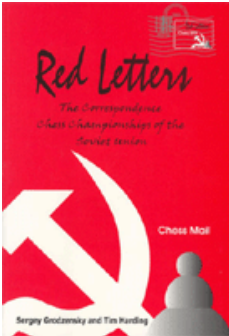




COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

Tim Harding




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In July, the University of Dublin will formally confer the degree of PhD on Tim Harding for his research into correspondence chess history. He is now extending the scope of his research and this month's article completes a two-part series on Philidor.

Philidor in the press: the final years

Last [month](#), *The Kibitzer* traced Philidor’s career in England through the various eighteenth century newspapers in digitised databases up to the summer of 1783. This month, we look at his final years and the mystery of when exactly he died.

The majority of the chess references to Philidor in the newspapers are concentrated in the last decade of his life. From 1775 to 1791 he was in the habit of visiting London for an annual season of chess at the Parsloe’s club before returning to Paris, but in 1792 he was trapped in England by the war between the two countries that followed the French Revolution. Thereafter he was unable to return home. And as his music fell out of fashion, he was obliged to rely primarily on chess for his income in these late years.

In his column in *The Times* on Saturday 10 May 1969, the late Harry Golombek stated as if it were fact that “Philidor played correspondence chess” but there is no contemporary evidence for this at all, and if he had done so, Philidor would probably have mentioned it in his anecdotes communicated to Twiss and printed in his book *Chess*.

The year 1787

There are various sources of information about Philidor’s various chess exhibitions at the chess club in London. Apart from the various newspaper reports, a list of his exhibitions can be found in a later book by Twiss, the *Miscellanies*. However, this is probably incomplete. It is likely that he gave more displays that were not reported in the press. The ones reported were always on Saturday afternoons at Parsloe’s club; whether he ever played chess in private houses in this period is unknown.



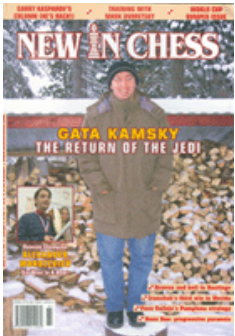
François-André Danican Philidor

It was in these later years that the majority of Philidor’s surviving games were collected. As those readers who have seen some of these games in databases will know, Philidor conceded material odds in the vast majority of them. In those where he did not, he generally played without sight of the board. Assessing his real playing strength is therefore almost impossible; he never met an opponent who really tested him, except perhaps in unrecorded games from early in his career. His reputation therefore rests essentially on the tributes of his contemporaries and on his book.

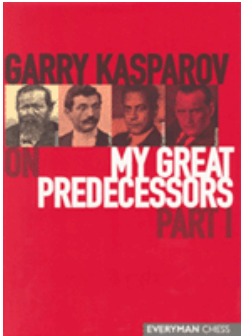
There were no reports of Philidor’s London doings in the Burney Collection in 1784, 1785, or 1786. In the *Public Advertiser* of 1 November 1785, it was reported from Paris that a new opera by Philidor, called *Themistocles*, given at Fontainebleau, had received “little or no success” but the correspondent admitted that tastes in Paris and London often differed, so this was no reason to condemn it.

In 1787 chess was reported once more. In the *London Chronicle* of 26 May, it was reported that three ladies attended a display at the chess club (on a date not stated) where Philidor played blindfold against Bruhl and Bowdler, conceding first move in each game. Bowdler won and Bruhl drew. His opponents spoke their moves aloud and then Philidor told his assistants what replies to make on the boards. Mrs. Wilmot of Bloomsbury-square was his representative against the Saxon ambassador. Philidor apparently spoke in French.

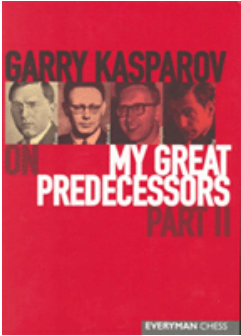
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This contest was also reported in the *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, the following Monday, claiming Philidor ‘made not one mistake’. This must refer to recalling the position and calling out moves; he must have made strategic or tactical errors. Nevertheless the reporter was mightily impressed. Cranking up his hyperbole, he called this “the record of more than sport and fashion: it is a *phenomenon in the history of man!*” which should be hoarded as an example of human memory “till memory shall be no more”. (In the nineteenth century of course, Philidor’s achievements at blindfold play were to be vastly exceeded by several masters.) Press reports of this event were just in time to be included in Twiss’s book.

The following game with Bruhl may be the one played on that occasion.

Hans Moritz von Bruhl – Philidor

London, 1787

Bishop’s Opening [C23]

1 e4 e5 2 Bc4 c6 3 Qe2 Nf6

Instead of 3...d6 followed by ...f5 as in the game from 1783 in the previous column.

4 d3 Bc5 5 Be3 Bxe3 6 fxe3 d6 7 c3 Be6 8 Bxe6 fxe6 9 Nh3 Nbd7 10 0–0 Qe7 11 Nd2 0–0 12 Kh1 d5 13 exd5 exd5 14 e4 dxe4 15 Nxe4 Nxe4 16 Qxe4 Rxf1+ 17 Rxf1 Nf6 18 Qc4+ Kh8 19 Qh4 h6 20 d4 exd4 21 Re1 Qf7 22 cxd4 Qh5 23 Qxh5 Nxh5 24 Re5 g5 25 Re6 Kg7 26 Re7+ Kg6 27 Rxb7 g4 28 Ng1 Rd8 29 Rxa7 Rxd4 30 Rc7 Rb4 31 a4 Rxa4 32 Rxc6+ Kg5 33 Rc5+ Kg6 34 Rb5 Ra1 35 g3 Rd1 36 b4 Rd2 37 Rb6+ Nf6 38 b5 Rb2 39 Rb8 Ne4 40 b6 Ng5 41 b7 Kh5 42 Rf8 Rxb7 43 Rf2 Rb1 44 Kg2 ^{1/2–1/2}

Philidor’s mind may have been more on music at this time. The *Public Advertiser* on 28 May advertised a concert that evening in Vauxhall Gardens to include a piece by him, so he could have been involved in rehearsals. Then on Wednesday 30 May, the *World and Fashionable Advertiser* announced that

Philidor, whose astonishing match of Chess made an article in our paper of Monday, is soon to undertake a task yet more arduous – He is to play in the same manner as before, the tables not in sight, three games of chess, subsisting at the same time.

There must be considerable doubt whether this actually happened in 1787; maybe the paper was misinformed. If it had happened, it would surely have been reported. Although this passage says “in the same manner as before”, it is not quite clear how many times did Philidor actually play *three* blindfold games in public. He certainly did so at least once, but his normal pattern seems to have been two blindfold with sometimes a third game in which he saw the board.

The only other mention of Philidor playing the game that year came on 18 June 1787 when the same newspaper reviewed “the new *Chess* book by ‘the elder Mr Twiss’”. The review noted that in Philidor’s opinion the best (other) players of the present century were Mr. Cuninghame [that should be “Cunningham”], Lord Sunderland, Lord Godolphin, Lord Elibank, Mr. Cargill, Sir J. Jansen, Stamma, Dr. Black, Dr Cowper, Mr. Salvador. At the present time the best are C. Bruhl, Hon. Henry Conway, Lord Harrowby, Mr. Bowdler, Mr. Jennings — “these give Mr Philidor the first two moves, for which they receive a knight, and then they are a match for him”. There are indeed some games on record with these odds.

The review also observed that Philidor never met a first, or even a second-rate lady player (although some women did belong to the club at Parsloe’s). The *Bath Chronicle* and *Whitehall Evening Post* also reviewed Twiss’s book and made reference to Philidor’s feats; this part of the work was clearly a major selling-point for Twiss.

The year 1788

The earliest mentions of Philidor in *The Times*, which was first published in 1785, were in 1788 and concern his musical work, specifically advertisements for the publication in print of his setting to music of the poem *Carmen Seculare* (the work whose premiere was discussed in the last column) and for a live performance of it. This was an important occasion, as *The Times* on 29 April noted that the performance next day would be the only chance to hear the celebrated French singing-master M. Richer, who was stated to be Philidor’s brother-in-law. The concert at the Great Hall, Hanover Square, would be attended by the Prince of Wales and other leading members of society.

After the fulfilment of this engagement, Philidor could play some chess. He was now sixty-one years old. Twiss’s *Miscellanies* notes that on 10 May 1788, Philidor played against Bruhl, Nowell, and Leycester, winning all three games. This, however, does not accord with the report in the

World, Monday 12 May 1788, which makes it clear that Philidor only played two weak opponents on 10 May, although Bruhl was present. The paper recounted various noted feats of memory, but...

“Philidor’s annual wonder yields to none of them. Two Chess Boards in full work at one time—Out of sight, and never out of mind—Playing BOTH GAMES upon hearsay, and WINNING all that he played for—were the points of curiosity on Saturday. In both games Mr PHILLIDOR gave the first move. Against Mr Leycester he won in less than two hours. Mr Noel took near three hours to be beat. Mr Bowdler called the moves. Mr Leycester and Mr Noel do not yet rank with COUNT BRUHL and Mr BOWDLER, but they played in a fine style.”

The exhibition on 10 May evidently was early enough in the afternoon to be reported the same day in the *Whitehall Evening Post*, which has some extra details and uses the spelling “Lester” for one opponent. About forty persons attended including “some very beautiful females”. This report confirms that Bruhl was not an opponent on that occasion but moved the pieces against Mr Lester.

“Philidor gave both of his antagonists a pawn and the move, playing alternately with each, and though they contended with much skill, particularly Mr Nowell, who had played with great caution and judgment, he won both the games. The match with Mr Lester lasted three quarters of an hour, that with Mr Nowell near two hours and a half; during which time Philidor sat with his eyes closed, and his back to the tables, giving his directions, at times, with much pleasantry, and taking snuff with easy indifference”.

When essentially the same report from a correspondent was reprinted in Dublin on 26 May, the *Freeman’s Journal* added that when the games ended “the company unanimously burst into a transport of wonder and applause”.

The climax of Philidor’s visit in 1788 was the exhibition on 31 May when, possibly for the first time, he played blindfold against three opponents. The *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, carried an advertisement on 13 May that he would perform this feat on Saturday 24th at 2pm. Apparently this was postponed for a week, as there are no reports of a display on the 24th.

The *World*, on 27 May, advertised that on Saturday next, the 31st at Parsloe’s, St James’s-street, he would play three different blindfold games against three of the best players.

“All the Members of the Club are desired to honour the Match with their presence; and the lovers of chess, not belonging to the Club, will be admitted by Tickets, which may be had by applying to Mr Parsloe.”

No ticket price was stated. This advert was repeated on the 29th and again on the day. Once more the *Whitehall Evening Post* had its correspondent ready so that the late editions could report the feat; this was possible as it was over by about 3:30pm. Other papers such as the *World* reported on the Monday, 2 June. The *World* said:

“PHILLIDOR – PARSLOE’S.
This extraordinary man, on Saturday, encountered three Antagonists – COUNT BRUHL even – Mr ATTWOOD receiving the pawn and move; and Mr MASERES on the same terms. Count Bruhl and Mr Atwood were beaten. Mr Maseres beat Phillidor. The Games were all played in two hours and a half. The games on the part of Phillidor, who stood at a distance from the table, were played by Mr Bowell against Count Bruhl, by Mr Bowdler against Mr Atwood, and by Mr Brune, a foreigner, against M Maseres. Never was Mr Phillidor more distinguished than on this occasion.”

Here “Bowell” was a misprint for Nowell, while the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (reporting on the Tuesday) added the detail that Nowell’s name was formerly Jennings.

The *Whitehall Evening Post* of 31 May noted that “The whole lasted an hour and a half, during which time Philidor exerted a degree and promptitude and skill which he never exceeded at any more juvenile period.” This display evidently completed Philidor’s public engagements in London. The *World*, on Tuesday 3 June, noted that Philidor was returning, “without any other great match” to Paris.

1789: the year of revolution

In 1789, Philidor came earlier in the year to London and his chess displays preceded his main musical engagement. The *World* on 2nd March reported:

PHILLIDOR’S CHESS.
This extraordinary effort of the human mind, was on Saturday. –
Though not new, it was as good as new: It surprised as much as
ever. Memory, in retention and distribution, can scarcely go beyond
it. Comte BRUHL and Mr BOWDLER were the two antagonists.
PHILLIDOR saw neither game. He lost one: he won the other. –
This, however, does not discourage him. He plays again in a few
days, and undertakes three games.

The *Morning Post and Advertiser* carried an advertisement on 9th, 11th
and 14th March 1789 for the three-game display on the 14th. Then the
World (25th, 26th and 27th March 1789) advertised that on Saturday 28th
“Phillidor will play three games at Chess, Blindfold, at once, against three
good players.” Admittance was for club members or by buying five
shilling tickets. The *World* again, on 15th and 18th April advertised a
similar display, the last of the season, to take place on Saturday 18th at
2pm. Now it was “members of the nobility and gentry” who were invited
to buy tickets. Perhaps rich merchants could have afforded the steep price
for a couple of hours intellectual entertainment but clearly they were to be
discouraged by that wording; the choice of those words could imply that
some of that ilk had attended earlier displays in the year to the displeasure
of the regulars?

The Times of 8 June carried an advertisement for ‘a grand concert of
vocal and instrumental music, entirely new and under the direction of Mr.
Philidor.’ The concert that evening, ‘under the patronage of several
Ladies of Distinction’, included his setting of ‘An ode on His Majesty’s
Recovery’. (King George III had been declared insane in 1788 but then
unexpectedly restored to temporary health, as readers who have seen the
play or film *The Madness of King George* will recall.)

The year 1790

Although the Bastille had been stormed on 14th July 1789, it was still
possible to travel between Paris and London without unusual risks in
1790 and 1791. The *World*, on Wednesday 24th February 1790 advertised
that Philidor would play next Saturday, the 27th, “at 2 o’clock precisely”,
three games against good players, two of them without seeing the boards
and one looking over the board. “He respectfully invites the Members of
the Club to favour him with their presence”. Ladies and Gentlemen who
were not members of the club could buy tickets for the usual five
shillings. A similar advertisement appeared in *The Times* on the 25th,
apparently the first time the paper mentioned him in connection with
chess. I have not found any report about this display but it appears that he
probably gave at least four displays in that year. On Tuesday 20th April,
the *World* briefly reported that “Phillidor’s Chess Match was again on
Saturday – and with the usual triumph of skill.”

On Thursday 27th May, *The Times* advertised that Philidor’s last chess
display of the season would be held on Saturday, under the usual
conditions. He would play two “good chess players” blindfold and a third
with sight of the board. No report of that occasion has been found and *The
Times* did not mention Philidor again until 1795.

The only display in 1790 which has been reported in detail was that
played on 13th May. Those games dated 13th March in ChessBase’s
database are almost certainly those from that occasion: the names of the
opponents and the results match. Twiss, in his *Miscellanies*, noted that on
13th May 1790, Philidor (now 63 years old) played Sheldon and Captain
Smith “sans voir”, but played seeing the pieces versus Hon. H. S.
Conway, giving the move to each. Philidor won all three. Twiss claimed
they were the only ones of the kind with all the moves. As last month’s
column showed, that may not be true as the three games published in that
article were probably those played in the exhibition on 27 May 1783.

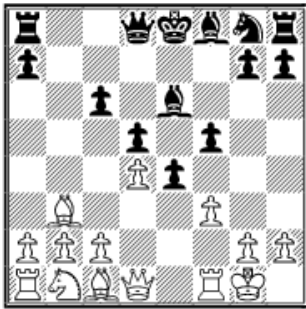
Here are the games of the 1790 display, if we can believe ChessBase. (I
have not had the opportunity to check the scores against other sources.)

Sheldon - Philidor
London 1790
Bishop’s Opening [C23]

1 e4 e5 2 Bc4

Philidor’s opponents had all studied his book so they played his favorite
opening against him.

**2...c6 3 Nf3 d5 4 exd5 cxd5 5 Bb3 Nc6 6 d4 e4 7 Ne5 Be6 8 0–0 f6 9
Nxc6 bxc6 10 f3 f5**

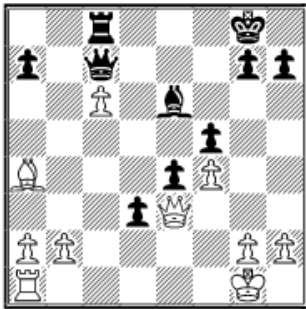


Philidor is clearly playing in accordance with his maxim that “pawns are the soul of chess”.

11 Be3 Nf6 12 Nd2 Bd6 13 c4 0–0 14 Ba4 Qc7 15 f4 Ng4 16 Qe2 Nxe3 17 Qxe3 c5!?

17...dxc4 is good but Philidor, playing blindfold, generally headed for simplifications and won in the ending.

18 Nb3 dxc4 19 Nxc5 Bxc5 20 dxc5 Rac8 21 c6 Rfd8 22 Rfd1 Rd3 23 Rxd3 cxd3



Philidor has a comfortably superior endgame. White’s next move is suicidal.

24 Bb3? Bxb3 25 axb3 Qb6 26 Kf2 Qxe3+ 27 Kxe3 Rxc6 28 Rxa7 Rd6 29 Kd2 e3+ 30 Kxe3 d2 31 Ra1 d1Q 0–1

Captain Smith – Philidor
London 1790
Bishop’s Opening [C24]

1 e4 e5 2 Bc4 Nf6 3 d3 c6 4 Bg5?! h6 5 Bxf6 Qxf6 6 Nc3 b5 7 Bb3 a5 8 a3 Bc5 9 Nf3 d6 10 Qd2 Be6 11 Bxe6 fxe6 12 0-0 g5

Philidor insures against White playing f2-f4 later and prepares a pawn storm.

13 h3 Nd7 14 Nh2 h5



15 g3 Ke7 16 Kg2 d5?

This is a positional mistake, with Black’s king in the center, and it would be better to press on with a kingside attack by ...Raf8 or ...g4.

17 f3 Nf8 18 Ne2 Ng6 19 c3 Rag8 20 d4 Bb6 21 dxe5 Qxe5 22 Nd4 Kd7 23 Rae1 h4



The game is now at crisis point. White has not made the most of his

opportunities to open the center and get at Philidor’s king but there was one last chance: 24 f4! gxf4 25 Ng4! and Black has awkward defending to do. Now Philidor can break through on the kingside and finish with a mating combination.

24 Qf2?? Bc7 25 Ne2 hgx3 26 Qxg3 Qxg3+ 27 Nxg3 Nf4+ 28 Kh1 Rxh3 29 Rg1 Rxh2+! 30 Kxh2 Rh8+ 31 Nh5 Rxh5+ 32 Kg3 Nh3+ 33 Kg4 Rh4 mate 0–1

H. S. Conway - Philidor
London 1790
Bishop’s Opening [C23]

ChessBase says Philidor was playing blindfold but the newspaper reports say otherwise.

1 e4 e5 2 Bc4 c6 3 Nc3 Bd6 4 d3 Bc7 5 Qf3 Qe7 6 Bg5 Nf6 7 Nge2 d6 8 h3 Be6 9 Bb3 b5 10 0–0–0 h6 11 Bxf6 Qxf6 12 Qxf6 gxf6 13 d4 a5



14 f4!?

An aggressive move but Philidor sees that he can force the undoubling of his own pawns. The critical move was 14 d5, trying to create an outpost on d5 Philidor probably would have replied 14...a4 15 dxe6 axb3 16 exf7 + Kxf7 17 axb3 Na6 (or ...Nd7), preserving his pawn structure and keeping some positional compensation for White’s extra doubled pawn.

14...exd4 15 Rxd4 a4 16 Bxe6 fxe6 17 Rhd1 Ke7 18 Ng1 Nd7

Black now has a similar position to the last variation but at no material cost; the game is roughly equal.

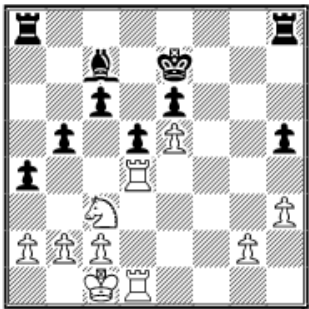
19 Nf3 h5!

A move of which Nimzowitsch might have approved. If now 20 Nh4 one of Black’s rooks goes to g8, while 20 g4 hxg4 21 hxg4 d5! brings Black’s bishop into the game. White’s next move is worse.

20 e5? fxe5 21 Nxe5

If 21 fxe5 d5. Of course White hopes to break through with his rooks to the seventh rank, but he will only be left with a weak e-pawn after Philidor’s correct reply.

21...Nxe5! 22 fxe5 d5!

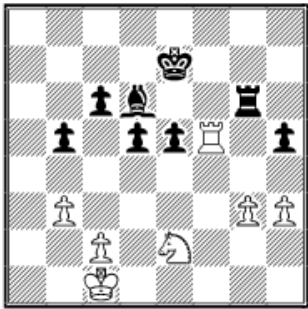


White has a lost position.

23 Re1 Raf8 24 Rd3

Also after 24 Rd2 Rhg8 Black will soon win either the g-pawn or e-pawn.

24...Rf5 25 b3 axb3 26 axb3 Rxe5 27 Rf1 Rg5 28 g3 Rhg8 29 Ne2 e5 30 Rdf3 R8g7 31 Rf6 Bd6 32 Rh6 R7g6 33 Rxg6 Rxg6 34 Rf5



A little counterplay, which Philidor snuffs out by transposing to a winning rook endgame.

34...e4 35 Rxh5 Bxg3 36 Nxg3 Rxxg3 37 Kd2 Kd6 38 Rh8 Kc5 39 c3 b4 40 cxb4+ Kd4! 41 Rh6 Rg2+ 42 Kc1 e3 43 Rxc6 Rg1+ 44 Kb2 e2 45 Re6 e1Q 46 Rxe1 Rxe1 0-1

1791: Philidor in decline?

To paraphrase the report in the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, of 7th February 1791, Philidor, “though sick, rather than disappoint”, played and won three games the previous Saturday at Parsloes, against adversaries “deemed excellent players”. Against Nowell he saw the board. He played “without looking over the boards” against Mr. Wilson of the Minorities and another man of the same name; Count Bruhl and Mr. Mazzanti making Philidor’s moves on those boards. There were present “several ladies and gentlemen of fashion”.



Chevalier D'Eon Beaumont

Philidor played again on Saturday 9th April. The *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* reported on the following Monday that: “We have not beheld a more fashionable or elegant assemblage of ladies and gentlemen than appeared on Saturday at Parsloe’s to see the Chess match announced in this paper.” The master had sight of the board against Wilson, whom he beat. The blindfold games were against “Mad. Chev. D’Eon” (Count Bruhl moving the pieces for Philidor) and Attwood (Nowell moving for Philidor). The display lasted one hour and three quarters, Attwood achieving a draw. The *Diary or Woodfall’s Register* also reported this event involving the celebrated trans-sexual Chevalier D’Eon Beaumont, here described as Madame Chevalier D’Eon.

The only musical report I could find for the year in the Burney Collection that mentioned Philidor was on Tuesday and Wednesday 17 and 18 May 1791. *The Times* carried an advertisement for an unusual musical and dancing concert to be held on Thursday evening in the King’s Theatre, with the work of several composers including Haydn and Philidor on the programme. His contribution was only minor and he may not have been personally involved.

1792-4: trapped in London

There is just one report of a display by Philidor in 1792 but he may have performed at least one other. That mentioned by Twiss’s *Miscellanies* for the year is probably the following, although there is a discrepancy of one day. The following account from the *St James’s Chronicle* or the *British Evening Post*, on Tuesday 27th March 1792, refers to an exhibition on the 24th whereas Twiss mentioned advertisements for the 23rd.

“The wonderful faculty by which Philidor is able to play the complicated game of Chess, without looking at the board, was exerted again on Saturday last, at Parsloe’s, in St. James’s Street, before the members of the Chess Club, and many amateurs of this scientific amusement. On this occasion, Philidor played three games at once; two without looking at the board. Mr Wilson and Mr Hull were the gentlemen against whom he played without seeing the board; Mr Nowell was the antagonist with whom he saw the game. The game with Mr Wilson he lost, and won the other two. This prodigious and almost incredible faculty, which is indeed an astonishing evidence of the power of the human mind, excited

universal surprise when Mr Philidor displayed it in his youth; but it must be viewed as still more wonderful, considering that he is now in the 66th year of his age.”

Then an advertisement on Thursday 19 April, in the *Morning Herald*, stated that Philidor would perform a similar feat the coming Saturday. On the day itself, 21 April, the *World* also advertised this but there was no report of the event in the Burney collection newspapers. There may have been reports in papers not preserved, which is a general problem with the papers of this period.



Chevalier D'Eon Beaumont

Philidor’s first display in 1793 was apparently on Saturday 2nd March; there are several advertisements extant for this, but no report. The conditions were as usual: two blindfold games and a third looking over the board, non-members to pay five shillings admittance. Another display by Philidor, on Saturday 13th April, was also advertised and did attract press attention, perhaps because one of his opponents was again D’Eon, which in turn probably meant more spectators than usual. The following account appeared in the *Morning Post* on Monday 15th April and was reprinted almost verbatim in the *Sporting Magazine* for April.

“Mr Phillidor lost the two blindfold games, played by Madame D’Eon and Mr Hull, but won the third against Mr Wilson, looking over the boards. The Marquis de Fonenillis moved against Madame D’Eon, and Mr Rameau, nephew to the celebrated composer, moved the pieces for Mr Phillidor against Mr Hull. There was infinite skill manifested by Mr Philidor at this entertaining match, and the loss of the two games must in fairness be attributed to Mr Phillidor’s being seized with a violent fit of gout during the match. A very gay and numerous assemblage of ladies and gentlemen of fashion were present, and the match lasted full two hours.”

Probably in need of the money, Philidor gave a third exhibition on 2nd June 1793. The *Morning Post* of Tuesday 28th May advertised this as follows:

“By particular desire of the True Amateurs, for the LAST TIME this Season. Mr PHILIDOR, next Saturday... will play a Select match against two very Capital CHESS PLAYERS at once without seeing either Boards. He most respectfully invites all the Members of the Club to honour him with their presence. Ladies and Gentlemen, who are not belonging to the club, may be provided with tickets... to see the match at five shillings each.”

The report in the *Morning Post* on 3rd June shows that the promise that the opponents would be ‘capital’ players on this occasion was kept, as Count Bruhl took one of the boards and Wilson the other. It said that Wilson was given the move, Philidor presumably therefore taking first move against the count, who was one of the strongest players in London.

Mr Nowell moved for Mr Philidor against Count Bruhl, and the Marquis of Fontenelles for Mr Philidor against Mr Wilson. The Match lasted two hours, and we never saw Mr Philidor acquit himself with more judgment. The Match against Count Bruhl was drawn, and he won from Mr Wilson. The Amateurs considered this a very extraordinary match on the part of Mr Philidor, and it was witnessed with pleasure by a large and fashionable company.

The 1794 season began with an exhibition on Saturday 22nd February when Philidor played two blindfold games. The advertisement in the *Sun* the previous day said he would blindfold two games at once against “two great chess players” and it added that The Turkish Ambassador plays against Mr. Philidor. However he did not do so on this occasion, and probably not on any public occasion, although he certainly was among the spectators as the report in the *Morning Post* on Monday (also reprinted in *Sporting Magazine*) showed. Philidor played two games: against Count Bruhl and Mr. Wilson again, but conceding first move in each game.

Bowdler and Rameau assisted.

“The match was strongly contested and lasted an hour and thirty-five minutes. Mr Philidor, though he never manifested a clearer head, nor a more tenacious memory, was obliged to yield to his adversaries, whom he had so often defeated before. The fact is, the odds are immense, and though this celebrated Foreigner is the best player in the world, the other Gentlemen having made a wonderful progress in their improvement, occasioned of course their success.”

Among “the most numerous and fashionable company present”, the Turkish ambassador (with his suite) watched Bruhl’s game closely. Four weeks later Philidor gave another exhibition with three games. With Bruhl and Rameau assisting, the master played blindfold against Hull and Wilson, and with sight of the board against Atwood. The report did not state who had first move. Both blindfold games were drawn and Philidor beat Atwood. Philidor was persuaded to play a third exhibition that season and it was stated that the Ottoman ambassador would be one of the opponents – but again he was not.

The third display was advertised in the *Morning Post* on Tuesday 29 April and in the *Morning Chronicle* on the Friday and it took place on Saturday 3 May 1794. The *Sporting Magazine* for May carried a report as follows, taken more or less verbatim from the *London Packet or New Lloyd’s Evening Post*:

“CHESS CLUB

On Saturday May 3, Mr Phillidor played three good chess-players at the same time. Two of the games he performed blindfold, and the third he looked over the boards. The blindfold games were against Mr Hull and Chevalier de la Radiers, a French Emigrant. Mr Bowdler moved for Mr Phillidor against Mr Hull, Mr Rameau moved for him against the Chevalier. The game looking at the boards he played against Mr Wilson. This was one of the most interesting matches ever witnessed by the amateurs. Mr Phillidor was wonderfully clear in his memory, and actually won the three games, after two hours strong contest. What is remarkable, all the games ended at the same time, and were won by only a *pawn* advantage. There was a very large and elegant company present.”

At first in the final years of the “ancien regime” and even in the immediate aftermath of the revolution that broke out on 14 July 1789, Philidor was not apparently affected by the political uncertainties. Then, because he had chosen to go to England, as so many of the French nobility did, he fell under suspicion.

The last mention of Philidor in the English newspapers of 1794 was a most sinister development. The *Oracle and Public Advertiser* of 24 September carried a translation of the proceedings of the tribunal in Paris on 15 Fructidor (1 September) of the forty-two supposed accomplices of Robespierre, among whom “Phillidor” was named. Only one was convicted of ‘knowingly participating in the counter-revolutionary plot’; the rest were freed, although convicted on a minor charge of taking an oath and signing certain papers. It is not clear from this whether the same Phillidor was meant, but it is likely the chess master was being tried *in absentia*. Perhaps some expert on the history of the French Revolution can clarify this matter?

The final season: 1795

The Times carried an advertisement on Saturday 21st February 1795 for a chess performance by Philidor scheduled for 2pm that day, at the Chess Club, Parsloe’s House. Described as “by particular desire... a select match blindfold” (“the only one this season”), on the usual financial terms, against “two very eminent chess players”. A report appeared on the Monday, 23rd February, in the *Morning Post and Fashionable World*, under the heading “The Fashionable World. Count Bruhl did not play, but assisted by making Philidor’s moves against one of the opponents.

“CHESS CLUB. – Mr Phillidor on Saturday last played blindfold, two games at once, against Mr Wilson and Mr Hull... Mr Philidor won both games, and it was one of the severest contested matches that has ever been played; the two games lasted two hours and a quarter. All the company were much entertained, and particularly the Turkish Ambassador, who guessed all the moves made by Mr Phillidor. The company was numerous and select, though the weather prevented the attendance of many ladies.”

On Saturday 2nd May, Philidor played again, and this was advertised two days earlier in the *Morning Chronicle* and the *True Briton*. The report was in the *Morning Post* on Monday 4th May.

“Mr Philidor played the two games blindfold, last Saturday, against Mr Hull and Mr Gloucester Wilson. Mr Bowdler moved for Mr Philidor against Mr Wilson and Mr Verdoin [*really* “*Verdoni*”] did

the same for Mr Philidor against Mr Hull. The match lasted near two hours. Mr Hull won from Mr Philidor, and Mr Philidor won the game against Mr Wilson. Many ladies were present to witness this extraordinary effort of memory, who were much entertained. We are sorry to hear that the above will be the last match for the season, if Mr Philidor is not prevailed upon to gratify his friends and the Public with another match.”

He was prevailed upon – or needed the money. An advertisement in the *Morning Post* on 18th June announced that Philidor “by particular desire” will play at Parsloe’s “for the very last time” on Saturday 20th June, three games (two blindfold), at the usual ticket price. As Twiss observed, he was now less than three months short of his 69th birthday. *The Times* advertised this event on the day, but in fewer lines than usual – the cheaper advertisement was however placed prominently at the top of a column. I found no report of this last display. The final time *The Times* mentioned Philidor was to report his death.

When exactly did Philidor die?

I am currently researching the death date of Philidor for a history journal article, so what follows should not be understood as my full and final discussion on this point. However, as the central evidence I have used in these two articles are what the newspapers said about Philidor, it will not escape the attention of anyone who reads them closely that they do not agree on this point. Indeed the disagreement, and probable reason for it, is perhaps of more interest to an historian than actually determining the precise date of death, which hardly matters at this remove of time.

George’s Allen’s *Life of Philidor* was published in 1865. On page 99, he stated that Philidor died on the 24th but he qualified it with a long footnote mostly to be found on page 100. The obituary text he gives is (as he admits) not a direct quote from any paper but a redaction of several versions. In the 1960s, Dr. Michael Carroll (in his thesis and articles in *BCM*) seems to have done the same. There is no report in the Burney Collection exactly corresponding to the forms of words these writers gave.

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and music directories all seem to give 31st August as the date of Philidor’s death, although at one time some writers (including his mid-nineteenth century American biographer, George Allen) preferred the 24th. Harold Murray changed his mind on this point. In his *History*, he gave the earlier date, but in a letter dated 4th August 1932 which is now in the possession of Dale Brandreth, and of which a facsimile appeared on Edward Winter’s website in February (Chess Notes, CN6000), he said the 31st was correct. Winter appeared to take the view that the right date had been established but I am not so sure. Gaige’s [Chess Personalia](#), which tends to be regarded as gospel although it occasionally errs, also gives the 31st. The 31st must be wrong unless Philidor’s demise was prematurely reported.

Admittedly it seems hard to believe that the 24th could be correct, given that it was high summer and all now agree that Philidor was buried ten days later. I have noticed that academic article about Philidor from the 1920s said his burial date was unknown; the 24th would thus have been plausible at one time. According to D. J. Morgan (in *BCM* 1965 page 113), it was John Keeble of Norwich who discovered that “Philidor died at 10 Ryder Street, London, on 31 August 1795, and was buried on September 3rd 1795 at St James, Piccadilly”. Unfortunately I don’t know when and where Keeble published his discovery, or whether he just communicated it privately to Murray. I may be able to check it in the Murray papers if I can get back to Oxford some time. Also I have not yet been able to check the parish records for myself; they are in a Westminster archive that has been closed for refurbishment, but they may become available once more this year. Whether they will provide any more details than are already known is doubtful; there was no official registration of deaths in 1795. If the burial record includes a date of death, it might just be based on misleading newspaper reports.

Death was reported before the 31st

On the face of it, the reports appearing in London papers on Saturday 29th August 1795 that Philidor died “yesterday” imply that he died either on Friday 28th or the night of the 27 th/28 th. Allen knew that Philidor’s death had been reported on the Saturday because Twiss said so in his *Miscellanies* (volume 2, page 105 and following), but does not seem to have seen any of the newspaper reports for himself. Yet if Philidor really died on the 24th in London one would have expected it to have been reported before the Saturday.

The reports stating or implying that Philidor’s death occurred on Monday 31st are really all one report with minor variants (all using the expression “made his last move into the other world”), so the apparent weight of evidence is really nothing of the kind. The core of the report first appeared in the *St James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post* on Saturday 29th.

That began “Yesterday Mr PHILIDOR the Chess Player made...”

The *Whitehall Evening Post* on the Saturday also said Philidor died “yesterday” in a list of recent deaths. Analysing these texts requires some understanding of how old (and even not so old!) newspapers work. It is impossible to be certain which report is original, because the original may not survive or one correspondent may have supplied several papers simultaneously. Editors often tried to disguise when they borrowed a report that previously appeared elsewhere, or might not be aware that it had appeared elsewhere.

On Tuesday 1st September, the *Morning Post & Fashionable World* report headed “Mr PHILIDOR the Chess Player” began “Yesterday this long celebrated foreigner made...”

This is the crux. The report in the *Morning Post* is otherwise in its first three paragraphs identical to that which had appeared in the *St James's Chronicle* and they failed to adjust the time reference “yesterday”. Then it ended with an additional paragraph about Philidor being unable to return to France because he was under suspicion.

On Wednesday 2nd September, the *Morning Chronicle* report under the same heading carried the same four-paragraph report as the *Morning Post* (and *The Times* had a shortened version of the same) but both of those Wednesday papers *do change* the time reference from “yesterday” to “on Monday”. The *Oracle and Public Advertiser* report on the Thursday and the report in the *Sporting Magazine* are essentially the same as that in the *Morning Chronicle*.

To reiterate, there are *not* several independent reports stating Philidor died on Monday 31st August 1795. The ones that do say that can be explained away as I have shown above, as deliberate or accidental rewritings of the report that appeared in the *St James's Chronicle* on the 29th.

Unless somebody can find contrary arguments or evidence, this is both the explanation of why the 31st has been believed and moreover the refutation of it. Murray, Gaige, and Carroll all seem to have chosen to disregard Twiss for no good reason. We cannot be certain of what Twiss (or his likely informant, the antiquarian Francis Douce) actually read, as he might have been looking at a newspaper that it is not in the Burney Collection and so probably no longer survives.

Twiss basically gives the four-paragraph report *but* he knows that reports of Philidor’s death appeared on the Saturday. So references to “On Monday” for him cannot mean the 31st; he takes them as referring to the 24th.

The only other source I have seen that could be taken to mean death occurred on the 24th is *Lloyds Evening Post* of Monday 31st August. In a list of deaths, it said Philidor died not “today” but “Monday” – which is ambiguous. Possibly it meant today as it was an evening paper. But it could also have been copying an unknown paper of the 29th which said he had died the previous Monday. Several of the dates of papers cited by Carroll do not match the hits from searching the Burney Collection online, so one has to wonder what was the source of his information and what, if any, he saw for himself.

It seems that certainty cannot be achieved unless new sources turn up. But those people who have persuaded themselves (and the editors of all the chess and music reference works) that Philidor died on the 31st have not persuaded me. If any reader has definite information (with sources), please write in.

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