Brain games

Chess attracts the analytically minded, says **John Saunders.** So the art of checkmate has always been at home in Cambridge

By the time Samuel Pepys arrived at Magdalene in the 1650s Cambridge was already playing chess. College statutes banned cards and dice, and football was discouraged as 'rude, boisterous exercise… fitter for Clownes then for Schollers'. But chess had a natural affinity with academic life; the only problem was that people became consumed by it. 'Play not at Chesse or very seldome,' Trinity students were instructed by their tutor James Duport (later master of Magdalene), 'for though it be an ingenious play, yet too tedious and time-devouring'.

Oxford had the same problem. John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* tells how two chess aficionados once played for two days without a break. One of them, the philosopher and inventor Francis Potter (1594–1678), is quoted as saying that 'he look't upon the play at Chesse very fitt to be learn't and practised by young men, because it would make them to have a foresight, and be of use to them (by consequence) in their ordering of humane affairs. *Quod NB*.'

Joseph Needham, the great Cambridge sinologist, traced the origins of chess back to fifth-century China. The rules of the western game date back to the early sixteenth century, but there is no sign that competitive chess was played in Cambridge before the mid-nineteenth century. Games in Pepys's day were entirely informal.

The popularity of chess in the University grew roughly in parallel with the rise of the sciences. As with many other sports and games, the organisation of clubs and competitions took place in the Mid-Victorian period and it was only then that records of chess activity were made. The Cambridge University Chess Club came into being in 1856, with membership at first restricted to dons. There was a correspondence chess game between Oxford and Cambridge in 1855, though the two clubs involved, Oxford Hermes and Cambridge Trinity, did not represent the universities in any true sense.

THE FIRST RECOGNISED Varsity chess match took place on 28 March 1873 in London. As is the norm for team chess, the players were arrayed in order of strength on each side and each team member played one (or, in the early matches, more than one) game against their opposite number. Intended primarily as a social occasion, the match was highly successful. It drew some 700 spectators, including such stellar names from the chess world as Wilhelm Steinitz, now recognised as the first official world champion (from 1886). At the second match in 1874, one of the guests was Howard Staunton – the man who gave his name to the most popular design for chess pieces – who in the 1840s was regarded as the best player in the world. Oxford won the first match, though Cambridge later established an ascendancy. The Varsity fixture is now believed to be the longest-running annual chess competition in the world.

The first Cambridge player to rank as a true chess master was Henry E Atkins. He arrived at Peterhouse in 1891 to read mathematics and was in a class of his own as an undergraduate chess player. Despite his great promise, he did the sensible thing and became a schoolmaster rather than risk all on a career as a chess pro. But he still found time to win the British Chess Championship nine times between 1905 and 1925, a record that stood until 1969.

A good deal less cerebral was the self-advertising satanist and hell-raiser Aleister Crowley, who arrived at Trinity and burst as a demonic force on the university chess scene in 1895. 'When I got to Cambridge I made a savagely intense study of the game,' he wrote. 'In my second year I was president of the university... Outside the master class, Atkins was my only acknowledged superior'. But Crowley's claims to chess mastery were hugely exaggerated. True, in the 1896 Varsity match he managed to win his game, but, promoting himself to the top board in 1897, he blundered a couple of pawns and lost ignominiously.

Crowley's Cambridge chess career finally ended in disgrace. Suspecting that a fellow member of the chess club (and his own college), Cecil Tattersall, had caused him to be expelled from a London club, the enraged diabolist marched round to his rooms and challenged him to retract or fight. Tattersall refused to do either, so Crowley set about him with a heavy stick. Although Trinity apparently did little to punish him for this assault, he was drummed out of the university chess club. He turned away from chess at that point to enjoy his 'very intense' sexual life and only returned to play it in his dotage.

Between the wars, three Cambridge chess players achieved national and international honours in the game. A nephew of Sir James Barrie, William Winter had his law studies at Clare interrupted by the First World War but returned to play chess for the University in 1919. He was a cultured man and a talented chess player, but led a disorganised and bohemian life. A committed communist, he once served six months in prison for sedition as a result of his political activities. But he played chess well enough to win the British championship twice and represent his country in chess Olympiads. He covered chess for the *Daily Worker* and *The Guardian*, and wrote excellent books on the game.

The other two chess players of note in that era were great friends who during the Second World War worked in tandem as Bletchley Park code-breakers. Stuart Milner-Barry (a Trinity classicist) and Hugh Alexander (a mathematician at King's) overlapped at Cambridge and in the late 1920s were the best players in the University. Alexander was born in Cork and had two other very Irish forenames (Conel Hugh O'Donel) but, like the Irish-born Duke of Wellington, considered himself an Englishman. Alexander was the better player of the two, because Milner-Barry's cavalier style led to inconsistent results. 'Wrong but wromantic' he may have been, but two of Milner-Barry's opening innovations are still played by modern grandmasters and carry his name. Alexander won the British championship in 1938 and 1956, and the two friends were in the England team that went to the 1939 Buenos Aires Olympiad. The tournament was cut short when war broke out and they returned to Britain, where they soon found their way to Bletchley Park.

ALEXANDER AND Milner-Barry were by no means the only Cambridge chess players engaged in code-breaking: Max Newman and Jack Good were others who had taken part in competitive chess at Cambridge before being recruited as cryptologists. On his first night shift, the 23-year-old Good was found by his boss, Alan Turing, taking a nap on the floor and after that had to keep his statistical brilliance operating in overdrive to recover his dented reputation. The Bletchley Park establishment's abbreviation was GCCS, which actually stood for 'Government Code and Cypher School', but was nicknamed the 'Golf Club and Chess Society'.

After the war, Milner-Barry joined the Treasury, rose to become head of the ceremonial branch (dealing with the Honours List) and was himself knighted. He served for a while as the president of the British Chess Federation and his tall, patrician figure graced many a match and tournament well into the 1990s. His impeccable manners belonged to another age. On resigning a tournament game, he didn't just shake hands in the normal way, but would exclaim 'Well played, young man! Most vigorous! Most vigorous!'.

Hugh Alexander continued working on intelligence, but he remained England's pre-eminent player in the early 1950s. In 1954 he shared first place with the world number two, David Bronstein, at the Hastings Congress, defeating the Soviet grandmaster in a marathon game which received a lot of coverage in the press.

By the late 1950s and 1960s British chess was in the doldrums, but the rise of Bobby Fischer in the run-up to his celebrated 1972 match with Spassky energised the English-speaking chess world. By 1969 there was a group of very strong players at Cambridge, and for some years the university club was the most formidable in the land, winning six national club titles in seven years. Raymond Keene (Trinity 1967) and William Hartston (Jesus 1965) were the two leading lights, and the first

MUSEUM OF LONDON/BRIDGEMAN

Above. *Chesspieces of viridian-stained and natural ivory reputedly given to Samuel Pepys by King James II. The king is seven inches high*

All concentration. *Hugh Alexander (left), playing Soviet grandmaster David Bronstein, 1954; and Sir Stuart Milner-Barry competing in a telex match, 1976*

university players to go professional. As well as winning the British championship three times between them and competing internationally, they wrote numerous books and articles, and appeared on television programmes during the 1970s chess boom. Hartston eventually switched to mainstream journalism (and is currently 'Beachcomber' in the *Daily Express*). Keene retired from playing the game but stayed with chess to become Britain's best-known chess author and journalist, and its most successful promoter of the game. Perhaps his most remarkable achievement has been to bring world championship chess to London (which he has done three times) and to re-establish the capital as a mecca for chess.

BO ZAUNDERS/CORBIS

JOHN SAUNDERS

Two generations. *Ray Keene, top, author of over a hundred books on chess; below, Harriet Hunt at the Varsity Match, 2000*

KEENE WAS ONE of the first two British players ever to qualify for the chess grandmaster title in 1976, and played a big part in the British chess boom during the 1980s and 1990s. There are now in excess of thirty Britons holding the official title of chess grandmaster. Since Keene, Cambridge has produced four more: Michael Stean (Trinity 1971) and Jonathan Mestel (Trinity 1974) in the 1970s, and more recently Jonathan Parker (Emmanuel 1994) and Matthew Turner (Sidney Sussex 1994).

It will be noticed that all names cited here so far have been male. Sadly, the proportion of female players to male has always been very low in the chess world, and this was even more marked in the days of single-sex colleges, when the women's colleges did not take part in college chess.

Things started to change in 1978 when a 'ladies board' (as it was then termed) was appended to the seven-board Oxford–-Cambridge match for the first time in its history. However, the rules stated that the result of the women's game did not count towards the score of the match except in the event of a tie on the other boards. In 1982 it was ruled that the women's board should count the same as any other board, and in 1992 things moved on a step when English women's international Natasha Regan became the first woman to play on a board other than the lowest.

A GIANT LEAP forward occurred in 2000 when the top players at both Oxford and Cambridge happened to be female. Four-times British women's champion Harriet Hunt (St John's 1997) took her place on the top board and played Oxford's Ruth Sheldon. Bearing in mind that women are now outperforming men on so many fronts, perhaps it is time for a cautionary rule change – stipulating that at least one of the players in each team should be male. ■

John Saunders (Selwyn 1971) edits British Chess Magazine *(www.bcmchess.co.uk)*

CHESSPIECE, 12TH CENTURY/ BRIDGEMAN/ NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND

Chess masters

Notable Cambridge players in the Varsity chess match include

1873 John Neville Keynes (1852–1949)
Played in the first six matches. University Registrary; father of John Maynard Keynes

1873 Walter Rouse Ball (1850–1925)
Historian of mathematics; Trinity fellow

1873 Edward Nicholson (1849–1912)
Bodley's Librarian at Oxford

1874 Falconer Madan (1851-1935)
Bodley's Librarian at Oxford

1881 Sir John Thursby (?1861–1920)
Racehorse owner

1896 Aleister Crowley (1875–1947)
Self-proclaimed diabolist and poet

1901 Bertram Goulding Brown (1881–1965)
Trinity historian for sixty years

1919 Kingsley Martin (1897–1969)
Journalist and *New Statesman* editor

1920 Lionel Penrose (1898–1972)
Geneticist; researcher on Down's syndrome

1922 Max Newman (1897–1984)
Mathematician who inspired Alan Turing

1930 Sir Richard 'Otto' Clarke (1910–75)
Senior civil servant; father of Education Secretary Charles Clarke

1931 Jacob Bronowski (1908–74)
polymath and broadcaster

1934 Sir Fred Hoyle (1915–2001)
astronomer and mathematician

1938 Jack Good, computer pioneer

1946 Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer
Mathematician, international bridge player; university administrator

1950 Oliver Penrose, mathematician; son of Lionel, brother of Roger

1957 Derek Lamport, biochemist

1962 George Sheldrick, chemist, Göttingen University

1976 Dafydd Johnston, professor of Welsh, University of Wales, Swansea