



# Back to Brum

After a ten year break the 4NCL returned to Birmingham, watched by your Editor

The 4NCL embarked on its latest venture in February, taking up residence at a new venue, the Holiday Inn at Birmingham Airport. As one might expect, local amenities were somewhat lacking, with the exception of a muddy, unloved park, unless that is one wanted to catch the shuttle 'bus to the airport terminal with its usual collection of chains. The hotel itself looked from the outside like an old airport terminal which had seen better days, but affairs were somewhat better within. Indeed, the only two complaints were one rather warm playing hall and that the restaurant was too small to accommodate the typical breakfasting chess player. Of course, such folk never rise early, but with the pairings published at 9.30am, by 9 o'clock a steady queue had formed of rumbling stomachs.

Matters were made worse for all those travelling from London by road and rail chaos, so much so that certain critics of the former venue at Hinckley Island, which is at least much nearer to the M1, were heard to be almost pining for a return to it. They will have their wish for a farewell weekend in May, but otherwise the top two divisions will remain in Birmingham. Incidentally, Division Three South is set to move at the end of the season from Daventry to Telford, a venue one might have thought better suited to Division Three North.

Grumbles aside, there was plenty to look forward to in the third weekend of the season, not least the likely title decider between Guildford and Cheddleton, Wood Green's unfortunate loss of sponsor having left the two strongest teams in the league in the same pool.

Guildford were gifted an early lead in round 5 by Cambridge when Daniel Bisby was one of the unfortunate few to default. Averaging 2588, Guildford simply proved far too strong, although Antoaneta Stefanova was a little fortunate to defeat Sabrina Chevannes. In the end the defending champions ran out 7½-½ winners, Maxime Lagarde (not to be confused with his older, stronger compatriot and Guildford team-mate Maxime Vachier-Lagrave) being the unfortunate soul who cost his side any whitewash bonus. Gawain Jones and Romain Edouard scored crushing victories on the top boards.

## R. Edouard - R. Haria Guildford I vs Cambridge *Ragozin Defence*

1 d4 e6 2 c4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3 ♙b4

The Ragozin Defence, a pretty common defence at GM level these days. It's as yet still rarely seen at club level, but should suit anyone who already has the Nimzo in their repertoire. Those interested in finding out more could do far worse than peruse Vladimir Barsky's 2011 work, *The Ragozin Complex: A Guide for White and Black*.

5 cxd5 exd5 6 ♙g5 ♘bd7 7 ♖c1 0-0 8 e3 c5 9 dxc5 ♙a5

At first one might assume that White has gone wrong. After all, Black is suddenly extremely active, but as young Ravi Haria was likely aware, there is a sharp way for White to deal with the pressure.

10 a3! ♙xc3+ 11 ♖xc3! ♘e4 12 b4

Essential (or 12 ♙a1 first). White gives up a whole exchange to maintain his queenside pawn phalanx.

12...♘xc3 13 ♙a1 ♙a4 14 ♖xc3 a5 15 b5



15...h6?!

The encounter which really put this line on the map was Topalov-Carlsen, Wijk aan Zee 2007 (although the stem game was actually back in 1929), where the slightly desperate 15...♘xc5? 16 ♖xc5 ♙f5 17 ♖c1 ♖fc8 18 ♙a1 failed to give Black enough counterplay.

Haria's choice also fails to entirely convince and it's noticeable that the top guys are no longer allowing this line, usually preferring 6...h6 7 ♙h4 c5. Perhaps here Black has to go 15...♖e8. Admittedly after 16 ♘d4 ♘f8 17

♙d3 ♘e6 18 ♘xe6 ♙xe6 19 0-0 it still looks pretty miserable, but at least Black has 19...♖g4 and can hope that one day he'll be able to return the exchange for the c-pawn.

16 ♙f4 ♘f6 17 ♘d4 ♘e4

Activity, at least for a move. Indeed, Edouard must have been very happy around here: he has complete control and the black queen remains badly sidelined.

18 ♖c1 ♙d7 19 f3 ♘xc5?

Carlsen-like desperation, but again Black will come up short. No doubt Haria didn't care for 19...♘g5 20 ♙xg5 (20 c6!? ♖ac8 21 ♖c5 bxc6 22 b6 is a sharper but not necessarily stronger approach) 20...hxg5 21 ♙e2 ♖ac8 22 0-0 ♖c7 23 b6 ♖cc8 24 ♖c3, but Black really had to grovel so.

20 ♖xc5 ♖fc8 21 ♙c7!



The problem for Black is that he is now material down and his queen still doesn't have a square. Moreover, his next won't be enough to save him.

21...b6 22 ♖xd5

The human choice, exploiting the fact that the bishop on c7 is now taboo. The materialistic machine, however, prefers 22 ♖d6!? when 22...♖a7 23 ♙xb6 ♖c1+ 24 ♙f2 ♖d1 looks rather scary, but after, say, 25 g4 ♖e1+ (or 25...♖d2+ 26 ♙g3) 26 ♙g2 ♖b7 27 ♖xd5 ♖xb6 28 ♖xd7 ♖b8 29 ♘f5 White should be winning without too much difficulty.

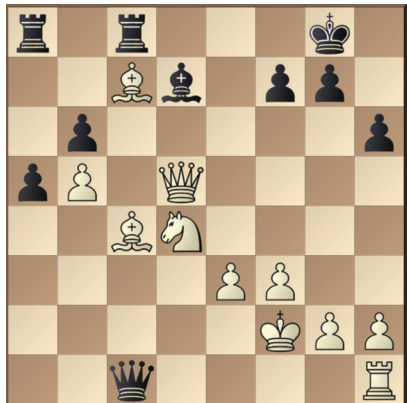
22...♖xa3

The point of Haria's play: his queen has broken free. White does, however, retain a clear advantage.

23 ♙f2 ♖c1?

Possibly underestimating the danger and White's diagonal-moving creatures now come into their own. It's hard to believe that Black

would have survived after 23...♖c5 24 ♗xc5 (24 ♗xd7 ♖xc7 25 ♗g4 ♖e8 26 ♙d3 a4 offers a bit of counterplay) 24...bxc5 25 b6 ♖xc7 26 bxc7 cxd4 27 ♙d3! dxe3+ 28 ♗xe3 ♖a7 29 ♖c1 ♙c8 30 ♗d4, but this was the last chance. **24 ♙c4!**



Material has not been an overwhelming concern for Edouard in this game and he now seizes a decisive attack.

**24...♗xh1**

Going down in flames rather than face a slow-motion death after 24...♗d2+ 25 ♙e2 ♙e6 26 ♗c6.

**25 ♗xf7+ ♗h8 26 ♙e5**

It's going to be mate.

**26...♖g8 27 ♗g6 1-0**



Leading French Grandmaster Romain Edouard built on top-level preparation to score a smooth victory for leaders Guildford.

Cheddleton, averaging a mere 2448, were slightly more restrained, but also highly professional, winning their four whites (victories for David Howell, Vladimir Hamitevici, Aleksandar Colovic and Simon Williams), and holding their four blacks against Barbican II. Moreover, they could easily have won three of those black games, as we'll see in this month's *Find the Winning Moves*.

Significantly outrated, Cheddleton were clearly up against it in the big match, but battled impressively. On top board Matthew Sadler enjoyed an edge throughout against David Howell, but his younger compatriot defended in typically resourceful and

impressive fashion to hold. Howell's teammates Keith Arkell, Aleksandar Colovic and Jonathan Hawkins all held too on boards 2-4, being happy to put up the shutters against Robin van Kampen, Gawain Jones and Romain Edouard respectively, although Colovic was under some pressure at one stage.

Maxime Lagarde too looked to be under pressure on board five as Simon Williams injected some typical dynamism into a King's Indian, but held on as the reigning champions wobbled a little, also facing middlegame difficulties on the next board.

### D.Eggleston-J.P.Le Roux Cheddleton vs Guildford I Caro-Kann Defence

**1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ♘f6 5 ♘xf6+ gxf6**

The Bronstein-Larsen variation, also an old British favourite from before Eggleston was born and the subject of Andrew Martin's latest DVD.

**6 c3 h5!?**

This rather ambitious move was one of two (along with 6...♗d5), which I analysed back in *Dangerous Weapons: The Caro-Kann*. **7 ♙c4**

As ever, Eggleston is well prepared, producing a critical move. My recommendation here was 7...♘d7 8 ♗b3 e6, but the French Grandmaster prefers to continue annexing space.

**7...h4!?** 8 ♗b3 e6 9 ♘f3 ♘d7 10 0-0 ♘b6?!

Whilst I've long had a soft spot for the Bronstein-Larsen, one does have to wonder about employing it in such an important match. Perhaps, though, Guildford had simply underestimated Cheddleton. At this stage it is tempting to flick in 10...h3 when 11 g3 b5!? 12 ♙e2 ♘b6 13 ♗c2 ♙b7 14 b3 ♙e7 15 c4 was Fargere-Prie, Caen 2011, and now Le Roux's colleague might have tried 15...bxc4 16 bxc4 c5 17 ♖d1 ♗c7 with a complex fight ahead, whether or not White tries 18 d5!?.

**11 ♙e2 ♗c7 12 c4**



The opening has not gone well for Black. White's king is safe enough and he enjoys a pleasant central space advantage. Ideas of

both d4-d5 and a2-a4-a5 are on the agenda and even Black's attempt to fight for a share of the centre doesn't fully convince.

**12...e5 13 dxe5 fxe5 14 a4!**

Rather than play slowly and potentially weaken with 14 h3, the Durham IM continues to battle for the initiative in a highly classical vein.

**14...h3 15 g3 ♙g4 16 ♙g5**

Not the only good move (16 ♖e1 arguably being more precise), but Eggleston was understandably keen to trap the black king in the centre.

**16...♖h5 17 ♗e3!?** ♘d7

Yes, there is a tactic here, but is 17...♘xc4?! 18 ♙xc4 ♙xf3 19 ♗xf3 ♖xg5 really a pawn you would want to snaffle? After 20 ♖ad1 Black's light squares and king position are shot, while White has the simple plan of doubling rooks.

**18 ♖ad1 f6?**

Despite playing some pretty logical and scary-looking moves, White has drifted a little and here 18...♙c5 19 ♗d2 f6 wouldn't have been too terrible for Black, as shown by, for instance, 20 ♙e3 0-0-0 21 b4 ♙xe3 22 ♗xe3 ♗b6. Instead, Le Roux opted to roll the dice; a decision he might well have come to regret.



**19 ♖xd7!?**

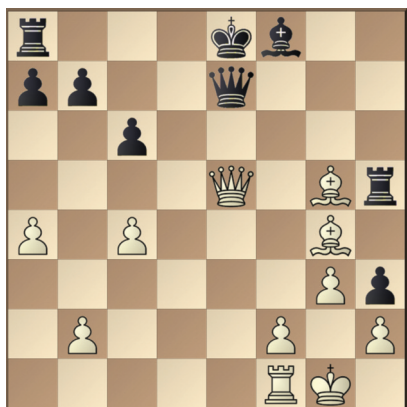
Tempting, but 19 ♘xe5! would have been more clinical. The main point is revealed after 19...♘xe5 (or 19...♗xe5 20 ♙xg4 ♖xg5 21 ♙xd7+ ♗f7 22 ♗b3 with something fast approaching a massacre) 20 ♙xf6 ♙xe2 (20...♗f7 gives White a few options, including 21 ♖fe1! and the simple 21 ♙xe5 ♖xe5 22 ♗f4+ ♙f5 23 ♙d3 ♗d7 24 g4, regaining the piece) 21 ♗xe2 when 21...♖f5 is the only move to save both rook and knight, but then 22 ♖fe1 ♖xf6 23 ♗h5+ ♗f7 24 ♖xe5+ ♙e7 25 ♗xh3 gives White three pawns and a huge ongoing initiative for the piece.

I should also mention the hard-to-spot but nifty 19 ♗e4! f5 20 ♗e3, simply weakening Black's centre and if then 20...♙c5 21 ♖xd7 ♙xe3 22 ♗xc7 ♙xg5 23 ♘xg5 ♙xe2 24 ♖e1 ♖xg5 25 ♖xe2, with a clear plus in the resulting double-rook endgame.

**19...♗xd7 20 ♘xe5?**

Surrounded by a myriad of variations, Eggleston loses his way. Correct was the calm 20 ♙xf6!, and if 20...♗f5 (20...♙h6 21 ♘g5! is another important point, and if

21...♙xg5? 22 ♖xe5+ ♗f8 23 ♙xg4 ♖xg4  
 24 ♖e7+ ♗g8 25 ♖g7# or 21...♞xg5 22  
 ♙xg5 ♙xg5 23 ♖xg5 ♙xe2 24 ♖xe5+ ♖e7  
 25 ♖xe7+ ♗xe7 26 ♞e1) 21 ♙xe5 0-0-0 22  
 ♗d4 ♖g6 23 ♙xg4+ ♖xg4 24 ♙f6 ♙h6 25  
 f4 with more than enough for the exchange.  
**20...fxe5 21 ♖xe5+ ♖e7 22 ♙xg4**



The point of White's flashy 20th move, but what both players had missed is that the game doesn't now have to end in an attractive perpetual.  
**22...♖xe5**

Indeed, 22...♙xg5! would have left Eggleston red-faced. He must have intended 23 ♙h5+, but after 23...♗d8 24 ♞d1+ ♗c8 it's very hard to believe that White has anything like enough for a rook, especially as Black will untangle after 25 ♙g4+ ♞xg4! 26 ♖f5+ ♗c7 27 ♖xg4 ♞d8.

**23 ♙xh5+ ♗d7 24 ♙g4+ ♗e8 25 ♙h5+ 1/2-1/2**



David Eggleston is never scared of facing grandmaster opposition and was swift to attack against French GM Jean-Pierre le Roux.

Guildford were also pretty fortunate on board seven where Vladimir Hamitevici squandered a large advantage just before the time control against Antoaneta Stefanova. And so the top seven boards were all drawn,

leaving the only decisive game to occur on bottom board and again it was an encounter not without drama.

### F.Steil-Antoni-M.Hebden Cheddleton vs Guildford I Vienna Game

**1 e4 e5 2 ♗f3 ♗c6 3 ♗c3 ♗f6 4 g3 d5  
 5 exd5 ♗xd5 6 ♙g2 ♗xc3 7 bxc3 ♙c5  
 8 0-0 0-0 9 d3 ♙b6 10 ♞e1 ♖f6!?**

Rather than move the king's rook to e8, as ever Hebden has his own take on the position. His games really are a model for how to handle 1 e4 e5 when White avoids the Lopez and Scotch.

**11 ♙d2 ♞e8 12 ♖e2 h6 13 h3**



Outrated by 400 points, the Luxembourg WIM appears a little tentative at this stage.

**13...♙d7 14 ♗h2 ♞ad8 15 ♗g4 ♖g6  
 16 ♗h2 h5!**

Mark Hebden rarely needs a second invitation to seize the initiative.

**17 ♙e4?**

Steil-Antoni doesn't want to see Black expanding, but objectively nothing too terrible would have occurred after 17 ♗e3.

**17...♖e6 18 ♗h6+!?**

This shocking move was seemingly the point of White's last. It may well have surprised even such an experienced adversary as the Leicester Grandmaster, but how is White going to get past the defensive bulwark on h6?

**18...gxh6 19 ♖xh5 ♗g7 20 g4 ♞h8 21 f4**



Kudos to Steil-Antoni for throwing everything at Hebden, desperately trying to open lines for her rooks and bishops.

**21...♗e7!**

Hebden wisely offers a pawn back to cover f5 and add a defender to the kingside.

**22 fxe5**

Unfortunately for White, there's no good way to crash through after 22 f5 ♖f6.

**22...♙c6**

Perhaps 22...♗g6!? was even stronger, keeping the option to fight back in the centre with 23 ♙f5 ♖e7 24 d4 c5.

**23 ♙f5!?**

White was clearly not intimidated by this stage and wants to keep setting problems, rather than hope that the strong centre might offer a bit of compensation after 23 ♙xc6 ♗xc6 24 d4.

**23...♖d5**

Hardly terrible as the queen can go back, but 23...♗xf5! 24 gxf5 ♖d5 was the way to do things. White can try 25 ♖g4+ (the black king runs away after 25 f6+ ♗f8 26 ♙xh6+ ♗e8, and if 27 ♖g5 ♞xh6!) 25...♗h7 26 ♙xh6, but after 26...♞d8 27 ♙g5 ♞g7 28 d4 ♖f3 Black's extra piece should eventually prevail.

**24 ♙e4**



**24...♖xe4??**

An amazing decision, but Hebden must have thought he was obtaining rook, bishop and knight for the queen, while ending White's attack. However, he should have repeated to emphasise control and then gone 24...♖e6 25 ♙f5 ♗xf5.

**25 dxe4?**

White fails to realise that it is now only her king which is in danger. There was only one good continuation, but it would have been strong, namely 25 ♞e4! ♙xe4 26 ♖h4!. As so often a backwards queen move proves the killer and Hebden must have missed this one. Black's problem is that 26...♗g6? 27 ♖f6+ either wins his rook on d8 or mates with 27...♗h7 28 ♖xf7#. Clearly 26...♞de8 27 ♖f6+ ♗g8 28 dxe4 and 26...♞d7 27 ♖f6+ ♗g8 28 e6 are far from optimal either, so 26...♙c5 might be tried, but after 27 ♖f6+ ♗g8 28 ♙xh6 ♞xh6 29 ♖xh6 ♙d5 30 d4 ♙a3 Black's three minor pieces are much, much less effective than they will be in the game.

**25...♞xd2+ 26 ♗h1 ♗g6**

Black actually only has three minor pieces for the queen, but his attack is overwhelming. Just note the difference in coordination between the two sides' forces, especially as 27 ♖ad1? would be met by 27...♗xe4+.

**27 ♖f5 ♗f2 28 ♖h5 ♗d8 29 g5 ♗dd2 0-1**

Guildford were undoubtedly fortunate to ultimately prevail, resourceful though the rearguard action fought by Lagarde, Le Roux and Stefanova was. Whether they underestimated the ever-dangerous Cheddleton or simply weren't ready for such a big match so early in the season isn't clear, but what is clear is that yet again a large rating advantage (over 100 points a board on average) didn't make for a routine victory in the 4NCL.

Elsewhere in Pool B, Oxford continued their fine season, seeing off the much higher-rated Grantham Sharks 5-3, despite Peter Roberson winning a neat miniature.



Luxembourg WIM Fiona Steil-Antoni battled gamely against Mark Hebden and might even have pulled off a major shock.

**P.Roberson-M.Rose**  
Grantham Sharks vs Oxford  
*c3 Sicilian*

**1 e4 c5 2 c3 ♗f6 3 e5 ♗d5 4 ♗f3 ♗c6 5 ♗c4 ♗b6 6 ♗b3 d6**

A solid, fairly sensible alternative to the crazy complexities of 6...c4!? 7 ♗c2 ♖c7 8 ♖e2 g5.

**7 exd6 e6 8 d4 cxd4 9 cxd4 ♗xd6 10 0-0 11 ♗c3**

Black has avoided a theoretical duel, but this is a slightly more pleasant IQP position for White, since the second player would prefer his king's knight back on f6 and, indeed, Rose now loses further time with the piece.

**11...♗d5 12 ♖e1 ♗e7?!**

This feels like one luxury too many. 12...b6 13 ♗xd5 exd5 was preferred in Kasparov-Polgar, Geneva (rapid) 1996, when 14 ♗g5 would have kept up the pressure and left White with a nibble, but perhaps Black might reinforce his control of d5 while adding a defender to the kingside with 12...♗ce7!?

**13 ♗c2**

Here comes the classic queen and bishop battery, except that Rose strangely now elects to accept a queenside weakness without waiting for ♖d3.

**13...g6?! 14 ♗h6 ♖e8 15 ♖e2 ♖b6!?**



Black's kingside is a medium-term worry and his development hasn't been ideal, so it is hard to be too critical of this decision to go pawn-grabbing and try to change the nature of the struggle.

**16 ♗b3 ♗xc3?!**

Except that this is inconsistent. Having said 'A', Black really had to say 'B' and go in for 16...♗xd4! 17 ♗xd4 (17 ♖e5 ♗xf3+ 18 gxf3 f6 just about defends) 17...♖xd4 18 ♗xd5! (18 ♗xd5 exd5 19 ♗a4!? is clever and tempting, but after 19...♗g4 20 ♖e5 ♖xe5 21 ♖xe5 ♗e6 22 ♗xe8 ♖xe8 White will have to display fairly good technique to realise his extra exchange) 18...exd5 19 ♖ad1 ♖h4 20 ♗xd5 ♗e6. I can quite imagine why Rose didn't like either the exchange-down endgame or this position and now 21 ♗f4!?, but after 21...♗xd5 22 g3 ♖h5! 23 ♖xh5 gxh5 24 ♖xd5 ♗f6 such a determined fighter as he might have managed to save the game after a long defence.

**17 bxc3 ♗d7**

Finally Black has developed all his minor pieces, but that is the end of the good news for him.

**18 d5!**

The classic breakthrough in such structures.

**18...exd5 19 ♗xd5 ♖c5?!**

Preventing ♖c4, but insufficient to prevent White's initiative from taking on frightening proportions. It wasn't at all easy to cover f7, but Black might have tried the grim 19...♗f6 20 ♖c4 ♖xe1+ 21 ♖xe1 ♗d8 and asked White if he could find a killer breakthrough.

**20 ♖ad1**



Just compare the difference in activity between the two sides, not to mention the gulf in terms of king safety. Rose now spotted the threat to f7, but failed to entirely appreciate the full force of the danger.

**20...♖ad8? 21 ♗xf7+! ♗xf7 22 ♖xd7 1-0**

Olé. It's mate if 22...♖xd7 23 ♖e6# and there's absolutely nothing for Black to do.

Oxford have long done well against the top teams; beating similarly-rated sides has long been their Achilles' heel. In round 6, however, they edged out Hackney 4½-3½, Justin Tan winning well after Bob Eames failed to develop his queenside.

**R.Eames-J.Tan**  
Hackney vs Oxford  
*Scotch Game*

**1 e4 e5 2 d4 exd4 3 ♗f3!? ♗c6**

3...♗b4+ 4 c3 dxc3 5 ♗xc3 might well offer decent compensation, so the Australian teenager prefers to transpose to standard lines.

**4 ♗xd4 ♗b4+!?**

A tricky little move, played largely to avoid the complex main lines of the Scotch, not least 4...♗f6 5 ♗xc6 bxc6 6 e5 ♖e7 7 ♖e2 ♗d5 8 c4.

**5 c3 ♗c5 6 ♗c4 ♗f6 7 ♗xc6 bxc6 8 e5 ♖e7 9 ♖e2 ♗d5**

White's 6th move was perhaps not quite the most precise, but the play has still been pretty sensible thus far. Now Eames should just have castled, but was instead seduced by a gain of space.

**10 b4?! ♗b6**

It's not totally impossible that as talented a tactician as Bob Eames had been busy examining 10...♗xb4!? 11 cxb4 (11 0-0 may be a better way to gambit) 11...♗d4 12 ♗b2 ♖xb4+ 13 ♗d2 ♖xb2 14 ♖b1 ♖c2 15 0-0, which packs some practical danger, although that may be all. Once again, though, Tan wisely sidesteps all the complications.

**11 a4 a5 12 b5 ♗b7**



The engines don't sense too much wrong with White's play, but he must now tread pretty carefully, trailing in development and with two potentially powerful bishops trained on his kingside.

**13 0-0 0-0**

13...♖e6!? 14 ♖d1 (and not 14 ♕a3? cxb5 15 axb5 ♘f4) 14...0-0 would have been a decent way to sidestep any potential danger from ♕a3 over the next couple of moves.

**14 ♖h1 ♖h8**

Both sides are keen to involve their f-pawns in the fray as the battle really begins to heat up.

**15 ♕d3?!**

Far too slow, especially as White will never get to attack h7. 15 ♕a3! was a better try, and if 15...c5 (or 15...♕c5 16 ♕xd5 cxd5 17 ♕xc5 ♖xc5 18 ♘d2) 16 f4 f6 17 ♖e4, lighting the touch paper while hoping to leave Black with a Radjabov-like bishop on b6 (see page 10 of the March *CHESS*).

**15...♖h4**

Prophylaxis against ideas of ♖h5 and ♖e4, although 15...♗ae8 16 f4 d6 would also have been strong.

**16 f4?! f6!**



Thematically undermining the cramping pawn wedge. White is already in some trouble (his last move was simply too ambitious), and even continuing to go after h7 won't save Eames.

**17 ♗f3? cxb5!**

Simple and strong (the point is 18 ♗h3? ♖xh3 19 gxh3 ♘xf4+), and now both black bishops are well and truly playing.

**18 ♕e4 fxe5 19 g3**

This doesn't help matters, but it's already

hard to offer any good advice with 19 ♗h3 failing to the simple 19...♘xf4 20 ♕xf4 ♖xf4.

**19...♖h5 20 axb5 exf4! 21 c4**

White has spied a pin, but Tan has matters fully under control.

**21...♗ae8 22 cxd5 ♗xe4!**

It's fitting that White should be undone along the long diagonal.

**23 ♗xf4**



I hope you saw this one coming when nodding in approval at Black's last, but once again Tan undoubtedly had. Black might now go 23...♗f5, but he actually has something somewhat more pretty.

**23...♗exf4! 24 ♖xh5 ♗f5**

The game is up. Just look at White's still sleeping queenside pieces. Indeed, even returning the queen isn't going to prove anything like sufficient to tame those mighty bishops.

**25 ♖xf5 ♗xf5 26 ♘c3 ♗xd5! 0-1**

In contrast to Oxford, who will make an overdue appearance in the championship pool, e2e4.org have endured a miserable season, in the February weekend only drawing with Hackney before being crushed 6-2 by the Sharks. That means that e2e4.org will play in the relegation pool, although whether they will be joined their by Grantham Sharks or Cambridge will only be decided when those two teams meet in round 7. Another team which has struggled has been Barbican II, although at least in round 6 they didn't lose to Cambridge, drawing the match after Kanwal Bhatia's persistence paid off as she outplayed Carl Spencer in a complex late middlegame to save the day for the London side.

## Pool A

Whilst Cheddleton had looked like Guildford's only real challengers, the second highest-rated team at Birmingham Airport was actually Guildford II. Yes, Guildford supremo Roger Emerson is not a man to spare any expense in his pursuit of the league, not to mention support of both leading and up-and-coming English and French players. Guildford II sure enough brushed aside South Wales Dragons 5½-2½, despite Nick Pert's over optimism being punished by James Cobb on top board. The next day Guildford II faced

a much stiffer test in the shape of Barbican, but prevailed 5-3 thanks to wins for Yang-Fan Zhou, David Smerdon and Sophie Milliet.

Guildford II sit proudly at the top of Pool A with the only team they've lost to, White Rose, enduring a miserable return to Birmingham. The Yorkshire side have finished third for three of the past four seasons, but will do well to repeat the feat having thrown away promising situations not once but twice in the February weekend. The first disaster came against perennial underachievers Blackthorne Russia, for whom Adam Hunt scored a fine win on top board against Peter Wells, while Laurence Webb played well to win an extremely complex battle against Colin McNab.

White Rose hit back through Sue Marorora and James Adair, who displayed fine preparation and then calmness against Danny Gormally, before seeing their captain miss a good chance in the first time scramble, leaving the match to come down to a tense second time scramble between Richard Bates and Iain Gourlay. Bates kept his nerve the better, giving Blackthorne the match 4½-3½ and a ticket away from the relegation pool.

The next day Gourlay was fittingly the hero, grinding down Neil McDonald to save the match for White Rose against Wood Green after Matthew Webb had thrown away a near-winning endgame with a horrible blunder. The match was also notable for being rather painful for the staff of this magazine. Our Executive Editor blundered a pawn and effectively the game against Colin McNab, while your scribe was finished off by a lovely shot from John Shaw.

## R.Palliser-J.Shaw White Rose vs Wood Green *Sicilian Scheveningen*

**1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 e6**

Already a surprise. John used to be a leading exponent of the Kalashnikov, although it's by no means impossible that he's been bunny-bashing galore with the Taimanov in the Glasgow League.

**3 ♘c3 ♘c6 4 d4 cxd4 5 ♘xd4 ♘f6 6 ♕e2**

Played after some thought. It's always hard to reject such a principled choice as 6 ♘db5, not to mention 6 ♘xc6 bxc6 7 e5 ♘d5 8 ♘e4 on which I couldn't quite recall a critical line in the few minutes I gave myself.

**6...d6**

The ever-dependable Scheveningen, a prudent choice and one that sidestepped my hopes of 6...♕b4 7 0-0! ♕xc3 8 bxc3 ♘xe4 9 ♕d3, which is quite a dangerous double pawn sacrifice as shown by another game from this season's 4NCL, Collins-Merry (see pp.22-23 of the January 2015 *CHESS*).

**7 ♕e3 ♕e7 8 0-0 ♕d7 9 f4 ♘xd4 10 ♖xd4**

Played with the idea of my next in mind,

but had I not been confusing half-remembered lines against Black's slightly old-fashioned approach to the Schevy, I might well have preferred the more natural 10  $\text{♙xd4}$   $\text{♜c6}$  11  $\text{♙d3}$  0-0 12  $\text{♞e2}$ .

**10...♜c6 11 b4!?**



**11...b6**

Giving the bishop an escape square and so sidestepping 11...0-0 12 b5  $\text{♙d7}?! (12...♜e8$  13 e5 dxe5 14 fxe5  $\text{♞xd4}$  15  $\text{♙xd4}$   $\text{♜d7}$  16  $\text{♜e4}$   $\text{♞c8}$  improved in Loskutov-Alekseev, Sochi 2004, although after 17 c3 I'd slightly prefer to take White, overextended though he might land up being) 13 e5 dxe5 14 fxe5  $\text{♜e8}?$  15  $\text{♞ad1}$ , which rather embarrasses Black's huddle of pieces.

**12 ♜f3?!**

Misplacing the bishop and a further sign of some typically sloppy Sunday morning thinking. 12 a4 would have been much more consistent, and after 12...0-0 13 a5 White is pressing on the queenside, not the kingside as usual, although Black is typically solid after 13...e5!?

**12...0-0 13 ♞ad1**

Switching focus. Of course, 13 e5?! doesn't convince tactically due to 13... $\text{♙xf3}$ , and if 14 exf6?  $\text{♙xf6}$ .

**13...♞c8 14 ♜f2 ♞c7**



Scottish GM John Shaw followed in Frank Marshall's footsteps by uncorking a stunning sacrifice on the g3-square against your editor.

John is content to make all the useful moves, although had he wanted to demonstrate full equality he might have preferred 14...d5, when a draw may result in the event of 15 exd5  $\text{♜xd5}$  16  $\text{♜xd5}$   $\text{♙xd5}$  17  $\text{♙xd5}$   $\text{♞xd5}$  18  $\text{♞xd5}$  exd5 19 a3  $\text{♞fd8}$  20  $\text{♞d2}$ .

**15 a3 ♞fd8 16 ♞e3 ♜b7!?**

My last three moves have been designed to shore up some of the weaknesses created by b2-b4. Here too I half expected 16...d5 17 exd5  $\text{♜xd5}$  18  $\text{♜xd5}$   $\text{♙xd5}$  19  $\text{♙xd5}$   $\text{♞xd5}$  20  $\text{♞xd5}$  exd5 when only Black might claim a small edge, but John preferred something sharper.

**17 ♜b5 ♞xc2!?**

A risky decision, rather than the solid 17... $\text{♞b8}$ , if one which swiftly turns out well.



**18 e5?**

A very tempting move, of course, but rather than punish Black's last, it was essential to keep the rush of blood under control. Moreover, I saw 18  $\text{♜xa7}$   $\text{♞c3}$  19  $\text{♞c1}$  when Black has to go in for 19... $\text{♞xe3}$  20  $\text{♞xc2}$   $\text{♞xa3}$  21  $\text{♜b5}$   $\text{♞aa8}$  22  $\text{♙xb6}$ , but he doesn't seem to be able to claim anything more than rough equality in the resulting near ending.

**18...♜d5!**

The Scottish Grandmaster reacts well. I expected this, although part of me was hoping for 18... $\text{♙xf3}?$  19 exf6!  $\text{♙xd1}$  20 fxe7  $\text{♞d7}$  21  $\text{♜d4}$   $\text{♞a4}$  22 f5 with excellent compensation for the exchange.

**19 ♙xd5 ♙xd5 20 exd6 ♜f8**

Black spots 20... $\text{♙xd6}?$  21  $\text{♜xd6}$ , and if 21... $\text{♙xd6}?$  22  $\text{♞c1}$ , and so drops the bishop back. However, the silicon beast prefers the more active 20... $\text{♙f6}!$ , and if 21  $\text{♜xa7}$  (even 21  $\text{♞c1}$   $\text{♞a4}$  22  $\text{♜c7}$  could easily worry a carbon-based life form) 21... $\text{♞c3}$  22  $\text{♞xb6}$   $\text{♞e4}$  23  $\text{♞xd5}$   $\text{♞xd5}$  24  $\text{♜b5}$   $\text{♞c4}$ , which I thought was just rather unclear, but White may well, indeed, not have enough with his kingside still quite shaky.

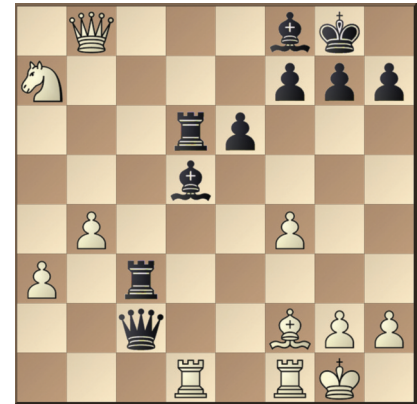
**21 ♜xa7**

The point of Black's play is revealed by 21 d7?  $\text{♞d7}$  22  $\text{♞c1}$   $\text{♞g6}$ . Neither was I especially taken by 21  $\text{♞c1}$   $\text{♞g6}$  22  $\text{♞g3}$   $\text{♞xc1}$  23  $\text{♞c1}$   $\text{♞e4}$ , hence the further roll of the dice.

**21...♞c3 22 ♞xb6!?**

Objectively it seems that White should try the horribly grovelly 22  $\text{♞e1}$ , but having said 'A', it's hard not to say 'B' and target Black's back rank.

**22...♞xd6 23 ♞b8**



**23...♞d3!?**

John has calculated extremely well over the past few moves and was now determined to preserve his mighty bishop. However, 23... $\text{♞e4}$  24  $\text{♞xd5}$   $\text{♞xd5}$  would have been much more clear than both of us realised as the flags started to rise. Indeed, Black is basically just winning here, as shown by 25 b5 (or 25  $\text{♙c5}?$   $\text{♞xc5}$  26 bxc5  $\text{♞d2}$ ) 25... $\text{♞e2}$  26 h3  $\text{♞d1}$  27  $\text{♞xd1}$   $\text{♞xd1}+$  28  $\text{♙h2}$   $\text{♞c1}$  29 b6  $\text{♞h1}+$  30  $\text{♙g3}$   $\text{♞c3}+$  31  $\text{♙h4}$   $\text{♞xg2}$ .

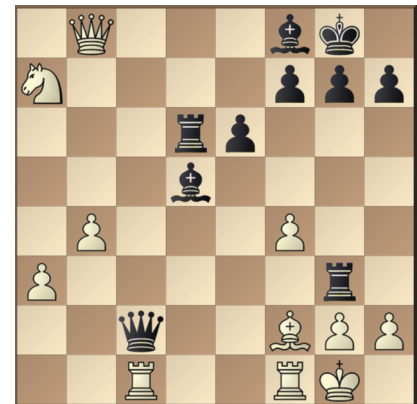
Most certainly, though, Black should be looking for a decisive counterattack. Indeed, I was hoping for 23... $\text{♞xa3}?$  24 f5 when anything might have happened in the resulting chaos.

**24 ♞c1**

I'm not entirely sure how to annotate this move, so won't even try. It's basically a 50-50 shot as it does allow a beautiful finish and one which is much more tricky to spot than 24  $\text{♜c8}?$   $\text{♞d8}$ . During the game we both thought that 24  $\text{♞xd3}!$ ?  $\text{♞xd3}$  25  $\text{♙c5}$   $\text{♙c4}?$  was pretty much the end, but actually 26  $\text{♞e1}$   $\text{♞c3}$  27  $\text{♞f1}!$  is a fiendish resource which it required a post-mortem to unearth.

Your intuition has not failed you, though, if you feel that Black must surely be winning here. Indeed, he is after 25... $\text{♞e2}!$  26  $\text{♞f2}$   $\text{♞d1}+$  27  $\text{♞f1}$   $\text{♞g4}$  28  $\text{♞f2}$   $\text{♙xg2}!$ , with the points 29  $\text{♙xd6}$   $\text{♙d5}+$  30  $\text{♙f1}$   $\text{♞d1}+$  and 29  $\text{♞xg2}$   $\text{♞d1}+$  30  $\text{♙f2}$   $\text{♞d8}$  31  $\text{♞e5}$   $\text{♙xc5}+$  32  $\text{♞xc5}$  h5!, which is a wonderfully calm move and one well worth visualising (or setting up on a board). White is a whole piece ahead, but has no defence to Black's far better coordinated force.

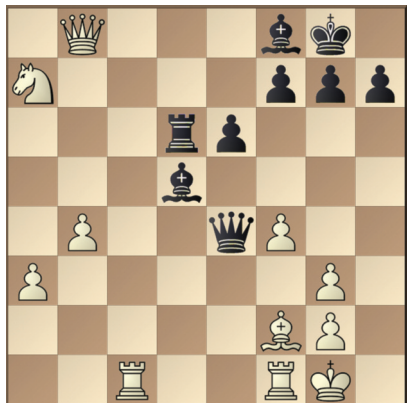
**24...♞g3!!**



Sadly this Marshall-esque shot was not

showered with gold coins. Of course, 25 ♖xc2 ♜xg2+ is mate next move and 25 ♙xg3 ♞xg2 is immediately.

**25 hxg3 ♞e4 0-1**



A picturesque final position. The checks quickly run out after 26 ♞xf8+ ♔xf8 27 ♜c8+ ♔e7 28 ♜c7+ ♔e8 29 ♜c8+ ♔d7, so I had no option but to congratulate John on a beautiful combination.

The day before Wood Green had been forced to default a board against the AD's, but partly aided by a crushing early victory for

captain Andrew Greet, prevailed by the unusual score of 4½-3 (5-3 in normal money, but in the 4NCL one is penalised an extra half-point for a default). Inspired by a late rearguard action there, the AD's fought much harder the next day, drawing the top seven boards against Blackthorne. Moreover, on board 8 Jana Bellin appeared to be having the better of things against Rita Atkins, but was bluffed to a certain extent and then butchered by her opponent's dominant knight-pair.

A quick glance at the table suggests that both the AD's and Warwickshire Select will do well to retain their first division status. The latter found Barbican too strong to cope with, going down 5½-2½, before losing a real four-pointer against the Dragons. The in-form James Cobb crushed Geoff Lawton to get the Welsh side off to a good start and they just about managed to hold tight elsewhere, prevailing 5-2½.

### Nationwide

Elsewhere the 4NCL continues to go from strength to strength. On top of the 32 teams of 8 players battling it out in the top two divisions in Birmingham, 44 sides of six turned up for Division Three South in

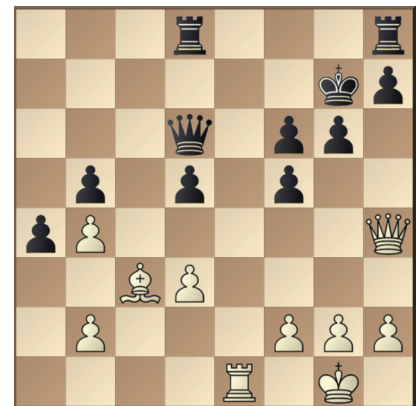


Wood Green's captain, IM Andrew Greet, spared them any potential embarrassment with his quick win cancelling out the point given away by defaulting a board against the AD's.

Daventry, while Division Three North is finally something of which the board can be proud: 16 teams fighting it out at the oldest and perhaps best of the three hotels used by the 4NCL in February, the Palace Hotel in Buxton.

Divisions Three South and North will now merge for their last five rounds (for the final time – from the 2015/16 season they will be entirely independent events), but before that the latter had witnessed a bizarre fingerfehler. Normally a fingerfehler involves picking up (or touching) a piece next to the one you intended, or pushing a pawn one square not two, but they are extremely rare when involving a capture and with just the one capturing option available.

### J.Yee-R.Cowan 4NCL, Buxton 2015



Black's penultimate move (26...♗e7-d5?, allowing 27 ♗xd5 cxd5) has given White a sudden chance. Unsurprisingly Yee slumped into deep thought, no doubt checking that it really was his lucky day...

**28 ♙e5?? 0-1**

...or wasn't to be. The text, simply losing a piece, is completely inexplicable and must have been absolutely horrible for Yee, who now had to resign, whereas 28 ♙xf6+! ♞xf6 29 ♜e7+ ♞xe7 (29...♞f7 is an attempt to play on, but after 30 ♞d4+ ♔f8 31 ♜xf7+ ♔xf7 32 ♞a7+ ♔f6 33 ♞b6+ ♔g5 34 ♞xb5 White should never lose with such an active queen, and might even win) 30 ♞xe7+ ♔h6 31 ♞h4+ ♔g7 32 ♞e7+ would have forced an immediate draw.

4NCL 2014/15 - Pool A							
	Team	P	W	D	L	GP	Pts
1	Guildford II	6	6	0	0	29½	<b>10</b>
2	Blackthorne Russia	6	5	0	1	28	<b>10</b>
3	Barbican 4NCL I	6	4	1	1	29	<b>9</b>
4	White Rose	6	3	2	1	28½	<b>8</b>
5	Wood Green	6	2	1	3	21½	<b>5</b>
6	South Wales Dragons	6	2	0	4	17½	<b>4</b>
7	The AD's	6	1	0	5	18½	<b>2</b>
8	Warwickshire Select	6	0	0	6	16½	<b>0</b>

4NCL 2014/15 - Pool B							
	Team	P	W	D	L	GP	Pts
1	Guildford I	6	6	0	0	<b>38</b>	<b>12</b>
2	Cheddleton	6	5	0	1	<b>29½</b>	<b>10</b>
3	Oxford	6	4	0	2	<b>25½</b>	<b>8</b>
4	Grantham Sharks	6	3	0	3	<b>26</b>	<b>6</b>
5	Cambridge University	6	2	1	3	<b>20</b>	<b>5</b>
6	e2e4.org.uk	6	1	1	4	<b>19</b>	<b>3</b>
7	Barbican 4NCL II	6	1	1	4	<b>18</b>	<b>3</b>
8	Hackney	6	0	1	0	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>