

# Brighton's public chess room, 1873-1914

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*Brighton's Public Chess Room, established in 1873 in the town's Free Library and subsequently relocated to the Royal Pavilion, constitutes an unusual example of a recreational activity financed directly from the public purse. In this article the role of the Chess Room is examined both in relation to 19th-century concepts of the role of the public library, and in respect of its impact on formally organized chess clubs in the town. Information is provided regarding the aims of the room's founders, the mix of social classes making use of its facilities, special characteristics of play in the room (including the playing of chess for money), and the problems of maintaining order in a place of public resort whose raison d'être placed a premium on undisturbed concentration. Special attention is paid to the role of H. W. Butler, an early and enthusiastic user of the room who was eventually to become its fiercest critic.*

## I

The first known reference to Brighton's Public Chess Room is to be found in a minute of the town's Pavilion Committee dated 21 October 1872, recording the receipt of a memorial or petition signed by the Mayor of Brighton, James Ireland, and 101 other residents. Like much of the Committee's business at this time, it has for its context the planned opening of the town's Free Library, which was to take place almost a year later in the former Royal Stables in Church Street. The memorial calls for a room in the library to be set aside for chess, since this 'would afford a large amount of pleasure to those who frequent the Reading rooms and forms almost a necessary adjunct to a Free Library and Reading Rooms'.

Few libraries today would regard the provision of rooms for chess-players as falling within their remit, and it is of interest to consider what assumptions lay behind the petition's assertion that such facilities formed 'almost a necessary adjunct' to the main role of the projected Free Library. The 'leisure revolution', identified by historians as a key development of the later 19th century,<sup>1</sup> resulted in an accession of recruits to many spare-time activities, including the game of chess. Successive reductions in the length of the working week, which affected most occupations, created ample opportunities for those who wished to do so to engage in 'improving' hobbies. Coincidentally, several factors encouraged the seekers of 'rational amusement' to choose chess

rather than another pastime; among them the success of the London International Tournament of 1851 (the first such tournament to be held anywhere in the world), the prestige attaching to Howard Staunton's reign as 'unofficial world champion' in the years before 1851, the ready availability of chess sets made to the improved 'Staunton' pattern, and the introduction of regular chess columns in widely read journals like the *Illustrated London News*. Staunton's apologia for the game, in his introduction to *The Chess Tournament* (1852), may appear overblown today, but for many late Victorians it provided a persuasive vindication of hours spent at the chessboard:

Chess was not designed to be a waste of time or an excuse for indolence; it is not a pursuit to be lounged over for want of better employment, or, like a game of chance, to be made the means of low gambling. Chess was intended to be the recreation of men of genius and practical energies; men who are fully alive to the responsibilities of their social existence; men who, even in their amusements, are desirous of bracing and invigorating to the utmost their intellectual powers.<sup>2</sup>

Sussex was in no way backward in its espousal of this exemplary pursuit. Chess clubs were inaugurated in Brighton (1842, 1880, 1885), Eastbourne (1855, 1866, 1880), Littlehampton (1873), Chichester (1877), Hastings (1882) and Lewes (1887), as well as in a number of smaller population centres. Most, like their present-day

counterparts, were single-purpose organizations, but chess also featured among the attractions offered by institutions founded with a more general aim, among them libraries and reading rooms. Chess clubs came into being in the Brighton Athenaeum and the Hastings and St Leonards Athenaeum, in both cases around 1851. Thirty years later the Eastbourne Mutual Improvement Society had a chess section strong enough to take on, and hold its own against, the main Eastbourne Chess Club. From the 1870s to the 1890s chess is also known to have been played in a significant number of mechanics' institutes and village clubs, including those at Haywards Heath, Horsham, Maresfield, Petworth, Hailsham and Lewes: the chess club of the last-named town had its origins in a local workmen's institute, opting subsequently for an independent existence in what may have been an attempt to broaden its class base. Several of the examples already mentioned show an intimate connection between chess activity and the provision of reading matter. Typical alliances of this kind were forged at Eastbourne in 1866, where the newly founded chess club met at Gowland's Library on Marine Parade, and at Horsham, which established a Chess Club and Reading-Room in 1879. Finally, and at a date which coincides neatly with that of the founding of both the Free Library and the Public Chess Room in Brighton, we may note that at its opening in October 1873 the Working Men's Club and Reading-Room in the West Sussex village of Staplefield introduced chess, draughts and bagatelle, granting them parity of status with newspapers and books as sources of 'rational amusement'.<sup>3</sup> In many Victorian minds there was thus an established connection between the most intellectual of games and the libraries and reading rooms whose mission was to elevate the minds of the better class of artisans and disseminate ideals of social cohesion and scientific progress. It was a short step, but a crucial one, to the concept of a chess room funded not by some combination of members' subscriptions and private charity, as with the clubs and institutes mentioned above, but from the public purse.

## II

While there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of James Ireland's support for the 1872 memorial, the prime mover was Councillor Edwin Booth, an enthusiastic 'chessist' who had the ear both of the

Mayor and of at least one other influential chess-playing Brightonian, Alderman Edward Martin. The identity of the other signatories is unknown, and it is unlikely that all were active chess-players, since at this date interest in chess in the town was not high. Booth and his supporters may initially have been disappointed by the Pavilion Committee's response to the memorial, for after an inconclusive debate that body merely referred the matter to its Library Sub-Committee for consideration. Nor was the Sub-Committee particularly welcoming to the proposal: in December it concluded that 'in consequence of the limited space at their disposal' no room could be set apart for chess, undertaking only that consideration would in due course be given to the 'propriety' of allowing chess to be played in the Reading Room.<sup>4</sup>

No more is heard of Councillor Booth's proposal until 22 October 1873, when the *Brighton Guardian's* regular report of Town Council proceedings tells us that chess was already 'in full swing' in the library. The opening of the Chess Room can thus be assumed to have coincided with, or followed closely after, that of the library itself, which took place on 12 September. Rather than allowing the main reading room to be used by chess-players, the authorities had instead decided that a smaller room housing patents and back runs of newspapers should be available to them.<sup>5</sup> Suitable tables, as well as men and boards, had been donated by Councillor Booth, and the room was open daily (excepting Sundays) from 10 a.m. until late in the evening. These opening hours were also those of the library, and like the library the Chess Room closed its doors between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., perhaps to allow the staff to eat.<sup>6</sup> It is to be noted that few chess clubs, then or since, have offered facilities to their members extending over so many hours. In other respects, however, the room left something to be desired. Ventilation was poor,<sup>7</sup> and there was probably no natural light.

The choice of the 'Patents Room' as a home for chess represented a sensible compromise between the interests of library users and those of chess-players. Brighton has never been known as a centre of manufacture or commerce, and consequently the books of patents — provided under an arrangement dating from 1854, by which Patent Office publications were distributed free to certain mechanics' institutes, learned societies and libraries — were seldom consulted. Figures compiled in

October 1873, one month after the library's opening, show that, of 5907 items issued to readers, only 23 were of material from the Patents Room.<sup>8</sup>

Arrangements for use of the Chess Room, as the new facility soon came to be called, were at first informal; but in October 1874 it was decided that 'for the better regulation of the room, the sets of Chessmen [should] be applied for at the Library Counter on the printed forms as in the case of books'.<sup>9</sup> The introduction of formal controls does not seem to have rendered the Chess Room less popular, for in the first month of the new régime there were no fewer than 402 applications for chess sets. According to the Curator, 'the new Rule had given universal satisfaction and . . . there had been perfect order in the room'.<sup>10</sup> A newspaper report from the same period indicates that as many as ten games of chess were often in progress concurrently.<sup>11</sup>

### III

Just how innovative was the Public Chess Room? Walter Mead, chess columnist of the *Southern Weekly News* between 1883 and 1889, suggested that a Chess Room 'sustained by a corporation' represented 'a unique condition of things', which other towns would do well to emulate.<sup>12</sup> By 1882, when this comment was published, Brighton was in reality not quite alone in welcoming chess-players to its public library, though it may have been the first town to do so. Similar experiments were initiated over the next few years in several other towns, among them Leamington Spa, which allowed chess and draughts to be played in its reference library from 1876, and the London borough of Wandsworth, whose library, at its opening in 1885, provided a recreation room equipped for chess, draughts and backgammon: in the latter case, according to the library's first annual report, 'a few boys took possession of the room, and made themselves a nuisance by unruly behaviour and gambling'.<sup>13</sup> Similar problems were to be a recurrent theme in the history of the Brighton Chess Room.

Most early advocates of the Free Libraries movement were suspicious of the introduction of recreational activities into the library. One pioneer, Thomas Greenwood, cited the recreation room of the library at Fleetwood in Lancashire as an illustration of the abuses which could follow such a step, arguing that 'a recreation room invariably injures the work of the library, and in no known

case can it be said to be a help'; furthermore, such a provision could not legally be funded out of the rates. Greenwood's case was strengthened, in his view, by the example of the mechanics' institutes, in which 'amusement and recreation have very largely usurped the educational work [and] so strong has the recreative element become that draught and chess boards, billiard tables, and dramatic performances have only too frequently elbowed aside the educational character of these institutions', making them 'little more than respectable lounges for men fairly well-off, who dislike the smoke-room of the public house or hotel . . .'.<sup>14</sup>

Greenwood's allusion to the illegality of rate-supported leisure facilities affords a reminder of one important difference between Brighton's Free Library and parallel institutions in other towns, the former being established under a legal enactment whose terms were more liberal than those applying to most borough libraries. To understand the statutory restrictions placed on the first public libraries, it is important to realize that many middle-class observers regarded such institutions as at best an unnecessary burden on the ratepayer and at worst a source of sedition and republicanism. Greenwood cites an unnamed visitor to Brighton's Free Library as insisting that 'no greater curse existed than these libraries, and [that] he had rather see a young man hanging about a public-house than spending his time in these places'.<sup>15</sup> This was an extreme view; but opposition to the Free Libraries movement was deeply entrenched, and the Public Library Acts of 1850-55 imposed stringent conditions on authorities which adopted them. The Act of 1850, for example, while authorizing the raising of a halfpenny rate for the provision of accommodation for a library, prohibited any spending of public money on books, all of which were to be donated by well-wishers. In such a climate it was not to be expected that the Acts should empower local authorities to establish anything so frivolous as a recreation room, and those which eventually came into existence did so through private charity.

For better or worse, Brighton was exempt from these constraints, since its Free Library was founded not under the Act of 1850 but under a private Act of Parliament governing the upkeep of the Royal Pavilion Estate.<sup>16</sup> The terms of this Act, whose passing followed the purchase of the Pavilion by the Corporation in 1850, sanctioned the levying of a rate for any purpose connected with the public role

of the institution. While the early history of the town's Free Library was not without controversy, it does not appear that the use of rate revenues to support the interests of chess-players was ever a matter of general concern. Such hostility to the Chess Room as was eventually voiced came, as we shall see, from chess-players themselves rather than from rate-paying residents of Brighton.

#### IV

Socially and in terms of its age range, the Chess Room's clientele was more heterogeneous than that of the average chess club, then or since. One of its early frequenters, William Shelley Branch, noted that it was regularly 'thronged with players of all ages',<sup>17</sup> and this is confirmed by Walter Mead, who declared in January 1883 that it attracted 'persons of all grades, from the schoolboy to the white-haired veteran, the tyro to the practised player'.<sup>18</sup> While few juvenile users can be individually identified, Mead's later reference to the 'ninety and nine small boys'<sup>19</sup> who had passed through the room suggests



Fig. 1. H. W. Butler as a young man.

a substantial patronage by very young players. In 1889, Branch was to estimate that 'hundreds of youths have there learnt the game'.<sup>20</sup>

The daily attendance of juveniles in such numbers soon created its own problems. As early as December 1873, the Town Council had considered a suggestion that a policeman should be stationed in the library to suppress 'disturbances' arising from the presence of 'young boys and girls'.<sup>21</sup> It was concluded on this occasion that the constant attendance of a constable was not required, but this was not the end of the matter, and early in 1878 the Curator twice 'caused the room . . . to be cleared by the Police and the Gas turned out', following complaints of 'disorderly conduct . . . by lads after 8 o'clock in the evening'; one persistent offender was banned from the library altogether. At this date antisocial behaviour may have manifested itself especially in the Chess Room, but problems were still being experienced in the main library, where volumes of *Punch*, the *Illustrated London News* and the *Art Journal* had sustained damage. On receipt of a report on these incidents, the Pavilion Committee ordered bye-laws to be formulated to deal with any recurrence, and further ruled that an attendant should be on duty in the building between 7 p.m. and 9.30 p.m. each evening. Initially this responsibility was shared between the library porter, A. Stoddart, and a retired police officer named J. Mitchell, both of whom were appointed as special constables.<sup>22</sup> A decision was also taken to replace the ground glass in a window between the Chess Room and an adjoining corridor with clear glass, thus facilitating surveillance.

Leaving aside Mead's 'small boys', several individuals who were to contribute significantly to the progress of chess in Brighton made their first acquaintance with the Public Chess Room while still in their teens or early twenties. Among them was Henry William Butler (Fig. 1), who in 1877, at the age of 19, 'acquired a knowledge of the moves in two evenings by looking on at others playing at the Church Street Public Rooms, and . . . on the third evening . . . challenged one of the then masters to mortal combat, and beat him'.<sup>23</sup> Other expert *habitués* were William Andrews, Albert Bowley, Fred Edmonds, Henry Erskine, Louis Leuliette and William Pierce, the last two of whom were of a somewhat older generation: all these played for Sussex following the inauguration of county matches in 1884, while Pierce, Butler, Andrews and

Bowley went on to win the Sussex Championship. Another county champion of the future, the Irishman William Wilson, became a Chess Room regular a little later, and rapidly gained a reputation for fast and brilliant play.<sup>24</sup>

In its origins, chess is an aristocratic game; and while the Chess Room was dominated by members of the new middle classes — clerks, shopkeepers and small businessmen — a scattering of men from the higher ranks of society were to be found among its frequenters, in addition to several representatives of the professions and of the Brighton 'establishment'. Prominent among the former group were John Thursby, heir to a baronetcy and a future president of the British Chess Federation, and the Erskine brothers, Oswald and Henry, of whom the first-named was holder of the Scottish barony of Dryburgh. Both Councillor Booth and Alderman Martin were Chess Room regulars, as were at least one clergyman and one doctor.

Like Brighton itself, the Chess Room at this period had a pronounced cosmopolitan flavour. Mid-1880s' regulars included a gaunt Frenchman of military bearing, 'dressed in the capacious habiliments of a past age', who was reputed to have led a body of troops during the revolution of 1848.<sup>25</sup> The attenuated Frenchman entered the folklore of the room, as did another 'gentleman of foreign nationality', whom Mead describes as accompanying his play with 'a string of gutterals' and eccentric bodily antics,<sup>26</sup> but not all foreigners were accepted so readily. The 'overweening' manner of one German visitor excited hostility and ridicule, if Butler's frankly xenophobic comments in the *Brighton Guardian* of 11 October 1882 are to be believed.

Styles of play in the Chess Room were of a piece with the personalities of its inhabitants. In an era notable for its allegiance to 'romantic' gambits and for preferring tactical to positional play, *habitués* of the room took these tendencies to an extreme, as well as showing a predilection for unusual systems of handicapping, and for *jeux d'estime* like blindfold chess. Butler, for one, was to make a speciality of playing without sight of the board, a piece of exhibitionism which apparently alienated 'a few fossilized individuals, who . . . consider[ed] the room to be their private property'.<sup>27</sup>

The Chess Room, despite the impression of good-humoured anarchy conveyed by some accounts, provided the setting for many serious chessboard

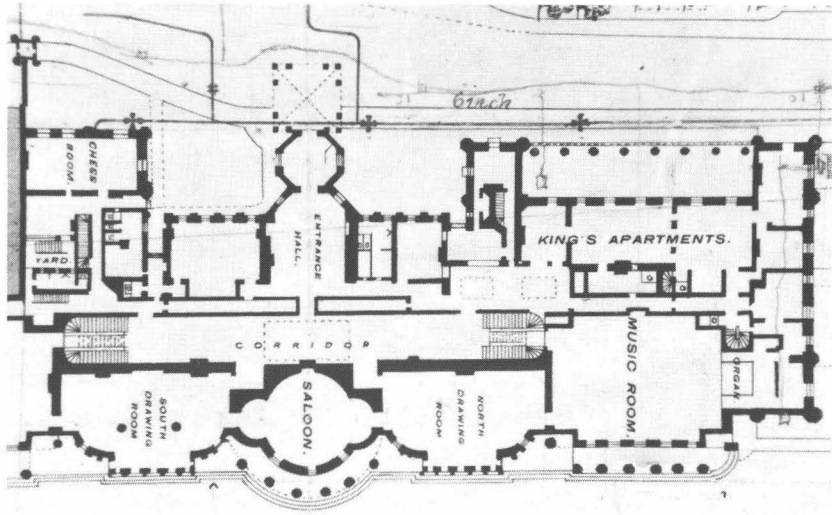
encounters, and nourished some formidable talents. By the early eighties, having consolidated its position in Brighton's leisure scene, it had also begun to attract notice among chess-players beyond the boundaries of Sussex, World Championship contenders Johannes Zukertort and Isidor Gunsberg being only the most distinguished of many visiting experts.<sup>28</sup> By 1889 it was estimated that 'hundreds' of visitors used the room every year,<sup>29</sup> and, even allowing for some exaggeration, this suggests that the room figured to a not inconsiderable degree among the tourist attractions of Brighton. Typical of the comments originating during the room's second decade is a passage in the *Croydon Guardian's* 'Brighton Intelligence' column of 18 November 1882:

One attraction of the library rooms is the chess department . . . Particular attention is drawn to this feature of the Brighton Free Library, in order that the visitors may give it a look in and take opportunity to embrace its advantages, and having done so we feel confident that on their return home they will (supposing no such institution exists) do their utmost towards establishing in their own localities free libraries, or at least free chess rooms.

In recognition of his role as the room's presiding genius, Edwin Booth was presented at a meeting in May 1882 with 'a handsome board and set of Ivory Chessmen . . . in a silk lined mahogany casket, the lid of which bore a prettily designed silver shield, with the following inscription:— "Presented to Mr Councillor Edwin Booth by the Brighton Pavilion Chess Players, as a token of their appreciation of his great services in connection with Chess in the town . . ."'. An audience described as 'numerous' listened to speeches by several members of the town's establishment, and responded warmly to the Councillor's words of thanks.<sup>30</sup>

A further tribute appeared two years later in the *Chess Player's Chronicle*, whose characterization of Booth as 'a generous patron of the noble game' summed up the feelings of many Brighton players who had benefited from his sponsorship of chess in the town.<sup>31</sup> Booth's personal generosity may, however, by now have found other recipients, for in 1883 and 1884 we encounter the first of many references to the increasing decrepitude of the equipment used in the room. In the former year Mead's column made passing reference to years of

a



b



Fig. 2. a) Part of an 1893 plan of the Royal Pavilion showing the location of the Chess Room; b) the South Lobby of the Royal Pavilion, home of the Chess Room between 1888 and 1914.

'rough handling', which had left the pieces used in the Chess Room 'the worse by a few chips and the loss of a king's crown or so';<sup>32</sup> while on 15 November 1884 the *Southern Weekly News* published a letter drawing attention to 'the dilapidated and incomplete condition of some of the sets of chessmen at the Brighton Free Chess Room'. Mead's response was to set up a fund for the purchase of replacement sets, but the apparent lack of response to this initiative bore out his view that 'those people who have been the most constant in their attendance at the room are the least generous in the cause of chess'.

The first half of the 1880s, it is clear, had been the heyday of the Chess Room. At no later period would it figure as a haunt of the most prominent personalities in Brighton chess, or be the subject of regular news items in national organs like the *Chess Player's Chronicle*.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the Chess Room of the later eighties and nineties possessed its own distinctive character, determined as much as anything by a change of location.

## V

The removal of the Chess Room from the premises of the Free Library, which took place in the autumn of 1888, was precipitated not by any dissatisfaction among its users, but by *force majeure*. After several years in which the propriety of adding a lending department to the services offered by the library had been keenly debated, the Corporation eventually decided to take what was still seen as a controversial step. Early in July 1888, the Library Sub-Committee received a report from a specially nominated team, recommending that the Chess Room and part of the library's entrance hall should be adapted to become a lending library. The threat to the facilities associated with the Chess Room was clear; however, within a week the full Pavilion Committee resolved that 'the room in the Pavilion proper formerly let to the School Board be appropriated as a chess room'.<sup>34</sup> A development potentially fatal to free chess was thus the means instead of securing for it a fresh lease of life.

The Chess Room's new quarters were in a room known as the South Lobby (Fig. 2), which now forms an annexe to the Pavilion Shop. Its associations with chess were of long standing. As early as December 1858 it had been offered to the first Brighton Chess Club as an alternative to the room on the Chain

Pier Esplanade which formed its headquarters at the time. A general meeting of the club concluded that the South Lobby was insufficiently ventilated for the proposed use, and voted against removal.<sup>35</sup> However, five years later the South Lobby was the subject of fresh negotiations between the club and the Pavilion Committee, which this time were successful.<sup>36</sup> In October 1863 the Brighton Chess Club entered on a period of occupancy of the room which was to last until financial circumstances forced a move to cheaper accommodation in 1867.

The room was to have one further association with chess, when in October and November 1870 the chess-playing 'automaton' Ajeeb (Fig. 3) was demonstrated there. Operated by the showman and inventor Charles Hooper, Ajeeb was one of several celebrated chess automata, of which the best known was 'the Turk', and, as with the Turk, its secret was a chess-player of diminutive stature concealed within the mechanism. Ingenious arrangements involving mirrors prevented the paying public from detecting the presence of the operator, even when the doors of the cabinet on which the figure sat were thrown

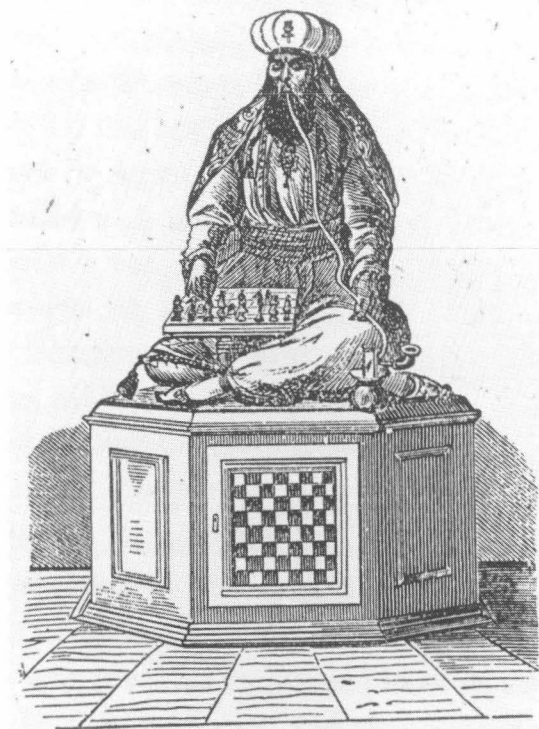


Fig. 3. Ajeeb, the chess-playing 'automaton' exhibited in the Chess Room in 1870.

open. Ajeeb's visit interrupted a successful career at the Crystal Palace, during which its patrons included no less a figure than John Ruskin. At the Pavilion, the ingenuity of the arrangements by which its controlling intelligence was concealed had its usual reward, and residents and visitors alike came in large numbers to view this 'triumph of automatic power and mechanical skill'.<sup>37</sup>

With this history, the South Lobby's qualifications to become the home of the facilities displaced from the Free Library were obvious, and the move was greeted with enthusiasm by most users. Writing in the *Southern Weekly News* of 10 November 1888, Mead reported:

Chess players who were in the habit of using the Free Public Chess Room, will have reason to feel grateful for the new apartment assigned to them in the Royal Pavilion. This apartment . . . has now been refitted and redecorated, and forms a most admirable resort for the devotees of the royal game; infinitely better adapted and more comfortable than the stuffy, ill-ventilated room set apart for the use of Chess players at the Free Library. Visitors to the town will doubtless much appreciate the comforts and advantages of a resort where they can indulge in their favourite pastime, free gratis and for nothing. We are glad to notice that Mr Booth, the Mayor, and other gentlemen have contributed additional sets of Chess men for use in the room.<sup>38</sup>

The atmosphere of goodwill reflected in this passage found issue in a number of developments in the period immediately following, among them the gift of a wall clock by an appreciative user of the room, the installation of a urinal (a facility which users owed once again to the intercession of the ever-solicitous Councillor Booth), and the provision of a set of 'short cane blinds with the words Chess Room worked in, to be placed in the windows'.<sup>39</sup> Such touches suggest that in its new location the Chess Room had become 'respectable', or at least had pretensions to gentility, whereas in its Free Library days its aura may have been slightly raffish. By 1896 the *Lady's Pictorial*, a journal with a 'refined' middle-class readership, felt able to recommend the room to lady chess-players visiting Brighton, citing the leading woman problem composer of the day (Fig. 4) as a regular user.

Visitors to Brighton should know that the Brighton Chess Club, at the West-street

Concert Hall, is not the only place where chess is being played. As you approach the Pavilion from East-street you will see on the right end wing of the Pavilion, a small private door. You enter that and opposite you will see another door which on opening will surprise you by being set out as a chess room. The place is public and upheld by the Corporation; it is open all day long, and players can go in and out without let or hindrance, free of charge. There is a good deal of play there in the afternoon, and any lady wishing to have a game during a temporary stay in Brighton, might go there or make appointments with any Brighton chess player whose address she happens to know to meet her there. Mrs Baird is often to be found there in the daytime, as there is no play at the [West Street Concert Hall] except in the evening hours.<sup>40</sup>

It is to be noted, however, that Mrs Baird's visits to the Chess Room took place in the afternoons. After dark a different tone may have prevailed.

## VI

The Chess Room, like some other 19th-century institutions, showed symptoms of *malaise* as the century drew toward its end. As early as September 1889, the Pavilion Committee found it necessary to approve a formal code of conduct to be observed by users of the room. 'Audible conversation to the annoyance of players' was strictly forbidden, as were 'remarks upon the game by onlookers'. To avoid injury to chessmen and boards, all games were to be played 'quietly'. More seriously, betting and playing for money were outlawed, as was smoking. Any breaches of the regulations were to be reported to the Custodian of the Pavilion, whose apartments were nearby and who had instructions to ensure the maintenance of order.<sup>41</sup>

The injunction against playing for money, supported though it was by a conspicuously displayed notice in the room, was not always observed. In 1890 the *Sussex Chess Journal* felt impelled to warn its readers against what it called a 'disgraceful mode of entrapping the unwary'. An (unnamed) *habitué* of the room, apparently a player of some strength, was deliberately playing like a novice as a device to persuade visitors to put down stake money. The 'Brighton Chess Shark', as one leading Metropolitan player called him, was said to





Fig. 4. Mrs W. J. Baird, problem composer and defender of the Chess Room.

be making as much as £1 per week by this deception. Nor was this an isolated incident, for the writer, almost certainly H. W. Butler, notes that playing for a small stake was at this time widely practised in the room.<sup>42</sup> While the existence of such practices would appear to contradict Staunton's statement, quoted above, that chess was of its nature inimical to 'low gambling', the truth is that there is a distinction to be drawn between 'playing for money' and gambling as such. Many impecunious professionals have resorted to the former expedient as a means of supplementing the meagre earnings to be made from prize money, journalism, and the giving of simultaneous displays. Richard Lean, who frequented the Chess Room in the years immediately before the First World War, was one such would-be professional, and is remembered for his eagerness to play anyone for a shilling a game.

The regulation forbidding smoking may have become a dead letter even more quickly than the ban on playing for money. It is crossed through in pencil in the minute book of the Pavilion Committee, suggesting second thoughts, and within a few years there was to be a complaint regarding players

smoking in the room before 6 p.m. 'contrary to the existing regulations', a form of words suggesting that the embargo now applied only to particular hours of the day.<sup>43</sup> The Committee's response was to advance the six o'clock 'threshold' to four o'clock, a decision which must have surprised and displeased the complainant. But smoking was a problem never finally resolved, and around the turn of the century the total prohibition was apparently reintroduced, since in 1902 the minutes record the acceptance by the Committee of a proposal from the long-serving Councillor Booth that lighting up be permitted 'for the period of one month', presumably as an experiment.<sup>44</sup>

The turn of the century brought other changes in social mores. By the summer of 1899 it had become customary for users of the room to arrive on bicycles, and the Pavilion Committee passed a motion permitting these to be left, at their owners' risk, on the patch of grass to the north of the room.<sup>45</sup> Risks to property there certainly were, and it was perhaps symptomatic of a change in the moral climate that the first month of the new century should have seen the theft of a set of chessmen, the first such occurrence in almost 30 years.<sup>46</sup> In its new location the room offered significant opportunities to thieves, since it seems that chess sets were no longer issued on request, but were set up permanently on tables in the room. A further set was 'liberated' a few years later, in June 1907.<sup>47</sup>

The familiar problem of unmannerly behaviour by juveniles engaged the attention of the Pavilion Committee on several occasions during these years. In February 1906 the Town Clerk was authorized to place a notice in the Chess Room confining boys and young people under the age of 16 years to the use of certain tables and sets of chessmen, perhaps those suffering most obviously from wear and tear.<sup>48</sup> This latest attempt to address the problem was again ineffective, and in November of the same year an adults-only rule was introduced, following numerous complaints of children 'congregating' among the chess tables.<sup>49</sup> The ban on juveniles was to remain in force through the last eight years of the Chess Room's existence, and was to undermine one of the room's 'historic' roles, that of encouraging the development of chess skills among the young.

Children, it would seem, were not the only intruders on the calm of the Chess Room. A regular user named W. Meikle, apparently a habitual complainer, wrote a letter to the Pavilion Committee in January 1907 regarding non-chess-players

'congregating near the fire'. Some of these unwelcome visitors appear to have been in the habit of bringing their domestic pets with them, and as a counter-measure the Committee deemed it necessary to post a notice in the room proclaiming: 'This Room is provided for Chess Players only. Dogs are not admitted under any circumstances'.<sup>50</sup> The notice may not have achieved all that its promoters intended, for in February 1909 there were once again complaints that passers-by were using the room as a shelter from the rain.<sup>51</sup>

Further representations regarding abuses of the room resulted in March 1907 in the establishment of a Chess Room Sub-Committee, charged with the responsibility of reviewing all aspects of the use of the room by the public.<sup>52</sup> The group seems to have made no recommendations, and it was not until February 1909, when Councillor Heitzman added his voice to that of the persistent W. Meikle and others in calling for reform, that various long-standing abuses — which once again included playing for money and disorderly behaviour by 'youths' — were seriously addressed. However, having once nerved itself to a definite course of action, the Committee now moved with surprising speed. In little more than a month a system for controlling access to the room had been introduced, as well as a set of rules governing both admission and the conduct of play. Entry was to be by ticket only, applications being made to the Custodian on an official form. Annual, quarterly, monthly and weekly tickets were to be available, though in practice it would seem that annual renewal quickly became the norm. The Custodian was empowered to reject applications without assigning any reason for such action, and tickets could also be withdrawn for breaches of the regulations. A list of the names and addresses both of persons issued with tickets and of those whose applications had been refused would be presented at each meeting of the Committee.<sup>53</sup>

Four of the nine rules issued to govern the conduct of users of the Chess Room were identical with those drawn up in 1889, from which only the prohibition of smoking was not repeated. This omission suggests that the experimental re-introduction of smoking in 1902 had been followed by a permanent removal of the ban. New rules covered the exclusion of 'children and young persons' (undefined), and of dogs, and included an assertion of the Custodian's power to exclude all persons contravening the regulations or 'causing

annoyance to those who are making reasonable use of the facilities provided'. Users of the room were again encouraged to report breaches of the regulations. The Committee accepted all the proposals, and in a final assertion of its authority requested that Councillor Heitzman should visit the room periodically during the ensuing months to satisfy himself that an orderly régime had become established.

Necessary and effective though they may have been, the reforms of 1909 changed the character of the Chess Room in ways which long-time users may have regretted. Mead's 'hundreds of small boys' were gone, as were the gaunt Frenchman, the aristocratic Erskine brothers, and — one imagines — much of the competitiveness and rough good humour of the era of Bowley and Edmonds. The Chess Room of the years immediately before the First World War was a more mannerly but less exciting resort of chess-players, its hush broken only by the occasional visits of Councillor Heitzman or the Custodian, or — but with decreasing frequency — by protests from those few 'undesirables' whom authority had decided to exclude from the pleasures of free chess.

## VII

It is also to be noted that a substantial segment of chess opinion in Brighton had by this time turned against the Chess Room, arguing that the existence of such a facility discouraged the emergence of more orthodox forms of chess association. Butler's most cogent, though *ex post facto*, statement of this position occurs in his column in the *Sussex Daily News* in 1921 and 1922, initially in a passage in which he argues that the room 'prevented the foundation of a permanent Brighton chess club, which long ere this would doubtless have made Brighton famous in the chess world'. As we have seen, chess clubs were founded in Brighton in 1842, 1880 and 1885: despite periods of success, none of these clubs succeeded in establishing itself permanently on the chess scene, and the Chess Room may have been partly to blame for this. In Butler's words, 'the cost of such an undertaking was never reached simply because many who really could have afforded it met one's enquiry with the excuse "We get our enjoyment for nothing including fire and light, why then should we pay for it?"'.<sup>54</sup> Butler is equally forthright as to the reasons why the Public Chess Room could never be a substitute

for a formal club. The development of a successful chess club, he argues, is dependent on its possession of a corporate identity, which is unlikely to emerge from the amorphous comings and goings of a public room. In addition, much day-to-day business is contingent on the existence of 'a private room for match and tournament play', an impossibility in a place of public resort. And since inter-club match play was a precondition for genuine progress in the game, any institution which inhibited its development was by that very fact 'a distinct bar to progress in chess playing strength'.<sup>55</sup>

While the charges levelled by the room's detractors were hard to refute, supporters continued to make their voices heard. In May 1896 the Plymouth-based *Western Morning News* published a paragraph on the Chess Room by a writer — almost certainly Mrs Baird — whose defence of publicly funded chess included one radically new proposal:

Every large town should have a similar room, and I would go still one further, and suggest that a professional should be in attendance to instruct all comers free of charge. I verily believe it would not only pay — indirectly — the rate-payers to carry out this plan, but it would tend to keep many youths straight who might otherwise go wrong, as it is specially a game with which no evil habits are connected.<sup>56</sup>

The suggestion that the appointment of a chess professional might be the means of transforming the Chess Room from a place of public amusement to a 'centre of excellence' in the game was never taken up, but with hindsight we may conclude that it was far-sighted. Despite the moralistic tone of the passage, which will be unsympathetic to many modern readers, Mrs Baird may have identified a key ingredient which could have reconciled the doubters to the concept of free chess. What, one wonders, would have been the consequence — for Brighton and for Sussex chess in general — had the Corporation invited the leading English player J. H. Blackburne to fill the role of resident chess professional, instead of spending the ratepayers' money on hours of attendance by J. Mitchell and A. Stoddart, loyal servants of the Corporation though these may have been?

### VIII

The reforms of 1909 were accompanied by fresh initiatives to refurbish the Chess Room and update

its facilities. A programme of cleaning and redecoration was launched, and a subscription organized among users of the room for the purchase of new sets of chessmen. This last scheme, however, came to nothing, since after obtaining promises amounting to £5 12s. 0d., the coordinator abandoned his efforts and returned such sums as he had received to the subscribers.<sup>57</sup>

As requested, the Pavilion Committee received regular reports from the Custodian regarding the issue of tickets for use of the room. Reports were at first made at fortnightly intervals, but later a three-weekly or monthly schedule was followed, and from January 1912 the reports were presented quarterly. None of the lists has survived, but from the summaries included in Pavilion Committee minutes it is clear that refusals were at first relatively frequent, but that over time their number declined. Very little is known of the individuals who excited the hostility of the authorities, or of the reasons why applications were refused or tickets subsequently withdrawn. In May 1909 the privileges of 'Mr Bidwell Senior' were cancelled on the grounds that he had transferred his ticket to 'Mr Bidwell Junior', presumably a minor.<sup>58</sup> Another persistent offender, a Mr A. J. Green, had his request for renewal refused in March 1910, was ejected from the room in February 1911, and in August 1914, having apparently been re-admitted, wrote a letter to the Pavilion Committee 'complaining of the action of the Custodian in refusing to renew his Chess Room Admission Ticket and in calling in the Police to remove him from the Room'. The Committee, as on every occasion when the decisions of the Custodian were called into question, gave him its unqualified backing.<sup>59</sup>

An exclusion of a different and distressing kind occurred in January 1910, when there were complaints from users 'as to a certain person suffering from consumption being permitted to use the Room', following which the Committee ruled that the individual in question should be asked to surrender his ticket.<sup>60</sup> The report affords a stark reminder of the well-justified fear which tuberculosis excited at this time.

Despite incidents like these, the life of the Chess Room in its final years was free from major upheavals. The period is of interest in one special respect, in that from April 1913 the Custodian's quarterly report included a statement of the numbers of admission tickets issued or renewed in the previous quarter. For the first time since

November 1874 we thus have reliable data on the usage of the room. The figures cited — 164 tickets issued or renewed in 1913, and 137 in the first three quarters of 1914 — indicate firstly that the Chess Room continued to be well patronized, and secondly that a significant number of users had been enjoying its facilities over several years.<sup>61</sup> It is not known how many users were seasonal migrants, or casual visitors who never became part of the Chess Room's settled population of *habitués*. Overall, however, it is clear that the room was continuing to attract adherents, and even that — within its own terms — it was experiencing something of an Indian summer. Certainly there have been few chess clubs, at this or any other period, which could claim a membership (inclusive of visitors) in excess of 150. The closure of the room in the autumn of 1914 was thus a consequence not of declining public interest but of developments arising from the outbreak of the First World War.

At the end of November 1914 the Pavilion was requisitioned to serve as a hospital for Indian servicemen wounded in the first battles in Flanders. The whole building was at once closed to the public, and a high wooden fence was erected round the Estate. The initial period of military occupancy was of short duration, for within little more than a year Indian troops had been withdrawn from the Western Front; the last convoy of convalescent wounded left the Pavilion in February 1916. The Estate was not, however, returned to public use, but functioned until 1920 as a hospital for the rehabilitation of limbless soldiers.

There was to be no resumption of free chess at the Pavilion in the years after the war. The Estate remained in War Office hands until August 1920, and substantial refurbishment had to be carried out when it was finally returned to the Corporation. The first postwar reference to the Chess Room occurs in the Pavilion Committee minutes of 8 March 1920, which record the receipt of a letter from a Mr E. Bonney 'suggesting that if it is intended to re-open the Chess Room at the Pavilion when the property is evacuated by the Military Authorities, the full number of boards should be re-instated and new chessmen provided'.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps ominously, 'the Committee made no order thereon'. On 11 April 1921 the Committee discussed 'a petition from certain chess players . . . requesting that they may be accommodated at the Old Chess Room at the

Pavilion'. The petition was dated 24 February, and it is likely that pressure of business had precluded its earlier consideration. Even now it was not the subject of an immediate decision, but was referred to the Director of the Pavilion, Henry D. Roberts, for report. A month later, presumably briefed by Roberts, the Committee again considered the petition, recommending 'that the matter be referred to the Director with authority to let the room to a Committee of Chess Players at a rental of £1 per week'.<sup>63</sup> Negotiations with the 'Committee of Chess Players' then ensued, and in July the Director reported that the applicants had offered to pay a rental of £30 for the first year of their tenancy of the room, £40 for the second, and £50 for each subsequent year. The Pavilion Committee agreed to these terms.<sup>64</sup>

Some aspects of the events which followed remain unclear. In particular, the relationship between the 'Committee of Chess Players' and the organizing committee of the fourth Brighton and Hove Chess Club, which was active from July 1921, resists full elucidation. It can be stated with some confidence, however, that the petition of 24 February 1921 referred to the wished-for restitution of the Chess Room in its pre-war status, and that the decision of the Pavilion Committee in May to impose a charge for use of the room effectively ended this possibility. Under whatever aegis the room was re-opened, it would no longer be the home of 'free chess' as the 19th-century proponents of that cause had understood the term. In the event, it was as the entrance to the new headquarters of the revived Brighton and Hove Chess Club that the 'small private door' at the Pavilion's south-west corner was eventually re-opened. The club was to occupy these quarters, albeit with an interruption during the Second World War, for the next 30 years.

That the founders of the new club were conscious inheritors of more than half a century of Brighton chess history is clear from comments made in H. W. Butler's column on the day of the inaugural meeting, 13 September 1922. Looking back over an association with organized chess which had begun with the use of the room by the first Brighton Chess Club in 1863, and in which 'free chess' had played a conspicuous and sometimes controversial part, Butler summed up his feelings in a passage which is at once elegiac and forward-looking. Chess, he concluded, 'is returning to its old home at the Royal Pavilion'.<sup>65</sup>

## NOTES

Unpublished sources used in this study include the Minutes of the Proceedings of Brighton's Pavilion Committee, for permission to quote from which I am indebted to the Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton and Hove: I am particularly grateful to Andrew Barlow, Keeper of Fine Art, for his help. I have also made extensive use of material in the Archive of the Sussex County Chess Association. I am indebted Brian Denman, author of *Brighton Chess* (Brighton: the Author, 1994), for many kinds of assistance, including an unceasing flow of information from obscure newspaper columns.

- <sup>1</sup> For a study of this subject based largely on Sussex sources, see J. Lowerson & J. Myerscough, *Time to Spare in Victorian England* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977).
- <sup>2</sup> Cited in R. Eales, *Chess: the History of a Game* (London: Batsford, 1985), 140.
- <sup>3</sup> *Sussex Agricultural Express* (hereafter *SAE*), 25 Oct. 1873.
- <sup>4</sup> Minutes of Proceedings of the Pavilion Committee (hereafter *MPPC*), 23 Dec. 1872.
- <sup>5</sup> The patents room is mentioned in the course of a detailed account of the internal layout of the new library which appeared in the *Brighton Guardian* (hereafter *BG*) of 3 September 1873. Its secondary function as a venue for chess-players is the subject of later references in several sources.
- <sup>6</sup> The Chess Room's opening hours were changed more than once. Directories of the time show that the library at first remained open until 10 p.m., but that by 1876 a 9.30 p.m. closure had been introduced. In 1878 the Chess Room closed at 9 p.m., half an hour before the library. The early evening closure, initially between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. and afterwards between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., was abandoned in 1876.
- <sup>7</sup> *Southern Weekly News* (hereafter *SWN*), 10 Nov. 1888.
- <sup>8</sup> All these issues were for reference only. Brighton residents had to wait another 16 years for a lending library.
- <sup>9</sup> *MPPC*, 12 Oct. 1874. It is an interesting reflection of the degree to which the activities of the Chess Room were integrated with those of the library that the handing out of chess sets should have become a routine part of the librarian's duties.
- <sup>10</sup> *MPPC*, 10 Nov. 1874.
- <sup>11</sup> *SAE*, 24 Oct. 1874.
- <sup>12</sup> W. Mead, 'A history of chess in Brighton', *Chess Player's Chronicle* (hereafter *CPC*), 20 Sept. 1882, quoted in H. W. Butler's 'Sussex Chess Records' for 1882 (manuscript in the Archive of the Sussex County Chess Association).
- <sup>13</sup> Cited in T. Kelly, *A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845-1965* (London: Library Association, 1973), 69.
- <sup>14</sup> T. Greenwood, *Public Libraries: a History of the Movement and a Manual for the Organization and Management of Rate-Supported Libraries*, 4th edn (London, 1894; repr. High Wycombe: University Microfilms for the College of Librarianship Wales, 1971), 96, 486.
- <sup>15</sup> Greenwood, 82.
- <sup>16</sup> Kelly, 33-4.
- <sup>17</sup> *SWN*, 12 Oct. 1889.
- <sup>18</sup> *Sussex Chess Magazine*, 17 Jan. 1883.
- <sup>19</sup> *SWN*, 18 Aug. 1883.
- <sup>20</sup> *SWN*, 12 Oct. 1889.
- <sup>21</sup> *Brighton Guardian*, 10 Dec. 1873.
- <sup>22</sup> *MPPC*, 11 Mar. 1878; *BG*, 27 Mar. 1878.
- <sup>23</sup> *Sussex Chess Journal* (hereafter *SCJ*), Aug. 1891. A later account, in the *Sussex Daily News* (hereafter *SDN*) of 6 July 1920, has Butler achieving his first victory 'after about an hour's silent watching', an example of a good story improving with age.
- <sup>24</sup> *SCJ*, Apr. 1891.
- <sup>25</sup> *SWN*, 19 Nov. 1887.
- <sup>26</sup> *SWN*, 25 Aug. 1883.
- <sup>27</sup> *SCJ*, Aug. 1891.
- <sup>28</sup> *Sussex Chess Magazine*, 25 Apr. 1883.
- <sup>29</sup> *SWN*, 12 Oct. 1889.
- <sup>30</sup> *CPC*, 24 May 1882, quoted in H. W. Butler's 'Sussex Chess Records' for 1882.
- <sup>31</sup> *CPC*, 1884, quoted in H. W. Butler's 'Sussex Chess Records' for 1884.
- <sup>32</sup> *SWN*, 25 Aug. 1883.
- <sup>33</sup> It is noteworthy that the *Southern Counties Chess Journal*, which was published in Brighton and contains detailed information on Sussex clubs and their activities between January 1893 and January 1896, makes no mention of the Chess Room.
- <sup>34</sup> *MPPC*, 16 July 1888. The Brighton and Preston School Board by this date had offices in the Old Steine.
- <sup>35</sup> Brighton Chess Club minutes, 29 Dec. 1858.
- <sup>36</sup> Brighton Chess Club minutes, 25 Sept. 1863.
- <sup>37</sup> *BG*, 5 Oct. 1870.
- <sup>38</sup> William Sendall, the Mayor of Brighton in 1888, may well have been a chess-player, since an A. E. Sendall — most probably a relative — was at this time a prominent member of the Brighton Chess Club.
- <sup>39</sup> *MPPC*, 5 Nov. 1888, 20 May 1889.
- <sup>40</sup> *Lady's Pictorial*, 4 July 1896. Edith Baird, usually known under her married name of Mrs W. J. Baird, was at this time a resident of College Terrace, Brighton.
- <sup>41</sup> *MPPC*, 30 Sept. 1889.
- <sup>42</sup> *SCJ*, Aug. 1890.
- <sup>43</sup> *MPPC*, 29 Nov. 1897. The complainant was H. Gilbert Stringer, a prominent member of the main Brighton Chess Club.
- <sup>44</sup> *MPPC*, 10 Mar. 1902.
- <sup>45</sup> *MPPC*, 5 June 1899.
- <sup>46</sup> *MPPC*, 22 Jan. 1900.
- <sup>47</sup> *MPPC*, 10 June 1907.
- <sup>48</sup> *MPPC*, 19 Feb. 1906.
- <sup>49</sup> *MPPC*, 26 Nov. 1906.
- <sup>50</sup> *MPPC*, 7 Jan. 1907.
- <sup>51</sup> *MPPC*, 22 Feb. 1909, 8 Mar. 1909.
- <sup>52</sup> *MPPC*, 25 Mar. 1907.
- <sup>53</sup> *MPPC*, 8 and 22 Mar. 1909, 5 Apr. 1909.
- <sup>54</sup> *SDN*, 25 Jan. 1921.
- <sup>55</sup> *SDN*, 13 Sept. 1922.
- <sup>56</sup> *Western Morning News* (undated press cutting of 1896, reproduced from a cuttings book now in the possession of the British Chess Problem Society).
- <sup>57</sup> *MPPC*, 8 Mar. 1909, 26 Apr. 1909, 10 May 1909. Richard Lean, the organizer of the collection, was a strong chess-player but was known to be the possessor of an erratic temperament, and may have been a poor choice for such a role.
- <sup>58</sup> *MPPC*, 24 May 1909. The Bidwell issue was not to be so easily disposed of. In January 1910 'a person named Bidwell' had to be notified that, in the event of his

continuing to use the Chess Room, proceedings would be taken against him for trespass.

<sup>59</sup> MPPC, 11 Apr. 1910, 27 Feb. 1911, 7 Sept. 1914.

<sup>60</sup> MPPC, 24 Jan. 1910.

<sup>61</sup> This last conclusion is derivable from the fact that the largest number of ticket issues (77 in 1913 and 71 in 1914) is recorded for the second quarter of each year, when those original ticket-holders who were still active users of the room would have renewed their current tickets.

<sup>62</sup> The fate of the boards and men which had been in use

prior to November 1914 is unknown. Were they removed to secure storage with the Pavilion's other possessions?

Were they — a reasonable hypothesis — left *in situ* for the use of its Indian guests? Were some of them inherited by the fourth Brighton Chess Club, which, as we shall see, took over the room in the autumn of 1922? None of these questions can be answered with certainty.

<sup>63</sup> MPPC, 10 May 1921.

<sup>64</sup> MPPC, 11 July 1921.

<sup>65</sup> SDN, 13 Sept. 1922.

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