

Birth of the WECU

This article is one of a pair about chess in the West of England both written from a southern counties' perspective. The first is specifically about Cornwall and its relationship with the Southern Counties Chess Union (SCCU). This second is more generic as it is about the birth of the West of England Chess Union (WECU), i.e., the secession of the western counties from the SCCU. Both articles, however, supplement a much bigger work on the SCCU written by your author, [*The Southern Counties Chess Union - a retrospective*](#). (May 2022). The book is a testimony to the first and oldest Chess Union in England and covers key aspects of the Union's 125year history (1892-2017). Apart from including overview of chess in the mid-/late-nineteenth century and reasons why Union formed, there are plenty of references to chess in west including formation of western associations (Cornwall (1902), Devon (1893 & 1901), Dorset (1923), Gloucestershire (1893), Hampshire (1890), Monmouthshire (1935), Somerset (1895), and Wiltshire (1889 & 1932)). A summary of each association's affiliation with SCCU is also given as are the statistics of each in the various over-the-board SCCU competitions they participate in. Another key aspect that is covered is the birth of the WECU as the proposed and eventual departure of the western counties had tremendous impact on the SCCU's organisational and competition structure. Their departure also affected the organisational and competition structure of the then British Chess Federation (BCF).

1955-56 saw a year of extensive debate and it is finally agreed in principle that a Western Chess Union will be formed. It officially comes into existence as WECU on 1st July 1957 which is celebrated with a dinner and the blessings of the SCCU Executive, *"The [SCCU] Hon. Sec. [J.N. Lomax (Sussex)] read a letter from WECA [West of England Chess Association] notifying the Union - that it was intending to form West of England Union from Oct. 1957 comprising the following counties: Cornwall, Somerset, Gloucester, Wilts, Dorset and probably Devon and Hants. Mr. Osborne [Gloucestershire] enlarged on this and the Meeting wished them good luck in the future."*

However, it must be remembered that before this seminal event the six founding counties (Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset, and Wiltshire) were all originally affiliated to the SCCU, so it begs the question what prompted these associations to secede from the Union and go their separate way with many having been members of an illustrious organisation for over 50years?

Before focusing on the circumstances that lead to the formation of the fourth Union (SCCU (1892), Midlands Counties Chess Union (MCCU (1897)), Northern Counties Chess Union (NCCU (1899)) it must be observed the idea of a western chess body had been explored twice before. The first was in 1865 when Captain H.A. Kennedy moots that an association of chess bodies based in West of England and South Wales be formed. He states, *"The object of such an association would be to unite the various chess clubs and chess circles in the district of the kingdom, so that they should form one large club."* The idea is met favourably but nothing really comes of it. This idea was revisited when the new South Wales Chess Association (SWCA (1935)) discusses the possibility of forming it at the outset of War (1940) but again it proved fruitless. The idea was practically established, if limited, when Monmouthshire affiliate to the WECA.

The second was in 1907 when Somerset posited that a 'Western Chess Federation' be established if only to ensure that western matches could be played centrally and over a shorter period of time. The idea was not supported but did take hold as some twenty years later (1928) it was acknowledged that except for the metropolitan counties (Essex, Kent, Middlesex, and Surrey) the west was the most developed geographical area in the SCCU. Regardless of this they were not really recognised as demonstrated by the fact that despite their innate strength they had essentially been denied participation in the BCF's County

Championships. This was because they were part of a large body, and it was almost impossible to be crowned SCCU Champion – at the time the SCCU had a total of 13 counties participating in their competitions which was equal to those competing in MCCU and NCCU combined, and Middlesex and Surrey were all conquering! It was felt that the recently installed Montague Jones Trophy (MJT) could be used to replace the 'bye' awarded to one of the three unions on rotation. Western counties believed they would have better chance of winning MJT than Championship outright thereby potentially participate in BCF County Championship. Although idea discussed by the SCCU Council it was rejected. F.W. Markwick (Essex) was publicly vocal in his opposition to the idea and his view seemed to capture the consensus,

“As one of the representatives present at the SCCU [meeting] I felt the suggestion that the Union should have two semi-finalists was not quite cricket.”

This decision was a slight on the west who apart from being a strong and organised unit had been a willing participant in the creation and development of the SCCU for nigh on 30years, Rev. J.F. Welsh (Wiltshire) for example as SCCU Secretary was instrumental in consolidating the Union after the resignation of Leonard Rees (Surrey). It was as though all their efforts were for naught. This appeared to be justified by the dismissive attitude taken towards a Gloucestershire proposal (1902). Gloucestershire were by far and away the strongest western county as time and again they reached the final stages of the Championship of the South of England only to be denied the ultimate accolade of champion by the winner of the far stronger southern division (Hampshire, Surrey, and Sussex). Their chances of being crowned champion in 1901-02 was denied due to the controversy of deciding whether there was a winner of North-East division. Since both Cambridgeshire and Essex claimed to be the winner the 1901-02 championship was abandoned much to the chagrin of Gloucestershire as they had defeated Surrey in the first of the three-way play-off. Consequently, Gloucestershire are moved to suggest a trophy be awarded to the winner of the western division. Although supported by the other western counties (Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, and Wiltshire) the idea was not met favourably by the other SCCU counties. The decision to recognise 'minor' counties was eventually validated by the creation of the Six Counties Championship (SCC (1923-24)) renamed MJT (1924-25). Although these decisions were accepted stoically, time would show that the unit stewed on them until there came a time when they could endure the slight no more!

For two decades the western counties continue participating in SCCU competition and make valuable contribution to the running of the organisation, e.g., D.H. Napper (Dorset) had on several occasions proposed the restructure of MJT divisions and G.W. Powell (Gloucestershire), Captain PH di Marco (Dorset), and R.M. Bruce (Devon) were all SCCU Presidents. Post-war though a new entity comes into existence the WECA (1st June 1947). Despite my extensive research for my book, *'The Southern Counties Chess Union - a retrospective'* one thing that I could not quite establish is why they are formed; that the Association is formed there can be no dispute, but why? With no evidence to hand, e.g., was there a constitution? we only have supposition. Some are the western counties finally recognise that they can only truly get their issues addressed by the SCCU if they act in accord, i.e., as a distinct bloc. Maybe the wounds of 1928 had reopened, and the counties agitated for independence and the WECA was the stepping-stone to it. Maybe they wanted to begin to address the needs of western chess players as the metropolitan counties had done for their players four decades earlier. Maybe all the above! Maybe some other unstated reason. It is hoped that time will be able to reveal the real reason why WECA formed but notwithstanding it was understood by the SCCU that they would be a sister organisation thereby work in concert with the aims of the Union. As will be seen this desire of the Union was quickly challenged.

If there is one thing the institution of the WECA allowed was to address the lack of wholesale county chess in the west as in 1949-50 they inaugurated the West of England Competition (WoE),

“A proposal from Somerset to increase the number of boards in the SCCU matches [MJT] to 20 boards and to inaugurate concurrent matches for other trophies over 30 and 50 boards was unanimously approved.”

Over time this competition became known as Cotswold Cup (1951-52) to avoid confusion with the West of England Championships which was an individual competition established in 1946, then Harold Meek Trophy (1955-56) in honour of Harold Meek who died on 16th November 1954. Meek was well-respected in SCCU circles as his county of birth was Bedfordshire, but he was long associated with Middlesex due to him being Match Captain (1920-25), Honorary Secretary (1926-39) and President (1945-54). He also went onto become Honorary Secretary of the SCCU (1949-54). Prior to assuming role of SCCU Secretary, he had written several chess columns most notably in the *London Evening Standard*.

Until Somerset’s proposal, for some unknown reason there were few, if any, largescale matches played by western counties; these counties seemed content to limit themselves to the MJT maximum of 16boards. It is possible that some ‘friendly matches’ exceeded this number, but these are outside the scope of my book and this article. Counties such as Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, Surrey, and Sussex had all been regularly participating in 50board matches. In fact, Kent, Middlesex, and Surrey had participated in matches upwards of 100, 200 and 300boards! The North of Thames vs. South of Thames match (1921) was in fact contested over 400boards a world record at the time! By focusing on their own needs, the western counties were able to ensure greater number of western chess players could have the honour of representing their county, something that was advocated by Rees when he took steps to form the first chess union of England. The WoE saw western counties finally play matches over 20, 30 and even 40boards.

West of England Table of Champions

Cycle	Competition	Division Winner MJT Western- South	Division Winner MJT Western- North	Champion
1949-50	West of England	Devon	Gloucestershire	Devon
1950-51	West of England	Devon	Monmouthshire	Devon
1951-52	Cotswold Cup	Devon	Gloucestershire	Devon
1952-53	Cotswold Cup	Devon	Gloucestershire	Devon
1953-54	Cotswold Cup	Devon	Gloucestershire	Gloucestershire
1954-55	Cotswold Cup	Devon	Gloucestershire	Gloucestershire
Cycle	Competition	Division Winner MJT Region A	Division Winner MJT Region B	Champion
1955-56	Harold Meek Trophy	Gloucestershire	Hampshire	Hampshire
1956-57	Harold Meek Trophy	Gloucestershire	Hampshire	Hampshire

It has been stated that the WECA came into existence on 1st June 1947 and when formed the Union assumed it would be a sister organisation working in concert with the SCCU’s Executive body to achieve the Union’s aims. However, this assumption was given short shrift when in 1948 the WECA AGM (26th June 1948) indicates an intention to secede from the Union,

“[SCCU Hon. Sec. O. Dixon] reported an attempt had been made to persuade the WCA to secede from the Union and affiliate directly to the BCF. The Hon. Secretary reported that in his opinion the motion would come to nothing. The Chairman thanked the Hon. Secretary for his efforts to preserve the unity of the Union.”

The Union were surprised by this action as at the time they were in the process of addressing the BCF proposal. The BCF wished to review the following elements of the Constitution, Federation Members, Members Subscription Rates and Delegates to Council and Executive Committee. The BCF was pushing for direct affiliation whereas the SCCU argued that most chess organisations affiliated to BCF through their affiliation to the Union. Depending on which route an organisation took these three constitutional matters would be drastically affected.

Since the Union were more focused on the implications of the BCF's proposal they were not prepared to fight on two fronts, so a compromise had to be reached with the WECA and quickly. Consequently, the WECA had to decide whether to go ahead and establish a separate Western Union or remain as a bloc under the aegis of the SCCU. The Union of course hoped the WECA would opt for the second, but it was up to the WECA to make final decision. The bulk of 1948 sees ongoing discussion between BCF and SCCU and they resolve their differences at the end of the year. With an accord reached between these two august bodies the WECA must now decide either join BCF warts and all or remain as a bloc in the SCCU and accept the organisational restraints placed.

The WECA seem certain to push for independence and counties such as Cornwall are very much in favour,

“After much discussion it was resolved that:

The county favours the formation of an entirely separate western counties union providing the BCF are willing to accept the affiliation fees of such a union as forming part of the SCCU guarantee”

The position Cornwall, and others of similar ilk, wish to adopt is a hotch-potch; organisational independence but financial affiliation to SCCU. This was a position neither the SCCU nor BCF could tolerate, the SCCU rejected independence but welcomed finances; the BCF on the other hand welcomed independence but could not sanction non-payment of fees directly to them.

Although many western counties were in favour of independence, one county was hesitant, Devon. Devon is not at all favourable to a Western Union and without the support of one of the major western counties the prospects of a successful Western Chess Union would be in doubt. It is resolved that,

“In view of Devon's opposition to the formation of a separate western union and the concessions made by the SCCU to the western counties, it was resolved to support the SCCU and to review the position again in 1952”

In short.

“...the project of forming a Western Counties Union entirely separate from the SCCU had been shelved until 1952.”

The concession the SCCU were willing to give is that the western counties could have some independence in governing their own affairs and one of the first things they do to show they accept concession is introduce WoE competition. The SCCU had a shaky couple of years but had been able to achieve peace with both BCF and WECA.

Although a decision had been made to review the position in 1952 there are no records of any discussion indicating such a review took place. The lack of any would imply that all parties were satisfied with the arrangements as reached in 1949. However, the performance of western counties at the outset of the 1950's combined with the performance of the new

entrant to the BCF County Championships, Welsh Chess Association (WCA (1954)) upset the status quo.

Having reached an accord both the SCCU and WECA could focus on chess-playing. As stated above 1949-50 sees the introduction of the WoE Competition. This competition allows the western counties begin to show that they are significant contenders. Devon, Gloucestershire, and Somerset especially show that given the right circumstances they are just as capable of fielding large teams and that they were as strong as their eastern brethren. It makes one wonder what would have happened had the SCCU gravitated around the west rather than London and the south! 1950-51 is a ground-breaking cycle as for once the western counties make a clean sweep of the major SCCU trophies (Championship – Devon, MJT – Devon, Stevenson – Gloucestershire). This success coupled with the regular 30board matches in WoE Competition allows the west to finally demonstrate their innate strength. It makes one wonder then why a review of the arrangements with the SCCU was not undertaken in 1952.

The continuing over-the-board success to 1955 coupled with the entry of the newly formed WCA into the BCF County Championships (1954-55) eventually forces the west's hand. The WCA are a new body as it is created after the collaboration of the SWCA and Monmouthshire. This new body though is soon seen to be out of their depth as to put it bluntly they are hammered! Middlesex's defeat of East Glamorgan (15-1) in their debut in the competition sees a record set for the largest margin of defeat. This humiliation of a WCA representative was the straw that broke the camel's back. Ever since 1893 western counties had participated in the longest running inter-county competition, had seen them participate in 19 finals (Devon x8, Gloucestershire x5, Somerset x6). They could even claim that despite the struggles of trying to defeat the much stronger counties of Hampshire, Kent, Middlesex, Surrey, and Sussex during this time they had been crowned SCCU champions twice (Devon 1903-04 & 1950-51). Many would argue that this should be three as Gloucestershire really should be recognised as champions for 1901-02.

Their greatest successes though were reserved for the SCCU's 'minor' competitions. Post-WWI western counties delayed entry into SCCU contests as infrastructure and costs were prohibitive, consequently, the SCCU focused on the 'needs' of counties based in and around London and the Home Counties. The counties of Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Essex, Hampshire, Kent, and Sussex accept they could not defeat Middlesex, and Surrey so institute the SCC which in essence was a 'minor' counties competition. The SCC was restructured and renamed MJT when the western counties resume participation in SCCU competition. A second 'minor' competition, the Stevenson Trophy, was introduced in 1932 as the MJT was a knock-out competition and those counties eliminated in first round wanted their own competition so that they at least got to play more than one formal county match a cycle. The west's success in these competitions was great, MJT (Devon x7, Somerset x2) and Stevenson Trophy (Cornwall x1, Dorset x4, Gloucestershire x2, Monmouthshire x1, Somerset x3). Except for Wiltshire all counties affiliated to the WECA had won a SCCU trophy to 1955 with many coming after 1946. Yet despite all these achievements not one had opportunity to participate in the most prestigious county competition in Britain – the BCF County Championships! However, a Johnny come lately had participated and failed to cover themselves in glory! In all the matches western counties played against the likes of Kent, Middlesex, Surrey, and Sussex they had never experienced a defeat on the scale of that experienced by East Glamorgan. Their silence could no longer be maintained!

"This year or next it is hoped will be the last in which the winner of the West Championship will have to suffer the indignity of having to qualify for the British Championship in a same way as the rawest tyro, while the Champion of the weaker Midlands Chess Union and palpably weaker Welsh Union are admitted without question. Such a rectification can only with certainty be achieved by the formation of a Western Counties Union."

A declaration of intent is made, the west will take steps to form a union and as a result secede from the SCCU thereby follow through on the intention to form one in 1949. It was envisaged that this new union would comprise of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Somerset, and Wiltshire. Although most WECA counties agreed, Devon and Hampshire were more circumspect; Devon because they were scheduled to hold the SCCU Championships and were unsure whether the new union would be in a position to fund, Hampshire as the SCCU was their 'spiritual home'. Hampshire's position is somewhat ironic as when discussion about forming an association let alone a union were undertaken Hampshire were less than favourable to both! Despite the prevarication of both after a considerable amount of discussion throughout the remainder of 1955 and into 1956 it is finally decided that a Western Union will come into force on 1st July 1957 (again see '*The Southern Counties Chess Union – a retrospective*' for comprehensive details of discussion). Devon ultimately sees the wisdom of the decision and sign-up to the proposal; Hampshire on the other hand decline, however, they do join some 15years later after another change to the structure of SCCU competition, one that was to Hampshire's disadvantage especially after their all-conquering year in 1969-70. Hampshire are the sole 'minor' county to win three of the SCCU's most prestigious competitions – Shannon (SCCU Championship), MJT and Amboyna Trophy (50board competition).

The aim of being a Union in their own right, may have taken a decade longer to achieve but once made they are finally able to participate in the BCF County Championship. Their entry led to great change for this competition. The competition was instituted in 1908 and played between the champion counties of MCCU, NCCU and SCCU. With three counties competing the bye was issued on rotation. When the WCA entered the bye was dispensed with. However, the creation of a fifth body meant that the competition had to be restructured. Beforehand there were only two rounds (semi-final and final) now a third round had to be introduced (quarter-final) meaning more teams could be allowed to participate. The competition now had the following participants: MCCUx2, NCCUx2, SCCUx2, WCAx1, WECUx1.

As Archivist for the SCCU I leave the journey of the western counties here and pass the baton onto chess historians in the West of England to develop and consolidate the points raised above. There are of course excellent articles already in existence about chess in the west as written by Bob Jones on the various websites he has overseen for both Devon Chess Association and WECU and of course magazine articles he has written.

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Sources:

The Southern Counties Chess Union – a retrospective

100 years of the County Championships

Background to 1921 North of Thames vs. South of Thames match

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