

OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD REPORT OBR.295



Brasenose College Squash Court Abingdon Road Oxford



Figure 1 BNC Squash Court

Introduction

The Oxfordshire Buildings Record are grateful to the owners, Brasenose College, and Bursar Philip Parker for allowing us access to this building for the purposes of compiling this report as a contribution to the better understanding of Oxfordshire's buildings. David Clark and Liz Woolley were able to spend about half an hour there on 15 December 2016.

The objectives of the survey were to understand the dates and phases of the building.

We made a visual inspection of the exterior and such internal spaces as were accessible. Photographs were taken of significant features. Unless indicated otherwise, text and images were created by members of the recording team. A limited number of historical sources were consulted.

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Please note that this building is private property.

Location (NGR SP 516 051)

The Brasenose College squash court is situated on the college's sports field off the east side of Abingdon Road, Oxford, opposite nos. 90-96. The building is parallel to the road, behind tennis courts, and below road level, which at this point follows the line of the Norman causeway or 'Grandpont' which raised it above the river meadows to either side. To the north are Grandpont Villas (built ca.1859) on land owned by the City of Oxford since the Middle Ages, when the 'bridgewright' – responsible for the

maintenance of the causeway – lived there. The squash court is shown on the 1939 OS map (Fig.2), but not on the 1921 edition.



Figure 2 Extract from 1939 OS map

http://www.southoxford.org/images/photos/Local_history_section/Suburban_development/South_Oxford_OS_1939_smaller.jpg

Access to the building is by means of a driveway between two cast iron gatepiers with pintles for (lost) gates. There is a further gatepier to the south (Fig.3) for a similar wide opening, but this has been closed with a narrow inserted gate and modern railings.



Figure 3 Southern gatepier with modern railings



Figure 4 View from south-east

Description

The squash court is a rectangular building in dark brick laid in stretcher bond, with a central doorway to the west and a window above (Fig.1). The roofline is a parapet with raised central sections in an Art Deco style. The long wall is articulated with three recessed panels either side of the central doorway section, the end panels being narrower than the others. The doorway is proud of the wall and consists of a rounded brick arch springing from pilasters. It gives access to an internal porch within which is a timber doorframe and glazed door with lights to either side. The window above is a metal-framed Crittall-type hinged casement. Two of the bays have small ventilators near their tops, and there are two cast iron round-section rainwater down-pipes painted green.

The rear elevation (Fig.4) is similar, but without the doorway. The parapet is also slightly different, and the downpipes have a rectangular section (Fig.5). The north and south elevations have two large panels.



Figure 5 Rainwater goods rear detail



Figure 6 Doorway and central corridor

Interior

The doorway opens to a central corridor (Fig.6) from which doors lead left and right to the two squash courts. The exposed brickwork is painted white. Ahead is a staircase (Fig.7) to the viewing gallery. There are no changing facilities, toilets, or showers.

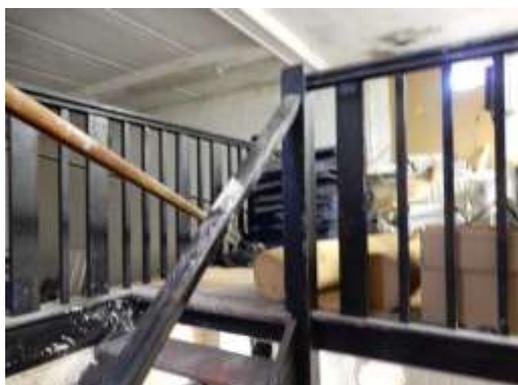


Figure 7 Staircase and viewing gallery



Figure 8 Southern court

Neither court was in use for its intended purpose at the date of the visit. The southern court (Fig.8) was used for storage. The playing area is virtually intact, the brick walls having a smooth coating below the red markings. The ceiling is supported by a framework of beams, probably steel or concrete, but clad and painted white.

The northern court was in use as a film studio, and had various interventions including additional cladding and black paint over a section of the wall (Fig.9).

The staircase (Fig.10) is a timber dog-leg; the treads are tenoned into the strings (Fig.11), and the handrail is supported only by the newel posts, without balusters.



Figure 9 Viewing gallery from northern court



Figure 10 Staircase

The viewing gallery (Fig.12) is lit to east and west by the large casements noted on the exterior. To north and south are timber balustrades (Fig.7) with stick balusters – single and groups of three alternating – between wider planks. The handrails are neatly mitred (Fig.13). Staircase and balustrades are stained black softwood.



Figure 11 Staircase detail



Figure 12 Viewing gallery



Figure 13 Gallery handrail detail

History

Brasenose College opened their sports field on this low-lying meadow site as a cricket ground in 1895. The college archivist, Georgina Edwards, has examined the Brasenose records and reports that between 1894-1895 past and present members of the College subscribed a sum of about one thousand two hundred pounds for the purpose of converting the meadow opposite the College Barge into a Cricket Ground and building the Pavilion upon it. There is also a copy of a letter written by the

College Bursar to a 'W. W. Wyatt', which discusses installing iron gates at the ground in March 1895, which are presumably represented by the surviving posts noted above. This Wyatt may related to George Wyatt, ironmonger, and later builder, whose house and business premises were at 67 and 74 St Giles respectively from the 1840s.

Regarding the squash courts, Georgina has found that tenders to build were received on 19 May 1937, and on 16 June 1937 the Bursar was authorised to accept an estimate of not more than £1250 for two courts from Messrs. Turner and Dopson, builders (no architect's name is mentioned in the records). Presumably it was completed that year, perhaps in time for the Michaelmas term starting in October.

Discussion

The Brasenose court thus derives from the first phase of standardisation of the playing area for the game. The model for these specifications was at the Bath Club in London, built at the turn of the 20th century, with dimensions of 32 feet by 21 feet (9.75 metres by 6.4 metres). Although these dimensions were proposed in 1911, the existence of a variant hardball game in North America, and the First World War, meant that they were not adopted as an international standard until 1923.¹

There are a number of historic squash courts in Great Britain.² Some of these are in other building types – such as barns – that have been converted for the purpose. Following the introduction of standard dimensions in 1923, others were built as part of other sporting or social complexes, such as the London clubs of the armed services, and the Manchester Tennis and Racquet Club in Salford. Here, the court was added as an additional floor to the 1880s building in 1925, and the complex is listed at Grade II*. Free-standing single courts were also built by owners of country houses – for example a vernacular version ca.1925 in the walled kitchen garden of Barrington Court, in South Somerset for A A Lyle, a utilitarian building of 1932 for the Hanhams of Dean Court, near Wimborne Minster³ and as early as 1913 for Allan Hughes at The Lynch, Allerford, near Minehead.⁴ In Wales, Thomas Evelyn Scott-Ellis, 8th Baron Howard de Walden of Chirk Castle built a court there in the 1930s.⁵

Among the pre-war 'institutional' courts are those at RAF Duxford (1935),⁶ RAF Yatesbury,⁷ and at Rivercourt House, now Latymer Prep School, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, by J. E. M. Macgregor, c.1930, with sculpture by Gertrude Hermes.⁸

In addition to those mentioned, there are purpose-built listed squash courts in England at St Catherine's College, Oxford (Grade I, 1961-66) and at Doxford Hall, Northumberland, (Grade II, 1910).⁹

¹ <http://www.worldsquash.org/ws/wsf-information/squash-history/140-years-of-squash>

² I am grateful to Dr Elaine Harwood, Historic England, for additional information on historic courts

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-3697916/Interiors-Art-stately-revamp.html> (unlisted)

⁴ <http://www.lynchcountryhouse.co.uk/activities.html> List entry Number: 1434745

⁵ <http://www.coflein.gov.uk/en/site/410408/details/squash-court-at-chirk-castle#archive>

⁶ BUILDING 46, list entry number 1067840 (Grade II)

⁷ see <http://squashbloglife.com/abandoned-squash-courts/> for exterior and the interior at http://s1371.photobucket.com/user/kevinr6665/media/RAF%20Yatesbury/DSC01920_zps6e990879.jpg.html (unlisted)

⁸ Grade II List Entry Number: 1412206

The Brasenose example may be a rare example of a surviving double court from this period. Jason Wood (Director, Heritage Consultancy Services, Lancaster, who has a particular interest in the archaeology of sport) has confirmed that pre-war, free-standing double courts are rare.

Conclusion

The Brasenose squash court, although not now in use for its intended purpose, is largely intact, and apparently as built in 1937. As a pre-war double, free-standing court building, it may therefore be of some significance as a heritage asset.

Disclaimer

This report has been prepared by member(s) of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record, a voluntary organisation whose objectives are to advance education and promote research on the buildings of Oxfordshire. Whereas every effort has been made to ensure its accuracy, it is based only on evidence which was visible at the time of the recording. The information and discussion contained in it is intended as a contribution to research, and the OBR takes no responsibility for any other use to which it may be put. Advice should always be sought from those professionally qualified to give it.

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⁹ Images of England number 237058