



C O L U M N I S T S

*New Stories about
Old Chess Players*

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*Henry Thomas Buckle*

The Telegraph, the Velocipede, and the Bristol Sloth Part One

Early nicknames given to chess players known for being exceedingly slow or fast seem somewhat surprising to me. One, its recipient now unknown, was given to the butt of a remark by Henry Thomas Buckle: “The slowness of genius is hard to bear, but the slowness of mediocrity is intolerable.” This unknown player was called “The Telegraph,” although I would not normally associate telegraphs with lack of speed. This nickname may have come from the difficulties that ensued when actually attempting to play chess by telegraph.

Actually, there was some dispute about when the first game of chess was played by telegraph. Chess by telegraph seems very natural, since the idea was raised independently multiple times. The first reference I have is to a very early pre-electric form of the telegraph, of a type most of us do not realize existed. This quote is from the *London Times* of February 19, 1824.

“We stated some days ago that the Paris Chess Club named Le Cercle de Philidor, challenged the London Chess Club to play a match at chess, the moves to be transmitted either by post or by extraordinary couriers. The challenge was accepted, and fifty guineas a game named for the stakes. An answer has just been received from M. de La Bourdonnaye [*sic*], the second player in Paris, declining the match, as the French Club is on the point of dissolution, in the consequence of a dispute among its members. Two games were to have been played at the same time; the French having the move in one, the English in the other; and it was calculated that if the moves had been transmitted by the post, these games would have lasted about

a twelvemonth. It was suggested by an enthusiastic chess-player of the London Chess Club, that as the national honour was in some way involved, Ministers might be induced to re-establish a telegraphic communication between the two countries for this special purpose. This plan would have abridged considerably the duration of the games, and would not have cost the country more than ten thousand pounds.”

I believe that the first telegraph game of chess was played between Baltimore and Washington DC, on December 5, 1844. Telegraph inventor Samuel Morse was somewhat upset about other claims, as shown by this from a letter to Louis McLane reproduced in *The Life of Samuel F.B. Morse, LLD*, by Samuel Irenaeus Prime, page 520:

“When I have mentioned in conversation the games of chess played by means of my Telegraph between B. and W., the answer has uniformly been ‘Oh, ah, yes, we have had that experiment on ours long ago.’ The English game of chess and its precise date I saw announced in a paper published a few days after it occurred, with a great flourish, as marking an era in the game of chess. The date, as you perceive, is Wednesday and Thursday, April 9 and 10, 1845. The date of one of our games of chess (see page 3, document 24) is December 5, 1844.”

Perhaps because of the stature of the players involved, the English telegraph game is better known, as well as being more relevant to this article. Actually, there were a number of games played by telegraph played in early 1845; I am not sure exactly how many. There is certainly one in which Staunton and Kennedy lost to a team of Walker, Evans, Tuckett, Buckle and Perigal, and another between these groups drawn on the next day. Sometimes (see the quote below) there is a mention of a drawn game between Staunton and George Walker, but this is probably also referring to the team game. I also have a reference (*der Humorist*, April 17, 1845) to a game played between Staunton and Matthew B. Wood, in London and Southampton respectively, which is again probably referring to the same event. A good description of one of these games is given in the *Living Age* of June 14, 1845, page 523. The writer of the article was stationed in Gosport (one end of the train line) with Staunton, while Walker was at the other end of the train line in London. Here is what he has to say about the experience.

“Of the game played between those distinguished professors of chess, Mr. Staunton and Mr. Walker, we have little to say; the battle may be considered to have been rather one of rapid execution than slow calculation, as the object was more to test the powers of the telegraph than the skill of the players. It was, as therefore might be expected, a drawn game. The amateur of this beautiful science, however, might have derived a more than usual share of information, for, during the period when the player was in expectation of a reply from London, Mr. Staunton went over the probable moves which were about to be made by his adversary, and threw out various suggestions which were in themselves admirable lessons. This fortunately relieved the tedium which would otherwise have arisen from the circumstance of being obliged to wait sometimes more than ten minutes before the determination of the London player was made known.”

The description continues, but I believe that this explains the use of the term telegraph for a slow player; simply getting the moves back and forth involved a ten minute delay. The draw in the second game was apparently agreed in part so that the Gosport players could catch the last train of the day back to London; telegraph play seems to have been an all-day affair.

The nickname given to a particularly fast chess player is less well known, and is interesting because it gives us our first known example of a match at what we now call bullet chess. Barthélemy de Basterot, in his *Traité Elementaire du Jeu des Echecs*, page v of the introduction, tells us of an amateur in the Café de la Régence named Bausset, who

was known for his exceptional speed at chess. He normally received rook odds from Labourdonnais, but decided to challenge him without odds on the condition that Labourdonnais would play as quickly as he did. Labourdonnais, who was never one to refuse a challenge, accepted immediately. Bausset had no complaints about the speed, since both players were moving instantaneously. The match did not go well for him, however; Labourdonnais won 23 times in a single hour.

Bausset's nickname at the Café was "la velociped," the name given at that time to the more modern type of bicycle. Today we do not think of great speed when we think of bicycles, but it is hard to imagine how much this simple invention revolutionized personal transportation back then. With a bicycle, you can travel anywhere in the city quickly and easily, without the wealth required to own and maintain a horse. Even Gladstone relied on the bicycle at the grand old age of 87; we should remember the seemingly modest bicycle along with other great inventions of the time!



Howard Staunton

So while it may be hard for us to understand why The Telegraph was a slow player and The Bicycle a fast one, concern over the length of time taken by an opponent's moves is a very familiar concern. I would love to see a history of the German word *Sitzfleisch*, one of my favorite terms, and its first use with respect to chess. Labourdonnais' fans noted how much more swiftly he moved than McDonnell, and supporters of both sides in the Staunton – Saint Amant match claimed their champion was faster. Staunton produced a record by one of his seconds which seems to show that he did in fact move faster on average; the very existence of such a log shows how much people worried about the time taken to move in the days before chess clocks.

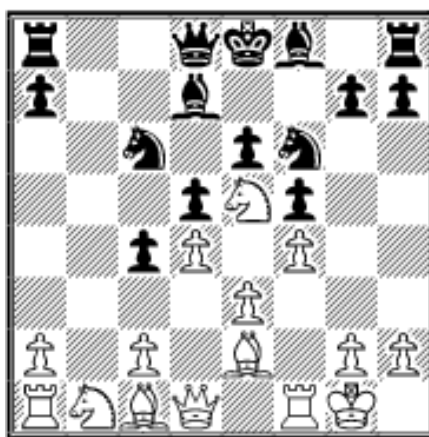
Despite a long history of accusations of slowness in chess, there is one player whose reputation in this matter is his chief legacy to chess history: Elijah Williams (1809-1854).

Williams was an enthusiastic chess player at a young age. There are two games preserved between Williams and the chess automaton which visited London in 1819-20, when Williams was just a boy; Williams lost these at P+1 odds. It has sometimes mistakenly been stated that he operated the automaton at some point, but that was a different player named Williams. Elijah founded the Bristol Chess Club in 1829-30, and the club soon became one of the strongest in the country outside of London. I give below a miniature

won by Williams against one of the other leading Bristol players, in which we see an attack leading to mate with almost no prelude.



Williams-Henderson, 1843, History of the Bristol Chess Club, page 36 (notes by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8): 1.f4 f5 2.d4 d5 3.Nf3 c5 4.e3 e6 5.Bd3 c4 6.Be2 Nf6 7.0-0 Bd7 8.b3 b5 9.bxc4 bxc4 10.Ne5 Nc6??



Necessary was 10...Be7 or 10...Ne4, but it was easy to overlook the threat presented by White's seemingly dormant QB. **11.Bh5+! g6** 11...Nxb5 makes no difference after 12.Qxh5+ etc. **12.Nxg6 hxg6** and White announced mate in three by 13. Bxg6+ Ke7 14.Ba3+ Nb4 15.Bxb4#.

Williams left Bristol in 1844 to test his skill in London, becoming a regular at Simpson's Divan. He was then a strong local player; not at the world-class level of Staunton or Buckle, but at least competitive with almost any other native English player. He did well in matches, playing Mongrédien in 1844 (the score of this match is unknown), beating Hugh Alexander Kennedy +4 -2 in 1846, and defeating William S. Kenny +11 -9 =5 giving P+1 odds in 1849. However, he was apparently not ready to take on the top players, losing to Staunton +0 -3 =1 receiving P+2 in 1845, and to Harrwitz by +0 -3 =2 on even terms in 1846. In a tournament at Simpson's Divan in 1849, Williams was eliminated in the second round by Buckle 2-0 after winning the first 2-0 over Edward F. Flowers; Buckle won every game he played in this tournament.

In 1850, Williams seems to step up to a new level. He was leading Buckle 3-1 in an unfinished match, and won the majority of games in matches giving P+2 to Robert Brien, and knight odds to John H. Sweet, that same year.

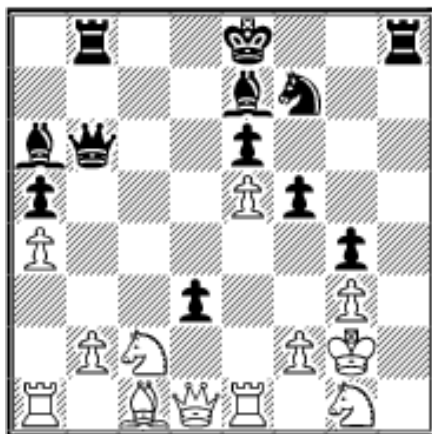
But it was in 1851 that Williams really seemed to emerge as a major factor in the London chess scene. He finished third in the first great international tournament, London 1851. In the first round, he beat the famous Hungarian master Löwenthal, who had come all the

way from America for this event, +2 –1. In the second round, he destroyed the minor player James R. Mucklow 4-0; here is the most convincing example:

Mucklow-Williams, London 1851: 1.d4 e6 2.e4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.Nf3 Nc6 5.Bb5 Preferable is 5.c3, as Paulsen would show not too many years later. This and White's next move merely strengthen Black's center. **5...Qb6 6.Bxc6+ bxc6 7.0–0 cxd4 8.Nxd4 c5 9.Nb3 f6 10.Re1 f5 11.a4 a5 12.c3 Rb8 13.N3d2 Nh6 14.h3 Nf7 15.Nf3 Be7 16.Na3 Bd7 17.Nc2 g5 18. Ne3 h5**



White is in considerable trouble already. A kingside pawn advance looming, he moves his king to give his Nf3 a retreat. **19.Kf1 g4 20. hxg4?** Opening the h-file is a *bad* idea. White is already lost. **20...hxg4 21.Ng1 Bc8!** Aiming for Ba6+, in a manner analogous to the Henderson game above. **22.g3 Ba6+ 23.Kg2 d4 24.cxd4 cxd4 25.Nc2 d3**



26.Ne3 Resignation was perhaps preferable. If instead 26.Na3, Black mates in at most nine starting with 26...Rh2+!! 27.Kxh2 Qxf2+ 28.Kh1 Bb7+ etc. **26...Qc6+ 27.f3 Nxe5 28.Nxf5** Or 28. Rf1 Bb7 etc. **28...Nxf3 29.Nxf3 gxf3+ 0-1**

In the third round, Williams lost to eventual 2nd-prize winner Marmaduke Wyvill +3 –4, after being ahead 3-0. But for Williams' eventual reputation, the key event was his final match, a playoff to determine 3rd and 4th places after Anderssen beat Wyvill to take 1st prize. Williams

defeated Staunton +4 –3 =1, thus taking 3rd.

Although you would think that this would enhance Williams' prestige, we will see that in some ways it led to a much worse reputation than he had previously.

To be continued ...



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