

What's Your Handicap? – a note from the Bromley Chess Club Archives

By chance, the Dutch National Library, which has the largest chess collection in the world, unearthed the minutes of the Bromley Chess Club from its formation in 1898 to 1903, together with some contemporary press cuttings.¹ They offer a fascinating insight into the formation of the first chess club in Bromley, to chess-playing before gradings, and to social attitudes. After writing up those early years, the question `what happened next?' was inevitable. Local newspapers and BCF Year Books provide only patchy source material from 1903 onwards, and our Club's own records, also patchy, go back only a quarter of a century. This note gives, therefore, only a limited history of the Bromley and the Beckenham Chess Clubs, united in the past and now united again as Beckenham & Bromley Chess Club.

In November 1898 "a well attended meeting of gentlemen interested in the formation of a Chess Club was held at the Literary Institute, Widmore Road, Bromley". The meeting was chaired by Mr W W White² the Secretary of the Kent County Chess Association who remarked that "in a town like Bromley, where there must be a very large number of chess players, he was surprised that there was no club in existence." He was right to be surprised: Richard Eales, in a history of the game, wrote that "After 1850 or so chess clubs became too numerous to keep track of".³ Mr White also regarded it as "a little to their shame" that it had been left to a Surrey man to initiate the work in Bromley – a reference to Mr Augustus Yeates, a valuable member of the West Norwood Club who had moved to Bromley to live. The Literary Institute was now offering accommodation and it was agreed to form The Bromley Chess Club with an annual subscription of five shillings (25p for younger readers). Messrs White and Yeates became Bromley's Chairman and Secretary respectively. Sir John Lubbock (later Lord Avebury) agreed to be President although there is no indication that he ever came to the Club.

There was a considerable degree of formality about the proceedings. At the first annual meeting, held a week later, the Club rules were drawn up. New members were to be elected by the Committee after being proposed and seconded by two club members in writing – and these were regularly approved at what appeared to be monthly committee meetings. Committee members also had to be on a rota for opening the Club, warning members 10 minutes before closing and generally attending "to all matters which may be conducive to the comfort and convenience of members". Lessons to be drawn from the past?

Within a month the Club had 27 members, rising to 38 at the opening of the 1901/2 season and 50 in 1903 when the minutes ended. It was very quickly agreed that the Club would open for two nights between September and March, albeit that there was some hard bargaining with the Literary Institute. The Club remained deliberately all male for the first three years until at the AGM in September 1901 it was moved "That Ladies be admitted members of the BCC...after considerable discussion was carried with one dissension." The second motion that "Smoking be allowed at all meetings of the Club" appeared to be less contentious and was carried unanimously.

Mention must be made of one of the first of these women to be elected – Mrs Lewis W Lewis. She had already presented the prizes at the AGM and became a member at the October committee meeting. No doubt a reasonable player, she was given a grading of B2. The following month she proposed her son Dr Harvey Lewis (grading A2) as a member, and by 1902 she was a member of the Committee. The name Lewis will be familiar to all those who play in the Kent competitions today for the teams in the second division play for the Lewis

¹ We are grateful to Hendrik Chervet for sending us copies. I understand that they were bought from a Dutch bookseller in 1991 for f.135.

² Was he the original www?

³ Richard Eales, *Chess The History of a Game*, 1985, p.141.

Cup. Mrs Lewis was the widow of the Lewis W Lewis M.A. who had been the vicar of Meopham in Kent until his death in 1900: he himself “was a clever chess player, the `Lewis` cup being given to the Kent County Chess Association by his son, the Rev Dr Lewis in memory of his father.”⁴

As today, chess activity was a combination of internal tournaments and matches against other clubs but that first season was confined to internal competitions. The Club ran three tournaments: a prize handicap, continuous handicap (which sounds like a ladder) and the championship. It was the handicap that looks strange to us as it pre-dated the current grading system.⁵ The system which appears to have been in general use was to classify chess players into one of five groups (and these were sometimes subdivided). At the January 1899 committee meeting it was resolved that a “preliminary classification of the members be now made and such classification shall be review before the competition”. A list of 27 members in order of playing strength was placed on the Club notice board.

The handicap odds were as follows:

Concedes to	Class 2	3	4	5
Class 1	P & M	P & 2M	Kt	R
Class 2		P & M	P & 2M	Kt
Class 3			P & M	P & 2M
Class 4				P & M

M = move

There is no clue as to when the extra move was to be taken, nor which pawn or piece would be selected. Presumably there were conventions that everybody understood. I assume that the extra moves were taken at the beginning – the idea of being able to take two extra moves whenever one felt like it is just too strange. The handicapping system was not novel to Bromley. Eales mentions their demise at the higher levels of chess: “One final effect of tournaments was to put an end to the practice of odds giving in high-level chess. Technical standards improved so that even the best players could not afford to give their opponents a pawn start, much less a knight or a rook... a few tournaments with handicaps were tried in the early days, as at London in 1866, but the practice was soon abandoned.”⁶

It was not until the 1900/01 season that BCC entered the Kent County Cup (the senior competition) and another two years before a team was fielded in the second division (the Lewis cup). In that first season BCC reached the County Cup semi-final, losing to Rochester Conservative CC by 2 ½ to 5 ½. The Club also made the semi-final of the Lewis Cup in 1902/03, losing to the Goldsmith’s Institute 2-4. However, getting to the semi-final was not quite as difficult as today. In 1902/03 the schedule for the first team was playing Lee, Lewisham and Sydenham twice; and for the second team there were only two opponents - Catford St Germans and Crays & Orpington.

In contrast to the contemporary programme, there was a much greater reliance on friendly matches. The list of opponents is interesting for its unfamiliarity – hardly any of the clubs remain, or at least under the same name. Apart from clubs played in the Kent leagues, matches were played against: Shortlands, Herne Hill, Brixton, Brookdale Institute [Catford],

⁴ [Dartford] Chronicle and District Times April 24? 1914

⁵ The BCF’s first grading list was not published until 1954. Numerical values similar to today’s ELO values were given and a player’s grade was based on an average of opponents’ grades plus or minus 10 times player’s deviation from a 50% result. The resulting numerical values were then used to produce groups of players from 1a and 1b onwards. The BCF resisted publishing the players in numerical order to begin with and the 1a 1b classification was not abandoned until the early 1970s.

⁶ Eales, pp 146-7.

Plumstead, Insurance CC, Swanley Junction, Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells, Metropolitan CC [at the Wool Exchange], and Lud-Eagle. Perhaps the most interesting were two 12-board matches played against the Ladies Chess Club in February 1902 and 1903. These were played in London and although Bromley won the first match 8-4 it lost the second 5 ½ - 6 ½ with losses on all top 4 boards. One wonders about the arrangements for these matches when presumably all the travelling was by public transport.

The minutes cease in 1903: how they got into the Dutch National Archive is a mystery, as is much of what happened subsequently. However, *The Bromley Record* published a report of the Club's AGM most years until its last issue in 1913.⁷ The reports paint a mixed picture. Membership appeared to peak at 54 in 1905; the Club still played in the County and Lewis tournaments and had also entered the "early division" of the London League. However, results were poor, with all the County Cup games being lost. The internal competitions were clearly well supported: in the handicap competition that year there were 28 entries playing 250 games: "One enthusiastic lady member played in no less than 39 games – (applause)".

A new President appeared the following year, a C F Delcomyn, who soon offered a cup to bear his name and to be called the President's prize – that cup has long since vanished into obscurity. By 1911 there were signs that the Club was finding it harder to run competitive matches. It was difficult to get a full team together due to members leaving the area and out of 135 games played, an appalling 35 (26%) were lost by default. It was decided not to enter a team in the London League again and just stick to the County Cup and friendlies. The last AGM report was for 1912 when the Club was down to 34 members.

It is not known whether the Club survived during the 1914-18 War and only one reference has been found of its immediate post-war existence. The first Kent Annual Congress after the War was held in Bromley in 1920 and the prizes were presented by a Mrs Churchill, wife of the President of the Bromley Chess Club – clearly indicating that the Club existed.⁸ Our next date is of particular significance for it is the first mention of Beckenham. Post-war press coverage appeared limited⁹ but, helpfully, there was a report in the *Bromley and District Times* of the October 1926 AGM of the Bromley & Beckenham Chess Club. Whether this was a merger of two clubs or merely an extension of the name is unknown but it is one of the first records we have of the Club using both names. The Club's current Championship Cup dates back to the 1925-26 season when it was presented by Frederick Schooling (there was someone of that name who was a President of the Institute of Actuaries 1912-14); the engraving refers only to the Bromley Chess Club. However, we have the Holloway Cup and this was also presented in the 1925/26 season – this time to Bromley & Beckenham Chess Club. The lack of earlier press coverage and the appearance of two cups in 1926 might indicate that the club was reformed in that year.

Some mention must be made of the Holloways. S J Holloway, was elected a member of the BCF Council in 1919. His wife, was one of the Club's strongest players. She was found playing on Board 2 in a County Cup game and was one of the two pairs of players giving a "consultation game" after the 1926 AGM. Mrs SJ was British Lady Champion in both 1919 and 1938. If the British Lady Champion was only on board 2, it suggested a strong Bromley team and the Club did indeed win the County Cup in 1927, 1928 and 1930.

The BCF year books give occasional glimpses of the strength of the Club. After 1930 there did not appear to be any cup successes. In 1935, Bromley and Beckenham was meeting twice a week at the White Hart Hotel in Bromley with around 20 members and playing in the

⁷ Available in hard copy at Bromley Library.

⁸ *The British Chess Magazine* no 5, Vol. XL May 1920.

⁹ An exhaustive search of every issue was impractical; I looked at sample issues around the time an AGM report would have been published.

County and Lewis cups. A year later, the venue was the Duke's Head; membership rose to 33 in 1937 but down to 22 in 1938. Playing strength must have been weak – the Club did not compete in the County Cup in the 1938-39 season and came last in the West Kent section of the Lewis Cup.

After the Second War, the 1945 BCF Year Book listed the Bromley and Beckenham Chess Club with 36 members, meeting at Heath House, Hayes Lane on Monday and Saturday.¹⁰ The playing strength improved considerably compared to the pre-war years. The 1947 Year Book recorded the Club, now meeting at Aylesbury Road School, as winners of the County Cup in 1946 and in 1947 the County Cup again (beating Folkestone & Hythe 7-1); the Lewis Cup (drawing 3-3 with Sevenoaks and winning on board count); and the Junior Cup (drawing 3-3 with Maidstone and also winning on board count). They were the last cups to be won under the Bromley and Beckenham name.

In the 1950-51 Year Book, Bromley and Beckenham were two separate clubs; I can find no one who knows of the reason, nor could I find any mention in the local newspapers. Bromley continued to meet at the Aylesbury Road School and the newly-formed Beckenham met at Verney's Restaurant in Beckenham High Street. Beckenham managed to win the Lewis Cup that year. Other local clubs of the period were Charlton; Dartford; Hayes; Kolster Standard [Sidcup]; Lewisham St Mary's; London Transport (Charlton and New Cross); Orpington; Royal Arsenal; Sidcup; Siemens Sports Club [Woolwich]; Welling; Wellcome Chemical Works [Dartford]; Westwood Sports & Social Club [Balham] and West Wickham.

The next quarter-century did not see either club hitting the heights. The two clubs maintained contact, playing each year for the Holloway 'Rose Bowl'. The result of the 1969 match is shown below.

<i>Beckenham</i>			<i>Bromley</i>
AG Trangmar	1	0	D Davies
RR O'Kelly	1	0	R Smith
LA Trangmar	1	0	E Hobbs
EW Beal	0	1	S Morris
MWB Sanderson	0	1	H Samek
HT Jones	1	0	A McIntosh
HA Nassibian	1	0	M Bone
W Beaumont	1	0	R Reeve

Bromley won the Stevenson Cup (the renamed Junior) in 1955 and that appeared to be it. Bromley moved to 41 Rochester Avenue in 1959, St Johns Church Hall, Freelands Road in 1962, and then to the Sylvan Restaurant in 1970. Secretaries came and went but some of our members may remember Herbert Samek who became the Bromley Secretary in 1968 and held that post for 14 years until the merger.

In 1958 Beckenham Chess Club moved to 6 Oakfield Road, the home of one Miss Lucy Anness; the Club met in her front room so the membership was presumably of modest size. She became headmistress of Aylesbury Girls School Bromley in 1938, the year she joined Bromley and Beckenham Chess Club, and immediately put chess on the school curriculum. When she retired in 1952 she became organiser of the Kent Schools Chess League and in 1959 became the first woman president of the Southern Counties Chess Union. Only two years before her death in 1973 at the age of 85, the *Daily Telegraph* reported a "near sensation" in one of the minor Hastings Congress tournaments as Miss Anness of Beckenham won her match in 20 minutes after a sacrificial attack against a Mrs Doubtfire (yes, really). After her death, Beckenham moved to the Old Council Hall in Beckenham but increased

¹⁰ It is interesting that in those financially straightened times the Club could afford to pay for premises twice a week, whereas with a similar-sized membership we now struggle to pay for one night a week.

charges forced a move in 1976 to the United Reform Church Hall in Beckenham. The other stalwart of the Beckenham Club was Bill Beaumont who became Secretary around 1962 and ran the Club and its merged successor for over two decades.

A small Beckenham Chess Club scrapbook dating from 1969 has survived and the cuttings indicate a club that just fielded the one team in the County Cup. The earliest mention of one of our current members was John Lewin, playing board 4 in January 1973, and Alan Sands the following year.

One of the last cuttings dates from August 1976, containing an appeal for new members, with the Club now down to only 12 members; the following year membership was down to only eight. In 1981 the Beckenham Chess Club and the Bromley Chess Club amalgamated following a meeting of the two committees at the Swan & Mitre in Bromley: the inaugural members' letter sent by Secretary Peter Finch described them as "two well known and long established but of late not so successful chess clubs". Each club had been fielding two teams in the Kent League but on amalgamation this increased to five, a number which has remained reasonably consistent. The enlarged Club continued to meet at Beckenham's venue.

In his letter to members of the re-merged Beckenham & Bromley Club, Acting Secretary Peter Finch wrote that "As most members will be aware, the two clubs were one many years ago and the Rose Bowl trophy, which has been competed for every year by the best two teams of the Clubs was, in fact, previously presented to the individual champion [of Bromley & Beckenham]."¹¹

In 1996 the Club was approached by the Hayes Chess Club about a possible merger; the talks came to naught and the Hayes Club folded not long after. Later in 1996 there was a more fruitful approach from the West Wickham Chess Club, whose membership had fallen to single figures. Beckenham & Bromley still field teams in the Croydon League under the West Wickham name. The Club also played in the London League but it is not known when it re-entered. It is believed that the Bromley Club was playing in the London League in the late 1970s team and this was continued by the merged entity. Beckenham & Bromley had done remarkably well in the 1990s, achieving promotion from Division 5 to Division 1 in almost successive seasons, and a second team was also started. Division 1 required an increase in team size to 12, at a time when our two strongest players were going to university. We were approached in 1998 by Charlton Chess Club who had a number of strong players but not enough strength for a full team, and the team now plays under the Beckenham and Charlton name, although continuing to be registered by Beckenham.

The Club has moved through several premises since 1995 when the rent for the Church Hall was raised to unacceptable levels. We were fortunate that, through one of our members, we were able to use the superb facilities on the Wellcome site in Beckenham but soon after that the merger with Glaxo led to the site being closed. By then, members had a taste for a room with a bar and we moved down the lane to what had been the Langley Park Social Club (ex-London Transport Social Club). That, in turn, was closed for redevelopment and the next move was what used to be the NatWest Sports Ground in Copers Cope Road, but by then run by Mike Corby's Fitness Exchange. In June 2007 we were ejected on the night due to immediate refurbishment of the premises and we now meet across the field in the Kent Cricket Club pavilion in what used to be the Lloyds Bank Cricket Ground.

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¹¹ Now used for the annual quick play competition.