

STOCKTON CHESS CLUB - 1953

For about two years, between leaving school and doing national service in the RAF, I was a member of this club. We met in the "Lit & Phil", Literary and Philosophical Institute, in Dovecote Street within sight and sound of Stockton market. The building was of black stone, or perhaps stone discoloured by centuries of smoke from coal fires.

I didn't know any members when I joined - just walked in and presented myself, and the captain and secretary welcomed me and found me an opponent for a game; before we closed I was told of the rules, practices rather, and subs though I had nothing to pay for a trial period. The club nights were wednesdays and saturdays; away team games were of course on the host clubs' nights. Probably the room was used by other bodies on other nights. The membership I would put at perhaps 30. I am not good at names so any of the following may be wrong though there will be few if any to contradict me! The captain I think was called Turnbull, a burly man slow of speech and quick of thought, one of the best players. Sadly I cannot remember the name of the secretary, who was afflicted with a horrendous speech impediment but gifted with a sunny disposition and great personal charm which enabled him to avert embarrassment in his listeners. Mr Lerman was perhaps the best player in the second team for which I played - I never made the first team unless they were scraping the barrel. He wore a badge in his lapel and when I enquired I learnt it was for having given 50 blood donations. I decided I'd have one of those; and have. Other players included Tiffany, Jones, Storey, Moses.

Looking further afield, T.H.Wise, a Middlesbrough teacher, was the best on Teesside and published a weekly column in the *Gazette*. I had a game published there once, though mainly to point out how I could have won quicker! I remember he had a grouch once about some gamesmanship; apparently if a team player didn't turn up and lost by default he was often claimed to be the

team's best, which enabled the team's real best to play the other team's second best and so on, leaving the offended team's top man cooling his heels, albeit with a default win. Clearly Wise was speaking of Wise, with justification.

The biggest difference between now and then would have been the air that we breathed; at that time chess clubs were the smokiest rooms on earth; if you stood up from the board your head practically disappeared in the clouds... The chess sets were old, not all Staunton, in some cases not all there! The country had been through two world wars, the depression, and a period of austerity that would make today's complainers blench. Cars were much fewer, though there were always some to convey teams to away games; perhaps chess-players were richer than average? Or at least older, mostly 40s and upwards. I remember away matches at Middlesbrough, Redcar, ICI Wilton (good for name-dropping, "I was playing chess at Wilton castle the other day...") Wilton was more up-market in terms of room, equipment, decor, ICI being able to afford it.

I live on the Isle of Wight now and play chess at a small club here. It was a pleasure 60 years ago and is a pleasure now. I wish you well.

Jim Gibbons