

FINDING A PLACE FOR CHESS IN THE RECREATIONAL WORLD OF NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

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■ In September 1842 the Preston literary institution debated whether the game of chess should be permitted there. Some members regarded it as quite unsuitable, considering chess a game of chance. As Mr Holden said, “this was a society for the diffusion of useful knowledge”... “the game of chess was opposed to the spirit of the promoters of the society”.¹ The case was hotly disputed, but ultimately only a handful opposed chess’s inclusion in the programme, the institution supporting the presentation of a far larger range of subjects, embracing both arts and sciences. As Mr Segar said:

“Society’s should be formed upon the most enlarged basis. That was the case on the continent;... hoped that one day the arts, the sciences and literature, would be encouraged to their fullest extent; and when all that could tend to ameliorate the condition of mankind could be admitted within its scope.”²

While there was nothing particularly noteworthy in such a victory, for Preston was just one of many similar institutions, chess’s ability to command sufficient prestige to become respectable enough for inclusion in the institution was instructive. The facts were that for a very long time chess had been regarded by respectable society as at best a waste of time and often as morally harmful, a practice akin to gambling.³ However, by the early 1840s this perception had been transformed, many considering chess as both intellectual and moral. Chess’s ascension to such exalted status had been a very long struggle and it was about to be confirmed in a highly visible way, commanding a place in the nation’s respectable periodicals. The following article is about the appearance of chess in Britain’s periodicals and newspapers during the first half of the nineteenth century.

By the eighteenth century Britain possessed newspapers and periodicals that appeared on a daily, weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis. From the very first this press included information on recreational activities and certain sports, notably horse racing, and commanded great attention. Indeed, the first specialist periodical focusing on horse racing commenced in 1729.⁴ While a work on chess was one of the first books ever published in England, stemming from the press of William Caxton – generally regarded as the father of English printing – the game does not appear to have commanded much attention in the early popular press.⁵ There were probably two reasons for this. Firstly, the game was regarded as too difficult to master and secondly, many who were religious did not consider it as a suitable recreation, associating it with gambling. Gradually, however, knowledge of chess did spread, often disseminated by chap-books. Chap-books were short (often under twenty pages), cheap literature, sometimes summarising the contents of larger, more expensive, works. These would contain the rules of chess and basic advice on tactics.⁶ Nonetheless, chess remained a very minor component of popular culture and it is instructive that it was barely mentioned in the first sporting periodical that appeared, *The Sporting Magazine*, which debuted in 1792. *The Sporting Magazine* sold 3,000 copies a month in the 1790s and embraced almost every recreational activity.⁷

By the early 1830s the population of Britain was becoming increasingly literate and enjoyed a greater disposable income. While these components were vital for the expansion of knowledge of chess, the game’s growth was assisted by a further decisive element, the appearance of a literature that was both more financially and intellectually accessible. Previous to this, literature on chess consisted of chapbooks and copies of *Palemède* and other works – mostly translations of foreign books – that were sold



William Caxton's printer's mark, 1478

in London, some of which were obsolete, being based upon rules that were no longer used.⁸ Books were invariably expensive, and many of the texts were not even generally available, being published via subscription, sometimes as little as fifty copies being printed.⁹ Also, the works were rarely well written and not conducive to disseminating knowledge of the game. Improvements in technology enabled the production of books with greater print runs and consequently their price shrank. As for the text, in 1832 William Lewis issued his first instructional book, a treatise on chess that was well written and accessible to the general reader.¹⁰ However, although it was cheaper than many earlier volumes, it was still expensive, costing £2, a sum that was unaffordable to the bulk of the population, many skilled workers, for instance, being extremely fortunate to earn that sum in a week! Fortunately for the public, Lewis possessed a rival, George Walker, the price of whose books dramatically undercut him. In no time Lewis and Walker were in a fierce price war, the cost of books reducing from £2 to half a crown.¹¹ The chess books produced by both Lewis and Walker were written in a style that was accessible to the general reader. The result of this was that knowledge of the game of chess spread rapidly.¹²