

# A History of Chess in the English Civil Service

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the costumes in crusader style, the white pieces wearing white costumes with gold decoration, and the black pieces wearing red with silver decoration. The kings and queens marched on to the board attended by their pawns. The four bishops followed and formed a square with their croziers under which marched the knights and rooks to salute their sovereigns. Michell had white and won on the 57<sup>th</sup> move. A strong local player, Mr EH Cumberland acted as 'shouter' (conveying the moves from the players) and Mrs Michell and Mr E Cox-Hartnell acted as 'shovers' (pointing the pieces to the correct squares). In the interval, the Kingston Hill Orchestra, led by Mr Jack Hatch played a variety of music, and a game of Capablanca's was demonstrated. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Kingston Hill Troop of Girl Guides acted as attendants.

It was about now that changes were approaching in CS sport. Warren Fisher (1879-1948) was permanent secretary to Treasury and Head of the Civil Service 1919 – 1939. He was asked to improve morale in the CS as it was recognised that staff were unhappy. He had a rather startling solution to this problem. Fisher thought that Civil Service staff were run down and fed up and he suggested that the Government should pay for staff to have a short holiday in Paris to see life! Unfortunately, everyone whom he consulted said it was unthinkable. Fisher commented that he was supposed to raise staff morale... According to O'Halpin's biography,

'He believed that sport could break down barriers of rank and department, and also that it increased a sense of common identity in the service as a whole. The founders of the Civil Service Sports Association were allowed to use offices in the Treasury for their meetings, and in 1921 he launched an appeal among his fellow heads of departments to raise £150 towards the cost of establishing the new body. In 1925 he persuaded

the Government, despite Churchill's objections, to give a grant of £200000 over four years to finance the purchase of suitable grounds. This was announced by Austen Chamberlain at the annual Civil Service dinner on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1926. Leo Amery, who attended the dinner, 'doubted very much this is the right moment for such a concession and I think the doubt is widely shared.'

The Cabinet withdrew the grant. Fisher was furious, 'If the Government do not intend to give the £50000 per year as promised, there seems to be nothing to be said for vague references to the future.' The Civil Service Sports Association was formed in 1921 and later renamed the Civil Service Sports Council (CSSC) and it bought the Chiswick grounds anyway.

In 1938, the Government started a grant of £20000 a year. At least Fisher was still in post then, but the 16-year wait must have rankled. He did not think much of Bonar Law. When Bonar Law stepped down as Prime Minister, Fisher shouted, 'Thank God!'

The Civil Service Chess Association was formed in 1922. GA Felce (President of Surrey) took the chair at a general meeting of Civil Service chess players held on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1922 with the object of approving rules and a constitution for an Association comprising the whole of the chess players within the Civil Service and to elect a provisional committee. The principal objects of the Association were to arrange matches for teams representing the Service as a whole and to obtain a central club room. It was announced in *The Civilian* on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1922 that 'ASSOCIATIONS had been formed for the following forms of Sport :- Cricket, Swimming, Rugby Football, Rowing, Chess, Shooting, Golf, and Athletics.' CSSC's own records said that CSCA was formed in 1921, but post-war this was amended to 1922, which looks correct.

JC Thompson (Customs, and later Government Chemists), a notable eccentric. He devised the opening system called the Hippopotamus, where most of the pawns are on the third rank. Earlier, Alapin's 3... Bb4 in the Ruy Lopez had been christened the Hippopotamus, but the name (and the move) fell into disuse. Admiralty had a further success with W.H. Bailey winning the junior championship.

The rather strong Ludlow Congress (August 12<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup>) was won by EGR Cordingley (6/7), ahead of BH Wood and FGT Collins 4½. Collins became a strong CS player. *Chess* in October 1935 featured an article by WH Watts about the London Chess League, which contained the extraordinary comment, 'When it started, and for a great many years afterwards, the London Chess League had the field to itself, but now there is competition. We have the North London League, the South London League, the Commercial League, the Banks and Insurance League and probably others.' There is of course a startling omission there, but Watts continues that as the LCL started first, it claims pre-eminence. 'All these other leagues do more for their members. I doubt if any of them would have come into existence had the London League been progressive...' He thought all these leagues should be represented at BCF meetings. The Secretary of LCL (JH van Meurs) responded in the next edition, pointing out that the South London League no longer existed and that some of the other leagues were not open to all. 'The suggestion that all these leagues be represented on the BCF is a rather comic one. Why not have every league in the country represented there?' It happened eventually.

The division 1 clubs for 1935/36 were: Inland Revenue, P O Savings Bank, Royal Arsenal, Admiralty, Customs & Excise, Ministry of Health, Air Ministry, Metropolitan Water Board,

in the 'Newmanry' in 1943, where they were using machine methods to decrypt the German cipher called 'Fish'. The first machine, christened 'Heath Robinson' worked well enough, and helped improve Colossus.

Gordon Welchman headed Hut 6, but he moved on to other duties, and was succeeded by Milner-Barry, who proved a very successful and popular manager. BP was a strange mix of military and civilian, with nobody really worrying about the respective hierarchies. The military tended to wear uniform only if they expected important visitors.

Security was paramount. One female academic started to get drunk at London parties and boast about her work and suddenly disappeared without trace. Even MI5 (British Security Service) and MI6 (Secret Intelligence Service) were not told about BP activities. A player named Jim Adams wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* to say that he played correspondence chess with a naval officer in the early 40s, with all the letters being checked by the censor, to ensure that the officer did not give away the location of the ship etc. Mr Adams was slightly surprised to find the annotation, 'Why not 14.e5?' signed by the censor.

When the war ended in 1945, many people at BP moved on to other work. There were 10000 staff in early 1945, but only 2000 moved to Eastcote in 1946. Government Communications Head Quarters (GCHQ) was formed that year, and many BP staff arrived there. GCHQ was a covert operation run by the Foreign Office, which moved to Cheltenham in 1951. Other Communications Departments came under GCHQ as well. GCHQ had a monopoly on SIGINT (Signals Intelligence), which isolated MI5, who only met the GCHQ twice a year. Alexander moved to GCHQ in 1946 and became Head of Section H (cryptanalysis) in 1949, where he remained

clear lead to Parliament.

KENNETH CHARLES MESSERE (16/4/1928 – 31/3/2005)

He played for Customs. In 1964, he went to work for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and was head of fiscal affairs from 1971 – 1991. In 1954 he began playing postal chess and became a leading player. He won a semi-final of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Correspondence Championship (1961-64) and became the first English player to compete in a World Championship Final.

REGINALD PRYCE MICHELL (9/4/1873 – 19/5/1938)

He was born in Penzance and was taught to play chess by his aunt, and before he left for London aged 17 to study for the Civil Service, he had made his name as an expert chess player. He won the Metropolitan championship seven years later, and two years later won the City of London club championship, having finished second for the previous six years! In 1902 he won the British Amateur Championship. Michell played for Middlesex, Surrey, Admiralty and also represented England eight times. He played for England in 1937 Olympiad, won City of London, Middlesex and Surrey championships, and twice finished second in the British Championships. He was President of Kingston Chess Club and their champion for many years. Michell retired from the Admiralty in 1933 with the rank of superintendent clerk. According to *Chess*, ‘his serious devotion to his duties as a civil servant effectively prevented his penetrating beyond the fringe of masterdom.’ He took up croquet on retirement. He died five years later after a short illness and is buried in Kingston upon Thames, along with his wife, Edith (nee Tapsell, 1872?-1951), also a strong player. J du Mont subsequently published a book entitled, ‘RP Michell,