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Chess

18 - Games - Games

The Lew is Chessmen

The most famous chessmen in the world are the Lewis chessmen, a group of 78 chess pieces that were found along with some other artefacts on a beach in Uig in Lewis in 1831. They were found buried in a sand dune, after being uncovered by a grazing cow. The cow's owner sold the pieces, and they were later sold on to their present owners, the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland. Six of the Lewis chessmen are on loan at the new Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway on Lewis.

Archaeologists believe that the chessmen were made in Scandinavia, perhaps in Norway, around 1150 AD.

Nothing is known for certain about how they came to be in Lewis, which was a part of the kingdom of Norway in the 12th century. It is thought that they might have been buried for safe keeping by a merchant, who may have been travelling from Norway to Ireland.

The 78 chess pieces make up four sets, with some missing pieces. They were found along with 14 draughts men and a buckle. The pieces are elaboratively carved and made of walrus ivory and whales tooth. They consist of kings and queens, bishops, knights on their mounts, standing warders and pawns in the shape of obelisks.

The Lewis chessmen have interesting and amusing carved faces, and have attracted crowds to the museums since their discovery. They became even more famous after being featured in the 2001 film, 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone'.

History of Chess

Chess is a very old game, which probably originated in India in the 6th century. It soon travelled east and west, and is believed to have come into Europe through the Middle East. By the end of the 10th century, chess was being played regularly across Europe and Russia. The shape of the pieces and the rules changed from time to time and place to place, but settled down into roughly the game we know today in the 15th century.

Books began to be written about chess, with the first chess magazine coming out in 1836.

The game began to attract professional players, and by the mid-19th century national and international tournaments began to be played. The first world championship was held in 1886.

Chess Today

Millions of people world-wide play chess, both as amateurs and as professionals. Computers are programmed to play chess, and online chess is very popular. Chess is played on a squared board, of eight rows

and eight columns. Each player starts with 16 black, or 16 white, pieces - one king, one queen, two rooks, two bishops, two knights, and eight pawns. The pieces move in different ways, and each player attempts to capture their opponents pieces, or prevent their opponent from making any more moves.

Timeline

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Games

Learn to play the game of chess and set up a chess club in your school.

Activities

1. Find out about the history of chess, and the history of the Lewis Chessmen.
2. Make a leaflet for schools giving factual information about the Lewis Chessmen.

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