

Samuel Newham – Founding Member of Nottingham Chess Club

Samuel Newham (24/6/1796 – 24/3/1875) was the most prominent figure in Nottingham chess for over forty years. A founding member of the Nottingham Chess Club (NCC), he held the posts of secretary and, later, president from its inception until a few years before his death. He was also founder and first president of the club at the Nottingham Mechanics' Institute.

Born in Wilford, Newham learnt the game of chess from his father at around the age of 10, years later reminiscing, during a lecture given at the Mechanics' Institute, of beating his school master Dr Waite on a stage in front of his peers – much to the master's displeasure! By the late 1820s he had settled in the Park area of Nottingham and had resumed a subscription to the Nottingham Subscription Library (now Bromley House Library, then – as now – on Angel Row), an institution that would become the first home of the NCC. He was to become heavily involved with the library, joining its committee in 1829, then becoming secretary in 1831. On the death of the president, Rev RW Almond, in 1853, he was elected to the position, which he held until his death in 1875.

Newham was a wealthy man by the time the NCC was founded, owning property in and around Nottingham and London, and was moderately involved in politics; he stood as the Tory candidate to be Nottingham's coroner in 1836, but was defeated. Other than this his involvement in politics – other than voting – was limited to a series of letters to the Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyne, Henry Pelham-Clinton, regarding the upkeep of various parts of the Park, part of the Duke's estate. Newham later married Millicent Killingley, proprietor of a wine and spirit merchant in Smithy Row, and is generally listed as either a merchant or a gentleman in trade directories of Nottingham from the 1830s onwards.

The NCC was founded at some point in October 1829 – the club itself records the 16th as the date of its first meeting, while the Nottingham Review reported it as the 26th. As mentioned above, Newham was a founding member and quite probably a driving force behind the formation of the club. Indeed, it is possible the impetus for the establishment of the NCC was from a "reading...on the Game of Chess" he delivered at the Literary Society in March 1829. He is likely to have been the first secretary of the club; the first confirmation he held this position is from the chess column of *Bell's Life in London* in 1835. In 1839 he became president of the club, replacing Thomas Wakefield, erstwhile mayor of Nottingham, who had become embroiled in scandal and was later declared bankrupt.

Newham was a frequent correspondent to the chess column in *Bell's Life in London*, both on his own and the club's behalf. His correspondence games with another leading provincial amateur were printed, as were offers to play various other clubs through the post. His ability was a key factor in winning a "beautiful set of chess men" from the Cambridge club in 1838, followed by a chessboard from Huddersfield in 1841. His services to the club were recognised as well, with various gifts – for example, an inscribed piece of silver plate, an ornamental chess board and set, and an inscribed fish knife – being recorded over the years.

Newham was recognised as the strongest player in the NCC and in 1837 George Walker hailed him as the "best provincial player" in his column in *Bell's Life*. Related to this was a claim three years later that Nottingham was the strongest provincial club along with Edinburgh. These claims should perhaps be taken with a pinch of salt as the evidence points to Newham and Walker being good friends – one of Walker's books was dedicated to Newham, and the former was elected an honorary member of the NCC in 1833 – although in 1841 *Le Palamede*, the French periodical, acclaimed him as the best chess player in the "*centre de l'Angleterre*" (presumably the Midlands).

Newham was certainly a very strong player by the standards of the time, to the point that the NCC, to ensure they received replies when advertising for correspondent opponents, indicated at least once that he would give no assistance to the Nottingham players! He played and did himself no disgrace against many of the top players of the period, beating Frederick Slous – along with Walker one of the strongest players in England in the late 1830s – some time prior to 1845, drawing with St Amant in 1847, and, at odds of pawn and two moves, losing “gloriously” (*Le Palamede* again) to La Bourdonnais. He was also heavily involved in promoting links with other clubs, frequently attending meetings of the Yorkshire Chess Association (often being the only Nottingham representative present).

Both as secretary and president Newham was the driving force behind the club, arranging matches by correspondence with other clubs – Nottingham were successful in their first such match, against Cambridge, winning a “beautiful set of chess men” – giving lectures on the game at the library, and representing Nottingham at chess events around the country for several decades. For example, he was the Nottingham representative at the 1852 meeting of the YCA at which the Northern and Midland Counties Chess Association was formed.

Though probably past his prime – in chess terms – by 1851 he was invited to play in the first ever international tournament, in London that year. In the straight knockout event he was unlucky to be paired with Jozsef Szen – the *Illustrated London News* lamented this being a first round pairing – and lost both games, first outplayed in the endgame following a Sicilian, then losing his way in an Exchange French (these – and his draw with St Amant – can be played through on chessgames.com here: <https://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessplayer?pid=125881>).

The NCC was not Newham’s only chess club. He was the first president (and again, was probably a strong influence on the creation) of the club at the Nottingham Mechanics’ Institute, formed in 1848. This appears to have been borne from a desire to promote chess further in Nottingham: he regularly chaired its annual meetings and frequently donated prizes for tournaments held within the club. It certainly flourished under Newham’s presidency, boasting around 60 members before his health forced him to limit his involvement.

By the late 1860s Newham’s name appears less often in reports on chess activities in Nottingham, and, while he remained president of the two Nottingham clubs he is noted as attending meetings and other functions with increasing irregularity. In January 1872, the *Nottingham and Midland Counties Daily Express* notes that the *Observer* of the previous day reported that “Mr Newman (sic) has, to the deep regret of all chess players, felt himself compelled to resign the presidency of the Nottingham Club”. It is perhaps not a coincidence that at the start of the following season the club was forced out of its rooms at the library, leaving the new president – one Sigismund Hamel – to secure new premises. Newham’s health continued to decline and he died a few years later, in 1875.