

GRANDMASTER CLASH

In July the British Chess Championships return to Bournemouth after 80 years. Jeremy Miles meets the local chess fans who brought the board game of strategy and tactics back to Dorset

PHOTOS BY HATTIE MILES



DESPITE a huge chunk of cliff crashing onto the promenade, Bournemouth is enjoying a series of spectacular summer events. There's been the Wheels Festival with its monster trucks and freewheel stunts. August will see the return of the award-winning Air Festival with daring wing-walkers and heart-stopping aerobatics and July sees the opening of the 2016 British Chess Championships.

Aha, do I detect a raised eyebrow? Well you might just be surprised. The competition, held over two weeks at the Bournemouth Pavilion, will attract thousands of players from all over the country and is confidently expected to bring millions of pounds into the town.

What's more it's the first time that this

prestigious annual competition has been staged in Bournemouth since 1936. And that really is exciting for the leaders of the local chess community

The campaign to put Bournemouth well and truly back on the British Chess map was spearheaded by Martin Simons, the chairman of the Bournemouth and District Chess League.

The successful bid came with help from the league's president Alan Dommett and Ian Clark, president of the Dorset County Chess Association.

"We're absolutely delighted," said Martin. "We did our best to show the English Chess Federation that we not only have a highly suitable venue but that Bournemouth would be

a great place for chess players and their families to spend two weeks.”

He points out that hotels, guest houses, pubs, restaurants, theatres, cinemas, nightclubs and of course the local shops will all benefit from the huge influx of visitors.

The championships will attract some of the best players in the world. More than 1,000 entrants are expected, including around 20 grandmasters. Who will win the main prize is anyone’s guess but Martin says he fancies the chances of grandmaster Michael Adams - a dominant force in British chess in recent years.

Back in 1936 the big winner in Bournemouth was William Winter, a hard-drinking nephew of *Peter Pan* author J.M. Barrie. A controversial figure, Winter was a communist activist who once spent six months in jail for sedition. It was rumoured that he was so alcohol-dependant that he played better drunk than sober.

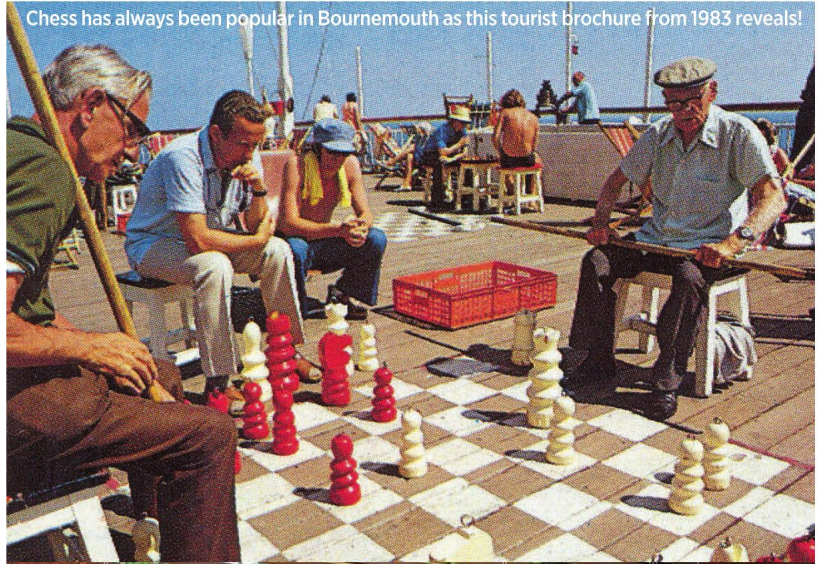
There were a number of remarkable and unusual players around at the time including several who would later be recruited as wartime code-breakers at Bletchley Park. They included schoolgirl prodigy Elaine Saunders who won the World Girls Championship when she was just 10-years-old.

The Championships in Bournemouth this summer will include male and female players of all ages but one local chess aficionado is determined to do her bit for the women’s game

Sarah De Lisle from Poole, a former champion player, is sponsoring the De Lisle Prize which offers £800 to the female player who achieves the most improved ratings in the tournament.

“I decided to do it that way because it gives a six-year-old girl exactly the same chance as the best female player in Britain,” explained Sarah. “There are far fewer women chess players than men and I want to change that.”

Male or female there are unlikely to be any who adopt the William Winter approach of fuelling-up on booze. “You wouldn’t get away with that now,” says Sarah though she remembers, as a girl, going to chess clubs where



Martin Simons (Chairman, Bournemouth District Chess League), Alan Dommett (President, Bournemouth District Chess League) and Ian Clark (President, Dorset County Chess League)

“everyone had a pint by the board and a fag in their hand. People would think nothing of drinking three or four pints during a game but all that is well gone now.

“To play at the highest level you have to be fit. People don’t realise how much it takes out of you. Six hours of concentrating. It’s a physical as well as a mental effort.”

Sarah herself won British Under 18 Girls Championship in 1985 and has also been a member of England Girls and England Ladies teams. She stopped playing at competitive level around 15 years ago, but in some ways her life as gone full circle.

“I learnt to play at eight and my dad ran the school chess club,” she told me. “Now my husband Richard and I run the chess club at Castle Court School and my son Arthur is eight and just starting to play in chess tournaments.”

He’s in good company. The Bournemouth area already has a thriving chess scene with hundreds of players meeting regularly for league tournaments. ▶

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Former chess champion Sarah de Lisle with her son Arthur



Chess player Alan Dommett at his Bournemouth home

CHAMPIONING BOURNEMOUTH'S CHESS SCENE: ALAN DOMMETT'S STORY

One of the most remarkable and tenacious figures behind the campaign to bring the British Championships back to Bournemouth has been player, writer and chess expert Alan Dommett.

Alan, who will be giving the opening speech at the Championships on Saturday 23rd July, is president of the Bournemouth and District Chess League. A one-time leading county player, he was paralysed from the chest down in a freak accident in 1990 when a loose horse bolted onto the A27 and hit his car.

Even though he can no longer play competitive chess at the same level, 67-year-old Alan, a former bank manager, has remained a stalwart of the game. He's written chess columns and magazine articles and authored a well regarded book on controversial high-risk strategist Emil Josef Diemer. He's also tirelessly championed Bournemouth as a thriving centre for chess.

Sitting in his wheelchair pondering over the chess board at his specially adapted Bournemouth home, Alan is in his element, exuding enthusiasm and good humour.

"I've really been incredibly lucky," he tells me. This is quite a disarming statement from a man who has just described in graphic detail the moment he lay slumped against the steering wheel of his car, his neck broken, and felt the life draining from his legs as paralysis gradually enveloped his body. His wife Marion and two young daughters were in the car with him but miraculously escaped unharmed. The one thing that still haunts Alan is their distress. "I can hear them screaming now," he tells me. Just for a moment his eyes flicker with a look of helplessness.

But he quickly returns to more positive thoughts. "I'm lucky in so many ways. I'm lucky that when the accident happened there was an off-duty police officer passing by who took instant control of the situation.

"I'm lucky that chess is a game I can still play to a relatively high level. I'm a little slow because I only have limited movement in my hands but it just means I have to play in a different way.

"I'm lucky that I have a chess players' way of thinking. I really believe that it helped me come to terms with my situation." ♦

The 2016 British Chess Championships will be staged at the Bournemouth Pavilion from the 23rd July to 6th August. More details at britishchesschampionships.co.uk.



Chess player Alan Dommett in action in his younger days