

A HISTORY

OF THE

DUBLIN CHESS CLUB

*Compiled and written for
the Centenary Year by
A. A. LUCE*

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*(a) Rynd v. Barry, founder-members;
played c.1870.*

*(b) Keres v. Dennehy;
played 1962.*

A photo (undated in the book) but probably taken in the 1950/60s. Dr. A. A. Luce, the author of the book, can be seen in the middle of the front row.



Back row : J. Hackett, G. O'Nolan, W. Conway, M. Drew,
J. J. Walsh, J. Sadlier, C. Ennis, H. Harrison, M. Hanrahan,
W. Lewis.

Middle row : F. Tully, M. Shevlin, C. H. Patrick, Miss M.
Kennedy, J. Murray, Miss A. Miley, F. Maher, P. Mullen, J.
R. Horsham, J. Bull, A. Montwill.

Front row : M. Cumberland, H. A. Hartford, P. McEvoy, E.
Martin, Dr. A. A. Luce, P. W. Whelan, C. L. O'Reilly, M.
Tarlo.

INTRODUCTION

CHESS IN ANCIENT IRELAND

IN n-imbéram fidchill? Have a game of chess? This invitation to a game occurs in the *Book of the Dun Cow*, a manuscript of the 11th century. *Fidchell* was played with two sets of figures, generally made of wood, on a square board divided into black and white squares. The rules of the game are not known. The word *fidchell* means by derivation "wood-sense"; it is more than "wood-pushing", and implies the intelligence and skill, which distinguish chess from other games. The word has an exact equivalent in Welsh, and there is little doubt that *fidchell* is, to all intents, *chess*. It is the Celtic variety of the ancient and far-flung game of skill, played in antiquity and in civilized nations from China to Peru.

That chess has had a long and honourable history in Ireland is certain. Medieval Irish poetry and romance tell of chess-players playing epic games, lasting for three days; so engrossed were they that they took no account of the passage of day and night. It was a royal game. Boards and pieces were heavily studded with flashing jewels. Royal tempers were sometimes frayed; royal players threw pieces about in token of displeasure; innocent menials suffered, and even lost their lives. It is related of King Conchobar that he divided his royal time into three parts: for one-third of the day he watched the sports of his young men; one-third he spent in drinking ale, and one-third he spent in playing chess ("a trian n-aill oc imbirt fhidchille").

Coming nearer our own day we find George Berkeley in a youthful publication, dated 1707, good-humouredly chiding the students of Trinity College, some of them, for spending half the day at chess, begging them to try instead his own invention — the game of algebra! It is certain, too, as our story will show, that by the middle of the nineteenth century chess was well established in Dublin and throughout the provinces.

The antiquity of Irish chess was recognised by the authorities when they included chess as an event in the Tailteann Games. The Dublin Chess Club took a leading part in that event, lending its rooms and equipment (see below p. 26).

The Dublin Chess Club is now approaching its centenary year, and to mark the occasion the following history of the club has been compiled from its records. The story of the club is in large part the history of almost one hundred years of Irish chess. It contains much that is of interest, not only to members of the club, but to all chess players. Incidentally, it contains matter of general interest, telling of changes in social habits, household goods, prices, and the pattern of Dublin life.

THE FOUNDING AND EARLY YEARS

THE DUBLIN CHESS CLUB was founded on the 29th day of October, 1867, at a meeting held at Lawrence's, 39 Grafton Street, Dublin. The founder-members present were the following gentlemen: S. Barry, G. F. Barry, Rev. E. Buckley, R. Collins, Rev. E. J. Cordner (in the Chair), Dr. R. N. Hamilton, R. F. Hunt, P. Jones, W. Lechley, T. Long, Dr. Mason, J. V. Mills, J. B. Pim and J. A. Rynd. The stated objects of the meeting were to settle the basis of the club, and to secure club rooms.

The club was constituted under the title "The City and County of Dublin Chess Club," and it was known by that title for the first eighteen years of its existence.* In 1885 the title was formally changed to "The Dublin Chess Club," and by that name it has been known ever since. The change was mooted at a meeting of the club in 1879; but there was opposition to the change, and it was dropped for the time being. There is no shadow of doubt as to the continuity of the present club with that founded in 1867. It is one club with a changed title. We possess a complete series of records — minuting the proceedings of our Committee and the Club at general meetings, from 29th October, 1867, to the present day.

The two titles, the opposition to the change in 1879, and the change made in 1885, are all explained by another, rather confusing fact, viz., the fact that there was a club with the title "The Dublin Chess Club" *before* 1867. We had connections with that other "Dublin Chess Club," but

* For a time the two titles appear to have been used indifferently in the public press. For instance, we read in 1881 that Steinitz is playing in the "Dublin Chess Club rooms." But in the *Westminster Papers*, vol. x, London, 1878, the full, correct title appears *passim*; e.g. *sub* March, 1878, Zukertort is playing in "The City and County of Dublin Chess Club."

The older "Dublin Chess Club" is also mentioned in the *Westminster Papers*, e.g. *sub* 1877, "At that time (sc. 1860) the Dublin Chess Club numbered among its members amateurs whose Chess force was second to none in the provinces. Sir John Blunden and the Rev. Mr. Salmon had not then retired from the practice of the game . . ."

are not continuous with it. We took over from its officers equipment, including five sets of chess men, and a picture of Paul Morphy (which we still have); but the older Dublin Chess Club *died* before the City and County of Dublin Chess Club was born. Some members of the older club joined the newer; and they, no doubt, hankered for the restoration of the older and neater title after a decent interval for the obsequies of the defunct club. For instance, Peter Jones, the Hon. Secretary of "the late Dublin Chess Club" was a founder-member of our club, present at the inaugural meeting; and we have a letter, signed by him, which proves the validity of the transfer of property. He was elected a member of our first Committee, along with Messrs. Cordner, Lechley, Mason, Pim and Thomas Long (Secretary and Treasurer). They were instructed to draw up a set of rules, and to secure a furnished room with fire, gas and attendance, the rent not to exceed £35 *per annum*. The subscription was fixed at £1 for members residing in the city or county, and 5/- for others. Mr. Cordner was elected Chairman, and Mr. Pim, Vice-Chairman.

The Irish Chess Congress of 1865 had a good deal to say to the formation of the new club. This Congress which was won by Grandmaster Steinitz was of more than local interest. Obviously it could not have been held if a considerable interest in chess had not already existed in Ireland. Chess has long been played here. Indeed as early as 1707 we find George Berkeley in a juvenile publication jesting about the amount of time wasted on chess by the students of Trinity College. What the Congress of 1865 did was to give Irish chess players a continental horizon, and the wish to give the game a national status. A public subscription for chess was opened, and the capital sum of £40 5s. 0d. with which the new club started appears to have been derived in part from this subscription. The Committee of the Irish Congress planned a second international tournament for 1871, and they often met in our rooms about it. This tournament did not materialize; but clearly our founder-members were imbued with the notion of the international character of the game, and in setting up our club they desired to do more than provide chess for its members. Indeed our first Secretary undertook to edit a chess

column in the *Irish Sportsman and Farmer*, "which should benefit the club and chess-players generally."

Our Committee secured a room at 11 Suffolk Street—our first, brief home. There a General meeting was held on the 21st November, 1867. At it the long-vexed question (now happily settled) of the admission of ladies came up for discussion. It was referred to a special committee which met on 9th December, 1867. After a debate the club resolved that, "It would be an innovation to admit Lady Members to a chess club, and as the Club was so recently established, it would be better to decide the question in the negative." Beneath the diplomatic wording one detects a wistful undertone; and those interested in the sociology of the question will find in our records for 1907, 1919 and 1920 details of the steps by which lady-membership attained its full status, and they will note that, as in many matters of graver import, it was the part played by women in the first world war that secured their final emancipation from the trammels of tradition.

The ordinary meetings of the club were on Tuesdays and Saturdays from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. Afternoon play was soon added, and the club days were often changed; indeed at the flourishing period in the first decade of the new century the club was open every day of the week. Competitive chess was encouraged from the start, and high standards were set, as is clear from the first benefaction to the club and its first recorded purchase. On the 17th December, 1867, the Chairman (or President, as we should now say) presented a handsome challenge cup, valued at £25; and on 7th January, 1868, the Committee authorised the purchase of "a few hour-glasses for the tournament." The hour-glass has its drawbacks as a measure of chess-time, but it served its turn till 1895, when two "timing-clocks" were purchased at 25/- each.

The benefaction, mentioned above, had a sad sequel. Mr. Cordner either left his intentions about the cup in doubt, or there was ambiguity in the drafting of the rules. Mr. Cordner was unable to attend the General Meeting of 1868 owing to ill health, and he died on 13th December, 1870. By that time the custody of the cup had become a burning question. Did it belong to the club, or to the "conditional winner"? The case nearly went to law. The club took counsel's opinion, which is still in our archives.

There is no point in going into the rights and wrongs of it now. The upshot was that on 13th February, 1872, the "conditional winner" was directed by the Committee to surrender the cup to two members of the Committee who waited on him; he refused to do so, and the cup was lost to the club. The case was long remembered in chess circles in Dublin, and in April, 1891, it was referred to in the public press.

During its first year the club did well, and at the first of the long unbroken series of its annual general meetings, held on 3rd November, 1868, the Secretary reported the accession of 23 new members, making with the founder-members a total membership of 61. That figure about represents our average membership, which has risen to the nineties and fallen to the forties. The first balance-sheet, too, was satisfactory, viz.: Receipts, £71-17-5; Expenditure, £47-7-1.

A word now about personnel. The Dublin Chess Club is democratic, and "all sorts and conditions" are represented on its membership roll. The Earl of Dartry, noted in the *Peerage* as a distinguished chess player, was a member in 1872, and if not actually a founder-member, he was probably in the movement that gave birth to the club.

The same must be said of Sir Arthur Guinness, who joined the club in 1870, and with characteristic generosity doubled his subscription in the years 1878 and 1879 when the club was in difficulties.

Of the founder-members Messrs. Cordner, Hunt, Jones, Long, Pim and White deserve special mention.

The Rev. E. J. Cordner, the donor of the Cordner cup, was a distinguished player, known in chess circles across the Channel. He took a leading part in the formation of the club, and his death soon after was a loss, keenly felt.

R. Fitzmaurice Hunt is styled "the founder of the club" in a motion of condolence, passed by the club in 1907 on the occasion of his death. He presented medals which for many years were competed for by the members.

J. B. Pim was an active member and officer of the club. He declined the office of Chairman on the death of Mr. Cordner, but was Vice-Chairman and Vice-President for some 24 years.

H. V. White, who was long known as "the Father of the club" had an astonishing record of long membership. He was a member for 67 years. He attended the annual general meeting of 1930, and gave an interesting talk on his recollections of the early days of the club. He died four years later, and the club paid a fine tribute to his memory. The hundred years from 1867 to 1967 is spanned and bridged in thought, when we reflect that there are members of the club to-day who attended that general meeting in 1930, and actually heard a founder-member speak of the foundation of our club. Some folk say that chess is bad for the health, and of course moderation in all things is a golden rule; but our membership roll is evidence for the health value of chess in moderation. A large number of our members played chess, and played it well, up to the threshold of old age.

P. Jones had been Hon. Secretary of the older Dublin Chess club, and he was very active in the establishment of our club.

T. Long was our first Secretary and Treasurer.

The second year of the club's existence was not so successful as the first. The initial impetus was lost; the accounts showed a deficit of £14. A move to cheaper rooms was necessary. We were in the grip of a vicious circle. A drop in membership means cheaper rooms; and cheaper rooms means a further drop in membership. We left Suffolk Street, and took an unfurnished room from Mr. Robertson of Grafton Street at £22-10-0 per annum.* In 1871 yet another move was necessary, and the club migrated to 189 Great Brunswick Street, where we stayed for four years. At the General Meeting of 1871 the Committee reported the numbers of "reliable town members" and "reliable County members" as, respectively, 25 and 6. The exact meaning of "reliable" is not stated, but one can guess it. The fall in membership was due to dissension over the Cordner cup and to dissatisfaction with the club rooms.

In 1873 under the new secretary, Mr. G. Spearing, a determined effort was made to pull the club together, to attract members and provide better accommodation. Spearing was an energetic officer and a stylist in language.

* It was stipulated that members should turn off the gas taps.

His reports to club meetings have every paragraph introduced by the words, "Gentlemen, I have the honour to report that . . ." — a formula typical of a dignified, if leisurely, period. An advertisement for new members was inserted in the *Irish Times*, the *Express* and the *Freeman's Journal*, announcing that the club would be open for play on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in the evening. New members joined, and new and better accommodation was secured at the Friends' Institute, 35 Molesworth Street. Teething troubles were over; a period of stability followed; and Molesworth Street was our home for the next 35 years.

From its earliest days the club took a broad view of its duties, and was not content to provide chess for its members only. In December, 1868, the rooms were lent for "a telegraph match" between Dublin and London, and a match with Belfast Chess club was mooted. In July, 1873, a correspondence match, three a side, with Glasgow Chess club was arranged and held.

Looking back on the struggles and strains of those early years, one is tempted to reflect on the vicissitudes of chess clubs. Chess is a respected game; it has rarely been a popular game, to play or watch. Russia is the one exception in our time. Except in Russia chess is a game of the few and for the few. It is more of a winter game than a summer game. I dare not say that it is more of a man's game than a woman's game; but I do think that high-class, masters' chess is a young man's game, and if young men play it too much — well, they risk not being able to pay their club subscription in middle life. All these things are against us. Chess club life is no primrose-path; in fact the pages of unwritten history are strewn with the dust of defunct chess clubs. Of those that survive many have had the experience, known as "pulling the devil by the tail." Of that experience the Dublin Chess club has had its fair share. We have had our ups and downs, our rising and falling membership, our credit and debit balances. But we have never been "in the red" for long; we have never ceased to function; there has been no interruption of our activities, no gap in our history. We have survived two world wars and internal "troubles." Yet week after week, month after month for one hundred years, without any known break, our club rooms have been open for members

and visitors who wished to enjoy the ancient, international and well-nigh universal game. Our members' roll contains honoured and respected names, men distinguished in politics, education, and the public services, in the professions, in business, and every walk of life. The club has been fortunate in its officers and committee-men, not a few of them eminent in affairs. Its secretaries have looked before and after, and have kept a careful record of the doings of the club, and have preserved for posterity an unbroken series of the minutes of general meetings and Committee meetings, and thus have made a written history possible. We have moved with the times; the gas-tap and incandescent burner have been replaced by switch and electric light, the sands of the hour-glass by the hands of the double clock, with flag poised to fall. But through all the changes of time and place and personnel, a sense of continuity has been preserved, and with it a lasting pride in our club. Members feel warmly towards it, and make sacrifices for it, when the need arises. It has been a home from home for many of us. Once or twice a week persons of different occupations and interests, of different persuasions and politics, have met in a friendly atmosphere, and have settled their differences, or forgotten them, in kindly rivalry and the bloodless battles of the chess-board.

Whenever there has been a call to join with other clubs or representative bodies in running a tourney, in entertaining a visiting master, or in any other way furthering the interests of chess in Ireland, the Dublin Chess club has been to the fore. "The rigour of the game" has been observed; our members have held their own in match play; but the social aspect of club life has never been forgotten. The competitive instinct has been held in check. The balance has been kept, for the most part, between mere "skittles" and serious matches, played to the clock. There has been "chess for the fun of it"; there has been the long, stern battle of wits, followed by the joy of triumph and the sportsman's acceptance of defeat. And there have always been members to whom chess was more than a pastime, more than a battle of wits, more than victory or defeat. We have valued and honoured the game itself. We appreciate its intellectual, aesthetic and moral aspects. Chance plays virtually no part in it. A winning sacrifice is intrinsically a thing of beauty, which winner and loser alike

can enjoy ; and so are the planned build-up of the opening, and the delicate combination of the middle-game, with the issue swaying now to this side and now to that. What a triumph of intellect the game is, played well or ill! The mind that could invent the castling or the queening of the pawn, and, above all, the knight's move that has nothing like it in nature, could invent almost anything.

Pride in our club, pride in its past and in its principles, and pride in the game of chess itself have won the lasting loyalty of its members, and have safely brought the Dublin Chess club through the changes and chances of well-nigh one hundred years.

To continue reading further chapters of Luce's history, return to the [history page](#) of the club's website and click on the chapter of your choice. The next chapter is Chapter 2.