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Chess in Scotland



www.chessscotland.com

by Alan McGowan

Most of our members will remember Alan McGowan from Canada as the author of the marvelous Kurt Richter book, published last year ([Alan McGowan: Kurt Richter - A Chess Biography with 499 Games](#)). However, Alan is also a renowned historian for Chess Scotland. We are most grateful that he just contributed an overview, to be shared with our community.

A brief look at the history, significant moments and some interesting personalities.

Understandably, there are only a few references available about chess in Scotland in the distant past. CHLS members will be aware of the Lewis chessmen, found in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides and dated to the 12th century. A recent addition to the web pages highlighted the story about a similar piece recently found in Edinburgh which sold at auction in July 2019 for over UK£700,000.

Some chess enthusiasts may have followed the recent Lindores Abbey Chess Stars tournament held at the Lindores Abbey Distillery near Newburgh, Fife, Scotland. The rapid, double-round event featured four outstanding Grandmasters; world champion Magnus Carlsen, former world champion Viswanathan Anand, Ding Liren Sergey Karjakin. <https://lindoresabbeydistillery.com/chess-stars-tournament/>

There was, initially, surprise that such highly-rated players could be attracted to such a location, until it was realised that several of the distillery's investors were Russian, which helped explain matters. Adding to the interest, however, was the announcement that papers in the abbey's archive indicated that chess had been played there more than 500 years ago by the monks of the Tironensian Order, an inventory recording "two pairs of thabills wt their men' – two chessboards with their pieces. In regards to the language used, it is worth noting the comments by Thomas Binder (Berlin) in Chess Notes 5243, part of a discussion of Kurt

Richter's use of the imaginary Dr Zabel for his instructive and entertaining writings:

The word "Schachzabel" is the medieval term for the game of chess, Schachzabelspiel, as well as for the chess board (originating from the Latin tabula, meaning a table or board).'

<http://www.chesshistory.com/winter/winter39.html>

In *A History of Chess* (1913), H.J.R. Murray wrote about a line in the King's Gambit Accepted – referred to as the Cunningham Gambit – and investigated its attribution in some depth:

'In the early eighteenth century, chess-players from all parts of Europe were attracted to the Hague by the fame of a great Scotch player, Alexander Cunningham, who was resident there from 1710 to 1730.'

Murray commented that there were two Scots with the same name, both chess players and both having resided in The Hague. The line had been attributed to Alexander Cunningham (c. 1655–1730), a critic and scholar, but Murray provided evidence showing that it should have been attributed to Alexander Cunningham (1654–1737), a historian, scholar and diplomat.

David Hooper and Kenneth Whyld also discussed this story in some detail in *The Oxford Companion to Chess*. There, however, the authors pointed out that the line – 1. e2-e4 e7-e5 2. f2-f4 e5xf4 3. Ng1-f3 (or Bf1-c4) Bf8-e7 – dates back at least to Greco.

While chess was played in family and friendly settings, social circles and hotels, or by travelling scholars and diplomats, there were no dramatic changes until players looked for a way to bring organisation to the game, which makes the formation of Scotland's first club a particularly significant event.

Edinburgh Chess Club

Edinburgh Chess Club was founded on November 4, 1822. It is the second oldest chess club in continued existence after the Zurich Chess Club (1809).

Two years later Edinburgh won the famous correspondence match against the London Chess Club. The match lasted over four years and gave rise to the Scotch Game: 1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.d4, first played, ironically, by the London team but taken up by the Edinburgh players.

In 1922, as a result of donations from several members, the club was able to purchase their own premises at 1 Alva Street, near the west end of Princes Street.



The club rooms are on one of the upper floors.

The club has a pleasant playing room, an extensive library, an interesting visitors' book and a fine collection of photographs and memorabilia that is dominated by material related to the correspondence match against London.

CHLS members might be interested to know that a club committee is currently discussing plans on how to celebrate their 200th anniversary in 2022. Further information about the club can be seen at <http://www.edinburghchessclub.co.uk/>

Other Major Clubs

The formation of the Edinburgh club and the publicity surrounding its correspondence match victory against London acted as an incentive to others. The official foundation date for the Glasgow Chess Club is 1840, but an unpublished history of the club suggests that it was formed soon after 1822. A fire in 1856 destroyed the club's papers, including Minute Books, but one surviving document, dated 1827, referred to the meeting of 'the Chess Club' in the city and referred to 'members'. Clubs were also formed in Dundee (1847) and Aberdeen (1853).

Dundee 1867

Dundee was the host city for the important 1867 tournament, only the third such international tournament in Britain after London 1851 and 1862). There were several notable features; drawn games scored a 1/2 point to each player and players tossed for colour at the start of each game.

Neumann scored a fine victory, his only loss being to Steinitz who, with the White pieces, introduced a

new gambit idea: 1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Nb1-c3 Nb8-c6 3.f2-f4 e5xf4 4.d4 Qh4+ 5.Ke2...

Dundee was represented by G.B. Fraser, already well known as an analyst and a researcher of various opening lines.

It was a hard tournament for Spens – not yet raised to ‘Sheriff’ in the Scottish legal system – who would soon be recognized as a driving force in the development of chess in the country.

Dundee 1867	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Pts	
1	Neumann	**	0	1	½	1	1	1	1	1	1	7½
2	Steinitz	1	**	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	7
3	De Vere	0	1	**	1	0	1	1	½	1	1	6½
4	MacDonnell	½	0	0	**	1	1	1	1	1	1	6½
5	Blackburne	0	1	1	0	**	1	0	*	1	1	5
6	Roberts	0	0	0	0	0	**	1	1	0	1	3
7	Dr Fraser	0	0	0	0	1	0	**	*	1	½	2½
8	G.B. Fraser	0	0	½	0	*	0	*	**	1	1	2½
9	Hamel	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	**	1	2
10	Spens	0	0	0	0	0	0	½	0	0	**	½

* G.B. Fraser resigned these games without play as they did not affect the prize money.

In the 1870s there was still no national organisation, but this did not stop the development of the game. 1871 saw the first of a series of West of Scotland v East of Scotland matches, held in Glasgow or Edinburgh. Also, there began a competition for the West of Scotland Challenge Cup which provoked numerous matches between individuals determined to win possession of the trophy.

Scottish Chess Association (SCA)

The Scottish Chess Association (now Chess Scotland) was founded on Saturday, February 2, 1884 at a meeting held in the chambers of Sheriff Spens in Wilson Street, Glasgow.

The first office-bearers were:

President:

- Archibald Orr Ewing, M.P.

Vice-Presidents:

- Sir Wyndham C. Anstruther, Bart.
- Rev. J. Donaldson, M.A., Kirkconnel
- Sheriff W.C. Spens, Glasgow
- G.B. Fraser, Dundee

Directors:

- Dr J. Clerk Rattray, C. Meikle and J. Fraser, Edinburgh
- J. Crum, J. Court and J.D. Chambers, Glasgow
- W.W. Mitchell, Millport A. Russell, Cupar
- C.R. Baxter, Dundee
- J.S. Pagan, Crieff



THE MUNICIPAL AND COUNTY BUILDINGS, GLASGOW.
MESSRS. CLARKE AND BELL, ARCHITECTS, 1844.

scotcities.com

In 1888 the building became the home of Glasgow Sheriff Court.

In its efforts to promote chess the SCA organised an annual Congress, which included a championship tournament and other events. The honour of winning the inaugural event went to John Crum (1841– 1922), who was also known for his interest in chess problems and endgame studies. The man who finished in 4th place was the inventor of the Forsyth Notation, and Peter Fyfe's name was attached to the Fyfe Gambit: 1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Nb1-c3 Nb8-c6 3.d4.

Scottish Championship 1884		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Pts
1	John Crum	**	1/2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1/2	7
2	G.B. Fraser	1/2	**	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	6½
3	Sheriff Spens	0	0	**	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	6
4	D. Forsyth	0	0	0	**	1	1	0	1	1	1	5
5	D.Y. Mills	0	1	0	0	**	1/2	1	0	1	1	4½
6	G. And rews	0	1	0	0	1/2	**	0	1	1	1	4½
7	J. Gilch rist	0	0	0	1	0	1	**	1	0	1	4
8	J.H.C. McLeod	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	**	1	1	3
9	J.D. Ch ambers	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	**	1/2	2½
10	P. Fyfe	1/2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1/2	**	2

The SCA also arranged for the organisation of a correspondence tournament – it was not referred to as a championship. It started in January 1885 with 16 competitors, was played on the knockout system, and saw John D. Chambers emerging as the winner after 21/2 years.

Club Chess

Much of the chess involved inter-club friendly matches. However, progress was made after the donation of the Richardson Cup for competition between the leading clubs in the country. Dundee was the first winner in season 1898-99. And after the sudden death of Sheriff Spens in 1900, a public subscription raised sufficient funds for the Spens Cup, a secondary team competition. Helensburgh, who fielded a future British Prime Minister on first board, won the inaugural 1901-02 event.

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Sheriff W.C. Spens

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J.B. Richardson

Both team competitions are still played today, though the current Spens Cup is a replacement; the original trophy was 'lost' during the 1939-45 war.

Club competition was further improved by the formation of the Edinburgh League in season 1903-04 and the Glasgow League in season 1908-09.

Women and Chess

When the Scottish Chess Association was formed in 1884 four women were among the 150 or so founding members, suggesting that there was clearly a desire by women to be more involved in the game.

This was proved at the beginning of the 20th century with the founding of the Edinburgh Ladies' Chess Club, whose origins date to 1904, and Stirling Ladies' in 1905. The Edinburgh club became so successful that at the start of the 1930s, when its membership peaked at 94, it was able to purchase its own rooms. They also instigated a Girls' Championship which ran from 1927–1938, which must have caused some

embarrassment to the SCA, which had not even attempted to organise a Scottish Boys' Championship (the first was for 1931).

Members of the club were also involved in the founding of the Scottish Ladies' Chess Association in 1905, which organised its own championship. The club continued to 1967 when falling membership obliged it to close.

Stirling Ladies' CC was disbanded because of the 1914–1918 war.

The Glasgow Ladies' Chess Club came into existence in early 1906. Several of the women had been with the Hillhead CC, prominent among them being members of the Gibb family.



— Mrs Margaret Skirving Gibb



— Miss Ellison Scotland Gibb

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Miss Margaret Skirving Gibb

These women were related to William Skirving (c. 1745–1796), one of five Scottish Martyrs banished by Britain to New South Wales (Australia) because of their political beliefs. Skirving had advocated for universal franchise and other reforms, which explains why all three women were Suffragettes. Mrs Gibb, a woman of private means after the death of her husband, funded women's causes. Ellison and Margaret – sometimes using aliases – were actively involved in the campaign for women's rights and were arrested and jailed on several occasions. The photo of Miss Margaret S. Gibb was taken in 1914 when she was a prisoner in Holloway. In July of that year she was arrested for slashing John Everett Millais' portrait of Thomas Carlyle in the National Portrait Gallery. Glasgow Ladies' CC disbanded in 1989.

<https://www.chessscotland.com/documents/history/biographies/gibb.htm>

Master's visits

Many masters have visited Scotland, including Alekhine, Blackburne, Botvinnik, Capablanca, Euwe, Harrwitz, Em Lasker, Marshall, Maróczy, Miss Menchik, Mieses, Réti, Rosenthal, Smyslov, Spassky, Staunton, Steinitz, Tal and Teichmann.

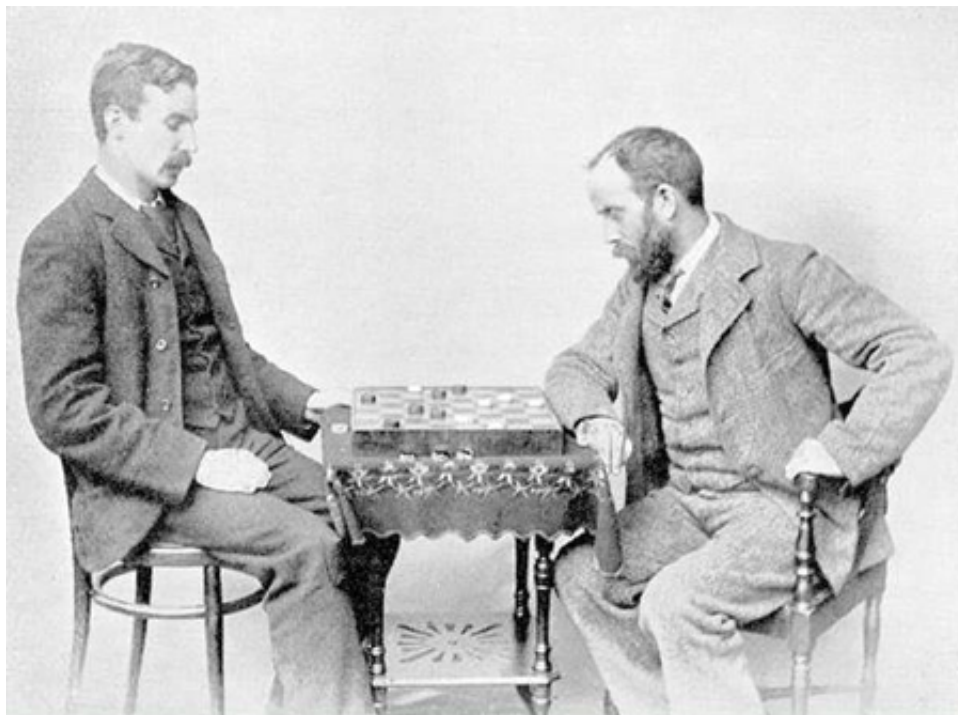
In 1967 Botvinnik hoped to visit the home of the poet Robert Burns, but scheduling problems prevented this from happening.

In 1984, the Scottish Chess Association's centenary year, Karpov, the then World Champion, was the special guest.

A particularly interesting visit was that by 20-year-old Eliskases in 1933. He was a guest of clubs in Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen, and he also played a six-game match with Fairhurst (3-3: +1, -1, =4). Not until 1983 was there another match of such significance in Scotland. That was because a local Glasgow club, Cathcart, celebrating its 30 th anniversary, managed to raise sufficient support and sponsorship to bring Tony Miles north for simultaneous displays and a four-game match with Roddy McKay.

And when Emanuel Lasker, who was interested in several board games, was in Glasgow in 1899 he dropped in on the Scottish Draughts (Checkers) Championship to spectate.

Incidentally, two world champions of Draughts – both Scottish – also played chess. James Ferrie (1857–1929) joined the Glasgow CC in 1908 and played in several matches in the first season of the Glasgow League. Richard Jordan (1872–1911) played for the Edinburgh CC in a match against Glasgow CC in 1897, but he later represented the Edinburgh Working Men’s Club, which won the Edinburgh League Championship in seasons 1903/4, 1904/5 and 1905/6.



www.wylliedraughts.com

Richard Jordan (left) and James Ferrie, during their 1896 World Draughts Championship match.

Some other significant dates

1895



Fernando Saavedra, a member of Glasgow Chess Club, contributed to a famous chess study. Georges Barbier published the above position,

indicating White plays **1. c7** and Black has to draw. The solution offered was **1. ... Rd6+ 2. Kb5 Rd5+ 3. Kb4 Rd4+ 4. Kb3 Rd3+ 5. Kc2 Rd4! 6. c8=Q Rc4+ 7. Qxc4** Stalemate. Soon after, however, Barbier announced that Saavedra's discovery, which involved underpromotion: **6. c8=R** wins for White, as **6...Ra4** (to prevent mate) **7. Kb3**, attacks the rook and threatens mate at c1.

1931

The English-born W.A. Fairhurst moves to Scotland to join a firm of civil engineers. He would prove to be a formidable driving force in the development of chess in the country.

1932

Scotland is accepted as a member of FIDE. They participated in the pre-war Olympiads of 1933 and 1937, finishing last on both occasions.

1937

Koltanowski sets a world record in a 34-board simultaneous blindfold exhibition in Edinburgh.

1939

The Scottish Championship this year included William Winter, a nephew of the Scottish writer Sir James Barrie, and British Champion in 1935 and 1936, as well as J.M. Aitken and Combe. However, the title went to Max Pavey, an American student studying in Glasgow (Geronimus and Bernstein were also American students).

Scottish Championship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
1939											
1 Pavey, ** M	1	½	1	½	½	1	1	1	1	1	7½
2 Combe 0 , RF	**	½	1	½	½	1	1	1	1	1	6½
3 Winter ½ , W	½	**	1	½	½	1	1	½	1	1	6½
4 Aitken, 0 JM	0	0	**	1	1	½	1	1	1	1	5½
5 Perkins ½ , NA	½	½	0	**	½	1	½	1	1	1	5½
6 Geroni ½ mus, LH	½	½	0	½	**	1	0	1	1	1	5
7 Gilchri 0 st, J	0	0	½	0	0	**	1	0	1	1	2½
8 McNau 0 ghton, WRD	0	0	0	½	1	0	**	1	0	0	2½
9 Page, 0 G	0	0	½	0	0	0	1	0	**	1	2½
10 Bernste 0 in, N	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	**	1

1946

R.F. Combe 'came out of nowhere' to win the first post-World War II British Championship, the first Scottish-born player to do so.

BRITISH CHAMPIONSHIP												
1	R. F. Combe	...	...	Elgin	...	...	*Combe	1	G. Wood	...	...	8
2	G. Wood	...	...	Southall	...	...	0	*	1	Abrahams	...	7½
3-4	G. Abrahams	...	...	Liverpool	...	...	0	0	*	1	Winter	6½
5-6	W. Winter	...	...	London	...	...	0	0	*	1	Alexander	6
	C. H. O'D. Alexander	...	...	London	...	...	0	0	*	1	Golombek	6
7-8	H. Golombek	...	...	London	...	...	0	0	*	1	Broadbent	6
	R. J. Broadbent	...	...	Cheadle	...	...	1	1	1	1	Milner	5½
9	P. S. Milner-Barry	...	...	London	...	...	0	0	0	0	B. H. Wood	5½
	B. H. Wood	...	...	Sutton Coldfield	...	...	0	0	0	0	F. Parr	4
10-12	F. Parr	...	...	Sutton	...	...	1	0	1	0	A. R. B. Thomas	3½
	A. R. B. Thomas	...	...	Tiverton	...	...	0	1	0	0	R. G. Wade	3½
	R. G. Wade	...	...	New Zealand	...	...	0	0	0	0		3

The contrast in the reports of this event in the two British chess magazines was remarkable. B.H. Wood, editor of CHESS, provided a detailed, enthusiastic report, clearly warranted by the victory of the 'unknown' over a number of established masters. The British Chess Magazine, however, said in its September 1946 issue: 'We must hold over until our next issue an appreciation of the play and players in the Championship...' and then failed to say anything further.

<https://www.chessscotland.com/documents/history/1946britchamp.htm>



Scotland's Jonathan Rowson not only repeated Combe's success, but exceeded it by winning three consecutive British Championships in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

1951

Fairhurst wins the first Commonwealth Championship.

1967

The Dundee International Centenary Tournament is held to commemorate the 1867 event. Gligoric takes outright first place, ahead of Larsen and Olafsson.

1978

Paul Motwani (born 1962) wins the World u-17 Championship to become Scotland's first world title holder.

1984

The Scottish Chess Association Centenary International Tournament is won by Lev Psakhis.

1987

Glenrothes, one of the 'New Towns' developed in the post-war years, celebrates its 40 th anniversary with an International Blitz Tournament, won by Tal ahead of Spassky.

1992

Paul Motwani and Colin McNab are the first Scottish players to be awarded the Grandmaster title.

1995

And, returning to where the famous chess pieces were found in 1831, the Isle of Lewis hosted a four-player Rapidplay International Tournament won by Judit Polgár, ahead of Simen Agdestein, Nigel Short and Paul Motwani.

A few personalities

G.H. Mackenzie (1837–1891)



G.H. Mackenzie

Born in Scotland, but spent his adult life elsewhere. In following a mercantile career, he was sent to Rouen, where he acquired a thorough knowledge of French. Then he went to Stettin, where he mastered German. He later chose a military career, both in Britain and America.

He had numerous match and tournament successes to his credit, including winning first prize in the American Chess Congresses of 1871, 1874 and 1880. His greatest tournament victory was at Frankfurt 1887, where he scored 15/20.

Mackenzie, en route to England for a major tournament, played in his only Scottish Championship in 1888, winning with 5/6 (+4, =2), ahead of former champions Barbier and Mills.

Florence Hutchison Stirling (1858–1948)

She was a member of Edinburgh Ladies' Chess Club and the Scottish Ladies' Chess Association, founded in 1905. She was Scottish Ladies' Champion five times: 1905, 1906, 1907, 1912 and 1913.

Miss Stirling was the daughter of James Hutchison Stirling (1820–1909), who helped introduce the writings of Hegel to Britain and America.

William Gibson (1873–1932)



— William Gibson

Gibson was Scottish champion nine times, West of Scotland champion 15 times and the Glasgow CC champion 14 times. He played in several British championships, coming 4th in 1912 and 5th in 1913. In 1923 he deprived Yates of the title by defeating him in the last round.

Few Scottish players had the opportunity to play in international events. But at the Ramsgate Easter Congress of 1929 Gibson won the Premier “A” with 5 1/2/7, ahead of Drewitt and Rellstab 5, Gibaud and Noteboom 3, Condé and Morrison 2 1/2, and Cole 1 1/2.

His only loss was to Drewitt in the last round, when he had already secured first place.

William Albert Fairhurst (1903–1982)



— William Albert Fairhurst

Fairhurst arrived in Scotland in 1931, shortly before the death of Gibson, who would have been his most formidable opponent.

His effect on the game in Scotland cannot be underestimated, as a player, organiser and financial benefactor. He encouraged and motivated young players, played numerous practice matches, organised a series of Scotland v England matches to expose Scottish players to higher levels of play. He was also involved in organising the 1953 Glasgow International tournament and Dundee 1967.

Fairhurst won the championships of Scotland (11—a record), the West of Scotland (16), and Glasgow CC (18) every time he entered. He was British champion in 1937.

James Macrae Aitken (1908–1983)



Aitken in the 1930s

Aitken's chess abilities were noticed when he was at Oxford University in the 1930s. He benefited from Fairhurst's presence and played two matches with him, winning one of them.

Aitken came to international attention when he played on first board for Scotland at the 1937 Stockholm Olympiad. His score of +4, =3, -10 included wins against Gilfer, Sir George Thomas, Storm-Herseth and Ståhlberg. In other games he made some of his opponents fight hard; Tartakower needed 94 moves to win and Reshevsky must have sweated a little in gaining a draw in the final round. During the 1939–45 war Aitken was a codebreaker at

Bletchley Park. He remained with the Foreign Office after the war, but resumed his playing career. He was Scottish champion 10 times.

Comins Mansfield (1896–1984)



Comins Mansfield

The noted chess problem composer arrived from England in 1935. In 1936 he won 1st prize for his submission to the problem section of the Munich Olympiad. The organisers were reluctant to pay him because of currency restrictions then in place, but Mansfield wrote directly to Germany's leader and soon received his prize.

Mansfield inspired several others in Glasgow Chess Club to take an interest in chess problems, in particular Tom Russell and Norman A. Macleod (1927–1991). In 1994 the latter was posthumously awarded the title of International Grandmaster of Chess Composition.

The people and events discussed here can be read about in greater detail in the Chess Scotland History Archive at https://www.chessscotland.com/documents/history/latest_additions.htm

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