

# **History of the Bradford Chess Club 1853 - 1953**

## **Part 2 of 4**

### **THE IVORY CHESSMEN**

It was decided to give £5 from the club funds towards the expenses of the association and to pay the rest by subscription. Equally generously a handsome set of chessmen and board were bought for presentation to the winning team. They cost eleven guineas, towards which the club paid £5 and private subscribers the remainder. Little did the Bradford members think of the trouble that set of chessmen was to cause them.

The great day was Saturday, 20th May. Attending the annual, meeting were representatives of the clubs of Bradford, Dewsbury, Halifax, Huddersfield, Leeds, Morley, Northallerton, Wakefield, Bolton, Liverpool, Manchester and Wigan. Bradford's representatives were the Mayor (Mr. M. Dawson), the president of the Association (Mr. B. Broughton) and Mr. J. Child, Mr. J. A. Heselton Mr. M. E. Werner, Mr. Richard Reaney, Mr. W. C. Ferrand, Mr. T. Fieldsend, Mr. F. Landolph, Mr. James Barker, Mr. Joseph Petty, Mr. William Fieldsend, Mr. Robert Paterson, Mr. A. K. Briggs, Mr. F. W. Broughton, Mr. A. Rowsby, Mr. M. Ramsden, Mr. George Richardson, Mr. A. Menssing, Mr. A. Sussmann, Mr. E. Fattorini, Mr. S. E. Sichel, Mr. D. Mills, Mr. H. Stanhope, Mr. G M. Wilson and Mr. Thomas Semon. Of these Mr. Petty and Mr. W. Fieldsend played in the county team of ten players.

Play began shortly after twelve o'clock, and continued until the tea adjournment at six, after which the president gave a brief address and others expressed their thanks to the Bradford club for, according to the "Observer" report, "the hospitable and handsome entertainment they had given to the strangers".

"The company (continues the report) then returned to their games at chess. The county match was a most exciting contest and some of the games lasted such a length of time that, by the time the Lancashire players had to leave, they were not concluded. Several of them, therefore, had to be drawn. It was agreed that it should be left for future consideration whether the match should be considered drawn, or the players should meet at times and places to suit their own convenience and play it out. The prize for the winning county was given by the Bradford Chess Club. It consisted of a set of the best African ivory chessmen of the Staunton pattern and club size, with a chessboard and casket. The casket was made of a black substance resembling ebony, and was beautifully carved, so as to be emblematical of the game."

On each board there were two games, but only nine of the twenty were concluded, and of these Yorkshire won five and Lancashire four. Unfortunately for the Bradford club the match was eventually declared a draw. The handsome ivory chessmen were taken back to the clubroom and as efforts to arrange another county match did not succeed, the set remained in the club's possession. Eventually a prominent member of the club took the chessmen and board home for safe-keeping, and thereby hangs a tale.

The member resigned-the reason is not stated in the minutes and when, in 1874, the committee asked him to return the chessmen he refused to do so. He ignored the first letter addressed to him on the subject but in reply to a second one he stated that, as the prize was put into his hands to be held until another match between Yorkshire and Lancashire was played, he felt justified in keeping it, but when there was a match he would hand it over to the winning county. A long correspondence followed. There was a personal

interview with the gentleman, but without effect. He refused to budge. The club was indignant. It passed the following resolution:

"That Mr. Adolphus Menssing, the president of this club, be and he is hereby appointed for the purpose of taking proceedings on behalf of the club against Mr. XXXXXX to recover from him a set of ivory chessmen and board in his possession belonging to the club and detained from the club by him and to recover damages for his wrongful detention thereof and for the purpose of taking all such proceedings on behalf of the club for and in respect of the detention or conversion thereof as may be advised and that he be indemnified out of the funds of the club in respect of such proceedings." Obviously they meant business. Legal proceedings were in their minds and the minute must be phrased in legal fashion. And in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion the president, two vicepresidents, the treasurer and the secretary each signed his name below the resolution after it had been written in the book. A solicitor was consulted. He was told that the club was determined to sue the member in the County Court, and he considered that it had a good case.

So to court they went, but without success. "Judge Daniel," it is recorded, "while expressing sympathy for the club, said he was compelled to non-suit them, as the club was neither a registered society nor an organisation for the propagation of arts or sciences, and the club had to pay the costs of the proceedings". How much the costs were is not stated.

In 1883, ten years or so after the stubborn member had taken possession of the prize, the county teams met again. The club pondered: Should it ask the winning team to request him to hand over the prize? It felt that it could hardly do that. To announce before a match that there was a prize but the winners must go and get it would be ungracious. Should it then invite the gentleman to present the prize at the conclusion of the match? That, too, did not appeal to the club. He was no longer a member of any chess organisation. To give him the distinction of presenting the prize and to have to applaud his speech would be too much for them. They took no action.

When in 1884 the Bradford and the Bradford Exchange chess clubs amalgamated, Mr. A. Illingworth drew the attention of the new committee to the fact that the chessmen were still in the hands of the ex-member. He would be sorry to believe, he said, that the club had finally relinquished hope of obtaining them and he urged the new committee to give the matter their earnest consideration, particularly if another match was played between the counties.

That is the end of the story. I have been unable to discover any further reference to the chessmen in the club records. Some years ago a set of ivory chessmen, of the origin of which no member to whom I have spoken has any knowledge, was discovered among the club's property. Whether this is the 1871 set I cannot say.

It is surprising that in spite of the great interest which the county match of 1871 and the annual meeting of the West Yorkshire Chess Association aroused in Bradford, in spite of the publicity which it was given by the Press—the "Bradford Observer's" report of the meeting and the match filled almost a column—and in spite of the fact that Bradford now had a strong team, which gave an excellent account of itself in matches with other clubs, the membership was small.

At the annual meeting in February, 1873, the report stated that "the past year may be considered as one of the most successful ones which this club has witnessed". Yet the number of members was only 35, which, said the report, "does not include four doubtful ones". The following year the number had dropped to 33—a decrease "accounted for by five gentlemen leaving England"—and, the members were once again informed that the attendance was "not all that might be wished for".

"The committee earnestly beg to impress upon you," said the annual report, "the necessity of regular attendance in that the strength of this club may increase, and that the town of Bradford may be renowned for its pieces in more senses than one, and take its place in the front rank of provincial clubs."

The meeting to which the report should have been read had to be adjourned "owing to the small attendance in consequence of political excitement, etc.". , The political excitement was, of course, due to, the General Election when, following a Cabinet disagreement, Gladstone surprised the country and even some of his Government colleagues by dissolving Parliament. What the secretary meant by adding the "etc." I do not know.

On 21st February of that year Benjamin Disraeli became Prime Minister. On 24th February the adjourned annual meeting of the Bradford Chess Club was held and the report presented. the excitement had subsided. There were twelve members present, and they were evidently sufficiently calm to approve the report and the balance sheet (which showed "a balance in hand of £19 10s. 9d., not including £6 10s. unpaid subscriptions") without making any observations important enough to be entered in the minute book.' They also adopted unanimously the revised rules, one of which stated

"That the club meet every Tuesday and Friday evenings; the clubroom to be open at 7 o'clock and no game to be commenced after eleven."

When the club was founded the rule stated that the room should be "closed at eleven". Why was it necessary, to make the alteration? Had some members objected to leaving at 11 p.m. if their games were unfinished? The new rule imposed no closing time. So long as a game was begun before eleven it would seem that the players could stay until its completion.

How many of them walked home at, say midnight, or were driven by their own coachmen or by hired cabbies? Many of them would not, of course, have to go so far as members have today, but I wonder what time they had to get up for business? The subscription and entrance fee remained the same as in 1853, but a member who entered on or after 1st April was only charged 5s. for that year in addition to the entrance fee. Under the original rules members were permitted to play draughts as well as chess, and in 1854 the club bought a set of draughts. The 1874 rules, however, withdrew the privilege. Rule 8 laid down that no game but chess could be played in the room.

Curiously enough it retained the old rule that any member conducting himself in an improper manner may ,be expelled and also the rule under which a spectator interfering with a game should be fined one shilling, but to this it added, "at the request of one of the players". There is nothing in the minutes indicating that there had during the first twenty years of the club's existence been a need for these rules, but the fact that they were repeated would suggest that the rulemakers still considered it wise to issue the warning.

Bradford's turn to entertain the West Yorkshire Chess Association's annual gathering came round again in 1877, and the committee endeavoured to make it as great a success as the earlier meetings in the town. The question of choosing an association president seems to have caused the committee members some little worry. A very well known and successful Bradford businessman was proposed and three members were instructed to see him and invite him to fill the office, but before the delegation had carried out its task the proposal was reconsidered and "it was further agreed that Bishop Ryan (the Rural Dean) should be invited". Even this did-not please. everyone, for one member protested, and insisted that his protest. a, should be entered in the minute book—"against the choosing of

president outside of the club". The reason for the protest was "in order that the decision of the committee should not be used as a precedent".

He need not have made the protest. A deputation of three members waited on the Bishop but could not induce him to accept the post, so the committee thought deeply again and finally invited the Town Clerk of Bradford, Mr. W. T. McGowen, who readily consented. From the fact that no similar protest was made I assume that Mr. McGowen was already a member of the club.

This was the twenty-second annual meeting of the association and -the third to be held in Bradford. First, second and third-class tournaments were held, the entrance fee for each player was 2s. 6d.— a sizeable fee for. 1877—and the Bradford club gave in addition prizes to the value of four guineas in the first class, three guineas in the second, and two guineas in the third. The price of a tea ticket, which also gave the right of admission to the meeting, was 2s. 6d. for members of chess clubs and 3s. 6d. for non-members. It should have been a remarkably attractive meal at that price—and probably, was.

The "Observer" reported the meeting at length. Of the presidential address, which was given after tea, it said:

"Mr. McGowen expressed his great satisfaction at seeing so many gentlemen present from neighbouring towns, to whom he tendered, in the name of the Bradford club, a hearty and sincere welcome. On leaving the other room just before tea he saw several gentlemen engaged in a deadly conflict, and he had no doubt many of them had, while at tea, been plotting and designing and laying all sorts of snares and traps for their opponents, just as on a larger scale the same was being done in matters affecting the well-being or destruction of those of our fellow citizens who were, engaged in a greater war. (Hear, hear.) Knowing therefore how eager the belligerents present were to fight each other again across the board, he would not detain them unnecessarily long ... One of the chief charms of chess, and one which was specially marked at those annual gatherings, was that however warm the contest might be, it was scarcely ever that one found the disputants themselves out of contempt with one another. (Applause.) That was one of the advantages which chess had over what might be called games of chance—cards and the like,—for in such games fortune sometimes favoured one player continuously for a considerable time, and then the temper of the other player was apt to get ruffled. But in chess it was a game of skill; the one who was unsuccessful knew that he had been either reckless of his own movements or had had a superior adversary to contend with, and in this world he did not think that anyone regretted being beaten in a fair field by a superior foe. (Applause.)"

As to which was the "greater war" to which he referred, we can only guess. The Russians and the Turks were in conflict in 1877, but would Mr. McGowen refer to those distant warriors as "our fellow citizens" ? But what glowing terms he used about the game of chess ! Surely they should have inspired many non-chess players who read, this report in the "Observer" to try to learn something of the game and to make application for membership of the Bradford club! Unfortunately they had little effect. As the years went by the membership fluctuated between 30 and 40, the reserve funds became almost exhausted, and in 1882 a special meeting to discuss the club's finances was called.

## **TWO CLUBS AMALGAMATE**

Happily there were better days in store. Although the number of chess players in Bradford may not have been large, there were certainly some very enthusiastic ones among them, in particular Herr Cassel, the chess editor of the "Bradford Observer Budget", who was a member not only of the Bradford club but also of the Bradford Exchange Chess Club, which had then been formed, and who no doubt was also, interested in the Schiller Verein, which had a chess section.

At the West Yorkshire Chess Association annual meeting in Leeds in 1884 Herr Cassel proposed that chess club secretaries should meet to arrange match fixtures for the season, and in order not to discourage the small clubs which might have been short of funds he suggested that the home teams should not be compelled to entertain the visitors. Let the well-to-do pay for their own meals! So enthusiastic was he about his scheme that he visualised a large number of matches each Saturday. "And the papers of Monday morning in reporting the results of these matches," he said, "would declare how popular the game was becoming and how it was taking an equal place with cricket and football, to which position none who thoroughly knew the game would deny its right." There was no applause after the statement—only one "Hear, hear". Perhaps Herr Cassel's audience was taken aback by the suggestion that chess would equal in popularity those outdoor sports. But they did rise to enthusiasm and applause when he finally proposed the institution of a Yorkshire chess challenge cup.

"I do not see," he said, "why the chess clubs should not meet just as the football clubs do and play for a cup. The early part of the season—November, December and January—might be spent in playing friendly matches; in February and March the more serious business of playing for the cup might be engaged in; and then when the annual meeting of the association came round that would form a splendid opportunity for the presentation of the cup to the victorious club."

The Mayor of Leeds, Alderman E. Woodhouse, who took a keen interest in chess and who presided at the meeting, agreed with Herr Cassel's proposals and very generously asked to be allowed to present the challenge cup. "I do not say that it will be worth a thousand guineas," he said with a smile, "but at any rate it should be a respectable piece of plate". And Alderman Woodhouse kept his word. He presented the very respectable piece of plate now known as the Woodhouse Cup. Bradford Chess Club, then, can justifiably boast that it was the enthusiasm of one of its members which led to the introduction of this first-team championship competition, which for long years has been one of the most notable in the country.

Herr Cassel also played a notable part in the amalgamation of the Bradford Chess Club and the Exchange Chess Club which took place that year, and was appointed the first secretary. A short time before the amalgamation the Bradford club had moved its headquarters to the Talbot Hotel and to mark the occasion the president, Mr. A. Sussman (who, it is sad to say, died three days later), entertained the members of the two clubs to tea. About sixty chess players were present, and, according to Herr Cassel, a team of twenty-five could be selected which would be equal, if not superior, to any team in the country. Once again he spoke with great enthusiasm. How could they maintain this superiority? he asked. And then he gave the answer—amalgamation!"Since the establishment of the Yorkshire Challenge Cup", he declared, "all objections raised to the amalgamation of the two clubs has fallen to the ground. The united strength of both clubs, would make the fight for the cup easier." The members of both clubs agreed. Each club held a meeting. Amalgamation was approved without opposition, and on 17th

June the new Bradford Chess Club held a special meeting to elect officers and revise the rules. Alderman F. Priestman, who had been a member of the Exchange Club, was elected president. At an earlier gathering, at which he had advocated amalgamation of the clubs, he had said that the game of chess was one which ought to be encouraged everywhere; it would keep the working men from the public houses and prevent gambling.



But where was the working man to be encouraged to play chess? The Bradford club, with its 10s. entrance fee and 10s. annual subscription, hardly offered him the opportunity in those days. I have, been unable to discover how long the Exchange Chess Club had been in existence before the amalgamation. Its minute books have not been preserved, but it must have had only a short life, for when, early in 1884, it applied for membership of the West Yorkshire Chess Association its spokesman, Mr. R. M. Macmaster, who was also a member of the Bradford club, said he supposed that "every player present knew that lately a new club had sprung up in Bradford". The youngster was full of vigour and self-assurance. Mr. Mac-master claimed that although its history had been short, it had been not altogether without brilliance, and he declared that if the association refused it admittance, it had sufficient confidence to challenge the association in a body. "Therefore," he added amid laughter, "it might not be altogether impolitic in the association to allow this enterprising club to be enrolled within its ranks." The application, which was unanimously approved, was seconded by a Leeds club representative, who said that as the Exchange club had defeated the Leeds club, he did not see how it could be kept out of the association.

That the Exchange club had every justification for its confidence was shown by the results of the competitions arranged between players attending the West Yorkshire Association meeting that day. There were five classes, with eight players in each of the first four and four in the fifth. The number of prizes "won or divided by the successful competitors were," said the "Observer" report, "allotted among the various clubs as follows: Bradford Exchange 4, Leeds 3, Wakefield 2, Dewsbury 2, and Sheffield 1". Where was the Bradford Chess Club? When the youngster joined forces with the 31-year-old club great things were expected and in due course were achieved. A competition was arranged to ascertain the playing strength of each member. In the classified list of members issued in

July, 1884, there were 30 in Class A, 32 in B, 38 in C, 19 in D and 26 in E—a total of 146, which is about twice the number of the club's membership in this its centenary year.

There were great days in store, with enthusiasm in the club competitions and success in the Woodhouse Cup, the Bradford club being the first winner of that trophy. To celebrate the amalgamation a social gathering of members and friends was held in July, 1884, and on 20th February the following year there was a ball at the Technical College. Chess had entered the social life of the town. And how quickly a ball could be arranged in those days!

The committee appointed to make the arrangements did not receive its final instructions until 13th February. It had to work speedily, but with caution, for the minutes announce, "The limit of the club's responsibilities to be £18".

The club must have been a very vigorous organisation at that time, and the secretarial duties must have been sufficient to require the services of two men, for the printed circular inviting members to "the annual chess gathering" to be held "on Saturday afternoon and evening, the 21st instant, when the president's trophy, a handsome cup, will be competed for", was signed by two honorary secretaries.

Unfortunately the two officials did not keep the minutes so thoroughly as some of their predecessors had done when it was a one-man task. The minutes of a few of the committee meetings are entered in pencil. I have been unable to discover an annual report for 1885, or any reference to the outstanding achievement of being the first Woodhouse Cup winners; and the only reference to the first annual ball after it had been held is that "Mr. Starling read the report of the ball and conversazione, showing a balance of £3 13s. 3d. to be handed over to the treasurer". Was that a profit, or was it what was left out of the £18?