

Our story

The Croydon & District League goes back a long way – in 2020 it will celebrate its centenary. The League's Secretary Howard Walden has explored its past...

The League was formed in 1920 largely through the efforts of Leonard Rees (who was also instrumental in the inception of the Surrey County Chess Association and the British Chess Federation). He noted that a number of clubs in East Surrey were regularly playing friendlies against each other and thought more interest would be created if they were embraced in a league format, with uniform rules of play and a trophy to be won at the end of the season. Rees' success at founding the Croydon League inspired other Surrey clubs to form a similar league for clubs in West Surrey.

The League commenced with one division and matches comprised six boards. This structure continued unchanged until the 1960s with the exception of the war years when the League was suspended. Up to the early 1970s at least 50% of the league was composed of works teams, such as Rotameter, Croydon Post Office, Croydon municipal offices and several insurance companies. Organisations were keen to provide cultural facilities for their workers in the belief that it fostered loyalty to their place of work, but times changed and by the end of the 1980s the works teams had largely disappeared due to organisations' cost rationalisations.

1960s heyday and beyond

Club affiliation was at its highest in the 1960s with as many as 15 clubs regularly competing and a second and third division were added to the League. After a brief flurry of interest prompted by the Fischer v Spassky world championship in 1972, the number of clubs participating in the League reduced, reflecting a general decline in interest in league chess. The number of divisions shrank from three to two, and matches were played over four boards rather than six.

Perhaps the nadir of the League was in the early 1990s when it came close to closure. Leagues and clubs rely heavily on a few dedicated people who do much of the work, and thanks largely to David Hodgson's unstinting efforts as Secretary and Treasurer the League survived. To spread the workload and ensure the future stability of the League, the current committee has separated out the various management roles.

One anecdote is worth recalling from this period. Smoking during matches was considered perfectly acceptable and was rife. Martin Cath recalls going to Croydon Chess Club in 1960 to witness a match in progress with a view to joining the club. There was smog across all the boards, so much so you couldn't see the players, and the curtains, wallpaper and ceiling were brown from nicotine stains. So he joined South Norwood instead, where he is still a member.

Trophies

Our divisional trophies are named after key figures who have contributed to the running of the league. David Luckin (Division 3 trophy) was a Secretary and Treasurer who helped to build the League over several decades. Martin Cath (Division 2 trophy) was the League's grader from the late 1950s to 2003 and remains a committee member. David Hodgson (Rapidplay Division trophy) was Secretary and Treasurer from the early 1990s to 2010

There are two competition trophies. The Bielski Cup, which commenced in 1967, is a team lightning competition played over one night. It is named after Bob Bielski, a refugee from the 1956 Hungarian Uprising who was a top Surrey player. The Trost Trophy started over 50 years ago as an individual standard play competition during the summer months. For the last 30 years it has been run as a lightning tournament. H R Trost was a notable President of the Croydon League who presented the cup that is still awarded each year to the winner.

With thanks to Martin Cath for his contributions.

Croydon Shield - Past Winners

1921 South Norwood

1922 Thornton Heath & Norbury

1923 Wallington

1924 Thornton Heath & Norbury

1925 Wallington

1926 Wallington

1927 Thornton Heath & Norbury

1928 Croydon

1929 Croydon

1930 Croydon

1931 Sutton

1932 Sutton

1933 Wallington

1934 Sutton

1935 Sutton

1936 Croydon

1937 South Norwood

1938 Sutton

1939 Croydon

1957 Coulsdon West

1958 New Addington

1959 New Addington

1960 Croydon

1961 South Norwood

1962 Rotameter

1963 Mushrooms

1964 Mushrooms

1965	Mushrooms
1966	Mushrooms
1967	Mushrooms
1991	Crystal Palace
1992	Croydon
1993	Crystal Palace
1994	Not Contested
1995	Wallington
1996	Dulwich Plough
1997	South Norwood
1998	Crystal Palace
1999	Wallington
2000	Crystal Palace
2001	Crystal Palace
2002	Crystal Palace
2003	Dulwich Plough
2004	South Norwood
2005	Dulwich Plough
2006	Dulwich Plough
2007	Streatham
2008	Streatham
2009	West Wickham
2010	West Wickham
2011	West Wickham
2012	Streatham
2013	West Wickham
2014	West Wickham
2015	West Wickham
2016	West Wickham
2017	West Wickham
2018	West Wickham

The League was suspended during World War 2. Records for the period 1945-56 and 1968-90 are missing.