

THE GIFT OF CHESS

Dedicated to my parents, Howard James (1919-1998) and Betty James née Smith (1921-2010)

It was fifty years ago, almost to the day as I write this, Christmas 1960. I was ten years old. Amongst the other presents on the Christmas tree was a plastic chess set, red and white pieces in a blue case.

What possessed them to think that chess would interest me I'll never know. There was no chess background in the family. My father just about knew how the pieces moved while my mother knew nothing at all.

You see, I was a strange, silent, sad and solitary child. At home my behaviour infuriated my father and puzzled my mother, while at school I never spoke to teachers and rarely to children, mostly standing on my own in the playground, forever the target of bullies.

Today, children like this, and I've met and taught several, are diagnosed on the autistic spectrum, but in my day there was no such diagnosis and no understanding.

Anyway, my father soon taught me the moves, with the help of the instructions that came with the set, and we started to play. Soon I could beat him, after which he wouldn't play me again.

That July I reached the age of 11 so it was time to move to a new school. I was fortunate enough to have won a scholarship to a school in London, and my journey every morning and afternoon involved two train rides. On the first day I took my chess set with me and, for the first time, played a game against another boy. He took all my pieces and mated me with two rooks.

Throughout my first few years there my chess set acted as a communication tool, through which I was able to relate to other children. I played on the train to and from school and still remember the thrill when, towards the end of my first year there, I beat a boy in the year above me for the first time.

At that point my parents, seeing my growing addiction to chess, decided I needed more help and bought me a chess book, which was to be the first of many. It's on the desk beside me now as I write this.

Through that book I learnt about chess notation, openings, middle-games and endings, and about the world champions of the past. Chess was placed in context. While continuing to play at school I spent a lot of my spare time playing games against myself and writing down the moves in an exercise book, which, sadly, I didn't keep. I also spent a lot of time in libraries, borrowing every chess book from every library within reach.

For my Christmas present in 1964 I received a year's subscription to the British Chess Magazine. Every month I'd play through all the games, and, on the first of the month, wait eagerly for the next issue. By the end of 1965, five years after learning the moves, I could beat everyone in my form at school so my parents thought I should move on. The London Junior Chess Championships took place (as they still do) during the Christmas holidays, so I was entered for my first tournament. I did quite well in the Under 16 Reserve section, so my mother made enquiries about chess clubs in the area, and got my father to take me along to Richmond & Twickenham Chess Club, which at that time met in a dingy room above a pub. 44 years on, I'm still a member and play regularly for their teams.

In college I got involved in chess administration, and, on leaving college, I had the chance to start teaching chess to children, and, a few years later, to write about chess. But that's another story, which I'll tell another time.

I spent 15 years helping run chess clubs for young children in primary and prep schools. It soon became clear to me that, if I had learnt the moves at the age of 7 and been thrown straight into a semi-competitive environment, there's no way I would have maintained an interest in the game.

The only children who do well are those who receive significant help at home, and my parents would have been unable to give me that.

In these days, where everything has to be faster, louder and brighter than ever before, we are pushing children too fast too soon, in chess as well as in many other ways. If you start something slightly too late you can catch up, but if you start something slightly too early you can be put off for life.

I've always been painfully aware that chess not only changed but probably saved my life. Without the outlet that chess provided as a way to meet and make friends with like-minded people I would have found the world very difficult to cope with.

So that's why I've devoted my life to teaching chess to young children, and why I've spent 10 years (so far) developing this website. Nothing other than chess would - or could - have had the same effect on me. I'm passionate about ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn chess, but also about ensuring that every child, and every parent and teacher, has access to coaching materials and advice to enable them to get the most out of the game.

Remember, it was 8 months after learning the moves that I first played another kid, and 5 years before I first played in a tournament. Is it really best to do what we're doing now: teaching children the moves one week and putting them in a tournament the next week?