

A family gripped with chequered fever

A recent victim of an epidemic which has attacked apparently healthy people for well over 1500 years describes how it swept through his family.

THE epidemic has attracted little public attention. It has not produced a single question in Parliament and there has certainly been no statement of public policy by the Government. There is no hint of the state of emergency for which the situation calls.

Yet behind tightly drawn curtains pairs of people of all ages and shapes sit, noiselessly, their eyes downward, their only movement an occasional abrupt sweep of an arm followed by a muffled "clunk," their only utterance the word "check" with clenched teeth . . .

In our family my brother and his wife were the first victims of the most serious outbreak of chess this century. They caught it apparently during a potholing holiday in Yorkshire. Subdued and silent they returned home and for days they never left those 64 chequered squares. Conversation was banned whenever the tournament was being fought. The tension was electric. By comparison an undertaker's waiting room seemed warm, inviting and relaxing. Breakfasts became a ritual as the pair pitted their wits, flanked by cornflake packets towering like castles and by boiled eggs bald as bishops.

After many weeks the fever had run its course. Normality and noise returned to the household, but they were short-lived.

Then one Saturday morning I found my parents at it. True, the game was being played in a mutated form. Pawns were moving backwards, castles raced diagonally across the board and a king was standing on his head. But the malaise had struck again. For weeks afterwards the house

resounded with blood-curdling shrieks: a sign that for the fifth time that day the old man's queen had been seized by an unobserved knight.

Smugly I looked on, secure in the knowledge that such afflictions may smite the weak, but to the mighty there was no threat.

A couple of weeks later I paid a visit to the seething metropolis of Surbiton. Alison was recovering from chicken-pox and I had gone to minister to the sick. And there the pestilence, having apparently pursued me along the Great North Road, across Central London and into the heart of Surrey, felled us both simultaneously and our worlds too became black and white squares.

I would like to record that I beat Alison twice that week-end. I mention it because since her spots have disappeared and her temperature has fallen half a dozen degrees to normal, I have taken a resounding thrashing in every game we have played.

* * *

Like many people, I regarded last summer's world championship in Iceland as a lot of trivial nonsense. Bobby Fischer was only an exhibitionist and his objections apparently at the start of every match were as baseless as they were annoying. And why was everyone getting so aroused over a game which took hours to develop and was anti-climax at the moment of excitement?

But that was last summer, and before the plague found its way into my veins and bones. Now a bluebottle fly buzzing about the bathroom will send me frantic in the front room. I start twitching if people watch me playing and I will not turn up unless my favourite (and only) set is used.

You have to play chess to understand what it feels like. Even thinking one move ahead (my normal limit) involves intricacies of thought far in excess of every day necessity. Planning three moves in advance (my record) must embrace the same number of permutations as a football pool and the chance of winning seems about as remote.

The game's complexities have tormented its players for well over 1500 years. In its present form it appears more restrained than its origins suggest "Check mate" is not, as I had once believed, a cockney utterance of defiance.

It comes from the Persian "Shah mat" and means: the King is dead.

And how does he die? Not from a casual nudge by a gentle bishop, a kick from a horse or a collision with a castle. The gentle bishop started as an archer and the castle derives from the Persian "Rukh" which means "warrior."

Seasoned chess players like myself will know how much it can be part of one's life. I can never now see a group of people standing together without wondering which of them I can take with a sudden sally into the ranks. At the table my mind idly contemplates the possibility of annihilating the milk jug with an adjacent salt cellar. And on the roads overtaking has now become just "taking."

The forward thinking Corporation of King's Lynn is already coping with the mania. They have provided public chessboards at convenient intervals along the length of the High Street. I find these delightfully convenient for practising my manoeuvres — such as the Sporadic Attack, The Specious Defence or the Pusillanimous Retreat.

But no blessing is unmixed. The theory behind the public chessboards is clearly that you cure your addict by taking him off the drug gently.

The public chessboards,

though succulently long, are only seven squares wide. I understand this cunning move but I accept it with regret, for King's Lynn has missed the opportunity of opening East Anglia's first open-air chess centre.

Teams of Boy Scouts could have been recruited to be pawns. Bishops from adjoining dioceses would no doubt have been delighted to stand for hours in a good cause. Sir Roderick Crimblethwaite and Sir Charles Chewthecud would have made excellent knights. And with Sandringham so close, there would never have been a shortage of Royalty to fill the middle ranks.

A touch of reality could have been given if each piece or man were carried off on a stretcher when taken. A little tomato sauce deftly used at the appropriate time would have drawn gladiatorial crowds eager for the kill, challenging even the annual Festival for popularity.

Alas these treats are not to be bestowed. Those of us who spend our lunch hours euphorically hopping from square to square must but dream of the pleasures which are denied us and return to our closeted rooms and wait beside our worn-out chess sets until the delirium has run its course or They Come to Take us Away.

R. B.

THE WEATHER

METEOROLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS AT MORLEY (Taken at 10.00 a.m. B.S.T.)

1973	Thermometer					Sun	Rain
	Bar.	Max.	Min.	Grass	Shade		
	Ins./mb.	Deg.	Deg.	Deg.	Hrs.	Mm.	
May 8	29.92 (1013)	12.2	4.8	2.2	0.7	0.4	
May 9	30.03 (1017)	14.1	8.1	8.0	1.3	5.8	
May 10	29.71 (1006)	—	6.9	6.6	—	—	

Rainfall for month to date 31.8
Mean rainfall for May 43.7

J. G. HILTON, Observer,
Norfolk Agricultural Station.

SUN RISES 5.06 a.m. SETS 8.38 p.m.
MOON RISES 2.40 p.m. SETS 2.58 a.m. (tomorrow)

Full Moon — May 17th
Rises 9.42 p.m.
Sets 5.18 a.m. (18th)
Last Quarter — May 25th
Rises 1.52 a.m.
Sets 12.43 p.m.
New Moon — June 1st
Rises 4.33 a.m.
Sets 10.02 p.m.
First Quarter — June 7th
Rises 12.23 p.m.
Sets 1.04 a.m. (8th)
HIGH WATER

	a.m.	p.m.
Gorleston	5.19	5.00
Lowestoft	5.34	5.35
Southwold	6.29	6.10
King's Lynn	2.42	2.87
Cromer and Sandringham	3.00	2.53

(Tidal predictions—Copyright reserved.)

G GAME

in chiefly by tits which are pampered at bird tables and do not have to spend much time searching for natural food. In this instance the artificial food supply was cut off in the hope that the mischief might cease but apparently the offender had by then become thoroughly taken up with the game and so kept on leaf-pecking in its spare time.

I have not come across a similar case and it would be interesting to hear if any other bluetits are clearing foliage from the vicinity of nest-boxes.
E. A. E.

THE GAME OF KING'S (LYNN)

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