

Bucks Individual Competition – A History 1933-1982

The following is derived from Alan Cox's excellent history of the BCCA which was compiled to celebrate the organisation's 50th anniversary.

The first record of a county individual championship indicates that C.H. Reid of High Wycombe who later became President of the County Association was the winner in 1932-33. In those days the competition was a "knock-out" tournament and comparison of the pairings table for 1933-34 which appears in the English Counties Chess Unions **Combined Yearbook (1934-35)** with a record in the Minute Book of the Leopold Institute, Slough, leads strongly to the conclusion that the eight players concerned fought out the whole championship in an evening - which, if true, just goes to show how clocks can prolong the game.

A fairly complete record exists of the championships from 1945-46, as Eric Bramley has participated in every one and holds the record for the greatest number of wins. The method of conducting the championship has been changed from time to time as it has evolved into its present very popular format. In the first post-war competition, six players selected by the Association played an "all-play-all" competition, with Dr. Bramley emerging as champion and Arthur Passant, then attached to the Marlow club, runner-up jointly with R.E. Burgess of Slough.

For the following season, fifteen players were divided into three sections from which the winners and runners-up were promoted into the championship later in the season. Besides Bramley and Passant who entered again, the entry for 1946-47 included two others who are still active players thirty-five years later, Harry Cookson of Aylesbury and Wesley Gammon, founder-member of the pre-war Lane End club who joined High Wycombe after the war.

From 1949-50 the selection process was replaced by a preliminary knock-out competition from which were exempted the previous year's champion and those placed second, third and fourth; this pattern continued until 1961-62 when entrants were divided into four sections, the winner and runner-up in each then competing in a championship section as before. The sections were increased to seven in 1963-64, with one qualifier from each. (1963-64 was a year when the competition suffered from an unusually high number of withdrawals and defaults which played a major part in deciding the final result and caused some controversy among those involved.)

The present format of the championship dates from the late sixties. In 1966-67 a championship section of six players nominated by the Association was formed to eliminate the two/three-stage aspect of former competitions. Remaining entrants played in a tournament similar to previous championships with the winner and runner-up playing the two lowest-placed championship contenders to determine who should enter the following year's championship. The format was further simplified in 1969-70 when the championship was extended to eleven players who met each other once with two supporting divisions in parallel with each other. The bottom four in the championship were relegated each year and the winner and runner-up in the two supporting divisions took their places. Finally, in 1976-77, the supporting sections were re-organised in order of playing strength with relegation and promotion throughout three or four divisions; this arrangement, which brings competitors together with others of equivalent strength, has encouraged healthy entries in the succeeding years.

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Given the complexity of the arrangements, particularly the division of the competition into three qualifying stages each year until 1961-62, the championship has worked remarkably well with relatively few defaults or withdrawals and has produced a champion, or joint champions, every year since chess activities were restarted after the war, which is more than some counties can claim.

There have, however, been some exciting moments, and a certain laxity over deadlines in the earlier years allowed one prominent contestant an opportunity (so his contemporaries thought) of delaying his games until he knew how many points he needed in order to win the tournament. When the rules were tightened to the extent that the Controller defaulted the gentleman concerned for failing to contact his opponent in due time, a special meeting of the Executive Committee was called to discuss his protest and appeal. The Executive upheld the Controller's decision and the offended party finished second in that year's championship; as H.G. Westcott, Honorary Secretary of the Association, commented in the Newsletter, however, he had the consolation of winning a neighbouring county's championship that year instead!

With twelve wins, two of them shared, Dr. Eric Bramley is well ahead of the field in competition for the county individual championship and, as none of the other current competitors has more than three victories to his credit, it will be some years before this record is challenged