Chess Clubs, Victorian gentlemen, World War I, 1916 and the Free State

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This article began as an investigation into the prevalence of chess clubs in Dublin both before, during and after 1916. From that initial research an overview of clubs in Dublin emerged through entries in Thom's Directory, up to and beyond 1922. The question then became, what if anything changed for the game after the foundation of the Free State? Through researching entries in the directory it seems that Dublin before that time had the monopoly of clubs, at least officially designated ones. However, from 1927 onwards Thom's also records a number of clubs around Ireland. Overall from an historical perspective the directory highlights a gradual increase in chess participation from the first entry of a Dublin club in 1848, or according to another source in 1838, through WW1, the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence and the Civil War. Interestingly, with the exception of a couple of the earliest clubs, the others are still in existence today. It is recognised that club listings other than Thom's are most likely available but the directory provides a valuable primary source and as such it is the focus of this article. Entries in the Thom's were researched from the mid-1980s to the late 1920s to provide an overview.

In keeping with many other sports and games, chess was played throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at private clubs around the capital, giving it an aura of establishment elitism. Chess and backgammon were the major pastimes of gentlemen in the Victorian era, as outlined in the book *Whigs on the Green*. For example, Sir Horace Plunkett and other members played regularly in the Stephen's Green Club, with the Hibernian United Services Club also making provision for its members to compete over the chess board. But, 'toffs' aside, was there much in terms of chess for the general public and how widespread was its appeal? Starting initially with Dublin, Thom's directory records the first club as the **Philidorean Society Chess Club**, founded in 1848. In this year it is unclear whether the address of 6, Fitzwilliam Square West was that of the Hon. Secretary, Montifort Longfield, LL.D or the club's meeting venue. The second and only other time the Philidorean Club is listed is in 1850. It is then noted as the **Philidorean Society Chess Rooms** and an address at Dublin Library, D'Olier Street is given. The Hon Secretary is once again Montifort Longfield and any uncertainty is cleared up, as his home address is clearly that of Fitzwilliam Square.

Moving on to 1851, the **City and County of Dublin Chess Club** is highlighted as founded in that year. No details of venue or times of meetings are given. Likewise no mention is made of a club secretary or other officials. However, in 1866 the **Dublin Chess Club** starts up with premises at 33 Anglesea Street. Reference is made to the club being formerly the City and County of Dublin Chess Club founded in 1851, as previously noted. The club secretary was Peter Jones, Jun, Esq. It is interesting that on their current website, this club which claims to be the oldest club in Dublin states that it was founded in 1867, a year after it was first recorded in Thom's. This is the only chess club listed for 1866 and indeed for 1867 and 1868. For those three years there is no change of secretary.

1876 saw the foundation of the **Dublin University Chess Club**. Its officials are listed as Rev. G. Salmon, DD, Patron; W.M.Hackett, B.A, President, G.B. Fairbrother, Secretary and G.L. Johnston, Treasurer. Predating this entry in Thom's, Dublin University Chess Club is listed by the Dublin Almanac and General Register of Ireland as being founded in

1838, according to an article cited online by Chess Mail. The Chess History Research Zone, gives the following information about this purported earlier date for the club: President, the Rev John McCaul, LL. D., Trinity College, Dublin, Hon. Secretary and Treasurer, William Goddard, Jun. Esq., 17 North Great George's Street and a committee of management, the Rev John McCaul, LL. D., Trinity College. William Goddard, Jun. Esq., 17 North Great George's Street. John W. Hallowell, Esq. TCD, John Walker, Esq. TCD and Henry Kennedy, Esq, Blessington St. The season commenced in October, and terminated in July. 'Members are elected by ballot, and none but graduates or under-graduates of the university are admissible'. If this information is correct and there is no reason to think it is not, then the actual foundation date would make it the oldest club still in existence.

1888 saw the arrival of a new playing venue in Dublin, **Rathmines Chess Club**. The entry in Thom's stated that the club met in the Town Hall, Rathmines on Saturdays from October to May at 7.30pm. C.E. Howell.LL.D, is named as President, with the Hon. Secretary being R.N.Scales of 62, Palmerston Road, Rathmines. Also listed for that year is the Dublin Chess Club, with a new location at 20, Lincoln Place. The club had a president of note in the Rt. Hon. Sir James Plunkett; the Vice-President was W.H.S Monck M.A and Hon. Secretary, James O'Hara JP. It looks as if Sir Horace had spread his wings beyond the Stephen's Green Club. He was to remain in the position of president for approximately thirty years.

Born on 24 December, 1854 in Glouchestershire, England, Horace Plunkett was the third son and sixth child of the 16th Baron Dunsany. Educated at Eton and Oxford, Plunkett was the founder of the Irish co-operative movement and an Irish Senator. However, in terms of this article, it must be highlighted that he was apparently a talented chess player. His most remarkable wins were against Wilhelm Steinitz an Austrian and later American Chess Master, and the first undisputed world chess champion from 1886 to 1894. Plunkett was the only player to beat Steinitz during two simultaneous matches in Oxford University. Comments in an article in the 'City of London Chess Magazine', Vol II, 1876 are high in their praise of Plunkett; 'Wow, who is this Plunkett ….wins against no other than Steinitz himself! The wins are gorgeous... clearly wasting his time on politics, agriculture and so on'. Plunkett was awarded a medal for drawing his game in an exhibition match against the Cuban player, Capablanca, who was the third World Chess Champion. Looking ahead, a letter dated 10 January 1920 on Dublin Chess Club headed paper, in relation to the medal is among the Plunkett papers in the National Library. It is sent to an unknown recipient and signed by T. G. Cranston, Hon. Secretary, which is interesting as he is not listed in Thom's as being in this position until 1921. He writes 'I enclose one medal awarded to Sir Horace Plunkett for drawing his games against Senor Capablanca in recent exhibition'. The letter goes on to say that 'we were all glad to hear that recent rumours were unfounded and trust that Sir Horace will be restored to good health after his visit to America'.

Coming to an important historiographical period, in terms of WWI, 1914-18, which impacted on the lives of many in Ireland, the pivotal events of Easter 1916 in Dublin and the years up to the foundation of the Free State in 1922, it is of interest in this centenary year to look at what was happening in terms of chess clubs in Dublin. For the pre-1916 years of 1913-5, Dublin University Chess Club is the only entry given in Thom's Directory. This appears to be operating as usual with the patron consistently listed as the Provost but the other officials changing yearly.

1916 was to be a defining moment in Irish history. Throughout the turmoil what was happening in Irish chess? An initial look at Thom's Directory would certainly indicate that the provision of club facilities changed only marginally from the previous three years with the Dublin Chess Club, under the president Sir Horace Plunkett and Rathmines Chess Club listed. Interestingly, it is noted in the directory that TCD was closed for the duration of the war but this did not seem to be the case in the entries for 1914 and 1915, or at least certainly not referred to. It would seem that perhaps chess was more influenced by WWI than by events at home. Looking ahead the entry for 1917, which is still very much a 'war year', Dublin University Club is listed as situated at 10, Trinity College. The Club had a new President, A.A. Macdonagh M.A. and Hon Secs., W.G. Price B.A. & J.G.Dillon M.A. It seems to be fully operable and no reference to 'the war' is made. Also listed for 1917 are Dublin Chess Club 20 Lincoln Place, President, Right Hon Sir Horace Plunkett. Hon Secretary, James O'Hara J.P, with no change from 1916 and Rathmines Chess Club (1888), President, C.E. Howell LL.D., Greenoge, Highfield Rd, Hon Secretary., R.N. Scales, 62 Palmerston Rd., Rathmines – again no notable difference from 1916.

In 1918 there is again a small change in the chess scene with four clubs listed. The Dublin Chess Club was still located at 20 Lincoln-place, under the illustrious president, the Rt. Hon. Sir Horace Plunkett; Hon Secretary, William Nicholls; Dublin University Chess Club, 10 Trinity College, again 'closed during the war' is stated; President: A.A. Macdonagh M.A.Hon Secretaries: W.G. Price, B.A and J.G. Oulton M.A and Hon Treasurer: H.C. Crawley B.A. Rathmines Chess Club (1888) President: C.E. Howell. LL.D., Greenoge, Highfield-road, Hon. Secretary: R.N. Scales, 62 Palmerston Road, Rathmines and a new club, **the Sackville Chess Club**: D.B.C., Dame Street with President: Major Odlum; Hon. Secretary: Wm. Gordon Macintosh. The club met on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

1919, the year following the end of WWI sees the continuation of the Sackville Chess Club, at DBC Dame Street. The President was H.N. Bowesman; Hon. Secretary, Wm. Gordon Macintosh. Also listed for 1919, making a total of four Dublin clubs are, Dublin Chess Club,20 Lincoln Place, President, Rt. Hon. Sir Horace Plunkett, Hon Secretary, William Nicholls; Dublin University Chess Club, 10 Trinity College. Again it is noted that the club was closed during the war.; begging the question, how closed was closed. The President is listed as A.N. Macdonagh, M.A., Hon. Secretary, W.G. Price, B.A. and J.G. Oulton, M.A. Hon Treasurer, H.C. Crawley B.A. The fourth club listed for that year is the Rathmines Chess Club, President, C.E. Howell, LL.D, Greenoge, Highfield Rd.

In 1920 these four clubs are again listed with another reference to the Dublin University Club as having been closed during the war. Both Rathmines and the Sackville clubs had new committee members and a new president in Major Odlum In Rathmines, the new president was W.H. Pollett, 3 Cambridge Villas, Rathmines, and the Hon. Secretary – J.Hilton, Cyanmore, Eaton Square, Terenure. The same clubs listed for 1921.

1922 was the year of the foundation of the Irish Free State and the start of the Irish Civil War. Perhaps one of the most poignant and well-known stories relating to chess in Ireland started in Mountjoy Jail that year. Liam Mellows of the anti-Treaty side was executed there on 08 December 1922. He left behind a carved chess piece – a pawn. This was later presented to the National Museum by de Valera in a box labelled, 'Chessman, first of set started by Liam Mellows in Mountjoy, completion of which was interrupted by his execution'. There is however, no indication of the war impacting on Dublin chess with the same four clubs being

listed in Thom's as in 1920 and 1921. The listing for 1923 includes the Dublin Chess Club 20 Lincoln Place, President, Rt. Hon. Sir Horace Plunkett, Vice Presidents - John Mooney & John Sweetman, Hon. Secretary - Thomas George Cranston, Hon. Treasurer - H. McIlwaine; Dublin University Chess Club, 10 Trinity College, again it is stated that the club was closed during the war; President, A.A. Macdonagh M.A., Hon Secretaries - W.G. Price B.A., J.G. Oulton M.A.Hon. Treasurer - H.C. Cawley B.A. Apparently the Armstrong Cup competition (one of the world's earliest chess leagues) had been run by the university club in the years leading up to the First World War. However, during the years 1916-1921 there was no league competition and the university club was the curator of the Cup during this troubled period in Ireland's history; Rathmines Chess Club President Professor W.H. Thrift, F.T.C.D, Hon. Secretary - V.W. Scales, 162 Rathgar Road, Dublin; the Sackville Chess Club. DBC Dame Street; President - Major Odlum, Hon. Secretary – J. Taylor, meets on Tuesday and Saturday.

In conclusion, 1927 was the first year to show a marked expansion of chess club provision, with clubs being mentioned in Thom's directory, not only in Dublin but around the country. One can only imagine the reactions to the radical political, economic and social changes that occurred in the five years of the Free State. It is very much in line with new norms and widening horizons that chess should have gained a more diverse outreach. In the directory for that year the **Irish Chess Union**, as the controlling body is listed, with the President being Lord Dunsany and Secretary, H.N. Bowesman, 33 Claremont Road, Sandymount, Dublin. Clubs featured in Dublin are the **Blackrock Chess Club** (Carnegie Library, Main Street, Blackrock); **Corporation** (4 Lower Ormond Quay), A.J Kavanagh, 67 Russell Avenue, Drumcondra; Dublin University (2 Trinity College), G.P, Stewart, 14 Appian Way, **G.H.Q. McKee Barracks**, Capt. J. Nolan, G.H.Q. Parkgate Street; **Jewish Social Union** (Harrington Street), G.M. Eliassoft, 75 S.C. Road, Portobello: **N.C.O. G.H.Q., Parkgate Street,** Sergt. J. Myers, McKee Barracks; Rathmines – (Town Hall, Rathmines), G.B. Thrift, 80 Grosvenor Square, Rathmines; Sackville Club (La Scale, Mid Abbey Street), W. Murray, 5 St Francis Terrace, Bow Street; **University College** (82 St Stephen's Green), L.P. Younglass, 4 Harcourt Terrace. The fact that there are two army clubs, one in McKee Barracks and the other in Parkgate Street shows a keen interest and demand or perhaps a division according to rank.

For the first time 1927 sees chess clubs around the country featured as well as those in Dublin, with Thom's recording the following clubs:

Cork Chess Clubs: Catholic YMS, Castle Street, Secretary, P.O'Herlihy and the Church of Ireland YMCA.

Galway Chess Club

Limerick Chess Clubs: Catholic Literary Institute, Sarsfield Street, O'Kelly; Munster, Stella Restaurant, O'Connell Street, McInerney.

Dundalk Chess Club (Town Hall), M.Murray, McBride's Terrace, Castletown Road, Dundalk.

Northern Ireland Chess Clubs:
Armagh Swan Café, Tuesday evening, P.A. Donagh, 14 Edward Street, Armagh.
Bangor, Savoy Café, Monday evening, R.N. Laurenson, 44 Groomsport Road, Bangor.
Belfast, Shaftesbury Café, Monday evening, J.E. Manderson, 58 Royal Avenue, Belfast

C.I.Y.M.S. Donegall Square, E. Saturday evening, G.C. Hamilton
North Belfast, The Institute, Danube Street, Wednesday evening, J.Martin,
St Paul's, Cavendish Square, Friday evening, M.McCarron, 28 Kane Street, Belfast
Strandtown Unionist Club, Strandtown, Thursday evening, H.Calvert,
Victoria Chess Club, Fountainvale School, Fountainvale Avenue, Tuesday evening,
Jas.Benner, 80 University Road, Belfast.

*Club names or counties are highlighted in bold for first mention only.