

## **Playing chess blindfold – and against eight opponents at the same time**

BLINDFOLD in a room facing eight unseen opponents!

That's how Joseph Blackburne found himself in Whitehaven one April night back in 1883.

These opponents were J Bellman, Dr W l'Anson, E Barker, Rev Welsh, John Higgins and Messrs Johnston, Bone and AN Other. Also present were an unspecified number of spectators.

Scene of the action – The Oddfellows Hall, Whitehaven - and he was there to play Blindfold Chess – pitting his wits against the cream of West Cumberland's chess players.

I'd like you to think about what was involved here. One blindfolded man playing eight games of chess – simultaneously.

It would take a rare talent to undertake such a feat. Or the performance he'd put on the night before in the same venue, which had been organised by Whitehaven Chess Club, when he'd played 30 of the area's best players simultaneously, this time minus the blindfold, and beaten 27 of them – drawing with the other three.

But then Joseph Henry Blackburne was one such talent. He was probably the best British chess player of his day and, at the height of his powers, some reckoned him to be the world's number two player. He was a chess powerhouse.

But then he had to be, because he was a chess professional. Winning tournaments did enhance his reputation and earned some money but, rather like the snooker stars of today, he made a good regular living touring Britain and the Continent. And, rather like today's sports professionals, he'd acquired a nickname – the Black Death.

I've only come across mention of his appearing at Whitehaven, in 1858 and 1883, but it's likely that he'd taken bookings for other Cumbria chess clubs – always assuming they could afford him. His reported fee for a two-night appearance was eight guineas.

Event organisers would have had to recoup this expense from admission fees and money paid by keen chess players for the honour of playing the great man – one shilling to be one of his 30 opponents and half a crown to be one of the eight for the blindfold event. Spectators were charged one shilling – on Thursday and 2/6 on Friday.

So how many of the eight did he beat blindfolded? The report doesn't say. But it would have been no great effort for him. He'd already played against 16 opponents on other occasions.

It seems that Whitehaven could lay claim to its own chess champion, according to a piece in the West Cumberland Times for July 29, 1891, which reads: "A Whitehaven Man the Scotch Champion. Mr JD Chambers, an old Whitehaven man, this year wins the Scotch chess championship without losing a single game."

Now John D Chambers was Scottish champion in 1891. He was one of the founders of the Scottish Chess Association and was also responsible for helping a lot of clubs in Britain to get started.

But, apart from the WCT snippet, I've no record of his being a Whitehaven man. Unless, of course, you know any different.

Something else you can help me with. Workington and Maryport chess clubs played a league match against each other back in 1888 – by telephone. Reputedly a world's first.

But when did it happen. Is there a report of this match in the old papers? I've searched for it – but so far, nothing. I want to find it. With your assistance, hopefully!

What about Workington Chess Club? On a cold October evening in 1879, a well attended meeting took place in "Mr Evans's Temperance Hotel, Falcon Place" to "take steps for the establishment of a chess and draught club for Workington".

They decided to establish the club and elected a committee, comprising Charles J Valentine – president, Rev EM Rice – vice-president, Charles Bradbury – secretary, and a committee including John Higgins, D Harkness and Messrs Black and Ditchburn.

It's interesting that the original club included the game of draughts because, all too often, some chess players do get a bit snooty about the "other" game.

Joseph Blackburne didn't. He claimed that, in some ways, it took more skill to play draughts than chess.

So what made him such a good player? He had an answer to this question. Whisky – and lots of it. He loved his drink – perhaps a little too much. But he claimed it improved his game. And who could argue with his record?

The next time I dig out my chess computer, which I've never beaten, I'm going to try it. Okay, I might still lose. But who cares?

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