

The earliest Fives ball ever found?



Photo by Lauren Palmer, courtesy of RAMM

In 2009 a familiar yet unusual object was handed in to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. It had been found in old thatch in a cottage at Morchard Bishop, Devon, and appeared to be a ball suitable for games-playing.

The usual methods of analysis showed that the ball was of leather, stitched and stuffed with sheep's fleece, and a date of the sixteenth century was suggested. Comparison with other Scottish finds of balls used in caich and with modern Fives balls led to the conclusion that the artefact was indeed probably used for this form of handball.

Fives was a village game played bare-handed against the walls of churches from very early times. Such sports were banned by the Synod of Exeter in 1287 because of the damage they caused, but Fives continued to be widely popular, particularly in the West Country. Queen Elizabeth 1 on a visit to Elvetham in Hampshire in 1591 enjoyed watching the game played by ten of the Earl of Hertford's servants, 'all Somersetshiremen'. In the mid-eighteenth century Fives was especially popular in Somerset and Dorset. Action frequently had to be taken by churchwardens to counteract fives-playing, or to limit the damage it caused to windows, for instance and in 1754 the Bishop of Bath and Wells ordered that Fives should cease to be played against church towers.

So walls were built away from the churches, often in inn yards and designed specially for the game; in Somerset several Fives walls—tall free-standing stone or brick structures—still exist. One easily-accessed example stands in the car park of the Lethbridge Arms at Bishops Lydeard (where there is also a Fives Bar); others are at Shepton Beauchamp, South Petherton, Stoke sub Hamdon, Hinton St George, North Cheriton and Otterhampton.

In view of the discovery of the ball at Morchard Bishop, early references to Fives in Devon might be expected. The game had certainly been adopted at Blundell's long before the Somerset walls were built: one of the very earliest references to Fives being played at a school is the intriguing one of 1649, when for political reasons the Assizes that year were held not in Exeter but in Tiverton, where 'Lord Chief Baron Wild...sat in the fives-place, in the school-house green'.

In the nineteenth century the village game declined, but it was taken up and formalized by public schools, the three variants we enjoy now being developed at Rugby, Winchester and Eton.

The historic ball was researched by Lauren Palmer, a student of Conservation at Cardiff University, and exhibited at RAMM in the exhibition 'From West Country to World's End' from October 2013 to March 2014.

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