

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

## **Part 3 of 4**

### **THE TOURNAMENT OF 1888**

But it would be unkind to be too critical of the minute writers. These were great days for chess in Yorkshire, and the Bradford club, which had reduced its annual subscription to 7s. ("payable in advance half-yearly, on October 1st and April 1st") and which no longer demanded an entrance fee, had a good membership, and the town was regarded as one of the leading centres of chess in the North. It was in Bradford on 23rd January, 1886, that the Yorkshire County Chess Club held its first meeting. Its supporters were chiefly members of clubs affiliated to the West Yorkshire Chess Association, and there was thus a link between the two organisations from the start; but it was not until ten years later that they amalgamated and took the name of the Yorkshire County Chess Association. And it was in Bradford in 1888 that the British Chess Association held an international master-tournament and the British Amateur Championship. This was the first international tournament ever held in the provinces. For Bradford to be chosen was a tribute to the town and to its Chess Club. Indeed, no chess club in the provinces can boast a greater honour.

Up till then there had been four international tournaments in this country—1851, 1862, 1872, and 1883, the last three of which had been organised by the British Chess Association. All four had been held in London. To increase the interest in chess the B.C.A. had decided that master-tournaments should be held alternately in the capital and the provinces, but at first, it could find no provincial committee which would undertake the responsibility. Then the Yorkshire County Chess Club showed initiative. It offered to make arrangements for a tournament in Bradford.

This is a subject that I thought would be fully described in the Bradford Chess Club's minute book, but the club members and officials were too modest. They left no record of the great part they played. There is little reference to the tournament at all apart from the announcement that it was decided to contribute £2 2s. towards the expenses and to form a provisional committee to see if satisfactory arrangements could be made for the tournament. Appointed to the committee were Messrs. Priestman, Muff, Delius, W. C. Ferrand, Macmaster, Macaulay, Glaser, Groux, W. P. Byles, Whitaker, Bell, Hameyer, T. A. Guy, Brooke, J. A. Guy, Miller, Browne, Hall, Padgett, Woollard, Gorell, Cassel and A. Fattorini. I am sorry that only a few of the Christian-name initials of the committee members are given, and that I do not know who was the Mr. Delius. Perhaps he was Mr. Julius Delius, father of the composer.

Judging by the reports of the tournament which I have read in the "Observer" files the provisional committee must have been a very efficient one. The tournament was held at the Alexandra Hotel. Supporters of the game in Bradford alone succeeded in raising £100 towards the funds—a remarkable sum for a provincial town to produce for such an occasion so long ago. The Yorkshire County Chess Club contributed £35, and the B.C.A. doubled the Bradford and the county gifts. With the entrance fees added the committee had more than £300 at its disposal. Of this £260 was paid in prize money, £230 being distributed among the six most successful players. The first prize was £80 and the others £50, £40, £30, £20 and £10.

There were eighteen entries, but one of them, the Rev. A. B. Skipworth retired after five rounds and his score was cancelled. The others included six masters resident in Britain—Bird, Blackburne, Burn, Gunsberg, Mason and Pollock—and Captain Mackenzie, who came from New York, Taubenhau (Paris), Von Bardeleben (Berlin) and Weiss (Vienna). There were a number of amateurs, among them J. E. Hall, a member of the Bradford club. Gunsberg, who scored 13<sup>1</sup> points out of a possible 16, was the winner, Mackenzie with 12 was second, and Bardeleben and Mason with 11 were equal third. Hall was sixteenth with 31 points. He defeated three amateurs and drew with Bardeleben. There were thirteen competitors in the British Amateur Championship, and Antony Guest, of London, chess editor of "The Morning Post", was the victor with a score of 10. A Bradford player, G. A. Schott, was second with 9<sup>1</sup>, and J. A. Woollard, a Keighley player, but also a prominent member of the Bradford club, was equal third and fourth with C. G. Bennett and J. S. West, of Leeds (7.5) . Woollard was also in the final of the first Yorkshire championship, which began at this tournament but which was completed some time afterwards, Bennett being the winner.

The congress began on 7th August and lasted a fortnight. Bradford was very proud of the honour, and the players were given a hearty welcome at a civic reception. There was great praise for the Bradford club at a subsequent dinner, at which there was an attendance of seventy, including Ald. Woodhouse, donor of the Woodhouse Cup, who made a very bright speech. "Leeds being the largest town in the largest county in the largest country," he said amid laughter, "I can scarcely understand how it is that Bradford has been chosen for the holding of the congress. "I have always said," he went on, "that of all towns in the world Bradford is famed for its excessive modesty." Then he paused, and added: "For aggressive, downright sheer impudence. I do not know a town in England to equal it. Of course, I am speaking exclusively now of chess matters. But Bradford had good reason to invite the Chess Association down, for there is no mistake that Bradford has given them an extremely good example in the art of chess playing. It is perhaps because there is a large foreign element, a cosmopolitan mixture, but be the facts what they might, Bradford has taken a foremost position in chess."

About eight months before his tournament success Gunsberg had been the guest of the Bradford club for a week and had given lectures and simultaneous displays. A short time before H. E. Bird, then a veteran, had engaged in simultaneous play, and the same autumn there was an important encounter in Bradford between Gunsberg and Blackburne. Unfortunately Blackburne fell ill after they had played 12 games, and the match was completed in London. Finally, Gunsberg had five wins and Blackburne two. The same season the Bradford club had two smoking concerts and the annual ball—the fourth—which resulted in a handsome profit. It therefore had certainly much to enthuse about when at its annual meeting of October, 1888, it reviewed the previous year's work.

"The important contests which had taken place in the town," said the secretary's report, "—including the Blackburne-Gunsberg match, the meeting of the West Yorkshire Chess Association, and the international chess congress, in which one of the members of the club, Mr. J. E. Hall, figured as a master—had no doubt given a great impetus to the game, and it was not too much to anticipate a brilliant career for the club during the ensuing season." At the annual meeting in 1887 Mr. T. A. Guy had urged "the need for greater unanimity among Bradford chess players", and had expressed the hope that "the new committee would make an effort to bring into harmony the dissentient feelings of chess players in the town generally". I do not know what they were dissentient about, but the differences could not have been very serious ones, for Mr. Guy himself, after making the appeal for harmony, had said that he knew of no club that had better prospects. "There are now in Bradford," he had added, "the elements of a combination of chess players such as has never

been known before. There has been a vast improvement in the character of the play during the past year, and never has there been so rapid an advance as on the part of the young chess players during the year."

Apparently the dissentient feelings vanished, for in the records of the annual meeting of the following year no reference is made to them by Mr. Guy. Instead he spoke of the busy year and said that "Bradford has never experienced in its whole history so much chess playing in its midst". That description is still true. Since then the Bradford club has had many notable seasons. Its teams have distinguished themselves. It has entertained many famous masters, but never has Bradford itself had a more notable period in the chess world than it had in 1887-88.

The annual ball of that period must have stood high in the list of Bradford's social engagements. The printed announcement that it was to take place at the Technical College is still preserved in the minute book. It states that the price of a double ticket, including refreshments, was 10s. 6d. (quite an expensive affair, I should imagine, for 1888) and of "extra ladies' tickets" 5s. 6d. The public was warned that an early application for tickets was desirable because the number would be limited, and there was the intimation that all names were subject to the approval of the committee. Why was that inserted? Did they really think that anyone who would spoil the tone of the gathering would apply? Or was it merely away of impressing upon potential ticket-buyers that this was really a first-class affair—a subtle form of advertisement?

There is no information as to whether the committee rejected any applications. Everything indeed seems to have run smoothly, and so pleased was the club committee with the members of the ball committee, who handed over a profit of £5 19s. 6d., that it decided on 24th February to entertain them "in some suitable manner at the expense of the club in recognition of their services". The committee members had, however, to wait a little while for the recognition. It was given to them in the form of refreshments—at a sum not exceeding £1—at the club's smoking concert held at the County Restaurant on 12th May. Details of the nature of the refreshments are not recorded.

Thus not only in chess but also in its organisation of social functions the club progressed. In its club amenities, too, it advanced. In 1889 the cafe at which it met changed from gas lighting to electric lighting—a change on which the president, Ald. Priestman, commented with great pleasure at the annual meeting. He said he was quite sure that members would find much benefit from the change. Gas, he told them, consumed the oxygen and left behind it certain residual products which were anything but advantageous from the point of view of health. Nothing of that sort happened when electricity was used for lighting purposes. I wonder if there was a protest from the gas suppliers when they read the report of his speech.

The Bradford team showed its appreciation of the improvement by winning the Woodhouse Cup, and in celebration of the victory the members had a dinner at the County Restaurant. The chess world seems to have been more inclined to celebrate in those days than it does today. A fortnight before the Bradford club's dinner, for example, the Yorkshire and Lancashire chess teams, which had played a match of twenty boards in Bradford, had a dinner of seven courses at the Alexandra Hotel, followed by six after-dinner speeches.

The Bradford club's dinner, too, was of notable dimensions. Its menu was:

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**SOUP:**

Ox Tail

**FISH:**

Fried sole and anchovy sauce Boiled cod and oyster sauce

**ENTREES:**

Braised chicken and mushrooms/Compote of pigeons

**JOINTS:**

Roast sirloin of beef/Roast fillet of veal

**SWEETS:**

Prince of Wales pudding/Rhubarb tar/Compote of fruit/Custards/Cheese Dessert

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The price was 2s. 6d. In the words of Mr. T. A. Guy, who invariably had a comment to make at the annual meetings, this was the most successful and active season that the club had ever had and the list of active playing members was the largest in its history. Unfortunately the number is not given in the minutes. A printed report and balance sheet had been issued and a copy has not been kept. The list of playing members of 1892, however, contains 143 names. It is surprising that so few annual reports in the first fifty years contain the number of members. The strength of the club should be one of the first facts noted in a report, but no one seemed to worry much about exact numbers and comparisons in those days. In the forty-ninth annual report it is stated that "unfortunately the club has sustained great losses to its playing strength from the cessation of active play of many of its members, and consequently to get together a really representative team has been somewhat difficult ... As against this, however, there has been a large influx of younger players of good promise, whom we trust will soon be in a position to carry on the high traditions of our club".

The balance sheet for the year showed that members' subscriptions and donations received amounted to £16 13s., and that unpaid subscriptions totalled £3 1s. 6d. Based on those figures the club must have had fewer than sixty members on the eve of its jubilee. How the jubilee was celebrated is not recorded. The e forty-ninth report draws attention to the anniversary and recommends that "some function of a public character should be arranged to celebrate the event," but the minutes contain no further reference to it, except that on 17th October, 1902, a sub-committee of three members was appointed to raise funds for the celebrations, and on 20th September, 1903, "it was decided that the sum of money required to make up the rent should be borrowed from Jubilee Fund". In the absence of information as to how much remained after the rent was paid and what happened to it, we can only trust that the members celebrated the anniversary in a manner worthy of the occasion, for the club certainly had a record of which it could be proud.

## THE CLUB'S HEADQUARTERS

In its first fifty years it had had many headquarters. Its first meeting, as has already been noted, was in the ante-room of the Exchange, and possibly its second meeting, a week later, was held there too, but afterwards the clubroom was, according to the minutes, "at the Savings Bank". Which building this bank occupied I have not been able to discover with certainty, but I believe it was in Manor Row. After a few months the members did consider removing to St. George's Hall, but' naturally they changed their minds when they were informed that the president had discussed the matter with the bank trustees, who had decided to allow them the use of the room rent free.

There the club remained for five years, and when it moved to the ante-room of the Masonic Hall, in Salem Street, at a rent "not exceeding £15 per annum, inclusive of gas, coal and taxes", it showed its gratitude to the bank by deciding "that the gas fittings be left in the board room of the Savings Bank". After another five or six moves it came, in September, 1909, to its present headquarters, the Central Cafe, Sunbridge Road, where it remained until 1947 and to which it returned in 1952.

There are some amusing observations in the minutes about the distractions which arose at one or two of the headquarters. At one cafe dancing classes were held in one room while chess was played in the other. The chess players were annoyed. They asked for the dancing nights to be changed, but were told that if there must be a change it was the Chess Club which must make it. At another place the clicking of billiards balls disturbed the strategists, and requests were made for a soundproof partition and a further source of irritation is revealed by this resolution of 1887: "That Messrs. Guy and Muller should see Mr. Bentley in reference to the new chessmen provided by the cafe authorities for the use of non-members, with a view to their removal. They apparently disliked the squatters.

One cafe—Steel's, in Charles Street—was damaged by fire, and new headquarters had to be found. Eventually the question was raised: Should the club run its own cafe? The Mecca Cafe, which had the premises now occupied by the Central Cafe, was for sale. Amember made inquiries into the matter, and at a committee meeting held on 15th July, 1909, he asked if the club was prepared to purchase the fittings, etc., and become cafe proprietors. "The reply," say the minutes, "was a decided negative. On the other hand, if a private company was formed to run the cafe the Chess Club was quite prepared to transfer its tenancy provided terms were similar to the present ones". A private company was formed by members of the club, the Central Cafe was established, and the Chess Club property was removed to the premises on 25th October, 1909, in readiness for the season's opening at the end of that month. The premises which the cafe occupies were originally, I am told, a turkish-bath. The walls are tiled, and in the main room there are two tiled pillars. All the rooms are below ground. Once there were a few windows at pavement level, but in 1939, as a protection against possible air raids, these were blocked up, and a new ventilation system was installed.

For more than forty years chess players and spectators have gathered there. They have come to love the place. It has a charm which, I am sure, no chess cafe in the world can surpass. It has a spirit of friendliness which would warm the coldest heart. And how entertaining are the lunchtime games, especially at the tables where by tradition the spectator is entitled to make comments and even to suggest moves if he wishes ! For a lunchtime player to object or for him even to look darkly at a commentator would be in the worst of taste. Throughout the day after morning coffee until 6 p.m., when except on Chess Club nights the cafe closes its doors, the chess player who has an hour to spare can almost invariably find a kindred spirit to challenge, and the non-player who likes to watch can find a game of interest. There are no rules and regulations. There is no compulsion to buy a meal if one wishes to play or to look on. There is

no compulsion to buy even a cup of tea or coffee, although he would indeed be a niggardly creature who came to enjoy the comradeship and made no purchase. When the café closes its daily business and on Tuesday and Thursday evenings and Saturday afternoons and evenings in the season hands over the chess room to the exclusive use of the Chess Club and play naturally becomes more serious even in the friendly games, and very serious where trophies are at stake. Spectators do not interfere. No one would dream of making a comment, let alone of suggesting a move. There is no need now for Rule 10 which the founder-members instituted in 1853. But the charm of the place remains. The club player who has had a busy day in office or workshop finds the same friendly atmosphere as does the daytime visitor. The quietness of the basement cafe is not disturbed by the buses and cars which pass by on Sunbridge Road and Tyrrel Street. The footsteps of the pedestrians do not penetrate. He can concentrate on his game in peace. He is in the centre of Bradford but as far away in spirit as if he were on a mountain top.

In 1909 the club quickly settled down in its new premises. Its affairs ran smoothly. Its membership remained of reasonable size, although its income was not always as satisfactory as the treasurer wished. At the annual meeting in 1911, for instance, it was stated "that it had now come to this—that we must either spend less or get more income." Perhaps it was shortage of funds that led to the decision recorded in the minutes in the following brief but blunt words: "An application by Senor Capablanca to give a simultaneous display was not entertained." Apparently not one solitary word was spoken in favour of the offer. Did Capablanca want too much money, or wasn't he of sufficient fame in those days to arouse the enthusiasm of Bradford's chess players?



CLUB NIGHT AT THE CENTRAL CAFE

*Photo: Telegraph and Argus*