

Hull-timate Chess

As it prepares to become the UK Capital of Culture, Hull's chess scene is on the rise. We got the lowdown from Stephen Greep, the General Secretary of the Hull and District Chess Association

Hull has had its chess celebrities in the past. The strongest player ever to have been born in Kingston upon Hull was Amos Burn. Born in 1848, Burn was mentored by the then world champion Wilhelm Steinitz and he crossed swords with the best in the world, with several notable tournament successes, such as equal first at London 1887 (ahead of Blackburne and Zukertort), and first at Amsterdam 1889 (ahead of Emanuel Lasker). Nimzowitsch named Burn as one of the world's six greatest defensive players.

Even earlier, Charles Frost, born in 1781, a solicitor to the Hull Dock Co. and the man responsible for the amalgamation of the Hull Literary & Philosophical Society and Subscription Library, is considered to have been the first President of the Hull Chess Club. A prominent 20th century member of the club was Dr Jacob Bronowski, born in Poland in 1908, but best known as a mathematician at Hull University and for writing and presenting the groundbreaking TV series *The Ascent of Man*. In more recent times Graham Chesters was impressively British Under-15 Champion in 1959 and then British Senior Champion in 2013.

Although there were chess associations in and around Hull in the 1900-1930 period, the current Hull & District Chess Association was formed in 1952. In the early days, the Association had just eight clubs playing in one division until the early 1960's when local chess began to expand greatly until there were almost 40 league teams, many from local works and offices, such as Hull Corporation Transport, Fenners, Hull Grammar Schools, John Goods, Needlers, Northern Dairies and the Hull Daily Mail.

During the Fischer-Spassky boom there were even six divisions of 8 teams. However, as happened almost everywhere in the country, the numbers of local players and local clubs declined. Today there is a core of 150 players, in just seven clubs, playing in two divisions of both four and six board leagues.

In 1964 the Association organised the very first Hull Chess Congress which attracted just 36 players. It was won by Roelof Westra, who was later to become British Veteran Champion in 1993. Now aged 84, Roelof, with a current ECF grade of 164, has played in every Hull congress since and has already registered for this year's – 53 years in a row. Surely that must be a record?



Fittingly local brewery Furley & Co produced a special beer to go with the recent ECF Chess Master @ The Local event in Hull.

At its peak, the Hull Congress attracted some of the top names in British chess, notably Tony & Jana Miles, the British no.1's of the day, and featured up to 200 players. In more recent years the congress has had around 140 players and now has a new, splendid home, at the University of Hull.

What sets Hull apart from other chess associations today? Hull has always been capable of organising one-off events and recent years have seen notable GM simultaneous exhibitions, as well as junior and public events. Things could have taken an even more serious upturn when in the 1990's local chess was left a considerable legacy by local player, former association President and businessman, R.P. (Bob) Ross.

Remarkably, little call was made on the fund, which resided in a private charity, and it could have been lost to chess with the charity due to be wound up in 2015 – when the funds were to pass to a charity, but not necessarily a chess one! Fortunately the Trustees of the Fund had been closely associated with Bob Ross and were very keen that the monies should not be lost to Hull or to chess. And so it was that the Association set in motion an application to become a charity, duly receiving charitable status after a lot of hard work in 2014. A further requirement was the agreement of a chess strategy, so the Ross Fund Trustees could see what the Association was going to spend its money on. This was formally agreed at the Association's AGM in 2014 with a vision for: 'Hull to have one of the most forward thinking and vibrant chess environments in the UK. We will make Hull recognised as a good place to play chess and make people want to come to Hull to play chess.'

The fund was duly received by the Association in 2015 and was placed with local investment managers, with the overall financial strategy of keeping pace with inflation and delivering an income of £5,000 per annum (an unchallenging return of around 3.5%). In this way we keep faith with the original intentions of Bob Ross that this was a chess development and promotion fund with only the interest spent and that there will be funds available for local chess *in perpetuity*. The 'normal running costs' of league and cup chess are still met through annual subscriptions set at the Association's AGM, although the charity provides some support for teams in the Yorkshire League.

The Association's first act on obtaining these funds was to pass a 'special distribution' to all local clubs amounting to £1,800, further subsidising the purchase of over 50 digital clocks with a 50% grant. We have also begun to replace all the Association's trophies, last year spending £1,300 on cups in a programme likely to last for several years. Although we are ever mindful of costs, we now play most of our events in nicer venues and, alongside our league and cup calendar, there is now also a programme of subsidised 'events' such as:

i. Investment in schools and junior chess. The Association has been able to provide equipment funding to local schools (there are now more children playing chess in local

primary schools than players in the league), and introduce a popular annual schools chess day with prizes for all. 2017 will see the first Hull Junior Congress as a part of the Yorkshire Junior Grand Prix. 2016 saw a small number of local schools participating in the *Chess in Schools and Communities* programme as well as entering the Delancey Challenge.

ii. As a charity we have to deliver 'public benefit', which we do by making our subsidised events open to all and by a small series of public events, such as 'Chess in the Park' and an open day, held this year on national Chess Day, with resources for advertising and display materials.

iii. An annual 'Hull Grandmaster Challenge', a full simultaneous display following a morning of lightning chess. In the first three years we have been pleased to welcome three of the five players who represented England at this year's Chess Olympiad (David Howell, Luke McShane and Gawain Jones), and while our scores are not very impressive (GMs 81, Hull 9), next year we hope to be visited by an even stronger grandmaster!

iv. A weekend of coaching sessions for players of different strengths – this year provided by IM James Adair.

v. New or reintroduced events, such as a team rapidplay (13 teams of four competed for two trophies this year), and an individual rapidplay event.

vi. Supporting our congress with a view to increasing numbers and making it one of the best congresses in the UK.

vii. Acknowledging that most local players simply want to play chess once a week for their club, we also have a budget allocation for club development and equipment, but our primary aims are driven by our overall chess strategy.

We recently hosted the second ECF Chess Master @ The Local event with IM James Adair. Around 70 people came to play chess and sample our own special Grandmaster Ale, and the event will lead to a monthly chess evening at the same city centre venue.

In 2017 Hull becomes the UK City of Culture and to celebrate this fact we are using our funds to support a challenge match with the city of Rotterdam over a weekend in July. In addition we shall be hosting and funding (alongside the ECF) an IM norm event, 'The Hull Masters', where we hope to support, in particular, Yorkshire players.

We still have a long way to go. The numbers of players is not increasing, we don't have enough organisers, and we don't make well enough the link from primary to secondary schools to clubs. Moreover, Hull is the only city in Yorkshire without a university chess club. We appreciate that delivering our strategy will take time, but we also know that we are in the incredibly fortunate position of being able to resource our ambitions.

All the documentation in respect of the charity and our strategy can be found on line at www.hullchess.com/organisation.html together with reports of some of our recent events.



Held by the waterside and just outside the Princes Quay shopping centre, the ECF Chess Master @ The Local was a major success, even attracting some businessmen to drop by.



Another successful event in the city was the 2016 Team Lightning event. It's rare these days to see a 10-second rather than blitz event, but clearly they are still popular in the north!



Back at the ECF Chess Master @ The Local event, IM James Adair (t-shirt, crossed arms) can be seen giving a mini-simul. Some of the crowd are rapt. others preferring to play each other.