

CHURCHYARD FIVES

'Fives' is a name given to a variety of handball played against the north or south walls of church towers in the West Country during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These walls were used because they did not have windows, but windows in neighbouring walls had to be protected from damage, and it is in these modifications that we can see evidence of the game having been played.

At East Pennard the game was played against the north tower wall. The window to the left of it (behind the children's' corner in the church) was protected on the outside by a pair of shutters hung from wrought iron pintles. The stone hood-moulding above the window was cut back to make room for the shutters, and when they were open they were latched back onto a pair of pendant hooks.

Balls would often be lost on the parapet roof of the church, so to the left of this window a series of iron bars, now cut off, were set into the buttress to make a ladder. Footholds have also been cut into the outer corners of this buttress, and into the corners of the buttress to the right of the north door, but the bottom edges have subsequently been cut away, probably to stop people climbing onto the roof when the game was discouraged.

A hard surface was necessary for the ball to bounce on, so the ground would have had a worn and stamped clay surface. In the late eighteenth century when the game came to be considered scandalous by church authorities, the digging up of the fives court became a standard deterrent. At East Pennard there are holes in the walls where railings were put up around the court area to keep people away, and the small churchyard cross in that corner marks a burial possibly sited there for the same reason.