

Chess is coming home... to Newcastle!

By Tim Wall

“I’m coming home, Newcastle,
Ye can keep yer London wine,
I’d walk the streets all day all neet,
For a bottle o’ the River Tyne.
I’m coming home, Newcastle,
I wish I’d never been away,
I’d kiss the ground for the welcome sound,
Of me mother saying, ‘Hinny, howay!’”

- *‘I’m Coming Home, Newcastle’* (Ronnie Lambert, see YouTube rendition [here.](#))

As a junior chess player in the North East of England in the recession-era 1980s, first on Teesside and then in Newcastle upon Tyne, I quickly got used to the idea that to play in big tournaments, you had to travel to London, far-flung seaside resorts or other places mostly in the south of England. Events such as the Lloyds Bank Masters were all expensive away fixtures, and the epicentre of UK chess seemed a long way away.

Almost in desperation, I suppose, I therefore started organising international tournaments in Newcastle in the mid-1990s. I felt that, while we didn’t have the strongest players in the world, we could at least ‘bring coals to Newcastle’ and help in particular young local players to get the opportunities they were lacking.

Sense of camaraderie

I started with my local pub [The Chillingham Arms](#), asking the manager after a boozy quiz night whether we could hold a chess event in his upstairs function room. Much to my surprise, the room hire was just £10 a day, and a series of great tournaments took place. To say they were run on a shoestring would have been a big understatement, as they were literally organised from entry

fees and the odd helpful donation from The Friends of Chess and the then BCF International Director David Sedgwick's budget.

The titled players (and pretty much a majority of the other players, as I vaguely recall) simply stayed in local players' homes. Among the future stars staying in mine and my friends' spare rooms, on sofas and even on floors in sleeping bags were such luminaries as Jacob Aagaard, John Shaw and Danny Gormally.

Lara Barnes, now the ECF Chief Arbiter, was cutting her teeth in her first tournaments as an arbiter, and among the youngsters playing their first international tournaments included a certain future British champion, Gawain Jones, then aged 9, and Indian superstar commentator Tania Sachdev, then aged 10.



Players at the 1996 Northumbria Masters, held at The Chillingham Arms, Newcastle. Second from right in the front row is a young Gawain Jones. (Photo credit: John Wheeler)

It is the most horrible cliché, but it was true to say, as the Monty Python Four Yorkshiremen sketch put it, 'we were poor, but we were happy'. A number of players made their first International Master norms, including Gormally and even myself – how I managed that while also organising a tournament is a complete mystery to me!

The events, some All-Play-Alls, some Northumbria Masters Swiss tournaments, were a bit rough and ready, but they were great fun. Not to toot my own horn too much, but even today, without exception, everyone I speak to remembers those events with great affection. It was not just the chess, but the camaraderie, the atmosphere and the feeling that we were all mucking in together.

Kevin Keegan and The Sniper

One occasion that particularly sticks in my memory was over Easter 1996, when future 'Sniper Master' Charlie Storey was trying to win some long endgame upstairs in the pub, while downstairs in the bar what seemed like hundreds of Newcastle United supporters were roaring as the Premier League title literally slipped from their grasp, and ill-fated manager Kevin Keegan uttered his immortal "I would love it if we beat them..." rant against Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson.

We chess players oscillated between watching the epic football match downstairs, and Charlie's heroic attempts to win his endgame upstairs...

My years in exile

Then, six months later, my time in Newcastle came to an abrupt halt, as I was lured away down south to London to work for Murray Chandler's *British Chess Magazine*. Three years later – somewhat bizarrely – I went further afield to the great chess nations Azerbaijan and Russia, where I became a mainstream media journalist and editor. Ironically, in the chess-mad cities of Baku and Moscow, I had little time for the game (despite in 1999 interviewing a 12-year-old Teimour Radjabov, and once enduring an epic, all-night vodka drinking marathon with Russian grandmasters at the 2014 Sochi World Championship match).

Some 20 years later, like the Geordie expat brickies from *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* it was finally time for me to 'come home, Newcastle' in 2016. Much as I had enjoyed an interesting and mostly fulfilling career working abroad, it was a highly emotional change in my life.

The feelings that I experienced, as an economic migrant 'exiled' from the North East, have of course been experienced by many millions elsewhere, but there is nothing like returning home – and finding, like Michael Caine in the classic 1971 Newcastle noir gangster film *Get Carter* that so much of that old world

had gone forever, even while (as in this fascinating short [documentary](#)) some of the old places and faces remained the same. Except that myself and my Newcastle friends were just much, much older. Almost like, as in the words of the *Coming Home* song, “Ah might as well ha’ been in jail...”

Putting the band back together

About a year after I’d come back to Newcastle, it was none other than Charlie Storey who suggested in an offhand comment, ‘Why don’t you hold another international tournament?’ The seed of an idea to put the band back together again took root, and I asked the manager of the self-same Chillingham Arms if his upstairs function room was available for a chess event. I was again pleasantly surprised to learn that the room hire was just £25 a day this time... and in February 2018 the reborn Northumbria Masters took place in the pub, with 7 GMs and 11 IMs in a strong field of 50 players.

Once again, the event benefited from the great work of Lara Barnes, and this time new sponsors were found, including the Liverpool-based company Capital Bridging Finance Solutions, the ECF, The John Robinson Youth Chess Trust, and the Friends of Chess. The budget was far bigger than in the 1990s, but in modern terms it was still an event on a shoestring – and it was only made possible by the efforts of a group of local volunteers, who put up titled players in their homes again and ferried them to and from the tournament each day.

The ‘chess holiday’ experience

This year, the 2019 Northumbria Masters (held August 23-27) was an altogether grander affair, with a great new venue, Novotel Newcastle Airport, organised in conjunction with Bridge Overseas/Guaranteed Events Ltd, the Bridgend-based company that organises accommodation for the 4NCL and other major UK chess events. This meant we could expand the number of players to 120 in four different sections, reaching maximum capacity in a large conference suite. The playing conditions were excellent, and all the players could enjoy a full trestle table per board to themselves and their opponent.

Like the 2018 and 1990s events, there was a great diversity in the makeup of the tournaments, with players from 11 different nations taking part. GM Roeland Pruijssers of The Netherlands won the Masters with 7.5/9, ahead of German GM Alexander Donchenko and English IM Alan Merry on 7/9. The Masters’ field of 52 players again was very strong, including a total of 6 GMs and 6 IMs. (You can view the results [here](#).)



GMs Justin Tan and Roeland Pruijssers (centre left and right) enjoying an evening of blitz with local club players in Newcastle after the last round of the 2019 Northumbria Masters (Photo credit: Jose Grueso)

The FIDE-rated Under 2050 (180 ECF) and Under 1825 (150 ECF) tournaments were also well supported, with many club players travelling to Newcastle over the Bank Holiday weekend. It was particularly pleasing to see some 30 juniors playing in the 9-round FIDE-rated tournaments, many with the support of bursaries from the John Robinson Trust.

To me, this level of success showed that it is entirely possible to organise strong and attractive international tournaments in a city a fair way away from London. To quote the baseball film *Field of Dreams*, if you build it, they will come.

One of the things that seemed to go down very well at this year's Northumbria Masters was the tourist excursions I organised for families and players who wished to take up to three half-point byes. Two carloads of chess tourists enjoyed walking around the historic Durham Castle and Cathedral, the Vindolanda Roman Fort along Hadrian's Wall, and – my personal favourite – Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland. Against the backdrop of the

Northumberland cliffs, after we toured the castle, we sat cross-legged on picnic blankets to watch as a richly-comic, open-air performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was performed by an all-female quartet of cycling actors, the aptly-named Handlebards.



Chess players and their families enjoyed an open-air performance by a cycling acting troupe, The Handlebards, of 'The Tempest' at Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland (Photo credit: The Handlebards)

I should, perhaps, offer a word to the wise for other would-be international tournament organisers in regional centres such as Liverpool, Leeds, Bristol and Norwich: It can be a huge undertaking, and one that requires quite some efforts from a team of dedicated volunteers to make it work. But the payoff is the huge amount of positive feedback we have received about the event from players and families who would like to return next year.

I am glad to say that preparations are already well underway for next year's Northumbria Masters, with the provisional dates of August 27-31, 2020. We are hoping to include more excursions for players and their families, to make it again an enjoyable chess holiday – at the same time as being a serious and prestigious international chess festival. These are likely to include a visit to Alnwick Castle, the famous location of the Harry Potter films...

For me, personally, the renaissance of the Northumbria Masters is about more than just retying the knot of history. It is hopefully a way in which chess at all levels can be revived in the various regions of the country – and serve as an example to other local organisers: If you build it, they will come.