

History of the Bristol & District League

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by Chris Carter

Edward VII was king, the Liberal Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman was Prime Minister, and Russia (under the czar) joined France and Britain in the triple Entente. The year was 1907, and on October 7th it was resolved 'that steps be taken to form a league among the chess teams connected with social clubs within the Bristol Parliamentary Boundary.'

"The Bristol Social Clubs Chess League" charged an annual subscription of 5/-, and each club provided one member of the League's Executive Committee which elected its own officers (President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer). There were to be 2 or more divisions with a minimum of 8 players a side in division 1 and a minimum of 6 in other divisions. Players had to be registered (at a fee of 2d each) for a week before they could play. Clocks could be insisted upon, if provided (24 moves per hour and 6 every 1/4 thereafter) and there was a minimum 2 hour playing session; unfinished games were to be adjudicated by M H H Davies, whose decision was final. Each team played home and away against all other sides in its division. The playing season was October 1st to April 30th.

YMCA (Central) won the 1st division from St Agnes and St George's Road. St Agnes II won the 2nd division from Redland Reading Rooms, All Hallows, St Michaels (Windmill Hill), St George's Road II, Broad Plain, Christchurch and The Dings. The champions were given cash prizes to buy mementoes (£1 for division 1, 15/- for division 2). The 9 founder clubs also provided players for 2 matches against Bristol and Clifton Chess Club (the combined clubs had played fixtures against B & C since 1889).

The next year the League decided to enter 2 teams in the Bristol, Bath and Gloucestershire Chess League, and then rejected the idea. Mr Vaughan presented a trophy (the present 1st division shield) for the champions of the highest division in which Redland Reading Rooms and Mission House had a team. RRR promptly won division 2 and had their name engraved on the shield; St Agnes won division 1 and did not. The following season RRR were placed in division 1 although there was no automatic promotion.

By 1913 a President's team versus Vice-President's team match had become established, the mementoes had been scrapped to provide funds for trophies and the Vice-president had become the President Elect. In September the League changed its title to "The Bristol Chess League", but was still tied to Bristol's parliamentary boundary. Teams in all divisions became a minimum of 6 a side and YMCA only failed to retain either championship because they handicapped themselves 2 points in division 1 and 1 point in division 2 (they had successfully

defended the titles the previous year when they voluntarily handicapped themselves only 1 point in division 1). There were only 4 clubs and 7 teams in the League.

In 1914 in spite of 'the terrible war now in progress ... After careful consideration your committee decided that in the best interests of the country it was advisable to continue League contests as usual.' However, by 1916 matches had to be cancelled and replaced by occasional League Socials. The greatest expenditure that year was a donation of 10/6d. to the Poland Relief Fund.

After the Great War the League expanded rapidly. In 1919-20 there was just 1 division of 6 teams, but this included Clifton 2nd (as a condition of entry all class 1 Clifton players were barred). 1920-21 saw 15 teams contest 2 divisions and Clifton entered without any restrictions; the League even considered amalgamating with this prestigious club. In 1921-22 there were 20 teams and a 3rd division was formed. However a plateau had been reached and membership stayed at about this level for a decade.

Individual championships of the divisions had started just before the war and were not revived, entrants for each divisional championship competing in an all-play-all throughout the season. From 1921, 1st division matches were played over a minimum of 9 boards, but this reverted to a minimum of 6 in 1924 and stayed there in spite of attempts to raise it again.

Mr Cummings Mansfield, the noted problemist, started a Problem Club in 1923. Members met monthly at the Victoria Cafe, High Street, and engaged in lectures and competitions. The League's minutes record that this club flourished for at least 4 years but then it is never mentioned again.

League rules could only be changed at the Annual Meeting (by a simple majority), but this seems to have been something of a social occasion, being sandwiched between supper and a lightning tournament. Often an Extra General Meeting was required to consider rule changes. In the '20's the League dropped its parliamentary boundary and welcomed clubs within Bristol and District, raised subscriptions to 7/6d. per club (and 3/6d for each extra team, abandoned game advantages in favour of play-offs to settle championships, demanded that board order was in order of playing strength and gave the job of compiling fixtures to the League's officials (previously these were organised by club secretaries meeting a few weeks before the season started). Not all suggestions were so successful; motions to limit the size of the Executive Committee to 6, to make clocks compulsory for the top 3 boards in division 1 and for automatic promotion and relegation (the Executive occasionally upgraded a team but this was often controversial) all failed.

Most years saw matches versus Clifton, and variations on the President v Vice-President fixture (e.g. married v single). 1925 saw the first congress and 2 years later a week long Chess Festival was held in January at Redcross Street School. The Roaring Twenties closed with 21 sides but in the '30's the League contracted; by the 31-32 season there were only 14 teams from 8 clubs, and club secretaries were 'urged to make a serious effort to arrest the decline in chess activities shown by the reduced membership.' The following season there were only 2 sides in division 2, and in 34-35 only the 1st and 3rd divisions were contested.

There were many attempts to increase membership. In 1930 the team KO cup was created (minimum 6 boards), a couple of congresses were organised along with a fortnight pre-season tournament (at YMCA and Clifton) and they even reduced the supper before the Annual Meeting to just tea (the lightning event after it continued). The most dramatic revision came into effect for the 38-39 season when a handicap system was introduced. 'The Executive Committee should award points in each division at the start of the season based on the results of the previous season's play. Points to be awarded inversely to their relative position with the top team. Limit on maximum number of points to be fixed at $\frac{1}{2}$ the difference between top and bottom teams in that division. New clubs to receive limit points.' Only 13 teams competed in 3 divisions and 'It is interesting to note that the placings this season have not been affected by the handicap credits.'

This experiment only lasted for a year since at the 1940 AGM it was reported that 'Under the shadows of the new war and of the black-out the League decided that its normal activities should cease and for the 39-40 season none of the inter-club matches nor the Individual and Perpetual Cup competitions have been played. Nonetheless there was sufficient enthusiasm ... for a congress ... in January (30 competitors). It is the hope of us all that circumstances favourable to the resumption of our former happy contests will soon come back.' An annual affiliation fee of 2/- was fixed, Bristol and Clifton were entrusted with the care of the trophies and all the officers were re-elected to hold their posts for the duration. There are no League records for the next 5 years.

The League has always been extremely fortunate in the loyalty and hard work of its officers. Since 1907 the League had only had 4 secretaries and all the adjudications had been decided by 2 men: H Davies from 1907-31 and C Welch from 1931 until the war. A H Hill became the first Assistant Secretary in 1914 and still held the post in 1940.

The League resumed its activities in 1945. The handicap system was scrapped and as a temporary measure teams were reduced to 4 a side and there was only 1½ hours' play. Fourteen teams (1 more than before the war) competed in 3 divisions. The following season teams reverted to 6 a side and were fixed at that figure (before this any number of boards could be played and only the minimum was stipulated). One and a quarter hours' play was possible but the board order rule was abandoned.

Attitudes had changed during the war. The old league had been revived and was coping but a new era was dawning. In February 1947 A W Osborne became the third secretary since the war and a completely new set of rules were drafted. The League changed its name to its present title of "The Bristol and District Chess League". A Chairman and Vice-Chairman joined the President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary and Assistant Secretary to form the League Management Committee which was elected by the AGM and given its present near dictatorial powers. Automatic promotion and relegation were established (1 up and 1 down). The Individual Championships were still tied to their respective divisions and there was still a week's registration before a new player could compete (and no new registrations after 31st December) but the League's basic structure is still that adopted in 1947 (a 2/3 majority was now required to change any rules).

Twenty-seven teams played in 4 divisions under the new rules. Thirty-four teams required 5 divisions the following season and by 1950 there were 40 sides in the League, a number which varied little over the next dozen years.

An Upper Ten tournament was created in 1947. This took the form of a ladder of the best 10 players available. Each player had to accept (or decline which would count as a loss) one challenge per year, when they had to play a 4-game match (and deciders if the series was drawn) in 6 weeks. 'A valuable and unique perpetual trophy to be known as "the Chess Nut" was to be awarded annually. The competition lacked interest and enthusiasm and ground to a halt within 4 years. An Individual KO tournament was started in 1953 and the Chess Nut became its trophy.

In 1948 the League's future was secured. 'The Management Committee, inspired by Captain P D Bolland, decided to do everything possible to help the Bristol and District Federation of Boys' Clubs and offered to organise a junior division for teams from youth clubs. A junior division was duly formed and continued as an integral part of the League until by 1955 the "Bristol and District Junior Association" had evolved. The Junior Association was located in its present headquarters at Youth House and as it has grown over the years it has provided more and more new members for its parent organisation. The Bristol Primary Schools Chess Association was formed in 1961.

In 1950 J G Milton became League Secretary. He and his successor K C Cleak (who took over in 1962) tended the League for over 23 years.

The season regularly opened with the President v Vice-President match which was now called the 100 board match, although it rarely topped 65 and often fell to less than 50 boards. The General Committee (one representative of each club) met most years but meetings became less regular and had virtually died out by the 1960's, although in theory this committee still exists.

The Championship Certificates, used to this day, were designed by Mr Bateman in 1951. They bore the inscription 'PRIMUS PRO TEMPORE' meaning 'First for the time being.'

By 1952 the number of adjudications had risen to 65 (2.44%) and H M Cuttle requested that a 2nd adjudicator be appointed to assist him. Over the next 5 years adjudications rose to more than 120 and 3 adjudicators became necessary. A dramatic experiment was tried in the 1956-57 season; in the 1st division teams met only once but adjourned and finished their games at the premises of the away side. The rate of play was 30 in 1¼ hours and no game could be adjudicated before 60 moves. There were only two adjudications in division 1 that year, but the innovations were generally unpopular and abandoned after one trial season.

The League's Golden Jubilee was celebrated in 1957. A Golden Jubilee Fund was launched with the intention of raising £2,000 over 4 years 'to build or buy premises in Bristol for the purposes of a chess centre.' This fund never approached its objectives and was incorporated into League funds. A dinner was held to celebrate the League's 50th birthday and a souvenir booklet (1/- each) was published. A telephone match versus Leicester was played (there were 4 other similar fixtures against

Leicester between '55 and '62) and we lost a friendly match away to the City of Birmingham Chess Club.

A duplicator was bought and Mr Milton started a monthly League bulletin called "The Western Knight." The League's records contain no copies of Western Knight but it was distributed free to League officials and club secretaries. Individual subscriptions were encouraged and after an initial slow response they peaked at 48 in 1959. Interest flagged and with falling circulation the bulletin was discontinued shortly after Mr Milton's retirement in 1962. An offshoot of this publication was the "Western Knight (Bristol) Chess Club." All members of League clubs were members of this club and its main function was to enter a team in the National Club Competition. This only happened in 1959 when Western Knight lost to Exeter (on board count) in round 2. The club was disbanded in 1961.

Although it proved impossible to organise a simultaneous display for the Jubilee, this form of chess was very popular. Keres had visited Bristol in 1955 (+23,= 3,-0), Flohr came in '62 (+41,=4,-0), Smyslov in '63 (+23,=3,-3) and Gligoric in '65 (+17,=17,-6 - he was not well), '66 (+20,=11,-1) and '69 (+15,=2,-2).

The League joined the West of England Chess Union in 1959 as a corporate body. However, when the WECU changed its rules and discontinued corporate membership in 1966, the League withdrew from the Union and has only recently rejoined it.

Numbers of adjudications continued to rise and in '64 D E March became the first Adjudication Secretary (with a seat on the Management Committee). He standardised adjudication forms and created the adjudication system as we know it, with a panel of adjudicators. Appeals had first been suggested in 1958 but were not allowed until 1962, when they could be made to the Management Committee. With the reorganisation of the adjudication system appeals were sent to the Adjudication Secretary who forwarded them to another member of the panel whose decision was final. Appeals were only permitted on games that affected match results, and had to be accompanied by analysis; unsuccessful appeals cost 10/-. The following year adjudication results could be appealed against without analysis and they were sent to the BCF's adjudication service. A 10-day time limit was also placed on appeals, but only after serious problems had arisen due to the omission of this stipulation. There were suggestions that 'there had been collusion between Totterdown YMCA and Downend and Fishponds to prevent Kingswood from winning the championship by means of appealing months after a game had been adjudicated. This matter was raised at the '65 AGM and it was most unfortunate that these divergences of views gradually deteriorated into angry vituperation and altercation with members on their feet airing their opinions without permission from the chair.' After a successful counter appeal by Kingswood (pending at the AGM) and a play-off Kingswood won the 1st division from Downend B.

This row spoiled an otherwise excellent year. An entry of 57 teams had caused the creation of a 6th division. There were so many teams (and fixtures) that the AGM decided to permit the season to start from September 1st, if necessary. They also carried unanimously a motion concerning promotion and relegation for 2 up and 2 down (the same motion had failed the previous year). Adjournments were permitted

and players were given the chance to finish their own games rather than just pass them onto the adjudicator (this opinion is still available but sadly under used). The following year, after an inconclusive 3-way play-off had resulted in promotion being determined by lot, it was resolved to decide promotion and relegation by game difference rather than by play-offs. From '66 Downend and Fishponds A dominated the League for a decade (see honours list).

1969-70 was a disastrous year. The season opened with 56 sides but finished with only 50. The following year only 47 teams entered and division 6 was scrapped and not reformed until 1977. All individual championships were cancelled due to lack of support (these had been played on merit rather than divisions since 1960). Changes had to be made, and they were. The 1st Division started playing 35 in 1¼ hours (division 2 and the team KO adopted this rate '72, division 3 in '75 and all divisions in '78). The individual KO was now suspended to help the revamped individual championships. These would be run by a Tournament Organiser (who had a seat on the Management Committee); entry was free but there was a 10/- fine for not completing games. The winner of section 1 was to have the title of "Bristol Champion."

Strikes by the postal workers and the city's employees (along with a work-to-rule by electricity workers) disrupted the first year of these schemes and the 100 board match was discontinued. The AGM insisted that there should again be fees for the individual championships; section 1 could be subsidised but the other sections were to be self-supporting. K C Cleak, the League's Secretary, accurately predicted 'that this would be the beginning of the end for the individual championships.'

Fixture books had long been a costly problem. Simple lists and proper printed booklets had been tried over the years; the latter were expensive (although often subsidised by adverts) and had to be sold to members but were preferred by most players. In 1971 the new Treasurer, D C Jarrett, reorganised the League's finances. Entry fees were £3 per team, 7 fixture books were inclusive in this price as were match result books (when necessary); entry to the team KO (which became 8 a side) was free. The entry fee rose to its present level of £5 in 1978.

The 70's saw the League taking a greater interest in chess matters outside its borders. The 1971 WECU Championships were held in Bristol. The League beat the Thames Valley Chess League over 18 boards, but lost a telephone match versus Glasgow in 1972, and in '73 Hanham and Kingswood were hosts to the British Lightning Championships. Chess National Promotions organised 2 congresses in Bristol in the mid 70's.

In 1977 K C Cleak started the latest of the great debates about whether the City of Bristol (or this time the County of Avon) should have county status in chess world. This matter had been raised before the war by C Welch and revived by A W Osborne in the 60's. On 3 occasions this idea was proposed by probably the most influential official of the time, and all 3 attempts were defeated more by the apathy than by the antipathy of the local players. 'Avon was a dead duck.'

Recent years have seen many developments. Defaults, long the bane of the League, are now penalised by penalty points which can result in fines, loss of match points

and even dismissal from the League. The rule insisting on a realistic board order has been revived after a lapse of 35 years, and appeals are once again handled by local experts (although now by 3 rather than 1 member of the panel). The 48 hour registration period has been abolished. The League has continued to grow; we now have a 7th division (with the Chess Nut as its trophy) and the individual KO has been revived. The individual championships died out as predicted, but have been replaced by an annual League Congress, open to all League players. This started at the YMCA and is now thriving in its new venue at the Students' Union. A League ladder has been created but does not seem to be any more successful than the Top Ten competition was, whilst 2 blindfold tournaments have been staged and with greater support could have a real future. Players in the 1st division can now insist on adjournments rather than adjudication. The Council has organised sporting exchanges (including chess) with Bristol's twin city, Hanover. The League has rejoined the WECU but the BCF is trying to change the status of Leagues. The last League AGM was unanimously opposed to the BCF's schemes. For the last 3 years the League has helped to organise a major weekend congress in Bristol sponsored by a leading local company. The Manor Tyres Chess Congresses have brought Grandmasters, amongst many others, from all over to play in Bristol. All donations and any profits from the Manor Tyres Congresses go to the newly established Bristol Chess Educational Trust Fund.

Details of all these subjects, and much more are obtainable in the League's monthly magazine "The Bristol Chesstimes," which was first published in the spring of 1980. The Chesstimes now has an associated 'road-show.'

This history could not be complete without at least a mention of Messrs I Apsey, J Beard, R H Bleadon, W J Bird, J Cullum, J P Davies, F F Finch, C Pillinger, G L A Schaefer, H C K Stephens and C D Virgin. The League owes much to the dedication of these and many, many others. The future depends on the enthusiasm and involvement of all local chess players