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To members of the British Chess Problem Society.

I shall be 70 in February, and I am asking Christopher to table "The future of the Library" for discussion at or immediately following the forthcoming AGM, and to circulate this letter with the notice calling the meeting so that everybody is properly in the picture.

When I joined the BCPS back in 1970, the Library was located in the meeting room at St Bride's, and to all intents and purposes it was accessible only to the members who attended the meetings there. When it moved to University College London in 1983, it became accessible to members during normal UCL Library opening hours, and this was regarded as a great improvement.

When it became clear that the agreement with UCL would not be renewed, I was asked, as its most frequent visitor, if I would accommodate it if no other accommodating library could be found. This proved unexpectedly successful. During its first nine years here, I had between two and three times as many visitors as had visited it at UCL during its nine years there, despite the less convenient location (almost certainly because I was normally willing to accept visitors on Sundays and Public Holidays, which UCL naturally was not). More recently, the number of visitors in person has dropped right away, and most use of the Library is now by enquiry. In particular, the advent of e-mail has meant that it is now almost as useful to members abroad as it is to members living within easy reach of it.

It is therefore my opinion that members will be best served if we now do things the other way round, seeking first a replacement member of standing who will be willing to accommodate the Library when I am no longer able and willing to do so here, and looking for accommodation within some other library only if no suitable member comes forward.

The Library is a very pleasant thing to have, as a glance through its catalogue will readily verify. I have greatly enjoyed having it here, and shall be sorry to see it go. Physically, it requires a room of normal height some 12' or 13' square - a typical spare bedroom, in fact. There is a need for approximately 150' of shelving, increasing at the rate of 2' to 3' annually. The BCPS's existing library furniture provides about 80' of this; whether the balance should be provided by wall shelving, or by self-standing racks such as Ken Whyld used to have, is a detail to be decided. There is currently one four-drawer filing cabinet, but a second would enable material currently stored in boxes to be made more accessible and in the long term I would expect there to be a need for a third. There is also a need for space where the various problem collections on cards or loose sheets can be held pending their eventual transfer to computer, but all this can be accommodated within a room of the size specified.

As regards the personal commitment involved, I estimate that looking after the Library costs me the equivalent of two to three weeks per year in working time and distraction. This comprises the time spent updating the catalogue, the inevitable disturbance to my own work when I have a visitor, and the time spent answering members' enquiries. The recent change from visits to enquiries by e-mail has tended to reduce this, because I can field a typical enquiry in far less time than it takes to accommodate a visitor, and these days I would estimate two weeks per year rather than three. I have regarded this as a small price to pay for the pleasure and convenience of having the Library here.

I have put a lot of work into the Library during the past seventeen years. If no member of standing comes forward to take it over and we have to revert to having it stored on somebody else's premises, the ability to have enquiries answered by a knowledgeable resident librarian will vanish, its usefulness to members will be very greatly decreased, and I shall feel that the effort I have spent maintaining and developing it has been largely wasted.