

A Window On The Past

Desmond Pott, Chairman of Wiltshire County Association, discovers an unsuspected hive of chess activity in sleepy Wiltshire at the turn of the century.

At the end-of-season pub meal in 1990, Richard Rendell, then Chairman of the Wiltshire Association, remarked that there were no County records dated earlier than 1932, when the County Chess Association was revived under the leadership of Canon A. G. Gordon Ross, Swindon Chess Club and President of the B.C.F. 1921 – 38. That led me to look through the records of the Salisbury Chess Club where I found a small batch of press cuttings covering the four months from December 1900, which threw some light on our murky past and make fascinating reading.

The cuttings establish that there was then a flourishing County Association, one report commenting that “Chess has been well-organised in Wiltshire for 10 years, and their county championship tourney, under the able management of Mr. A. Schomberg as hon. Secretary, is most successful”. Mr. Schomberg was then the regular Board 1 for the Devizes Club and also a very enthusiastic simul-giver: in the four month period alone, he travelled to Calne, Pewsey, Swindon, Calne (again) and Mere, his full record being W37, D16, L17 = 64.3%. One wonders whether he was paid for these displays, at least enough to cover his expenses.

Two county matches are reported, the full score sheet being given for both. Apparently, Wilts, Somerset and Glos. Played one another over 16 boards to decide which of them should proceed to the Southern Counties Championship Finals. The first of the reports, dated 23.2.01, records the first-ever victory of Wiltshire over Somerset (by 9½ - 5½) at Trowbridge, and notes that the Bd. 5 result (a draw, making the final score 10 – 6) was not known at the time of going to press because the game had been played at the home of one of the players involved! A week later, Somerset lost to Gloucestershire 5 - 11, but no further details were given.

The crunch match, the, between Wilts and Glos is reported at length - over 12 column inches, 2½ inches wide and very small print - but unfortunately no games or positions were included.

Wilts were strengthened by six new players coming in, (the redoubtable Canon Ross drawing on Bd. 1 incidentally) whereas Glos were weakened by 4 team changes. Nevertheless, Glos emerged victorious by 10 - 6.

Here are some interesting details from the report. The openings played on the various boards were as follows:-

Opening	Boards
Ruy Lopez	1, 3, 6, 8, 9
Centre Gambit	2
Queen's Gambit	4, 10, 12, 13
Centre Counter Gambit	5
Sicilian	7, 15, 16
Giuoco Piano	11
French Defence	14

A certain Miss Rudge, described as the “Lady Champion of the World”, had been expected to play for Glos, but did not appear. Does any reader have further information on this lady and her qualifications for assuming this title? Col. Law, who had played on Bd. 2 for Wilts v. Somerset, and lost, was relegated to Bd. 6 because of the team-strengthening, and had to leave the match early to catch a train (!): the game was adjudicated a loss for him.

The match was played at the Imperial Hotel, Clifton, and began at 4.15 p.m., which no doubt reflected the facts that many people, who would today enjoy a 5 day week, then worked on Saturdays to at least midday, and that trains were the usual means of transport between towns. Play was at the rate of 24 moves an hour and clocks were used. There was a break for refreshments at 5.45 and play stopped at 7.45, so it could easily have been 11 o'clock or later before some of the visitors got home.

What about club chess in Wiltshire, you may ask? Well, it seems to have been more vigorous than it is today. The cuttings reveal the existence of 10 clubs – Bradford, Calne, Chippenham, Devizes, Marlborough, Melksham*, Pewsey Vale*, Salisbury, Swindon and Warminster. (* = unaffiliated), with Mere being revived in

addition: there may have been more. Today, there are 9 affiliated clubs, of which two are exclusively junior clubs. When the W.C.C.A. was revived in 1932, there were initially only 3 participating clubs - Malmesbury, Salisbury and Swindon - though there was known to be at least one other club (Ramsbury).

Not only were there more clubs then, but the average membership was probably greater than it is today. For instance, in 1896/97 the Salisbury Club boasted 33 members, whereas this season it has only 13. There were no juniors or women included in the 33, but the current 13 includes 2 juniors and 2 lady members, evidence of the Victorian belief that “children should be seen and not heard”. (I can remember my Grandfather saying that, rather sternly, at a family Sunday lunch in the mid-20s!) and “A woman’s place is in the home”. How times have changed! Now junior chess is thriving and a highly-organised activity in its own right, whilst women are featuring more and more in the game, as witnessed by the election at a recent Wiltshire A.G.M. of Fenella Cohen as Match Captain for the 1995/96 season. Is this a first for any county?

There was extensive reporting of inter-club matches, both friendlies and cup ties, although no league appears to have existed. One interesting curiosity was that occasionally two games were played between the same two players, presumably with colours reversed in the second game, and both games counting in the match result. A striking feature is the number of clergymen then playing in the county, nine being named, of whom three belonged to the Warminster Club.

The most obvious difference between these reports and the ones we are able to get into the Salisbury Journal today, lies in their length and scope. My earlier comments on the Glos v Wilts match give an idea of the length. The scope is well-illustrated by the report dated 15.12.1900 which opens with Mr. Schomberg’s correct score for his simul. V Swindon, and then goes on to relate that in the North v South correspondence chess match, Mr. Burn had won on top board for the North against Mr. Gunston of Cambridge (1½ - ½) and that Mr. Moore of Manchester had donated a handsome trophy to be competed for by the Northern Counties (asking “Will no one do the same for the South?”) The next paragraph relates that the Great Western Railway had beaten the Midland Railway in a friendly match,

and gave the names of all the Swindon Club members who had played for the GWR and their scores. Two full match scores for cup ties followed – Devizes ½; Salisbury 4½ and Warminster 4½ - Bradford ½, and finally the full score was set out of an 18 move game (and the diagrammed final position) played the previous week between two unnamed players in the City of London Tournament. Altogether, nearly 7 inches of a 2½ inch-wide column!

The North v South correspondence match was continually updated. On 16.02.01 the full match score sheet of Swindon 4.5 v. Paddington 4.5 was given. No, you railway buffs, the great G. J. Churchward did *not* play for Swindon! On 12th January it was announced that Mr. Blackburne would visit Trowbridge on 25th & 26th January, playing blindfold against 6 opponents on the former date at 1 shilling (5p) a board, and simultaneously (sighted) against any number on the latter date at 6d (2½p) a board. Alas, there is no record that the visit took place. Does any reader know? A later report said that the Rev. J. F. Welsh was trying to induce the then World Champion Dr. Lasker, to visit Wiltshire after his forthcoming visit to Bristol. Did either visit take place?

Before closing the shutter on what is not so much a window into the past, but more a little peep-hole, here is a game taken from a cutting dated 12.01.01, selected and analysed by my Club colleague Bob Lynn, currently Salisbury’s strongest player. The game was played the previous Saturday at The Woolpack, Trowbridge, on Bd. 2 in a match won 4 - 2 by Swindon, evidently then the strongest Wiltshire Club. Mr Plaister had played Bd. 4 and Mr. Woodrow Bd. 10 in the above Wilts v. Glos match, and so were no slouches in their day.

J. Woodrow (Salisbury)

C. A. Plaister (Swindon)

1901

1. e4	e5
2. Nf3	Nc6
3. d4	exd4
4. Nxd4	Qh4 Such an eccentric and potentially troublesome move would hardly have occurred to the modern player. Black stamps his

style on the game and starts on the road to scatty territories.

5. Nb5 Qxe4+ White takes up the challenge. Otherwise 5. Nc3 Bb4 doesn't help much.

6. Be2 Bb4+

7. c3 Ba5 A nice idea to protect c7. White could have played 7. Bd2, when presumably Black would have kept up the spirit with Kd8. Then, if 0-0 Nf6 etc.

8. 0-0 Nge7

9. Bd3 Qh4

10. Re1 a6
11. Re4 Qf6 White, a pawn down, erroneously embarks on a wild idea which might have come off.

12. N5a3 d5

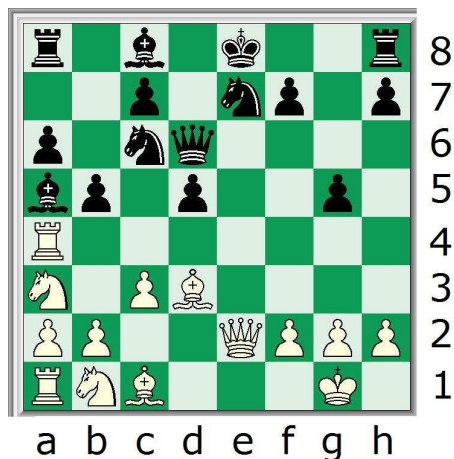
13. Rf4 Qd6

14. Qe2 White is already in a bit of a pickle. He clearly doesn't relish the idea of the Black Knight coming to g6. I suspect that some vigorous play such as Qh5 or Be3 might have been better.

14. ... g5 Modern players might opt for the safer Be6

15. Ra4 It was vital that this square was kept open for the rook. Why else should it have gone to e4!?

15. ... b5



Now for the fun!

16. Bxb5 axb5

17. Nxb5 Qh6

18. b4 If 18. Nc7 Bc7 19. Ra8 Qh2+. White has his eye on the b2-h8 diagonal.

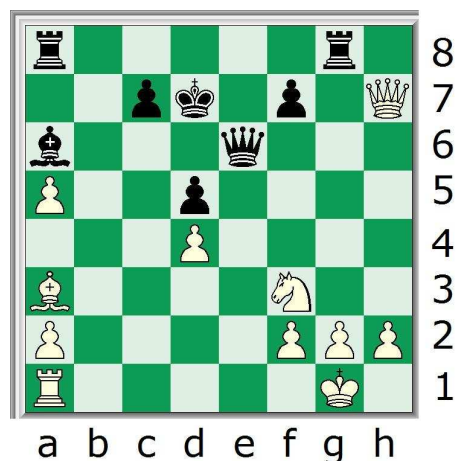
18. ... Bb7 Suddenly, Black's position does not look quite so comfortable. Alternatives, however, seem worse.

19. bxa5 Kd8 The King is less exposed here than on d7 where White can simplify into a favourable ending with Qg4+ and Qg5.

20. Nd4 But this is definitely not right

20. ... Nxd4

- 21. cxd4 Ba6**
- 22. Qe3 Qc6**
- 23. Ba3 Qxa4**
- 24. Qxe7+ Kc8**
- 25. Nd2 Qe8**
- 26. Qxg5 Rg8**
- 27. Qf5+ Qe6**
- 28. Qxh7 Kd7**
- 29. Nf3?**



The final blunder. g3 would have held on for a bit longer. **29...Rxg2+**

30. Kxg2 Qg4+

31. Kh1 Qxf3+

32. Kg1 Bd3

33. Qg7 Ra6

34. Be7 Rg6+

0-1

No doubt soberly dressed, these gentlemen certainly played with panache!