

The Gentlemanly world of Nottingham Chess Club

A treasure in the Nottinghamshire Archives is the minute book of the Nottingham Chess Club 1872-97, the source for most of this piece. The club was established 16th October 1829, so it must be the first chess organisation in the county. Membership was rather exclusive, and by election only – recorded membership varied between 30 and 55. There were no women or juniors. The members were a classy bunch. Those I have tracked down on the census include lace manufactures (3), a soap manufacture, lace merchants (2), a silk merchant, the manager of a lace factory, solicitors (2), a banker, an accountant, a clergyman, a master tailor and a town alderman. The number of Germans is striking – I have found four, including Sigimund Hamel, long-time President, and Carl Sipman treasurer in the 1880's, and there may be others, as well as Albert Heymann, whose parents were German. The death of William G Ward, the esteemed club vice president and Mayor of Nottingham (from injuries sustained by falling from his horse) is recorded in 1878 and in 1891 the Sherriff was the principle guest and an entertaining speaker at the annual dinner. This is the Nottingham elite at play.

The club was keen on its annual supper or soiree. Sometimes this was combined with an "exhibition of simultaneous play". So in 1873 the date was fixed "as soon as Mr.Blackburne can make it convenient to pay Nottingham the intended visit". The following evening he gave a "grand séance of blindfold chess".Gunsberg came in 1888 (Fee 3 guineas) and 1889 and Blackburn again in 1894 (fee only 2 guineas)

In 1873 the club was turfed out of their long-term home at Bromley House and moved to a room offered by Mrs Bowman, just across the Road at , where they remained for most of the period covered by the minute book. This mutated into Bingham's Restaurant and after it went bust to the Eagle Restaurant. The ground floor is now a branch of Boots. There was a brief period at the Albert Hotel, Derby while the mess from the bunruptcy was sorted out. It met Tuesday and Friday evenings, October to March – chess as a winter sport goes back a long way.

The club had exclusive use of the room for £15pa. Rather expensive but "with the privilege of a piano standing in the room. An inventory was taken of club assets prior to the move in 1873 – 1 sofa, 3 screens, 8 tables, 10 cushioned chairs, 5 mesh bottomed chairs, 1 cushioned armchair, 1 cupboard, 1 clock (a proper one, not a chess clock), 1 fender iron, 1 coal bucket, 1 coffee pot, cups saucers and spoons, 4 chess boards, 7 folding boards, 3 boxes of chessmen, chessmen in the drawers of tables (club rules in 1891 were exhorting members to put the pieces back in the drawer) and various magazines going back to 1841. There was also an oil painting of Samuel Newman esq, one of the clubs founders and for many years club president. I wonder what became of it?

As was fit and proper for a club of gentlemen there was a rather casual attitude towards money. The usual deficit was made up by prior guarantees from leading members. In 1886 it was agreed that "the subscription in future years should be 10/6 (52½p) instead of the optional amount in vogue during the last few years. This was put forward by the match captain and star player and might have had something to do with the next resolution

“Railway fares of the match playing teams should be met by the funds of the club”. But old attitudes die hard. Here’s a report in the press from 1894, the sort of journalism it is impossible to image today – “A financial statement was read, showing that inspite of some exceptional charges the income of the club had exceeded the expenditure. The treasurer was out of pocket to the extent of £6 odd, but this was perfectly satisfactory to the members insamuch as they always expected a balance on the wrong side and the amount was less than it had been for many years”

Turning (reluctantly) to the actual chess. From 1880 the club played four or five matches against near neighbours. Leicester home and away was a regular fixture, with a predictable series of losses to the young H E Atkins (subsequently 9 times British Champion) on Board 1. Other opponents included Hull, Manchester (reckoned to be unsportingly good), Derby, Birmingham and Northampton. The only recorded playing session was 3 hours against Hull in 1892 when “at 6.30 we adjourned play for [what else?] high tea. At the close of which the Rev J A Mitchell (club president) made a very appropriate speech”. Games were played without chess clocks and when they finished early a second game was played, which happened about half the time. This doesn’t exactly suggest a very high standard.

The only recorded local match was against Nottingham Mechanics in 1873. It all sounded rather jolly, but the experiment was not repeated – the plebs had the effrontery to win 7½-6½. There was usually some sort of club competition. In 1873 there were a planned series of matches for a 5/- stake for the benefit of club funds. So S.Hamel vs Gilpin at odds of a rook, 5 games. The minute lament on the 1887-88 season “A handicap tournament with an entrance fee of 2/6 was played at the club during the season. Only eight members took part in it, the interest taken in it being of a milk and water character...an unusually slow season” – followed by complaints about the absence of a dinner that year.

The club seemed to have a positive attitude to the outside world. An SGM in 1885 unanimously decided to join the newly formed British Chess Association (not to be confused with the BCF, founded 1904). The occasion of the visit by the Counties’ Chess Association in 1886 led to the international tournament in Nottingham. The club was invited to join and have a member on the Committee of the newly formed MCCU in 1897, though whether this was taken up is not recorded.

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