

## **Cornwall County Chess Association – a former SCCU affiliate!**

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). The 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).

For many based in Cornwall, and West of England generally, they would believe the WECU, to which Cornwall is affiliated, is an essential unit of the ECF and a long-standing entity. In some sense this is true as the WECU was formed in 1957 and in recent years has reached the milestones of celebrating its Golden (2007) and Diamond (2017) jubilees, but considering Cornwall was formed in 1902 thereby pre-dating the WECU, it begs the question, 'To whom, if any, were Cornwall previously affiliated?' This article is a summary of the details given on Cornwall in the book. Please note in it, it is stated, *"...issues of [Union] activity and achievement, such as the initiatives introduced into the SCCU and on occasion adopted by the BCF, along with SCCU personalities and the omitted competitions are best covered elsewhere, possibly a second volume as it is ambitious enough just covering the formation of the Union, a brief history of its county associations, and compiling statistics of the over-the-board inter-county matches between them."* This caveat applies to this article on Cornwall, any information given here serves to be a foundation for those interested in the history of chess in Cornwall to develop.

When reviewing BCF/ECF YBs the year, let alone date, when Cornwall formed is rarely, if ever given. It can be said with certainty they form on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1902 under the impetus of Philip Dancer, who responded to the expressed wishes of Helston, Falmouth, and Penzance Chess Clubs that Cornwall has its own chess association. Dancer had previous as he was on Hampshire's committee. He took it upon himself to visit all clubs in the county especially Truro and Penzance who were likely to be the backbone to promote the new association.

There are lofty and not so lofty reasons why Cornwall forms. The lofty reason is that chess is a branch of education that will develop the mental faculties and well-being of young people. The not so lofty reason is that Devon had formed an association the previous year and it would not do for their rival to have an association and Cornwall not!

After being formed one of their first actions is to affiliate to the SCCU. However, although formed it takes almost a decade before they first participate in SCCU competition. The primary reason for the delay is lack of strength. Although Penzance and Truro are likely to provide the core of players, there were fears that the county would not be competitive enough. In order to address this, they form a partnership with the revived Devon and present the SCCU with an intriguing proposal – the two counties should be allowed to enter a combined team into the Championship. It must be noted that Devon had previously formed in 1893 and participated in the inaugural SCCU Championship but soon became defunct. Despite sporadic attempts to revive they finally do so in 1901 under the stewardship of Rev. H. Bemridge. Since both Cornwall and Devon are new, they think it better to combine forces so that their players had opportunity to contest inter-county matches. Unfortunately for both, the SCCU rejects the novel approach as it would not allow combined teams to participate. Devon decides to enter but Cornwall decline as in first instance they do not have enough players, let alone those who could be considered to be of county strength. An interesting aside must be given in that the idea of Cornwall and Devon working together was not a new one. In 1852 it was agreed after a tournament in Stonehouse that an entity called, 'Devon and Cornwall Chess Club' be established. The entity though was not successful from a Cornwall perspective as it was based in Devon!

Cornwall's hopes of contesting inter-county matches are dashed so Cornwall are precluded from participating. However, a few short years later the Executive comes up with another intriguing proposal that may expedite participation. The early twentieth century had seen the growth of a new form of technology – the telephone! This new technology had allowed chess matches to be contested, certainly at association level as in 1898 the Isle of

Wight had played Norfolk. Cornwall believe that their geographical location made it difficult travel to other western counties, other SCCU counties would be nigh impossible, so it was deemed it would be reasonable to allow them to play their matches by phone. Cornwall have identified yet another novel way to allow their participation, but like the first it is rejected by the SCCU Executive as once again it is not in keeping with the spirit of over-the-board play. Consequently, Cornwall will be continued to be denied playing competitive inter-county matches unless they accept the SCCU's conditions of play.

[N.B.: Although my book gives statistics of inter-county SCCU over-the-board matches they do not include 'friendly' matches; thus, it is quite possible that Cornwall did indeed participate in 'friendly' matches against Gloucestershire, Somerset, and Wiltshire and others from 1902 to 1909 but this was outside the remit of my work.]

Cornwall's concerns about their relative strength and geographical location continues to prevent them from participating in the SCCU's premier competition, the Championship of the South of England. Although trying to find workarounds to include their participation they finally enter the competition in 1909-10. Their entry is double-edged, in one respect it is positive as virtually all western counties have an association – Dorset are still yet to form. However, the consequences are the restructuring of the west. Devon and Cornwall form one geographical group, Gloucestershire, Somerset, and Wiltshire the other. This structure displeases Devon especially as they now play less competitive matches than before.

When Cornwall formed in 1902 their fears of not being the strongest county in the west, let alone the SCCU, were well-founded, as they were roundly beaten time and again by their western neighbours primarily Devon. This pattern continues even when the SCCU introduces the Montague Jones Trophy in 1924 and then Stevenson Trophy in 1932. Both competitions were in essence SCCU 'minor' counties competitions with the Stevenson being the 'minor plate' – see ['The Southern Counties Chess Union - a retrospective'](#) for rationale of each over-the-board competition overseen by SCCU and Cornwall's overall performance. However, despite this they can boast of lifting the Stevenson Trophy (1947-48 walkover victory vs. Berkshire.)

Cornwall's affiliation to SCCU overall is uneventful, yes, they took longer than some to participate in or post-WWI return to SCCU competition, and yes, despite losing more than they won, they finally lift an SCCU trophy. However, on occasion there do come moments when you need to stand up and be counted. The period 1955-57 is a watershed moment as after the poor performance of the Welsh Chess Association representative in the BCF's County Championships (1955 SF East Glamorgan lose 1-15 to Middlesex), western counties are more proactive than previous (1948-49) in forming a Western Chess Union. Cornwall most certainly are favourable to such an idea,

*"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."* (September 1949)

And,

*"The match captain [W.C. Rickard] and the Secretary [A.W. Busby] gave information regarding the proposed formation of a separate Western Counties Union apart from the SC.CU comprising Cornwall, Dorset, Devon, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Hampshire. After discussion it was unanimously agreed to support this proposal and it was further recommended this be carried out as soon as possible."* (September 1955 – see article *'Birth of WECU'* and ['The Southern Counties Chess Union - a retrospective'](#) for more details).

Once decision taken for the West of England Chess Association to become a Union, Cornwall accepts its time with the SCCU is over and it is appropriate to explore new horizons.

As Archivist for the SCCU I leave Cornwall's journey here and pass the baton onto those interested in Cornwall's chess history to develop and consolidate the points raised above. It is hoped that at least the journey post-1957 is completed in time for their own 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary (2027) celebrations.

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Source:

*The Southern Counties Chess Union – a retrospective*

With thanks to:

Ian George (Cornwall)