

Some thoughts on the history of New Milton Chess Club

by Barry Jolly

Mike Jay has asked me to write a history of New Milton Chess Club.

I have to say that this is a challenging prospect for someone who arrived in Hampshire only six and a half years ago, there being so many players with memories of the Bournemouth and District Chess League going back over several decades ready to correct my every error. My thanks go to John Beasant and Richard Ursell, who both consulted their personal records with dates of matches and team results from many years ago, but who cannot be blamed for any inaccuracies which I now set down on paper.

Richard was a relatively early member of the club joining with his father Bob, in 1975 along with the original members including Keith Spooner, Geoff Bridden, Mike Bond, Terry Gurd and Bill Page. The club first joined the B&DCL in 1983 and it met at New Milton Community Centre in Osborne Road where it remained until December 2015, when it moved to New Milton Conservative Club. Many will remember being shepherded out at 10.15 to meet the whims of the caretakers of the time. Never mind that their shift ended at 11.00pm, games were interrupted and sealed moves made as players found themselves in the car park with the clocks still ticking.

With a modest population, New Milton has always found some difficulty in attracting the strongest of players, the employment and study prospects of Poole and Bournemouth being so much more appealing. Nonetheless, in the 1996/7 season, the impossible happened and New Milton won division 1 of the Bournemouth and District Chess League.

It was a most successful period for New Milton, because on the 19th April 1996 they defeated Wimborne 4-2 in the first ever Team Handicap Knockout Final competition final. New Milton only needed a 3-3 draw to win.

The league at that time sported four divisions. So many clubs of that era have closed or amalgamated since, but many will remember them with, no doubt, varying degrees of fondness. There were two teams from Oakdale Conservative Club, both in Division 1, but overshadowed by Southbourne which could then boast three of its seven teams at that level. Kinson, Wimborne, Parkstone and a solitary Bournemouth side made up the remainder of the 10 top tier teams.

None could hold a candle to New Milton that season, however. The New Milton team of Julian Corfield, Paul Kemp, Len Laker, Richard Ursell and David Balfour swept all before them. The final league table showed New Milton as Champions with 8 wins and 1 draw from their nine matches. Three points back was Southbourne A and the two Oakdale teams three points further back still.

Other teams in the lower divisions were from Merck, DSS, Abbey Life, Lytchett Matravers, Lymington, Highcliffe, Frizzells, Ringwood and Winton Junior Knights. As in other parts of the country where I have played, the withdrawal of sports and social facilities by many employers has seen the demise of many a good chess club, and only a handful of these 16 clubs now remain.

In 1999, New Milton again emerged triumphant. I have not been able to unearth the league table for that season, but the team was now Ray Edwards, Paul Kemp, David Balfour, Len Laker and Richard Ursell or was it? I still have Hari Iyengar, who returned to India later, and Bill Page to fit in and I think both played a part. Apologies for the uncertainty, but now is the chance for the old stagers – if I may call them thus – to come forward, please, with more accurate details.

As the company social clubs closed, so player strength moved more to the big beasts which dominate the league scene today. New Milton had shrunk to just one team by the time of my arrival in October 2013, and relegation from Division 2 looked a distinct possibility. I found myself playing in a scratch team of Steve Disney, Bill Page, Peter Ashwood and myself in the frozen wastes of the only too well remembered skittle alley in Wimborne, and somehow, I won and my colleagues all drew. From that moment, and with the arrival of Reenen Du Toit for the very next match, we staged a revival and swept to the division championship with promotion to Division 1 for the ensuing two seasons.

We have made strenuous efforts since then to develop club activities. The most significant perhaps was the move to the Conservative Club in January 2016. Ironically, the caretakers who caused so many problems had been replaced by two very nice lads who could not be more obliging, but the die had been cast and the move effected.

We have had the odd hiccup when our matches and our host's social calendar have contrived to collide, but we have managed to deal with these without too much damage. We remain grateful to the small number of clubs who have suffered this way. On the whole, though, the creature comforts of the Conservative Club seem to be appreciated. Indeed, there have been many occasions when I have turned up for a home match a full half an hour before the scheduled start time to find opposition players providing full support to the Conservative Club's coffers at the bar.

The club championship has been re-instated and a knock-out trophy initiated. Additionally, an annual yuletide fun frolic of rapidplay chess, with mince pies and sausage rolls as a seasonal treat, is now a firm favourite.

At the half way stage of the 2019/20 season, we had three teams all leading their respective divisions. Not all have managed to last the pace, although second place (as we stand at the current hiatus) is no mean feat. Nonetheless, we look forward with some confidence to a post coronavirus world where we will once again be testing our skills against the best in Division 1.