

ADAMS Edward Aurelius Revd 1836 - 1918 by C P Ravilious - Chess playing parson

The title of this article may appear misleading, since Eastbourne, like Sussex in general, has had no shortage of chess-playing clergy. Many nineteenth-century clerics-particularly those in rural parishes-led somewhat isolated lives, with little in the way of diversion or intellectual stimulus. Even in the towns, the duties of a parish priest left ample time for leisure pursuits, among which chess, a game of the intellect which could be studied in solitude but which also provided a context for civilised social interaction, tended to figure prominently. Hence it is that at this era we find a veritable army of clergymen in their rectories, reading Staunton's Praxis (the Bible of nineteenth-century chess-players), solving and composing problems, and very much to the fore in starting up chess clubs.

Our justification for singling out E.A. Adams in this context must be that he played a specially significant role in furthering the cause of chess in Eastbourne, and, alone among the town's 'chessists' at this time, was also a force in the game at county level.

Adams was born in 1836 at Newton Blossomville in Buckinghamshire, where his father was the parish priest. After graduating from Cambridge in 1860 he served curacies at Bury St. Edmunds and in Marylebone, and in

September 1869 became the first vicar of St. John's Church, Eastbourne. In 1869 St John's, with its vicarage, enjoyed a somewhat startling isolation, in what G.F. Chambers, in his book East Bourne memories (1910), was to call 'an open waste'. Adams' first congregation came from Meads village, whose inhabitants had previously attended Sunday services in a schoolroom, but the area around the church was soon to be caught up in the development of the Devonshire estates, and by the early eighties sheep pastures and cornfields would give place to solid middle-class residences situated in broad roads with grass verges; each new arrival representing, in principle at least, an added workload for the local clergy.



Adams soon gained the reputation of an 'orthodox preacher', and his twenty-three year incumbency of St. John's provides its own evidence of hard work on behalf of his growing parish, A reference in his valedictory letter to 'the inflexible integrity of the trustees' suggests that the post of vicar of St. John's was anything but a sinecure. However, it is not for his labours on behalf of his flock that Adams is to be remembered today, but for his achievements in what was, for him, almost a second career: the art or science of chess play. We do not know when Adams learned to play chess, or what prompted his first contacts with fellow chess-players in the town. He was not among the, pioneers who met in the Church Room in South Street on 17 November 1880 and established the nucleus of the Eastbourne Chess Club, a group which within a few months had recruited more than forty members. In October 1881, however, at the first Annual General Meeting of the club, a letter from Adams 'expressive of interest' in its doings was read out, and the members present decided to invite him to become their president. In the next few years, his influence on the club's affairs was to be pervasive.

The new club's regular quarters were in the Gildredge Hotel, adjacent to the railway station,

and we may picture Adams-doubtless in the regulation garb of a Church of England cleric - as a frequent attender at its meetings, and at matches against other clubs, A rare glimpse of such an event is accorded by a report in the Eastbourne Gazette of an encounter between the Eastbourne Chess Club and the local Mutual Improvement Society in February 1883:

Play was to be commenced at seven o'clock, and punctual to the moment the representatives of the Club took their seats in a row on one side of a long table, each having before him a chess board with the men set out in proper order, and eagerly watched for the appearance Of the foe. The suspense was of short duration, and in a few moments the players of the Mutual filed in one by one, and took up their respective positions... After this introduction, the Gazette's description of the match itself is appropriately gladiatorial. Contestants 'place their opponents hors de combat', 'drive them into a corner and force them to strike their colours', and if worsted 'give up the ghost'. Thoroughly at home amid this carnage, Adams 'by a series of manoeuvres and home thrusts, ... so maimed his opponent that the latter soon cried peccavi'. Given the social and religious origins of the 'Mutuals', it is tempting to suppose that, in disposing so summarily of his adversary, Adams fancied himself to be striking a blow against dissent.

The impetus of the club was not sustained after the first years of the eighties, and a serious decline in membership led to its closure at the end of the 1884-85 season. For Adams, however, the lure of chess was too powerful to be resisted for long, and he was one of two local players to join the Brighton Chess Club at this time. The connection with Brighton, as we shall see, was to be resumed a few years later. At this stage, however, Adams' first allegiance was to the chess fortunes of Eastbourne, and when the club re-formed in 1887 he reverted to his former, loyalty. Despite vicissitudes, Eastbourne continued to be the main focus of his chess interest until his departure from the town in 1892.

For much of the 1880s the major chess centres of Sussex were Brighton and Chichester, though Hastings was beginning to flex its muscles as the decade advanced. At no time was Eastbourne on a par with the 'big three', but the seeding system under which county competitions were organised meant that two players from the town were assured of places in the County Championship finals. Adams took full advantage of this arrangement, playing regularly in the finals and achieving respectable if not impressive scores. His chief weakness as a player would appear to have been a certain rashness of approach, which went naturally with a tendency to blunder: probably he was in the habit of playing too fast.

A report of the Eastbourne Chess Club's inaugural match against the Mutual Improvement Society, published in the Eastbourne Gazette in December 1881, gives a flavour of his style of play: '...the Rev. E.A. Adams and Mr. E. Curtis attacked each other with great fury, and the latter was soon beaten down by the attack of Ins adversary and had to succumb, but after this brilliant victory the rev, gentleman's impetuosity seemed to be exhausted and he fell an easy victim to his opponent's coolness, who bore him twice to the earth...' In July 1895 the Southern Counties Chess Journal printed a humorous 'Chant of the Brighton Chess Club' containing the enigmatic line. 'And all I could say of Adams would be thoroughly deserved'. While it is impossible to be certain of the writers meaning, a natural inference would be that Adams' play was so erratic that anything you said of him, good or bad, was likely to be true. All too plainly, Adams was not of the stuff of which county champions are made.

From 1884. Sussex began to involve itself in representative matches, first against Surrey and afterwards against other neighbouring counties, the combined universities, and the strong City of London Club, Adams was an eager participant in these contests, travelling willingly to such places as Croydon, Havant and Portsmouth as well as to events in London. Sadly, these exertions did not always receive the praise they deserved, Reporting on the second match between Sussex and Surrey in May 1884, the weekly newspaper The Brightman was disparaging about the contributions of players from the east of the county:

'Eastbourne and Hastings made a very poor exhibition and undoubtedly lost the match for Sussex, The Eastbourne representatives [one of whom was Adams] did not score a game'. Apart from over-the-board encounters, Adams took part in correspondence matches against the Irish and West Yorkshire Associations, and, as a Vice-President of the Sussex Chess Association, played a significant part in the organisation of chess within the county. In September 1890 Adams suffered a severe loss through the death of his wife, and this event was probably not unconnected with the following letter, which appeared in the Eastbourne Chronicle of 6 February 1892:

ST, JOHN'S, MEADS.

Sir : Acting upon the doctor's advice I am contemplating stepping aside for a stronger. I shall do so reluctantly for several reasons, one will be because I have been a sharer in, as well as a witness of, the advantages that have been added year by year to this position. When I came a small village contained nearly all the inhabitants. What a change! The whole parish has become a vast transformation scene. Acres in the hand of the tiller have become occupied by a diversified society, the leisurely movements of shepherds and their flocks have given place to rapidly moving conveyances belonging to tradesmen who are always ready to meet the wants of a growing population. Meadows and cornfields have become studded with stately villas and beautiful gardens. This intimation is given for the benefit of those who have intentions to apply for the living.... I am sure the best man who offers will get the appointment. The Lord be with him and grant prosperity and harmony. I am, Sir, yours faithfully, THE VICAR St. John's Vicarage.

Aside from its biographical content, the letter is of interest as a description of the changes which had been effected in an area once aptly named 'the Meads'. Developers' sprawl, that familiar concept of our day, had made a thoroughgoing conquest of the once verdant pastures familiar to earlier generations. Personal tragedy and the loss of his vocation notwithstanding, there was at first no slackening in Adams's enthusiasm for chess. In both the 1890-91 and the 1891-92 seasons he won the Eastbourne Chess Club Championship, and in August 1892 performed well at the Counties Chess Association meeting at Brighton. After leaving St. John's, his first move was to an address in St. Leonard's Road, Eastbourne, but by 1893 he was living in Hove Park Villas in the newly developed area of 'West Brighton', Here he joined the St. Ann's Well Chess Club (a group with a stronger social emphasis than most chess clubs, and with, unusually for the period, a number of women members) as well as the main Brighton Club, and for a short period was as active in chess circles as at any time in his career. In 1893, however, a poor performance in the County Championship presaged an eclipse either of his powers as a player or of his commitment to the game, and after 1896 his name disappears from Sussex chess records altogether.

Adams continued to live in Hove until his death, at the age of 81, in 1918. Fittingly, the last glimpse we have of this chess-playing parson is of his attendance in 1912 at the funeral of Arthur Smith, an early secretary of the Sussex Chess Association. Chess, it would seem, maintained some kind of hold over Edward Aurelius Adams almost to the end.

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