were to be incarcerated the next day. (Clue: Today he is a Chief Examiner in Mathematics for OCR.)!*

At the Dinner James Paul reported on an encouraging season, and Barry Trapnell spoke briefly on the prospect of new courts (see later), but he was unable to tell John Pretlove who would be alive to see them. Bob Dolby presented a finely bound edition from the Lonsdale Library to David Hebden in recognition of all he had done for Fives in his recent capacity as President of the RFA but also as the record-breaking winner of trophies and tournaments. On the evening we thought Dave had won 93 singles and doubles titles, plus being six times in the winning Alleyn Old Boys club side. It turns out that it was actually 95, and he has won another one since – the Winchester Doubles for the eighth time. And, with Dave becoming eligible for the Vintage competition next year, the ton may well be reached. It seems unlikely that anyone will ever match Dave's extraordinary record!

The Courts Situation: We await the success of the Appeal Committee, headed by Sir Geoffrey Cass, in recruiting major donors to the massive West Cambridge project, details of which can be found at www.sport.cam.ac.uk/westcambridgedevelopment.

A delicate matter: When Jock Burnet and his Captain initiated the Past versus Present in 1949 there was no such thing as 17½% VAT or 10% service charge, wages were low and Colleges probably ran their finances in an inefficient way. Times have changed. The Past versus Present Dinner now comes under the aegis of the Magdalene College Conference Office and is classed as a 'corporate event'! The cost of the evening has escalated dramatically, such that the real cost to the members of the Past who entertained the Present this year was £63. You will recall the paragraph in Jock's letter of invitation: *"In previous years some of those who were unable to be present were kind enough to send a donation towards the entertainment of the present team. There may be some who would like to do so on this occasion: I make no apology for mentioning this every year, as the generous donations made in the past have helped to keep up the high standard of the evening; I need hardly say how delighted we still are to receive them."* Sparrows continue to send very generously, but in an age when people decline by e-mail rather than by letter the sums received have diminished while the costs have risen. This year's Dinner was the first to make a loss, a significant one, and there is a real danger that it may not be economical to hold the Dinner at Magdalene for much longer. All I can do for the moment is to echo Jock's unapologetic request.

The 73rd Varsity Match, 2003: Without Giles Corner and James Richardson, who were not playing Fives this year, Cambridge faced an up-hill task at St. Paul's. Seldom has a top IV been as strong as the Oxford one, and however hard Brian Elfick, James Paul, James Birch and Simon Maskell tried, they were bound to be struggling for points in both Singles and Doubles. It was in the bottom pairs that Cambridge retrieved some lost ground, with Jeremy Dickens and Joff Lee giving their inexperienced partners sufficient support and encouragement to come out ahead against much more experienced opposition. In the Beavers versus Sparrows match, Cambridge were bolstered by the return to the fold of Tim Bromfield, whose dogged refusal to yield a single point lightly meant that the match went on till nearly six o'clock.

Cambridge Successes: This season John Denison won the Vintage Doubles with his Oxford (!) partner, beating Martin Wilkinson and Bob Dolby in the final. Jez Fabes (currently playing for London University) reached the BUSA Singles final and the final of both the Singles and Doubles in the Under 25 competition. Paddy d'Ancona and Ben Taberner won the West of England Doubles, and Paddy won the South West Doubles with his Manchester partner. Dave Hebden won the Yorkshire Doubles with his AOB partner and the Winchester Doubles with his regular partner, Ian Fuller. In addition Cambridge players won the Plate in the Yorkshire Doubles and the Winchester Mixed Doubles.

Valete: This past year we have lost **Brian Armitage**. Brian, a St. John's man who played in John Burton's very strong side of 1951, attended the 50th Anniversary Dinner in 1999 and clearly relished meeting his old friends. He played his court games - fives, squash, real tennis, as well as croquet and boules - till the end of his life with great enjoyment.

Correspondence gratefully received and enthusiastically answered!
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CAMBRIDGE v. OXFORD 2003
Saturday, February 22nd at St. Paul's School

Cambridge	Oxford	
<i>Singles</i>		
BRElfick (Bradfield & Selwyn)	losttoJPToop (Eastbourne & Magdalen)	3-15
JSBirch (KES Birmingham and Hughes Hall)	losttoMSBate (Eastbourne & Brasenose)	9-15
JCDPaul (St. Paul's & St John's)	(<i>Captain</i>)losttoEWBrooke (Eastbourne & Magdalen)	1-15
SRMaskell (Malvern & Corpus Christi)	losttoJAOBristow (Winchester & Worcester)	6-15
		19-60
<i>Doubles</i>		
Elfick and Paul	v. Toop and Bate	8-15
		1-15
Maskell and Birch	v. Brooke and Bristow	14-16
		5-15
	v. Brooke and Bristow	4-15
	v. Toop and Bate	10-15 4-15 1-15
JM Dickens (Bedford & Emmanuel)	andv. RM Evans (Whitgift & St. Anne's)	15-10
SGP Williams (St. Dunstan's & Christ's)	(<i>Captain</i>) and S Mudd (Whitgift & Hertford)	12-15
	v. Hatton and Sommerville	12-15 15-8
JLC Lee (St. Paul's & Clare)	andv. EWG Hatton (Christ's Hospital & Balliol)	11-15
N Patel (St. Paul's & Trinity)	and PJ Sommerville (Clifton & Queen's)	15-8
	v. Evans and Mudd	14-16 15-9
		156-217
		Oxford won by 175-277

Cambridge now boast 48 wins against 25 wins to Oxford.

In the **Sparrows versus Beavers** match on the adjoining courts, Oxford won 89-162. Cambridge were represented by JWW Stevens (Tonbridge & Christ's), TJ Bromfield (St. Paul's & Emmanuel), IO Steed (Nottingham HS & Jesus) and TW Marks (St. Paul's & Pembroke).