

BOB WADE

CHESS ORACLE

by John Saunders

TOWARDS THE END of October, I motored over to Blackheath to pay a visit to Bob Wade. The purpose of the visit was two-fold: firstly, to return some bulletins which I had borrowed from Bob about a year earlier, and which I have transcribed onto ChessBase files (interested readers will find them at *Britbase*, the British gamescore archive on the internet - go to the *BCM Online* page, www.bcmchess.co.uk, and navigate from there). Bob's chess library is almost as celebrated as the man himself, and he has played a very significant part in getting *Britbase* off the ground.

My second purpose was to interview him for the magazine. In preparing for this it dawned on me that the main difficulty in doing this was knowing when to stop. He has been involved in so many aspects of chess, over so great a period of time, that it is almost impossible to cover the requisite ground within the boundaries of a single interview.

In the end I decided to concentrate on how he got started in the game, and how he came to move to the UK and become a chess professional; but in the end I occasionally succumbed to the temptation to discuss better-known events from his later career.

How did you come to learn chess?

My father, who was a farmer, taught me when I was eight years old, in about 1929. We lived in the country near Dunedin.

And you got the bug fairly early?

No - he used to win all the time. Sorry, this is no Capablanca story. I didn't develop at chess until about 1936. I went to high school in Dunedin and got a prize, which was membership of the Athenaeum Institute. It had a general library and a chess room and I met some chess players there. I used to go after school, and gradually started haunting the place. There were some of the best players in New Zealand at the club: JB Dunlop, the New Zealand Champion at that time, used to go there now and again. It had a library of chess books, including the *BCM*. There were no formal chess tournaments, it was just somewhere you went to play. No money seemed to be changing hands!

When did you get the idea to be a chess professional?

Never! These things just come about. You don't suddenly get the idea of being a chess professional. In June 1938 I went to Wellington to join the Land and Income Tax Department. I benefited from this because my job was to brief inspectors and I learnt about the law, which helped me later (in 1949) when I got involved in the drafting of the FIDE Laws of Chess. I joined Wellington Chess Club, which had a number of good players. The first tournament I ever played in was the "Second Tournament" of the New Zealand Congress in 1938 - I won it. One man by the name of Cunningham always used to bring interesting positions or games along to the club night for people to look at, and I learnt a lot from this, though I had no formal training.

Did you play blitz chess, and do you think it is good for your chess?

We wouldn't have dreamt of using chess clocks for playing blitz. I don't think this form of chess is an end in itself, but should be used for testing ideas; otherwise it doesn't develop your thinking, it limits you to reactions. Half-hour chess is much better, though even then there is a tendency to play routine chess, knights out, bishops, 'b' follows 'a', etc. I was very bookish in the 1950s; I reckon I wrote about two thirds of one edition of *Modern Chess Openings*, which Korn published in about 1951 (although it contains only a brief acknowledgement to me). I remember living in Switzerland working on it - there's a photograph of me then, looking rather emaciated, working on MCO. I knew then that I didn't understand the difficulties of chess, and I spend my time now trying to tell people the difference in thinking between understanding and chess analysis.

You played in the Australian Chess Championship in 1945? How did that come about?

There was a reciprocal arrangement between Australia and New Zealand. For example, Purdy played in the New Zealand Championship and scored his first major success there in 1925. I was invited to play in the Australian Championship, probably the second New Zealander to do so. I think I shocked them because I came second equal, after Lajos Steiner - a very good player - in a very strong championship.

Were there more resources for chess in Australia?

This was the first day after the end of the war with Japan - so the resources were not for chess. Players were hungry for chess. I personally didn't fight in the war - I could not be called up because I was found to be suffering from tuberculosis in 1941. I had seventeen months away from work because of this, during which I could only play some correspondence chess. As regards the Australian Championship, I had a seven-hour flight across the Tasman Sea to Sydney in a flying boat. I had difficulty in getting the right priority to get on the flight. Eventually the Prime Minister's Office gave clearance for me to make the journey - and I won my best game on the same day.

When did make your plan to come to Europe?

I received an invitation to play in the British Championship and came in 1946. Before playing in it, I contracted an inflammation of the knee which meant that I had to play the whole tournament with my leg in plaster. *(There was some shared mirth at this point when the interviewer misheard the last two words as "in Plaistow")*

So you stayed in England after that tournament?

Yes. I was rather annoyed at not having done myself justice, although when I look back at it now, I realise that I didn't know how to play chess properly. I had a tremendous amount to learn. So I stayed and looked around for another tournament. I got a chance to play in a tournament in Barcelona in November 1946.

(Note: At this point, Bob went straight to the correct place in his library and brought back a copy of the Barcelona 1946 tournament bulletin. We perused it together...)

I got half a point from my first ten rounds. This included people like Najdorf. I actually learnt to play chess in the last three games I played there. These were my first master-level games.

So you were now domiciled in Britain?



Bob Wade plays his move on the famous old pieces at the Hastings International Chess Congress, in the early fifties. The interesting queen-side piece configuration didn't yield to a position search in ChessBase. Is it a posed position?

No. I stayed until February. It was an awful winter, one of the worst on record. I remember having difficulty getting to Ayr to give a simul. Then I went onto Iceland with Yanofsky where I played a tournament and gave lots of simuls. Then I went onto New York and Canada, and was in North America until October. I played in the Canadian Championship – not particularly well – and visited almost all the chess clubs in Canada. I played in the US Open in the summer of '47 and remember losing to Kashdan. The US Open was played in Corpus Christi on the Gulf of Mexico. I travelled everywhere on Greyhound Buses. It took four days to get from Winnipeg to Corpus Christi.

Do you enjoy travel?

Not really, no, and certainly not now. It doesn't excite me – I've been to too many places. And these days, when you fly, you don't see anything. After playing another swiss tournament, a minor one which I won, I travelled down the West Coast and ended up at Hollywood Chess Club, where I stayed with the club's founder Herman Steiner, and met film people like Barry Fitzgerald.

Did you meet Humphrey Bogart? What did you do in Hollywood?

I should know that, but one gets confused after years ...

(At this point, Bob went to consult his collection of diaries, and read out a long list of places he visited in North America in 1947: Houston, Dallas, Winnipeg, St Louis, Calgary, Vancouver, Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, etc)

I met Billy Wilder at Paramount Studios, saw Bing Crosby, and also saw the shooting of a film with Barry Fitzgerald, Joan Caulfield and Veronica Lake amongst others. Then I took a three-week boat trip back to New Zealand from San Francisco. I went to see the Public Service Commission in Wellington. They said they'd filled my old job: this had been an interesting one in scientific research, during the last years of the war. I worked in the National Library Service for a while. I was still in contact with people in Britain like BH Wood and Julius du Mont (then BCM editor). At the end of the 1947 I won the New Zealand Championship (note: after previous wins in 1943/4 and 1944/5). I came back to Europe in August 1948 to report (for BCM) on the British Championship held at Bishopsgate, which was won by Broadbent. There was a famous last round where the establishment were terribly worried that BH Wood had a winning position – but he then got flustered and blundered ...

The establishment?

Oh, BH Wood was regarded as anti-establishment by people like Alexander and Milner-Barry.

You became FIDE representative for Australia and New Zealand at this time.

FIDE started by awarding titles to people who achieved results at the 1948 Interzonal tournament. I stayed with the first FIDE President, Dr Rueb, in Paris, and I attended four congresses between 1949 and 1952. In 1950 I was on the qualification, central and rules committees. Purdy and others from this country were very good on the rules of chess, as well as a fellow called Broadley, a BCF arbiter. I learnt a lot from these others about the rules of chess. BH Wood and I, plus two Russians and FIDE President Folke Rogard, drafted the rules of chess at a two-week meeting in Stockholm in 1950. The trouble came when the draft

– done in English and Russian – had to be translated into the official language, French. This is where Golombek came into his own in 1952, and he took over. I had trouble with French when sitting a university entrance exam, but Golombek was an excellent linguist.

You became involved in some controversy over the awarding of titles.

There was an article I wrote – where I may have been wrong as I didn't know enough about Soviet committee systems – about Bohatyrychuk, who was a strong player who lived in Canada, and was gradually getting eliminated from Soviet chess history: he had criticised Botvinnik. I said that to some extent Botvinnik couldn't have done what he had himself. But what I really got wrong in Canada was when I suggested that there was no reason why they should have a zone to themselves, whereas Europe was one zone at that time. They took umbrage at this attack on their national pride. It was very difficult to know what to do with Canada, because if it was lumped with USA, they would be swamped by them. I don't know the answer to that one; but I was a member of the qualification committee dealing with titles, except for my own – which was added by the FIDE Congress, based on some results I achieved in Holland and Venice. I also got into trouble with the Soviet bloc when I strongly recommended Bogolyubow for the grandmaster title.

I saw a comment which Kotov made to the effect that “Wade is not fit to be a FIDE representative” ...

... which proved I was! (Laughter)

What were your relations like with some of these personalities?

You must remember that I spent seven weeks in 1951 with some of these people during the Botvinnik-Bronstein match as a guest and a journalist.

You wrote a book about that match with William Winter. What was he like?

One can get a wrong impression of him. He was a very cultured man. He had a reputation as someone who drank a lot but I don't think that was really true. In the 1950s when I knew him he had a woman friend who kept him in order, but he didn't look after himself properly. He was a very good chess player and easy to work with on the book. He was a capable writer and had a very clear mind.

You made a comment at the time about how impressed you were by the Moscow Press Room in 1951. How would that compare with today?

About the same. They had established this sort of thing in about 1935. They had a habit of getting each game annotated by different players. I did one game with a Russian master. They had massive audiences in the Tchaikovsky Hall.

What were your impressions of that match?

I got to know Bronstein very well. I used to talk with him, more so towards the end – although I have talked with him a lot more since. I was confused by what happened, but also quite impressed. It was when I gave my famous simultaneous ... (Note: when Bob Wade lost 20 games and drew 10 against some young Russians)

I was going to ask you about that. When I told a well-known fellow countryman of yours that I was going to interview you, he rather unkindly suggested asking you about that simul. I

notice that Flohr said something about it in BCM [note: Flohr had attributed to Wade a comment before the simul that "It is not very interesting to play with kids" - BCM, September 1952, page 246]

... which was totally wrong. I would produce my diaries... you will see that I was visiting schools all the time and that my attitude to teaching in schools was certainly not hostile.

Anyone who knows you, Bob, over the years, will have to say that remark of Flohr's was one of the stupidest comments ever made by a grandmaster!

It was made more for their consumption than ours. From what I remember of the occasion, Szabo was also giving a simul. I had almost winning positions for much of the games – but then the battle really started. I got worn down eventually. I returned to the world championship match, where an adjourned game was being played. Afterwards Botvinnik came up to me and said "I would only play fifteen of these people". I didn't have a choice, I had to play thirty. No-one ever mentions my return simul in Moscow at the time of the Olympiad in 1956. I gave a simul over ten boards and scored something like +7, =2, -1.

When did you start teaching in schools?

In the late 1940s, I started to visit London schools. I remember meeting Stewart Reuben at that time. I wasn't trained as a teacher. I just stood up and talked chess. I still don't know whether I would pass at teaching. Even after years of experience I am still learning. In this country everyone has to do things themselves. You cannot get a team together to do a course for teaching. I talk about this with Gary Kenworthy [BCF Director of Coaching]. We need people to get together for a proper syllabus. I don't want to do all the admin work! They are happy in this country if you do all the admin work – they don't want your skill at all.

Did you see how chess was taught in the USSR?

I saw what they showed me. Children who did reasonably well at their schoolwork were allowed to go to sessions at Young Pioneers, where there were hundreds of activities available. Their schools tended to finish early, leaving time for these extra activities, in big centres where they had paid teachers to do the training; for example excellent teachers like Alexander Kostyev, who wrote a book for Batsford. He was one of the main teachers amongst the Central House of Young Pioneers, though they had them all over the place. They had syllabuses that they worked to; I have copies of these somewhere. I think there were meetings between teachers.

You played in the Saltsjöbaden/Stockholm interzonal of 1952, where Kotov had a great victory.

... during which he flattened me! Golombek also played. I was nominated to play by Australia/New Zealand.

In that event, Golombek commented that you started well but tired towards the end. These big all-play-all of twenty plus players must have been gruelling.

This is basically true. It may have been as a result of my tubercular infection, although I was cured of it by then. I noticed this during the Australian Championship of 1945, where I lost a stone during the tournament.

Did you have a second during the interzonal?

No! Not at all. And I don't remember having consulted with Golombek during the event.

What about invitations to tournaments?

Well, being a New Zealander - an odd country that just about knew how to play chess - meant I got more invites than if I had been from elsewhere ...

... like my being Welsh, I get the occasional invite to ten player all-play-alls when English organisers need a "cheap foreigner" (laughter). And what of the famous names that you knew?

Of the pre-war champions, the only one I knew was Euwe, but not very well. I played Bogolyubow and Tartakower at Southsea. Bogolyubow was an affable man, not an organised person, or a systematic player - he said outrageous things about chess, but didn't play as outrageously as he talked.

I played Tartakower at Southsea and in the Staunton Memorial in 1951. I can't add much to the stories about him, except to say that he seemed slightly annoyed that he wasn't taken more seriously. He considered that he had been a quite serious contender for the world championship title in the 1920s. Whether that is true or not, I don't know. But he was an undisciplined chess master.

You won the British Championship in 1952 ...

... not a strong one.

Yes. I read the reports in BCM and Chess. BCM seemed rather grudging about your success, saying that luck had played a big part; whereas BH Wood was kinder and referred to you as a universally popular winner.

The leaders lost their last round games - including me. But I won by a point.

In the 1950s and 1960s - you were playing tournaments and teaching in schools. Was it hard to make ends meet?

I don't know how I did! I never felt pressed to beg; I couldn't do anything like that. Chess was going down and down in Britain. I make a strong point here: one of the reasons for our renaissance later was as a result of examining our position at the end of the 1960s when we were down to about 20th in the Olympiad. There was a new determination on the part of people like Barden, who brought in Jim Slater - and I would say David Anderton and I were part of this - who were determined to do something about it. Penrose was a friend of mine but wasn't involved. He didn't want to play international chess, probably quite wisely, from the point of money - and he also very much hated publicity. He was probably one of the best chess-players we had this century.

You played several Olympiads. Did you work together as a team on adjournments?

Yes, we did. That led to us deciding never to do it again...

Really?

We resolved to work only "in twos". On one occasion we worked together as a team on (I think) my game against Darga of West Germany. We didn't see what he saw! We decided not to work together as a full team again. The trouble is, you always get some smart person wanting to dominate the conversation and lead the way. You don't get the thinking. Our best effort in the 1950s was at Moscow when Wheatcroft was the captain.

When did your library collection start?

It really only started in the late 1960s, when I moved to Blackheath and had the space for books.

And your book writing?

I didn't really start to write books regularly until the Tony Gillam era – *The Chess Player* series, in the mid 1960s. I did the Sousse 1967 and Palma 1970 Interzonal books. I attended both those events throughout. Also the 1973 interzonals in collaboration with Kotov. I was responsible for his publishing *Think Like A Grandmaster*.

You came into contact with Fischer during those Interzonals and also played him on three occasions. How did you get on with him?

I gathered that he respected me from a game that he saw that I played in 1958. We had meals together in 1960 in Buenos Aires, which is where Fischer had his worst ever tournament performance. So we got to know each other at that time. I played him during the Havana 1965 tournament, but that was via telex – he was in Brooklyn and I was in Havana. He probably didn't respect me for the way I played the opening on that occasion – although it ended in a draw. He and Edmondson came to see me in 1970 to help to prepare for the Candidates' matches. I think this must have been the result of the Interzonal tournament in 1970. Our working relationship really started then. Fischer asked me to get the games of his opponents – Taimanov, Larsen and Petrosian. Fischer came back to me again in 1992 for his match with Spassky. I had to do everything differently that time. It all had to be provided on disk. I was actually rather proud of my effort there because *New In Chess* thought they would be nice to Fischer and went to the match venue with 1,400+ Spassky games. I had already given him 2,100+ games.

In 1971 you also produced a collection of Fischer's games for Batsford.

Yes, and I nearly lost my friendship with Fischer by doing that. Kevin O'Connell did most of the collecting and I put it together for the publisher. They would normally take six months to get a book out, but on this occasion they published in about one month – before the Fischer-Spassky match started – thus giving Spassky his preparation on a plate. This made me somewhat unpopular. The word that Fischer's lawyer used when he came to see me after the match, in a general discussion, was "ambivalent". I also helped Korchnoi prepare for his "bad" match against Karpov, i.e. the Merano one.

You were the first chess editor of Batsford.

Yes. Peter Kemmis Betty and I started it in about 1968. The early books were very good and in advance of opening books produced to that time.

On books in general - what book would you recommend for beginners?

My view changes all the time. It isn't written yet. One point - there is no one book: it has to be written for the particular age group. A suitable book for a 7-year-old will be different from that for a 12-year-old. It is important to design the book to attract the right category or age. So there would be five or six different books.

Do you use the internet, and what do you think of it as a medium for playing chess?

I use it a little. I haven't given it much thought. I was wondering if the Third World should

be moving into this as a way of participating in world chess. I have mooted this in South Africa where I have worked recently. I know that a lot of top players play a lot of games on the internet. I wouldn't approve of it all - it's like going to a chess café for blitz games. But it is a normal development for the game.

Regarding the resurgence of British chess in the 1970s: other than the people involved that you mentioned, what were the key factors in the success?

Batfords was one: or rather the young people working on the opening books, which meant that they were developing a systematic approach to the game. People like Keene, Hartston, Speelman and Stean. You had 'rogue' people like Miles: the main problem you have nowadays is that these same people demand so much of chess. They won't play easily in the same teams. We desperately need sponsorship in this country, and the sponsorship breeds success. If we send a team: Short, Speelman, Emms, Conquest, and no Mickey, no Matthew or Tony Miles ... not liking the captain ... if we have these sorts of things and accept this, we are going to suffer. There is no easy way of improving this. There is no leadership there. The only thing I'm hoping is that Mickey Adams will come back onto the selectors' committee, which he left two years ago because of some minor dispute about Miles. I want him to put his shoulder behind the team because we need someone like him to say we're going to win. It's not something a person like me can do.

Were you directly involved in the training of England's first batch of grandmasters, like Miles?

No. I refer you to a remark made by Miles recently, that the only thing he can thank me for by way of training was sartorially ... (laughter). He and I never agreed on many things but he went his own way and still does. He's a very practical person and has developed his own repertoire. You can't tell people at this level what to do in the opening. As regards which of the first English grandmasters were trained: the answer is, almost none. There was nothing systematic as in Russia. We don't nurse them. We decided in the 1970s that the small group of people we selected were going to get any international invitations that were going, and basically provided them with some resources and advice.

Going back to the key factors in the 1970s resurgence - what about the proliferation of weekend swisses?

It helped. This is an area where Stewart Reuben's contribution to chess was a major one. He went to the States in the 1960s and brought the concept back.

Your favourite decade since the war?

Very difficult. One of the things after 1973 was that I didn't play in the British Championship. This was after I made an improvement in the late 1960s, early 1970s. I was second in 1969 and first in 1970: this was one of my best tournaments ever. Les Blackstock helped me work on my openings at that time. He came to Skopje in 1968 on his way to Turkey. He helped me with the French Defence when I had to play Uhlmann. This turned out to be one of my best games. In 1970 I dropped myself from the England team for the Olympiad in favour of younger players and went to play for New Zealand.

Who do regard as world champion?

I am in favour of having a world match-player champion and a world tournament

champion. I am actually in favour of the current FIDE event because it gives a lot more people a chance to take part in the world championship. The Kasparov version gives a limited number of people access to money. With the FIDE system, you get knocked out in the first round, and you take home some money. These people are not making anything out of chess. So, on the whole, there is a lot to be said for the new system, giving opportunities for more people.

Closer to home: there has been a lot of debate in England recently about the numbers of juniors given the opportunity to play in World and European competitions. What is your view?

I agree with Leonard Barden's standpoint: that more places should be found for more players to go. I am not convinced that people are properly prepared to go to events. Barden makes the point that the younger players do not have proper qualifying events where they play four-hour games. The BCF is very poor at raising money. When a player is selected for the squad, one of the things you should tell the parent is "see if you can get sponsorship for training": get general advice, go to a local newspaper or business, and get the firm behind you. This is not done. People like the BCF Director of Junior Chess have too much to do: this sort of work needs to be shared around the Federation, with one person reporting to the board. At the moment we have an unsound structure, going through club to county to union to federation; thus, unless we know someone, we cannot personally affect BCF policy. There are effectively too many tiers.

What are your views on the "Chess As A Sport" campaign?

I am talking this evening to a group of parents at a club near here, at which I am going to discuss children's chess and chess in the educational system; chess against the drug culture; chess as a way of taking children off the streets (along with other mind sports). The education system leaves teachers no time for teaching recreational subjects. Chess has been widely dropped, except in private schools - they tend to do a good job on chess and dominate it, not because they are private schools, but because they are the only ones doing it. The government has its priorities wrong and the teaching profession cannot seem to do much about it.

I'll read you a quote you made at the time of a tour of Germany in 1950. You said you had an "almost fanatical interest in chess in schools and amongst the youth. Why? Because besides a sense of duty, I find unadulterated enthusiasm that gives my own chess a great lift.". Do you still find this enthusiasm today?

Yes, I do, definitely. I noticed it looking after a third team in the 4NCL, a junior team from Kent. I had a training session with them on the Sunday morning and was very pleased with the way they came to me for help. "Yes" is the answer. It means I'm still alive!

Around this point, Bob offered me another cup of coffee, which was as good a point as any to conclude what had been a fascinating interview. Over coffee, we played through a game from the following day's column in *The Independent*, which had been sent through for proof-reading, and Bob fielded phone calls from chess journalists about various current news stories. I was by no means the only person needing to consult the "chess oracle" that day. And we talked about Bob's future projects. But we'll leave those for another day.

