

A short history of the Plymouth Chess Club



In the beginning

Chess has ancient roots, with the game we play today having evolved from chaturanga, played in India 1,500 years ago. However, it was not until the 19th century that chess competitions and organisations began to take shape in the format we would recognise. The first modern chess tournament was held in London in 1851 and Wilhelm Steinitz beat Johannes Zukertort in 1886 in the first official World Chess Championship title match. Two years later on 1st October 1888 a group chess players met and according to the minutes of their meeting, agreed that 'a club be formed called The Plymouth Chess Club'. We can assume the club owes its formation to Thomas Winter-Wood. A writer and poet, Winter-Wood had periods of active chess playing and periods away from the board during his life. Nearing the age of 70 he sold the family's Hareston estate at Brixton and moved into Plymouth. At that first meeting of the club he was elected President. The Winter-Wood's were a family of strong chess players and his son Carslake was the club's first Secretary and Treasurer and another son, Edward J. Winter-Wood, was also a founder member. His wife Eliza was also a chess player but in the early days the club was a men only affair and it was not until 1903 that women became eligible for membership. Following the death of Thomas Winter-Wood he was replaced as President by Edward in 1905/06, a position he held for ten years.



Plymouth Chess Club's 1st President - Thomas Winter-Wood

The early years of the club clearly owe a lot to the Winter-Woods but it was in fact the youngest, Thomas's daughter Edith Baird, who achieved greatest fame in the chess world for her chess problem composing. Edith's first problem was published when she was eight years old and she went on to win many problem composition prizes and publish two chess books. In 1951 her daughter

Lilian Strong presented Plymouth Chess Club with a chess set of silver pieces inherited from her grandfather which the club had made into a new shield, called the Strong Trophy, which is still competed for in the annual club knock-out competition. So the club's founding family still play a part in the life of the club.

The Winter-Woods contribution to chess was Devon wide with Edward being elected in 1907 to the position of DCCA President, a post he held until his death in 1920. Upon taking office he donated a 5 guinea silver cup, given for the individual championship of Devon. In 1994 that 5 guinea cup was valued at £650 and the Winter-Wood Cup continues to be awarded each year to the Devon individual champion.

So thanks to the efforts of the Winter-Woods a chess club was established in Plymouth, but it wasn't just a family affair, there were 48 members in the club's first year – clearly there was plenty of demand for the Chess Club in Plymouth.

Great Club champions

From the outset the club developed a healthy programme of internal competitions, indeed over the years there have been too many to mention but it is the title of club champion that members covet. To become champion it is of course necessary to be a strong player and those who have done so on more than one occasion are the crème de la crème of the club's chess players. However only two have got into double figures of club championships and they both must feature highly in the club's 'Hall of Fame'. The early years of the Club Championship were dominated by Thomas Taylor who won the title eighteen times between 1893 and 1926. Taylor was born in 1860 at St. Cleer near Liskeard but by 1888 he lived in Plymouth and was one of the founding members of the club.

Taylor was not only Plymouth's leading chess player but he was also amongst Devon's best for many years and was Devon individual champion six times between 1910 and 1921. In addition to his contribution as a player he was match captain for the club for 38 years and for the county for over 30 years. Like many significant figures in the club's history, a trophy was named after him and the Taylor Trophy was awarded to the winner of one of the clubs lower divisions from 1947/48 to 2010/11. Taylor lived in Connaught Avenue, just a few minutes' walk away from the club's current home off Mutley Plain.

The season before Thomas Taylor won his last club championship the title was won by a 21 year old Plymouthian Ron Bruce who had won the Devon Individual Championship a year earlier. This was the first of no fewer than thirty seven wins in the club championship, with the last one in the 1985. I think we can assume his record number of club championships is extremely unlikely to be ever broken. Like Taylor, Ron Bruce was also a major figure in Devon Chess, winning the County individual championship seven times and captaining the county team for 40 years. As we will see further examples of below, Ron was a central figure in the club for over 60 years and it is only fitting that since the 1991/92 season, the Club Championship has been named the Ron Bruce Cup.

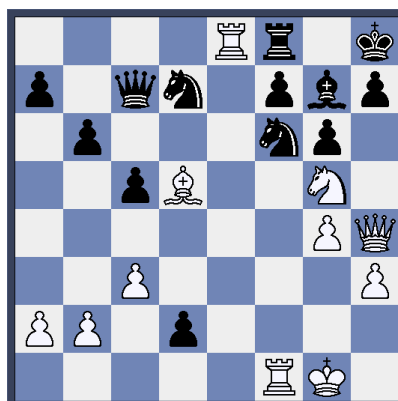
Our World Champion and British Champions

Although this short history is the story of a local chess club, one club member has played a major part in the history of British Chess. Rowena Dew was born in Plymouth, the youngest child of Harvey and Mary Dew, who lived at Cheltenham Place, also just a few minutes' walk from the Club's current home. Mary was a member of Plymouth Chess Club and seeing the potential in 10 year old Rowena, in 1925 she arranged for Ron Bruce, then 22, to give Rowena two lessons a week. She progressed quickly to become the World Girls' Champion in 1935 and the British Women's Champion for the first time two years later. Ron and Rowena married in 1940 and she went on to win the British title under her married name a further ten times (sometimes shared) between 1950 and 1969. Her eleven British titles is a record that stands to this day. She represented Great Britain on a number of occasions and progressed as far as the Women's World Championship Candidates' Tournament in 1952 in Moscow, where she came 12th out of 16.



Rowena Bruce at the Women's Candidates - Moscow 1952

Due to Ron's dominance in the Club Championship, despite her many British titles she only won the championship once, in 1956/57 when she shared the title with her husband. However, in the early 1960s the BBC broadcast a series of radio programmes on chess which included well known players talking through their favourite game. Rowena's choice was a Plymouth Club Championship game which she won with a spectacular mating combination – her opponent – none other than Ron! It had been a very open game during which Ron had the better of the play and he had actually missed the opportunity to win a piece the previous move, Rowena playing white has just taken a rook on e8.



Best play would have been 21. d1Q 22. Rxf8+ nxf8 23. Rxd1 nxd5 24 Rd5 with an almost level game. Instead Ron played the move most club players would probably play in this position without too much thought 21.....Rxe8?? and the game concluded: 22.Qxh7+!! Nxh7 23.Nxf7+ Kg8 24.Ne5+ Kh8 25.Nxg6#. It does seem a little harsh to say on national radio that a victory over your spouse is your favourite game but then, who wouldn't want to talk about such a combination!

Together with Ron, Rowena was very active in chess organisation and they were jointly honoured with a British Chess Federation President's award for services to chess in 1984.

The Club's two other British Champions were at junior level. In 1974 at Clacton, Plymouth schoolgirl Jane Anson won the Girls under 18 British title. Jane went on to go into the first intake of women to Trinity Hall, Cambridge to read Maths where she was also the first female member of the university chess team, winning a Chess Blue (1979). In 1986/87 she won the Club Championship, only the second woman to do so and the first to win it outright. Jane was a great ambassador for her club and county, having captained a Devon girls team to win the counties championship and captained the British Faber Cup team. In the 1988/89 season a presentation was made to Jane shortly before she moved to the USA with her American husband.

Ten years after Jane's British title, in the 1984 Championships at Brighton Neil Crickmore was the joint winner of the under 18 title (shared with Neil McDonald, now GM). In the previous season Neil had become the club's youngest ever Champion at the age of 17. More recently he has played limited over the board chess but when he has played his defeated opponents have included International Masters and he remains Plymouth's strongest chess player.

Simultaneous exhibitions

A unique feature of the Club's history has been its ability to attract the very best players in Britain and the world to Plymouth to give simultaneous exhibitions.

Bob Jones' Devon Pioneers biography of Thomas Winter-Wood relates:

The Winter-Woods, father and son, were keen to give the new club a high profile and invited a number of big names down to give simultaneous displays. Blackburne came down that very autumn (1888) and gave one of his popular blindfold simultaneous displays. In 1891 the Rev. George McDonnell took on 37 opponents, and Blackburne returned, taking on eight opponents blindfold one evening and 23 simultaneously the next. McDonnell returned in 1895. He described the illustrious visitors thus "Blackburne, quiet, gentle and thoroughly good-natured. McDonnell, ever gay and humorous. Bird, as naturally he should be, ever 'chirpy'."

Reading the above descriptions, it is amusing that JH Blackburne should have acquired the epithet 'the Black Death'.

Those who gave simultaneous exhibitions included World Champion Emanuel Lasker in 1898, former World Champions Max Euwe (1948) and Vasily Smyslov (1963) and World Champion to be, Boris Spassky (1966).



Boris Spassky at Plymouth Chess Club in 1966 with the Lord Mayor of Plymouth, Alderman Pascho and Club President, Rowena Bruce

Added to this were many of the biggest names in British chess in the 20th century including Mir Sultan Khan (1932), Sir George Thomas (1935) and Harry Golombek (1951). It is a huge tribute to the club's committee members who will have organised these visits that so many of the very greatest names in chess history have come to Plymouth to display their skills.

Great events

Even more ambitious than the hosting of simultaneous exhibitions, for the Club's Jubilees in 1938 and 1948 the club organised Congresses which included players of local, national and world wide fame. The 1938 event in particular was outstanding in that the top group included both reigning World Champions, Alexander Alekhine and Vera Menchik. This section was completed by Sir George Thomas, Dr. List, Stuart Milner-Barry and George Wheatcroft, while Devon was represented by Harold Mallison of Exeter and Ron Bruce.

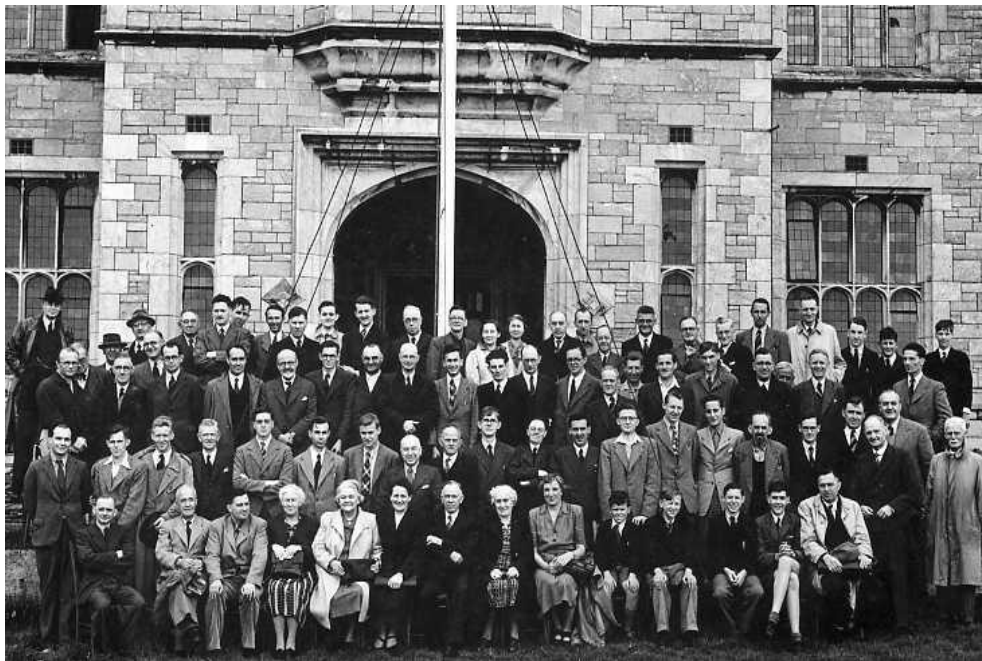


World Chess Champion Dr Alekhine and Mrs Alekhine meet Plymouth's Lord Mayor.

Alekhine did not have things all his own way and in the end tied for 1st place with Sir George Thomas. Ron only scored two draws but that was no disgrace in such exalted company. The following extract from Bob Jones' Devon Pioneers biography of Ron Bruce is entertaining:

The 7 rounds were played in 6 days. The Tuesday was particularly tough, with a game in the morning, the afternoon reserved for adjournments and the Round 3 game in the evening. The draw had determined that Ron would face Alekhine in the morning with Black. He tried the Caro-Kann but was cut down in a game that lasted 11 moves and 30 minutes and entered the chess literature. His opponent for the evening game was Vera Menchik, which he also lost. His one consolation was his subsequent claim to have been the only person to have played two current world champions on the same day in serious play; he dined out on that story for the next half century.

In 1948 the Club celebrated its Diamond Jubilee and held another event on the same lines as the 1938 congress. The star attraction in the top group this time was former World Champion Max Euwe, with Dr. List returning. Ron again represented the home club and he was joined by Devon players, Frank Kitto, and Andrew Thomas. The other home country players were Dennis Horne, Gabriel Wood and former British Champion William Winter.



The group photograph of the Plymouth Diamond Jubilee Congress - Plymouth Institute 9th – 14th August 1948. Max Euwe is seated extreme left. Rowena Bruce and her mother are seated together left centre. Frank Kitto is standing front row extreme left. In the back row, Ron Bruce is standing in front of the right guy rope with Ken Bloodworth beside the left one, and he has Leonard Barden on the left.

Perhaps as a result of the burden of being on the Congress Committee, Ron Bruce possibly underperformed scoring 1.5 points from 7 while Exeter's Frank Kitto had the result of his life, tying with Euwe for 1st place on 5 points.

British Championships

It is a privilege for a chess club to be involved in the hosting of the British Chess Federation (BCF) Championships and the Plymouth Chess Club has enjoyed this privilege three times. I say privilege but it is a huge burden on the club officials who have a large role in ensuring a successful event. The first time it came to Plymouth, in 1957, it was seen as a major success with over 200 entries for the first time. The Club Secretary Ken Bloodworth was the leading spirit in the arrangements but a large number of the members were involved in carrying out tasks – it was clearly a great team effort by the club. The winner of the Championship was Dr Stefan Fazekas who at 59 is the oldest player ever to have won the title.

In 1989 the championships returned to Plymouth and like the 1957 event the record number of entries was again broken, this time with over 1,000 entries! Club officers and in particular Alan Crickmore and his wife Linda worked tirelessly to ensure the success of the event. The 1957 Championship had gone to the oldest player ever to have won the title and the 1989 event produced the youngest British Champion, a 17 year old lad from Cornwall called Michael Adams.

The Championships returned to Plymouth for a third time in 1992 and Alan Crickmore was once again recorded as having done the lion's share of the effort from the Plymouth club including organising a cricket match between the BCF and locals from the Tamar League. In keeping with Plymouth's tradition of breaking records, the 1992 title was won by Julian Hodgson with a record score of 10 points from 11 games which was unequalled until Michael Adams won the 2016 title with the same score.

Those who make things happen

The history of chess is quite rightly dominated by great players playing brilliant chess. However behind the scenes are the organisers and administrators that ensure events are well organised and conducive to great chess playing. This applies at all levels of chess and this history demonstrates that from the time of the Winter-Woods through to the present, Plymouth Chess Club has been lucky to have had club officers of the highest calibre. Two recent examples who have ensured the reputation of the Club has continued to be held in high esteem across Devon and beyond are Ken Bloodworth and Tony Tatam.

Ken Bloodworth refined his chess skills playing with Polish seamen during his service in the Royal Navy and shortly after being demobbed in Plymouth after WW2, his new wife's home town, he joined the Chess Club in 1946 whilst beginning his career as a school teacher. Ken had spells as the Club President and as the Honorary Secretary but it was as a teacher and organiser of junior chess that Ken made his greatest contribution. The first event he organised was the Devon Junior Congress at Plymouth College in 1953. That year, there were 24 entrants with local schoolboy George Wheeler being among the top winners and perhaps the first of many great junior talents nurtured by Ken. George went on to be seven times Club champion and four times Devon Individual champion before retiring from active chess, he remains a club Honorary Vice President. By the mid-1950s Ken had become Devon's Junior Chess Secretary and held just about every position there is in junior chess, up to and including Chairman of the BCF Junior Committee.

One of his many roles in junior chess was secretary of the Glorney Cup competition, a position he held for 30 years from 1961. The Glorney Cup is an annual event for junior teams from the four home nations and at different times, France, Holland and Belgium. Ken must have been delighted when Plymouth hosted the combined Glorney and Faber (Girls) tournaments in 1976 and local schoolgirl Jane Anson not only captained the victorious team but won all her games as well.



Ken Bloodworth 1914 to 2011

Ken also made huge contributions to chess in many other ways including as the writer of a weekly chess column in the Western Morning News for 37 years and spells as President of the Devon County Chess Association and as WECU President. As for his chess playing, I can personally testify as one of his defeated opponents in his final season, his skills did not decline with age!

There can be little doubt that as computer games and other technologies have grown in popularity the number of chess enthusiasts has declined and many smaller chess clubs have closed. It is a testament to the organisation skills and professionalism of current Honorary Secretary Tony Tatam that the Plymouth Chess Club has not only kept going but continues to thrive and provide opportunities for players from beginners to county first team standard to play in a variety of internal and external leagues. Tony took over as Secretary in 1990/91 and he has seen the Club's successful move to its current home at the Plymouth Bridge Club in Mutley. In 2014 he organised the 1st Plymouth Rapidplay tournament. It has quickly become a popular part of the Devon chess calendar and in 2016 welcomed its first Grandmaster participant, Keith Arkell.

Tony continues to have a key role in the life of the Chess Club but his work on behalf of chess is taking him further afield as his expertise grows. In 2007 Tony passed the ECF Arbiter exam and is now regularly arbiting at East Devon, WECU, Paignton, Torbay and Beacon Seniors Congresses and he has been arbiting at the British Chess Championships since 2013 and at the 4NCL since 2015. In January 2016 Tony passed the FIDE Arbiter exam and now has 3 of the 4 norms required to become a FIDE Arbiter. In addition, he has been an ECF Grader since 2014 and currently grades for four chess clubs, six congresses and two leagues. As Lucille Ball said 'If you want something done, ask a busy person to do it'.

Concluding comments

This paper provides a summary of what appear to me to be the key events and personalities in the history of Plymouth Chess Club. Others might well have written a different account. I am aware that there are two significant topics one would expect to see in a chess club's history which I have barely touched on which I should briefly mention here. The first is participation in external leagues. From its early days the Club was very active in Devon County team competitions winning the top division Brembridge Cup for the first of many times in 1905. In more recent times, geographical convenience perhaps has meant the Club has focussed its team chess efforts on Torbay Chess League competitions but it is pleasing to note that for the first time in many years, in 2016/17 Plymouth Chess Club is again competing for the Brembridge.

The second topic is the physical home of the club. Unlike tennis clubs and golf clubs which for obvious reasons tend not to move, chess clubs generally rent rather than own the club room and can have to move on the whim of the landlord. Few can have been more itinerant than Plymouth Chess Club, which started in Matthews restaurant, Bedford Street and has enjoyed (or endured) twenty three moves before settling into its current home.

In early 1941 the Club was based at the Athenaeum but as the bombardment of the city intensified Rowena Bruce took the decision to move all of Club's equipment from the premises. This was a wise decision as a week later the Athenaeum was destroyed by bombs. The Club's activities were suspended for nine months from March 1941 when the club minutes stated 'It was regretfully decided that, owing to the distressing conditions caused by the air raids on Plymouth, the Club should be closed sine die'.

I will leave the final words to Thomas Winter-Wood who wrote in 1898 about the Plymouth Chess Club, "a club of which any man must be wanting in all proper respects to Caissa not to be proud. Long may it live to give pleasure to its devotees after its founders have passed away".

Martin Quinn
19th December 2016

Acknowledgements:

This paper has involved little original research on my part and most of the information has been obtained from two sources whose authors I thank. A much fuller history of the Club was produced in 1968 by the H. G. Roberts without which a good deal of the Club's story may have been lost. This was updated in 1988 by Ken Bloodworth and again in 1994 by Bob Luffman. The second source has been Bob Jones' excellent biographies of 'Pioneers of Devon Chess' which can be read on the Devon Chess and Keverel Chess websites. In addition to information on the lives of many of those mentioned in this short history, all photographs were copied from these websites. Responsibility for any errors or omissions is of course mine.