

Mary Rudge: Bristol's World Chess Champion

By John Richards

She was “the leading lady player of the world”¹ and “known throughout the length and breadth of the land”² in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The pinnacle of her career was winning the first international women’s chess tournament in 1897, but she lived a life of genteel poverty and died almost forgotten.

Mary Rudge was born in Leominster on the 6th February 1842 to Henry and Eliza Rudge.³ Henry was a surgeon and “very fond of chess and played a fairly strong game, though he never took part in public chess. He taught the moves to his elder daughters, and they in turn taught Miss Mary.”⁴ Leominster was a small town and could not have provided much in the way of serious competition, so it is unsurprising that the first record of Mary playing chess is in a correspondence tournament in 1872.⁵ The first mention of over the board competition is in August 1874 when Mary played in Class II at the Meeting of the Counties’ Chess Association, at Birmingham.⁶



Mary Rudge

Two months later Dr Rudge died, leaving Mary, 32, and her sister, Caroline, 41, to fend for themselves. Both women were unmarried and they went to live with their brother Henry in Bristol. Henry was 37, also unmarried, and had been a curate at St John Evangelist, Whiteladies Road, Clifton since 1870.⁷

Mary started playing chess seriously and, for her, the move to Bristol was particularly fortuitous. Bristol had a long chess history; the Bristol Chess Club was formed in 1829 or 1830 and is thought to be the first English club outside London. More importantly for this story, in 1872, the new Bristol and Clifton Chess Club Association voted to admit women: “During the year the vice-president proposed that ladies should be admitted to the Club as associates, at an annual subscription of 5s.,

1 *Colombia Chess Chronicle*, 1 November 1889, pp 92-93, quoted in Winter, E, *Chess Note* 3281

2 *British Chess Magazine* (BCM), 1890, p264.

3 General Register Office, reference March 1842 Leominster XXVI/194. The date of birth is often given, erroneously, as 1845.

4 *BCM*, 1897, p289.

5 Personal e-mail from C.P.Ravilious, saying Tim Harding has record of Mary playing in the first correspondence tournament of *The Amateur Chess Magazine* (Ed James T.C.Chatto) which began in the summer of 1872.

6 Burt J, *The Bristol Chess Club*, 1883.

7 *Crockford's Clergy List*, 1889.

which was agreed to. We believe that no members of the softer sex were admitted as subscribers, by any chess club in this country, prior to this date.”⁸ Although Burt’s claim is very doubtful – there are examples going back to the eighteenth century⁹ – Mary had ended up in a place that was going to give her the opportunity to play competitive chess.

The first mention of Mary in Bristol is in 1875 when she played Blackburne - who gave a blindfold simultaneous display against ten opponents. The following year she played in another blindfold simultaneous display given by Zukertort¹⁰. At this stage Mary had not made much of an impact on the chess world. When John Burt wrote his history of the Bristol Chess Club in 1883, Mary was considered worth just two very brief mentions. If she had been recognized as a leading woman player at this time then Burt would surely have recorded it.

The arrival of Henry’s sisters must have caused a major upheaval in his life and, in particular, a need for new accommodation. Before 1876, Henry does not appear in the residents’ lists. In 1876-77, he was living at Walmer Villa, 48 Wellington Park, Clifton. This house may have been owned by St John’s, because when he moved to become curate of another church, St Thomas, Bristol, in 1878, he also moved house to 8 Burlington Buildings (now Burlington Road) Clifton. Perhaps Henry’s new post at St Thomas still did not bring in enough money because the Rudges had a new plan. The following year they took over the new Luccombe House Preparatory School on Redland Green; Henry became the schoolmaster and we can assume his sisters helped with the teaching.¹¹ The school was described as providing “high class education for boys, 7-11. Efficient masters providing a thorough grounding for public schools.”¹² The venture may have started successfully because Henry gave up his curate’s post in 1881, but by 1885 things were going wrong. In January, the school was advertising for pupils¹³, but by August it seems the school closed and the Rudges left¹⁴.

Henry moved to become curate at North Meols¹⁵, near Southport, but Mary stayed in Bristol. What happened immediately after the school closure is not clear – Mary did not appear in two matches that autumn that she would normally have played in¹⁶. But she eventually reappeared on the chess scene and this time she quickly began to make a real impact. This is all the more remarkable as she was already 45 years old. On 12th March 1887 she played on board six for Bristol against Bath at the Imperial Hotel, Bristol, and she got a draw against a Mr W E Hill. At the beginning of 1888, Rudge played and won on board six for Bristol & Clifton against City Chess & Draughts Club¹⁷, and then drew with Blackburne in a simultaneous display on 1st March.¹⁸ The

8 Burt, J, *op cit*.

9 BCM, 2004, p666.

10 *ibid*.

11 1881 Census, RG11, 2504 / 23, 39.

12 Web site: bristolinformation.co.uk/schools/

13 *Clifton Chronicle & Directory* (CCD), 14 January 1885.

14 CCD, Rev H Rudge is listed at Luccombe House up to 12 August 1885, but no one is listed at that address for the rest of the year.

15 *Clergy List for 1886*.

16 CCD, 18 November 1885. The two matches were an internal club match over twelve boards and an 8-board match against Oxford University.

17 CCD, 18 January 1888.

18 BCM, 1888, pp186-7.

following year Mary must have really made the men sit up and take notice as she won the challenge cup of Bristol & Clifton Chess Club.¹⁹ However, the very same month (June 1889), Mary was in dire financial straits.

‘Our readers will be sorry to hear that Miss M. Rudge, of Clifton, is at present in very depressed pecuniary circumstances; so much so that she has felt obliged (though most reluctantly) to give her consent to an appeal being made on her behalf. We are sure English chessplayers will not allow one of their best lady players to remain in actual, though it is to be hoped only temporary, want, and contributions for its relief, however small, will be thankfully received by the Rev. C.E. Ranken, St Ronan’s, Malvern, and acknowledged by him privately to the donors.’²⁰

Perhaps the school venture had wiped out any funds or legacy that had once existed. Mary was reduced to relying on a form of charity, as she became a companion to various ladies. The most important of these ladies was Mrs FF Rowland, who lived at Clontarf, near Dublin, and also Kingstown. Frideswide Rowland was a significant figure in late nineteenth-century chess, both as a problemist and, with her husband, Thomas B Rowland, as a chess journalist and writer of chess books. And so Mary started alternating between living in Bristol and Ireland.

By September 1889, Mary was living in Clontarf where, possibly inspired by Mrs Rowland, she composed and published a chess problem (in the Clontarf Parochial Magazine).²¹ She also gave a simultaneous display - she won all six games²² - and it is possible that she was the first woman in the world to perform a ‘simul’. By November Mary was being hailed as “the leading lady player in the world”.²³

Meanwhile, brother Henry was still in Lancashire. By 1889 he had moved a short distance to Church Town, Southport.²⁴ The same year he succeeded in getting a new post, as Curate and then Rector of St Mary, Newent, Gloucestershire.²⁵ It appears that Mary decided not, or was not invited, to move to Newent. In any case, Henry was destined not to enjoy his new post for long; he died in September 1891.

Over the next few years, Mary took part in various competitions, playing for Bristol & Clifton,²⁶ and for Gloucestershire,²⁷ and also moving to Dublin for several months at a time. She won the Ladies’ Challenge Cup in Cambridge in 1890 and was third in Class II. By now, the British Chess Magazine could describe Mary as “known throughout the length and breadth of the land”.²⁸

19 *CCD*, 5 June 1889.

20 *BCM*, 1889, p231.

21 *CCD*, 11 September 1889.

22 *CCD*, 30 October 1889.

23 *Colombia Chess Chronicle*, *op cit*.

24 *Crockford’s Clergy List*, 1889.

25 *Crockford’s Clergy List*, 1890.

26 *BCM*, 1894, p48; *BCM*, 1895, pp 17, 68, 511.

27 *BCM* 1895, p220.

28 *BCM*, 1890, p264.

In 1896, Mary won Class II at the Southern Counties' tournament, at the Imperial Hotel. Mr Stevenson tied for first place, with a score of 6½. The latter beat Mary in their game, then waived his right to play off, giving Mary the first prize of £5.²⁹

The following year, 1897, the first international women's chess tournament was held at the Ladies' Club in London. Twenty players entered. Two rounds per day were played, with a time limit of twenty moves in one hour. Some expressed concern that the event would be too taxing for the ladies.

It is likely that Mary was urged to enter and her supporters may have raised money to enable her to stay for a couple of weeks in London. If so, it was worthwhile as Mary sailed through the event undefeated with eighteen wins and one draw.

“Miss Mary Rudge, of Clifton, won her games in the eighteenth and final rounds of the International Chess Tournament, played in London, at the Ladies' Chess Club, on Saturday. Miss Rudge came out as first prize winner of £60, her full score being 18½ points.”³⁰



The first women's International Tournament, London 1897. Mary is top centre.

The British Chess Magazine commented her play was marked by a lack of risk taking and published only highlights of her games, but they did confirm the status of the event:

29 *BCM*, 1896, p389.

30 *CCD*, 7 July 1897.

"Rudge in capital form, ... displayed those qualities of steadiness and tenacity for which she is renowned. ... Her play was marked throughout by care, exactitude and patience. Someone said of her, 'She doesn't seem to care so much to win a game as to make her opponent lose it.' She risked nothing, she never indulged in fireworks for the purpose of startling the gallery; if she got a Pawn she kept it and won, if she got a piece she kept it and won, if she got a "grip" she kept it and won, if she got a winning position she kept it and won. Not that she always outplayed her opponents in the openings, or even in the mid-games, for the reverse was sometimes the case; but risking nothing she always managed to hold her game together, and then in the end her experience as a tournament player and her skill in end positions came in with powerful effect."

"Miss Mary Rudge has for long enjoyed the reputation of being the strongest lady chessplayer in the world, and the fact that she has carried off the first prize in the present tournament, thereby becoming entitled to style herself lady chess champion of the world, is very satisfactory to her many friends."³¹

At the age of 55, Mary had reached the pinnacle of her career. It is certain that the £60 prize money was also very welcome. Afterwards it was back to the more mundane life of playing in Bristol and Dublin.

In 1898 Mary played against the men's world champion, Emanuel Lasker, in a simultaneous display at the Imperial Hotel. Lasker was unable to finish all the games in the time available³² and Mary's was one of those unfinished. Mrs Rowland described how Lasker had been winning but made a mistake. He graciously conceded defeat in this game when it was unfinished at the call of time because he would be lost with best play.³³ She continued to play for Bristol and for Gloucestershire.³⁴ The following year, Mary was playing in Dublin "with great success".³⁵

Mary's health deteriorated sometime in the next few years. Her sister Caroline died in 1900 leaving her on her own. In 1912, there was a new appeal for funds. The *Cork Weekly News* published the following announcement by Mrs F.F. Rowland:

'Miss Mary Rudge is the daughter of the late Dr Rudge, and after his death she resided with her brother, who kept a school, but since his decease she is quite unprovided for, her sisters are also dead, and she is without any income of any kind. She lived as companion with various ladies, and was for some years resident with Mrs Rowland, both at Clontarf and Kingstown. Whilst at Clontarf, she played in the Clontarf team in the Armstrong Cup matches, and proved a tough opponent, drawing with J. Howard Parnell and winning many a fine game. She was also engaged at the DBC to teach and play in the afternoons. At the Ladies' International Congress, London, she took first prize (£60), making the fine score of 19½ in 20, the maximum [18½ from 19, in fact]. Miss Rudge held

31 *BCM*, 1897, p285-296.

32 *CCD*, 30 November 1898, gives the story of Lasker not finishing but does not mention Mary by name.

33 *Weekly Irish Times*, 14 January 1899.

34 *BCM*, 1898, p200.

35 *BCM*, 1899, p454.

the Champion Cup of the Bristol Chess Club, prior to Messrs H.J. Cole and F.U. Beamish. Miss Rudge is now quite helpless from rheumatism and is seeking admission into a home or (if possible) the Dublin Hospital for Incurables. A fund is being collected for present expenses, pending her admission, and chessplayers are asked to help – either by influence or money. Donations may be sent to Mrs Rowland, 3 Loretto Terrace, Bray, Co. Wicklow, or to Mrs Talboys, 20 Southfield Park, Cotham, Bristol.³⁶

The next few years must have been very difficult indeed. In 1918, Mary attempted to solve her financial problems when a cousin, James Barrett, died intestate. Mary claimed to be sole next of kin, but another Barrett claimed to be the grandson of the deceased's uncle and hence sole heir.³⁷ Mary's claim appears to have failed.³⁸

Mary moved, at some point, to Truro and then to the British Home for Incurables, Streatham. She died in Guys Hospital, London, on 22 November 1919. The British Chess Magazine accorded her just three lines:

“As we go to press we learn with great sorrow of the death, at Streatham last month, of Miss Mary Rudge, winner of the International Ladies' Tournament in 1897.”³⁹

So how good a player was Mary Rudge? Although she was considered the best woman player in the world it is doubtful that she was all that strong. A reasonable indicator of her strength is that she played around boards 4 to 8 for both Bristol & Clifton and for Gloucestershire, and that she played in the second strongest section (Class II) of tournaments at regional and national level. So, relative to her male contemporaries, she was not as strong as a top female player of today, but this is not to belittle her achievements. She played chess at a time when women were not encouraged to play, in fact often positively discouraged. She also started at a late age for a chess player and had her greatest success at 55. In contrast, when the first official women's world championship tournament was held, it was a 21 year old, Vera Menchik, who was victorious. By coincidence, the tournament was also in London, almost exactly thirty years after Mary's triumph, and Vera won by a similar score: ten wins, one draw, no losses.

Mary deserves to be better recognised and remembered as a pioneer of women's chess. A blue plaque in Bristol would be a good start, but we need to find a building to place it on. Her only definite address in Bristol, Luccombe House, no longer exists.⁴⁰ Perhaps a good alternative would be the Imperial Hotel where she played on many



Imperial Hotel – now Canynge Hall

36 Source: *American Chess Bulletin*, May 1912, page 112, quoted in Winter, E, *Chess Note* 3281.

37 *London Gazette*, 2 August 1918.

38 *London Gazette*, 8 November 1918.

39 *British Chess Magazine*, 1920, p13, quoted in Winter, E, *Chess Note* 3281.

40 Personal e-mail from G Nichols, 17 January 2004.

occasions, and the venue for her near-win against Lasker. The Hotel is now named Canynge Hall and it is the home of the University of Bristol's Department of Social Medicine.

Games

Very few of Mary's games seem to have survived and I have found just nine so far. Doubtless more remain to be found in old newspapers and magazines and I would be happy to receive any that turn up.

W. Berry v Mary Rudge, Birmingham, August 1874.

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6 4. Nc3 a6 5. Bxc6 dxc6 6. O-O Bd6 7. d4 Qe7 8. Bg5 h6 9. dxe5 Bxe5 10. Nxe5 Qxe5 11. Bxf6 Qxf6 12. f4 Qe7 13. f5 Qe5 14. Qd3 Bd7 15. Rad1 O-O-O 16. Qc4 Rhf8 17. Qd4 Qxd4+ 18. Rxd4 f6 19. Rfd1 Rfe8 20. b4 Re5 21. a3 c5 22. Rd5 Rxd5 23. Rxd5 cxb4 24. axb4 Re8 25. Kf2 Bc6 26. Rd4 Re5 27. Ke3 a5 28. bxa5 Rxa5 29. Kf4 Rc5 30. Rd3 b5 31. h4 Rc4 32. g4 b4 33. Nd5 Bxd5 34. Rxd5 Rxc2 35. g5 hxg5+ 36. hxg5 fxg5+ 37. Kxg5 c5 38. Kg6 b3 39. Kxg7 b2 40. e5 b1=Q {and wins.} 0-1

JH Blackburne (blindfold sim) v Mary Rudge, 1875

1. e4 e5 2. d4 exd4 3. c3 dxc3 4. Bc4 Nc6 5. Nf3 h6 6. O-O d6 7. Nxc3 Nf6 8. Bf4 Be7 9. Qd2 Ng4 10. Rad1 Nge5 11. Bxe5 Nxe5 12. Nxe5 dxe5 13. Qe2 Bd6 14. f4 O-O 15. f5 Qg5 16. Rf3 Qh5 17. Nd5 Kh7 18. Qd3 f6 19. Rg3 Bxf5 20. exf5 e4 21. Rh3 Qxf5 22. Qe2 Qe5 23. Ne3 c6 24. Ng4 Bc5+ 25. Kh1 Qg5 26. Rh5 Qxh5 27. Nxf6+ 1-0

Harsant v Mary Rudge, 1883

1. e4 e5 2. f4 Bc5 3. Nf3 d6 4. d4 exd4 5. Bd3 Nc6 6. O-O Bg4 7. h3 Bxf3 8. Qxf3 Nf6 9. Nd2 O-O 10. g4 Qe7 11. g5 Nd7 12. Qh5 g6 13. Qh6 f6 14. Nf3 Rae8 15. Kh2 Nb6 16. Rg1 Nb4 17. f5 Qg7 18. fxg6 hxg6 19. gxf6 Rxf6 20. e5 Qxh6 21. Bxh6 Rxf3 22. Bxg6 Rf2+ 23. Kh1 Rxe5 24. Bd3+ Kf7 25. Rg7+ Ke6 26. Bh7 Kd5 27. Rxc7 Kc4 28. c3 Nc2 29. cxd4 Nxa1 30. dxe5 Kd5 31. exd6 Kxd6 32. Rxc5 Rf3 33. Rh5 Rf2 34. Bg7 Nc2 35. Be5+ Ke6 36. Bg8+ Ke7 37. Rh6 Kf8 38. Bb3 Nd7 39. Rh8+ Ke7 40. Rh7+ Ke8 41. Bd6 Nd4 42. Rh8+ Nf8 43. Bd5 1-0

Mary Rudge – R Fedden, Bristol & Clifton Handicap Tournament, 1885

Clifton Chronicle & Directory, 17 June 1885. Played at odds. Remove Black's f pawn.
1.e4 e6 2.d4 c5 3.Nf3 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nc6 5.Nb5 Nf6 6.N1c3 d5 7.exd5 exd5 8.Nd4 Bc5 9.Nb3 Bb6 10.Bd3 0-0 11.f3 Re8+ 12.Kf1 Be6 13.Bg5 h6 14.Bxf6 Qxf6 15.Be2 Rad8 16.Na4 Be3 17.Nac5 Bc8 18.Nd3 b6 19.Rb1 g5 20.Qe1 g4 21.Qg3 Kh8 22.Rd1 gxf3 23.Bxf3 Rg8 24.Qe1 d4 25.Nbc1 Bh3 26.Nf2 Qxf3 27.gxh3 Bxf2 28.Qd2 Black mates in two. 0-1

Mary Rudge v R Fedden, Bristol & Clifton Handicap Tournament, 1885

Clifton Chronicle & Directory, 15 July 1885. Played at odds. Remove Black's f pawn.
1.e4 e6 2.d4 c5 3.Nf3 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nc6 5.Nb5 Nf6 6.Bd3 a6 7.N5c3 Bc5 8.0-0 0-0 9.Kh1 d5 10.f3 Nh5 11.Qe1 b5 12.Ne2 Ra7 13.Ng3 Nxg3+ 14.Qxg3 Raf7 15.Nc3 d4 16.Ne2 Be7 17.Qe1 e5 18.Bd2 Be6 19.f4 exf4 20.Rxf4 Bd6 21.Rxf7 Rxf7 22.Ng1 Ne5 23.Be2 Bg4 24.Bxg4 Nxg4 25.Nf3 Qc7 26.h3 Bg3 27.Qe2 Nf2+ 28.Kg1 Re7

29.e5 h6 30.Bb4 Re8 31.Be1 Nxb3+ 32.gxh3 Bxe5 33.Bg3 Bxg3 34.Qxe8+ and wins 1-0

Charles Drury v Mary Rudge, Dublin, 1889

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Be7 4. c3 Nf6 5. d3 O-O 6. O-O d6 7. h3 Na5 8. Bb5 Nc6 9. Nh2 Bd7 10. Ba4 d5 11. Bg5 dxe4 12. Bxf6 Bxf6 13. dxe4 Qe7 14. Na3 Rad8 15. Qe2 a6 16. f4 exf4 17. Rxf4 Bg5 18. Rff1 Ne5 19. Bb3 Ng6 20. Nc2 Nf4 21. Qf3 Qe5 22. Nd4 b5 23. Ne2 Ne6 24. Kh1 c5 25. Ng4 Qc7 26. e5 c4 27. Bc2 Bc6 28. Qf5 g6 29. Nf6+ Kh8 30. Qg4 Qxe5 31. Nxb7 Kxb7 32. Qh5+ Kg8 33. Bxg6 Qg7 34. Bc2 Qh6 35. Qg4 Ng7 36. Nd4 Bb7 37. Rad1 f6 38. Bf5 Qh4 39. Qe2 Rde8 40. Qc2 Re3 41. Nf3 Qh6 42. Rde1 Nxf5 43. Qxf5 Rfe8 44. Rxe3 Rxe3 45. Nd4 Rxb3+ 0-1

W Cooke v Mary Rudge, Armstrong Cup, Dublin, 25 January 1890

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 exd4 4. Nxd4 Bc5 5. Be3 Qf6 6. c3 Nge7 7. Bb5 O-O 8. Nxc6 dxc6 9. Bxc5 cxb5 10. Na3 Re8 11. f3 Ng6 12. O-O Qg5 13. Bf2 Be6 14. Nc2 Rad8 15. Nd4 Bc4 16. Re1 Nf4 17. Bg3 c5 18. b3 Ne2+ 19. Rxe2 Bxe2 20. Qxe2 cxd4 21. f4 Qc5 22. Bf2 Qxc3 23. Rd1 d3 24. Qf3 Qc2 25. Bxa7 Ra8 26. Bd4 Rxe4 27. Qxd3 Re1+ 0-1

Mary Rudge v Louisa Matilda Fagan, London, 1897

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. d3 d6 5. Be3 Bxe3 6. fxe3 Na5 7. Nbd2 Nxc4 8. Nxc4 Be6 9. Ncd2 c6 10. Qe2 Nf6 11. O-O Qb6 12. b3 O-O-O 13. Kh1 h5 14. Ng5 Rde8 15. Nxe6 Rxe6 16. Rae1 Qc7 17. Nf3 d5 18. Ng5 Re7 19. exd5 Nxd5 20. Qf3 f6 21. Qh3+ Qd7 22. Qxd7+ Rxd7 23. Ne4 Nb4 24. Rf2 Rxd3 25. cxd3 Nxd3 26. Rd1 Nxf2+ 27. Nxf2 b5 28. Ne4 Rd8 29. Rxd8+ Kxd8 30. Kg1 Kc7 31. Kf2 Kb6 32. Kg3 f5 33. Nd6 g6 34. Nc8+ Kc5 35. Nxa7 g5 36. a3 Kd5 37. Kf3 Kc5 38. g3 Kd5 39. e4+ fxe4+ 40. Ke3 g4 41. b4 Kc4 42. Nxc6 1-0

Emanuel Lasker (sim) v Mary Rudge, 1898

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 exd4 4. Nxd4 Nxd4 5. Qxd4 d6 6. Nc3 h6 7. Bd3 Nf6 8. h3 Bd7 9. Bf4 Be6 10. Bh2 Nd7 11. f4 Nc5 12. O-O Nxd3 13. cxd3 c5 14. Qf2 f6 15. d4 Be7 16. d5 Bf7 17. e5 fxe5 18. fxe5 O-O 19. e6 Bxe6 20. Qe2 Rxf1+ 21. Rxf1 Bf7 22. Rxf7 Kxf7 23. Qe6+ Kf8 24. Ne4 Qc8 25. Qg6 Qe8 26. Qh7 Rd8 27. Qh8+ Kf7 28. Qh7 {Adjourned and unfinished.}

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