



Churchyard Fives - An Advisory Note

Recent survey work in central Somerset has identified a number of physical adaptations of the exterior fabric of parish churches which appear to be associated with attempts by the post-medieval church authorities to prevent or accommodate the playing of fives against their buildings. Some of these have been noted in the past, but a more painstaking examination of the fabric of a sample of churches suggests that the extent of the evidence is much greater than had previously been thought.

However, **it is also clear that in a number of instances recent repairs have obscured or destroyed this evidence.** This advisory note has been written in the hope that a wider recognition of these signs of seventeenth and eighteenth century fives playing may help to preserve these indications of a largely forgotten episode in the social history of the church.

'Fives' is the name given to a variety of the game of handball which is now played in three main forms derived from the adaptation of the original game in the public schools of Eton, Rugby and Winchester.

The original game was extensively played against the unfenestrated north or south walls of church towers, or sometimes, where a tower was unavailable or unsuitable for play, against another plain wall. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century church authorities appear to have mounted a concerted effort to eradicate the game from churchyards, and at this time many inns constructed fives walls (their architecture copied from the lower elevation of church towers) in their yards, of which nine survive in Somerset, and a further ten are known from documentary sources - three more are known in west Wiltshire and one in Dorset.

Documentary sources suggest that fives playing was widespread throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and a court case concerning fighting during a game of 'ball' in the churchyard at Beckington in 1498 probably also refers to handball. It is likely that the large expenses for the repair of glazing often seen in churchwardens' accounts relate to damage occasioned by the game. The purchase of shutters and lattices which are regularly recorded by churchwardens during this period often mark the point at which such glaziers' bills suddenly reduce. These elements represent the commonest signature of the game on church fabrics, as churchwardens attempted to accommodate the playing of fives.

Signs of adaptation of the fabric for the game:

1. Shutters

The installation of opening shutters immediately adjacent to the blind walls of towers or other unfenestrated parts of the church (but not elsewhere) is likely to be associated with fives playing. Such shutters were generally hung as pairs, meeting at the centre of the window, and suspended from pintles set in the jambs a little above sill level and a little below springing level. The signs of the former presence of shutters can be seen in a number of different forms:

1.1. Indications of the existence of pintles for the suspension of shutters

1.1.1. Surviving wrought iron pintles. Usually with a diameter of upwards of 1.5 cm, these can be leaded into the window jamb (often using a purpose-drilled lead pouring hole) or fixed with lime mortar. In some instances years of use have worn the upper face of the shank beneath the ring of the hinge, giving some indication of the thickness of the hinge-strap.



1.1.2. The holes left by the withdrawal of the pintles. These are sometimes left open, but have usually been filled with mortar or cement. Where modern colour-matched mortars have been used by conservators the repairs can be very difficult to identify.

1.1.3. Whole-stone repairs following the removal of the pintles. In many instances pintles have been cut out of the jambs and the resulting holes filled with squared stone inserts. It is likely that this is most commonly a response to leaded ironwork, since lead is notoriously difficult to remove without cutting away the stone adjacent to it.

1.1.4. Radiating cracks caused by the rusting of pintles. Sometimes where a jamb stone had been damaged by the rusting and expansion of the ironwork a large part of the block may have been repaired with new stone, and the only certain way to identify the former presence of a pintel is by noting the presence of the ends of the radial cracks caused by the expansion of the iron. In many instances these cracks have not been deemed sufficiently serious to replace the block, and they co-exist with one or more of the above.



1.1.5. The replacement of a whole jamb stone may be an indication of the former presence of a pintel where there is clear evidence for two or more of the others elsewhere in the window.

1.2. Other indications of the presence of shutters

1.2.1 Ring and strap marks from the hinges

- In order to drop the hinge over the pintel it was sometimes necessary to cut a chase into the jamb; this is particularly likely where the upper pintles are set above the springing of the arch and the curvature of the voussoir brings the stone across the vertical line of the riser of the pintel.



- The additional presence of a horizontal chase in the outer part of the jamb at the level of the pintel riser shows that the hinge was on the outside of the shutter and indicates the height of the strap

- The presence of horizontal chases on the mullions at the level of the pintle risers shows that the hinge was on the inside of the shutter and indicates the height of the strap

Marks at the outer edges of the top of the jambs on square-headed windows may exist, where a narrow chase had to be cut into the lintel to allow the installers to raise the shutters' hinge-rings over the top of the pintles - this may give an approximate indication of the thickness of the shutter boards

1.2.2 Marks of stiles and bolts

- The presence of horizontal chases on the mullions at heights other than those of the pintle risers indicates the position of horizontal stiles to reinforce the boards of the shutters on their inner faces
- It seems that the shutters were usually secured closed with a hook, but occasional instances of bolts at the centres of the lower edges of the shutters may survive, or of marks at the centre-height of the jambs where bars could be turned horizontally to latch into the stonework

1.2.3. Alterations to the head of the window itself generally take one of two forms:

- where the pintles lie within the casement mouldings of the jamb the shutters could only open to within about 60° of the face of the wall, and even this was sometimes only possible by cutting away the edges of the lower voussoirs of the window head to accommodate the tops of the shutters
- where the pintles lie on the wall face the shutters could have been opened flat against the wall, but if there is a hood-moulding above the window this may have been cut back flush with the wall to accommodate them

Such reworking of the window head has often been obscured by nineteenth century restorers inserting new stone in the areas of damage - these piecings can usually be identified by the different surface morphology or geological origin of the renewed stone.



1.2.4. A latching system was usually provided to keep the shutters open.

- a pair of rings, one on each side of the window, was fixed into the wall: where the axis of the ring is vertical this is likely to have held the upper ring of a pendant hook; where its axis is horizontal it is likely that it was intended to receive the hook fixed to the back of the shutter



- in instances where the hook was left hanging from the wall-ring its movement in the wind has often meant that the end of the hook has incised a curved chase into the ashlar beneath, allowing the length of the hook and the geometry of the opening of the shutter to be reconstructed. Multiple instances of such incised arcs, where the hook has been renewed several times, have been identified
- in rare instances the hook itself may have survived

2. Lattices

The installation of lattices can leave marks on the windows very similar to those of shutters, but it is often possible to differentiate between the two systems. Lattices may have been the preferred solution, since (although they probably needed more maintenance) they were fixed in position and their effectiveness was not dependent on the players remembering to close them. Two types appear to have been current.

2.1. Lattices in wooden frames: the traces left by these will often be very similar to those of shutters, except that their pintles are usually much slighter, with a diameter of around 1 cm or a little less; because the frame of the lattice did not need to open the head of the window will be undamaged, and, lacking hinges, there will be no marks of the ring or strap of the hinge on the jamb

2.2. Lattices fixed directly to the window jambs: similar to more modern lattices designed to protect stained glass, these were held in position with iron hooks or bent-over nails driven into a series of wooden dowels fixed in drilled holes around the jambs (and sometimes also the mullions). The iron fixings are sometimes set in white lime mortar, and are often driven directly into bed joints. The positions of fixings may not match on the two jambs; they should be present in the head of the window, and may also occur on the window sills (though sills are likely to have been renewed in the nineteenth or twentieth century).

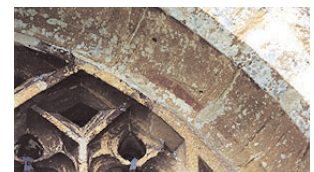


Lattice and shutter marks are not mutually exclusive, since a shuttered window may have received a lattice at a later date, or vice versa.

3. Paint, chafing and drip marks

These are rare, and may be associated with either shutters or framed lattices, but since they were formed only when the wooden frame was set within the window it is more likely that the differential weathering of drip-marks would be associated with fixed lattices.

3.1. The painting of the wooden frame of the lattice or the outer face of the shutters when they were closed may have spilled over onto the stonework to leave a visible mark outlining the position of the wood. Instances of limewash and red paint have been noted surviving on the protected stone of the casement moulding of window heads.



3.2. Where the mouldings of the window jamb contained flourishing lichen communities the edge of the frame may have either scraped these away where the board chafed when it was opened (or installed), or have changed the microclimate so that the original colonies have died off, ceased to develop, or been replaced with different species, leaving a vertical line on the jamb coinciding with the edge of the frame or shutter



3.3. Occasionally an original sill stone may exhibit a line of natural weathering erosion - either continuous or as a series of pits - coinciding with the line of the lattice or the shutters when closed. This has presumably formed as rainwater dripped off the bottom edge of the frame.

4. Climbing aids

Where the part of the building adjacent to the fives place was equipped with a parapet mis-hit balls could be lost on the roof, and a means whereby players could get up onto the leads to retrieve them was needed. Where the church authorities condoned the presence of the players direct access via an adjacent spiral stair may have been allowed, or a ladder may have been available; but other means may have been more illicit.

4.1. The use of a ladder seems to be implied by the shuttering of the west windows of some towers - with the restraining hooks holding the shutters open as much as 4 metres from the ground, and the need to latch them closed, it is difficult to see how they could have been operated without a ladder. An ancient ladder, too short to provide access to the ringing chamber hatch, is preserved in the base of the tower at Priddy where fives was played against the south side of the tower.

4.2. The adaptation of buttresses by cutting footholds in their outer corners seems to have been the commonest method of getting up to the roof. Easily ignored or confused with accidental damage, these footholds generally take the form of a series of fairly shallow triangular recesses, alternating left and right, which may have been modified (or erased) in several ways

- their lower edges trimmed. When first made footholds would have been most effective if the bottom corner of an ashlar was cut out at the angle, but usually the top corner of the stone below is also cut away - possibly as a result of an attempt by the churchwardens to prevent the players gaining access to the leads. This may explain why it is often the case that more than one buttress has been adapted.
- small inset repairs. Probably after the fives place fell out of use the damage to the buttress may have been repaired by cutting out the foothold to provide the seating for a rectangular whole-stone repair. The position of such repairs will, of course, follow the left-right succession of the original footholds
- chamfering off. Either in an attempt to stop the players climbing, or, after the game had died out, to tidy up the appearance of the buttress, the whole height of the edges may have been chamfered back to remove the footholds altogether.



4.3. Other - so far unique - methods of climbing to the parapet have been noted:

- essentially a variation of cutting footholds in the angles of a buttress, at Wincanton a series of chisel-cut recesses have been made in the face of the south wall of the 1735 south porch which would allow a climber to reach the segmental pediment of the porch and thence gain access to the aisle roof
- immediately next to the fives place at East Pennard a series of iron bars (now cut off flush with the stone) have been leaded into the eastern side of the NW aisle buttress, extending up onto the parapet, at roughly 50 cm intervals and alternating left-right. The creation of this fixed 'ladder' must imply some sort of approval from the church authorities.

Elsewhere, major towers with angle buttresses often have a narrow gap between the NNE buttress and the west wall of the aisle which could have been climbed without the need of footholds. A drainpipe on the corner of the building may also have provided an ad hoc route to the roof.

5. Tally marks

Identified at Martock by Prebendary Saunders (1923) these may take the form of a series of five drilled holes in a cross or 'T' pattern with a sixth outlier. Saunders proposed that they were for counting the five services, the sixth hole serving to mark 'game ball', the 21st point.



At Montacute a lightly scratched grid exists at the base of the buttress immediately east of the fives place. More examples are needed before a definite association with scoring the game of fives is possible.



6. Structural adaptations

Where the playing of fives was approved some major adaptations of the building are known from documentary sources, or may be inferred from the fabric.

- refacing the fives wall: this is known to have occurred at W Pennard in 1813, where the lower part of the blue lias south wall of the tower was refaced with Doulling stone, and may have been done at Knowston (Devon) and Wookey
- removing obstacles to play: at Montacute two of the original late medieval quatrefoil bands have been trimmed off the southern elevation of the tower; at Closworth the original niche on the north elevation has been cut back flush with the wall and filled
- in the absence of documentary evidence it is impossible to prove that the blocking up of windows is connected with fives play, and often there are other more likely explanations (e.g. Compton Pauncefoot where the blocked west window of the south nave aisle has a monument erected on the interior). However, fives players at several churches have certainly taken advantage of the presence of blocked windows to use the wall as a fives place, sometimes partly refacing the wall.



It has been noted that many churches, particularly where the tower has no playable elevation, have a blind wall at the west end of the north aisle - a position often associated with a fives place elsewhere.

7. Adaptations to the graveyard

In a few rare instances signs of deliberate landscaping exist which appear to be directly associated with the fives place:

- at Craswall (Heref.) the north side of the chancel of the church was the fives place, and a rectangular area 8 m. east-west x 18 m. north-south adjoining the wall has been reduced by 30 cm or more, its eastern edge coinciding with the NE corner of the church, its western with the edge of the well preserved plaster which appears to mark the limit of the fives wall

- the sloping churchyard of Winscombe has been built up to form a relatively flat area immediately north of the tower out to a distance of 15 metres.

Marks of deterrence

8. Equally extreme measures were taken to prevent the game being played in churchyards, especially in the later eighteenth century. These range from minor alterations such as trimming back the footholds on climbing buttresses, already noted above, to major reorganisations of the graveyard.

- 8.1. Railings and spikes are known from documentary sources to have been erected to prevent access to the fives place, and the marks left by cutting in the horizontal bars which held the railings are sometimes still apparent in the faces of buttresses.

The drilled holes for spikes on their weatherings show that these were used to stop players using the buttresses to reach the roof to retrieve lost balls.



- 8.2. The siting of significant monuments

One common means of disrupting the fives place was the setting up of stones, but this seems to have had limited success, probably because the players had the manpower to remove them again. However, at least one determined incumbent provided in his will that he should be buried in the fives place, and the players would have been unable to remove the resultant monument. It seems entirely likely - though without documentary evidence it cannot be proved - that other large monuments erected against the fives wall were inspired by the same motives. Amongst these are the large monument with an extensive rectangular enclosure surrounded by railings built against the south wall of Batcombe tower, and a similar monument in the same position at Ashcott, both of later eighteenth century date.



- 8.3. Landscaping the churchyard

As well as frequent documentary references to digging up the fives place or sinking fences or trenches into it, there are other, sometimes more extreme methods of rendering it unplayable known from documentary sources:

A persistent tradition exists in several places that trees were deliberately planted to inhibit access to the fives place, though given the vulnerability of saplings this was probably only part of the initial solution, and was more likely viewed as a long-term preventative.

At Ashwick in 1763 the churchyard cross was moved, "to the Vifes place... to prevent the Young People from spending so much idle time in that sort of exercise". The cross at Montacute appears to have been used in the same way in the early nineteenth century, and the proximity of the churchyard cross to the south wall of Charlton Adam tower may have the same cause.



Finally, it may have been necessary to prevent casual access to the churchyard altogether, as Rev. Baily of South Cadbury did,

'In the year 1771 A Wall was built on the South Side of the Church yard & the Gates erected & made Close at the Entrance of the Church yard, the foot Path through the Church yard being by this Means prevented & the most scandalous Custom of Fives Playing, for many years permitted in this & most of the Western Church yards to the great Injury of the Tower & Church & to the Distress of Religion. The Rector planted Fir Trees round the Ch: yard & kept it private & neat.

*'The Rector gave... Five Guineas towards the Expence of the Wall & Gates.'*¹

8.4 Potential implications for excavation in churchyards

In considering the archaeological monitoring of building or service trenching in churchyards it is also important to bear in mind the potential survival below ground of traces of the fives court.

Documentary evidence shows that the digging up of the fives place was a standard deterrent in the eighteenth century, and probably earlier. A letter of 1779 outlining the means of preventing the game by force states that, 'The Customary Method I have been informed is to break up the Gro[un]d, Build upon it, or Erect Stones or Pillars'². The documentary evidence which has so far been examined shows that

- digging up the fives place was undertaken at Buckland Dinham (1756, 1761 and 1803, when 'tranches' were dug), Castle Cary (1768) Crewkerne (1640 – making 'gutters' to stop the playing of fives), Martock (1740 and 1758), and Wrington (1647, 1648 and later);
- at Corston in 1786 the churchwarden was ordered to 'sink fences' in the fives place;
- the erection of rails and posts took place at Blagdon (1641) and Chew Magna (1749);
- the erection of stones is recorded at Wrington in 1772.

All of these expedients, together with the erection of railings (as detailed above), should leave traces in the archaeological record.

It is unclear at present what the rules of the game were in the earlier post-medieval period, but in the nineteenth century eyewitness accounts of the secular inn-yard towers the presence of a 'hopping-stone' is recorded, on which the ball was bounced prior to the service, lying on the central axis of the court about 15 paces away from the wall. It is possible that a similar stone was set in the court in churchyards.

It seems unlikely that the ball would have bounced sufficiently off a grass surface, and it is probable that a worn or stamped surface would have been needed for play – possibly a clay surface was deliberately created. An early illustration of the 'secular' fives-wall at Axbridge appears to show yellow clay over the playing area. The original 1878 version of Thomas Hardy's 'Far from the Madding Crowd'³ described a game of fives against the church tower 'in front of which the ground was trodden hard and bare as a pavement by the players'. Buried traces of such surfaces may also survive, and their composition could show whether this was simply a stamped surface, or whether clay was brought in and laid to make a properly constructed court. The extent of such surfaces would help to define the size of the playing area.

¹ S.R.O. D/P/cad.s/5/2/1

² S.R.O. DD\DP/7/10

³ Most modern versions follow the Osgood edition revised by the author for the collected works in 1912, in which the game has become 'Prisoners' base'. The Penguin Classics edition has the original text.