

The History of the EBU

by Richard Fleet



THIS article has been written to commemorate the EBU's 75th anniversary. I am grateful to Karen Durrell at the Aylesbury office for the assistance provided in facilitating access to the archive records.

Early Days

The EBU came into existence at a meeting held in Liverpool on 23 May 1936. Sadly, the minutes of that meeting have not been preserved, but we know something about it from an article written in 1948 by one of the participants, Teddy Bruce Parker.

Three regional bridge associations were already in existence in England, the North-East, the North-West and Yorkshire. However there was no representative national association in existence, whereas the other home countries had set up such bodies. The Liverpool meeting was organised 'to try to work out some form of democratic set-up which should cover the British Isles'. The emphasis here is on democracy, since there were already two national organisations, both backed by playing card companies.

The British Bridge League had existed since 1931 and was democratic in form, but not in substance, being controlled by its founder Alfred Edye Manning-Foster, the editor of *Bridge Magazine*. In addition, there was the National Bridge Association, set up two years later under the control of Hubert Phillips, the editor of the rival *British Bridge World*. Each had its own programme of events, including some familiar names: open teams for the Gold Cup (BBL) and Tollemache Cup (NBA) and, correspondingly for women, the Whitelaw and Lady Milne Cups.

Those present at Liverpool included representatives of the other home countries,



Hubert Phillips

the three Northern associations, several leading London players and Phillips. Significantly, there was no-one present from the BBL: this is not really surprising since Manning-Foster never referred to the NBA or its events in his magazine.

Parker wrote that there were wide discussions, that the three Northern associations were prepared to join together but that the Scottish and Irish representatives would only deal with a national democratic organisation. Consequently, the EBU came into being. This account is supported by an Edinburgh Evening News item: 'Our representatives quite rightly refused to treat with them [i.e. the existing English organisations] in discussions as to duplicate control, international representation and the like.'

The fledgling EBU Council met less than three weeks later, with Phillips as Chairman and Richard Lederer, perhaps the leading tournament player at the time, appointed to the position of Honorary Secretary. The draft constitution was approved, there being eight constituent

associations (the three present at Liverpool, London & Home Counties and four representing the East, the South-West, the North Midlands and West Midlands).



Richard Lederer

The constitution provided that the Council's first duty was to ratify 'the provisional representation on the Duplicate Bridge Control Board'. This body, now long forgotten, had been set up at Phillips' initiative to take control of tournament bridge, which was then experiencing great growth in popularity, including international matches. Little time was lost and the first Camrose matches took place early in 1937.

Selection Shenanigans

The minutes show that the young EBU was much concerned with selection matters. In January 1937, an extraordinary Council meeting appointed the first Selection Committee, with a brief to select a team 'likely to win – not necessarily the best available'. Five weeks later, the Council changed some of the members and instructed it to 'Select

as far as possible: (a) different personnel for each match; (b) include two players from the provinces for each match.' The reference to provincial players is a reminder that those from London were then regarded as a cut above the rest, not least in their own opinion.

Later that year, the Council overturned the Selection Committee decisions for two forthcoming matches, leading to the resignation of its Chairman, Norman de Villiers Hart (now best remembered for his co-authorship of *Right Through the Pack*). Lederer also resigned, though the reason is not stated: he had written a letter of resignation which was discussed at great length, with a vote of thanks for his services only being passed by seven votes to five. It is reasonable to conclude that this letter was possibly expressed in less than diplomatic terms.



Maurice Harrison-Gray

In the autumn of 1937, four captains were appointed to select the teams for the Camrose matches, subject to ratification by the Council. These captains comprised Phillips and three of the acknowledged leading players of the time, Maurice Harrison-Gray, Lederer and Edward Mayer. Following this, the North-East association withdrew from the EBU in protest at the selection mechanics and, a little later, the Council ventured to select teams for two matches without the assistance of a committee: this mechanism turned out not to be beyond criticism, the Council proving adept at selecting its own members (of the thirteen people present, four were selected).

Aside from selecting international teams, one is struck by how little the EBU actually did in those early days. In particular, there were no EBU competitions of any sort. A

clue as to why this may have been the case is provided in Terence Reese's autobiographical work *Bridge at the Top*: Reese, who was an associate of Phillips in the latter half of the 1930s, and the effective editor of the *British Bridge World* for much of this time, wrote that the EBU and London & Home Counties Association were both established as 'makeweights'. That is, Phillips' motivation in setting up the EBU was to facilitate international bridge amongst the home countries, and he would not have expected it to compete with the established programme of events being run by his NBA.

Constitutional Change

In early 1939, it was reported to the Council that negotiations were in hand for the 'fusion' of the EBU and the BBL. Manning-Foster had resigned as BBL President in 1938 and his successor, Noel Mobbs, was more conciliatory in his attitude, being quoted in *Bridge Magazine* as undertaking to work towards amalgamation. Although it is not specifically recorded, it is a reasonable inference that it was intended that the NBA would be included in the process; indeed, it is possible that, given Phillips's involvement with both bodies, the EBU and NBA were regarded as synonymous for this purpose (although he had stood down as Chairman, Phillips was still active within the EBU). The impetus for this move was very likely financial, since a minute of December 1938 opined that the 'Question of future finance of the EBU required very serious consideration.'

In July 1939, the new EBU memorandum and articles of association were approved and also a draft constitution for a democratic BBL. In early September the old Council held its last meeting; unfortunately, and perhaps unsurprisingly given that war had just broken out, the record of this meeting is absent from the minute book.

The new structure took the form of a limited company operating by means of an unincorporated association. Some six months later, the first meeting of the new EBU Council was held and Kathleen Salmons, the BBL Secretary, was appointed to the same position for the EBU. The Council was now composed of delegates from counties in recognisably the same form as endured for almost sixty-five years. In some cases, however, the appearance of democracy was more theoretical than real since the county associations that the dele-

gates purported to represent had not been set up. The Bye-laws were not yet approved and would not be for over five years since the EBU now went into abeyance.

Post-war Revival, Crisis and Recovery

The EBU Council did not meet again until June 1945. Meanwhile, Reese had taken advantage of the EBU's inactivity to set up the Tournament Bridge Association, and ran a programme of events commencing in the latter half of 1944. This included some which are now major EBU tournaments, including Crockfords Cup and the Two Stars Pairs Championship. The TBA continued to run its own events until 1950 when it was taken over by the EBU.



Terence Reese

The June meeting revived the EBU on the 1940 model, though with the appointment of a full-time secretary, Mr H.D. King, at an annual salary of £300 together with an expense allowance of up to £50 per quarter. This may not sound like very much, but an MP's salary in 1945 was only £600. At the same meeting, the first Tournament Committee was appointed and a programme of events inaugurated using the trophies from pre-war days, although the BBL retained responsibility for the Gold Cup.

It is recorded that, at the start of 1946, there were 44 clubs plus 829 individual members. However, this total is understated since membership of the North-West and Yorkshire associations was by clubs at the time. By the end of the year, there had been a great improvement, with over 2,000 individual members plus those in Yorkshire.

Selection remained a controversial issue in 1946, with a proposal being put that only British born players should be eligible for selection. Almost immediately afterwards, in response to a letter from a David

Brown of Sheffield, it was recorded that there was 'no question of ante-semitism [sic], nor anything personal'. The ultimate decision was that players had to be British born or naturalised, and this was taken seriously: the selection of so eminent a player as Boris Schapiro was conditional on his confirming that he had been naturalised, and Rixi Markus's selection was delayed for the same reason.



Kathleen Salmons

A major step was the launch in September 1946 of *Contract Bridge Journal*, under the editorship of Harrison-Gray. It was an immediate success, though not in financial terms (almost three years passed before a regular monthly profit was made). In fact, it was too successful for its own good, and the office of the Controller of Paper banned the January and February 1947 issues on the grounds that the paper allocation had been exceeded. For some time afterwards, the magazine was published on paper of poorer quality with some contents printed in very small type.

In 1947, the Rules & Ethics Committee came into being, but the major issue in this year lay outside the EBU's control. Out of the blue, the petrol rationing regulations were changed and the 'basic ration' (i.e. that which could be used for social and pleasure purposes) withdrawn. This had a drastic effect on tournaments, with the EBU section of the Gold Cup declining from 77 entries to 49. As Reese commented in a letter to the CBJ, time, money and travelling were all easier in the years prior to the war.

In the months that followed, it became obvious that the EBU was living beyond its means: the BBL owed it £450, but with little prospect of recovery, and, in mid-1948, the books showed income of £950 but expenditure of £1,292. The situation was untenable and a major overhaul was inevi-

table. The secretary, who had sacrificed a secure job with the civil service to take on the role, was made redundant, the office was closed and honorary officials working from home were appointed instead, a basic structure which lasted for a quarter of a century. These drastic measures proved successful, a financial report for the eleven months to 28 February 1951 showing a surplus of virtually £300.

After the excitement of its first fifteen years, the EBU embarked upon a quieter period of steady growth, though one notable development was the inauguration of the Master Point scheme in the second half of 1956. With the passage of time, it is difficult to appreciate the excitement engendered by this, and there was a significant – and permanent – increase in the level of tournament entries.

A Professional Organisation

In 1971, the Tournament Secretary (Geoffrey Fell) died. Fell had many other calls upon his time, and had still managed to perform this role for over twenty years. He was a man of boundless energy, noted for his hearty laugh and loud voice, and it was futile to expect to be able to replace him on an honorary basis.



Geoffrey Fell

A solution was found in the appointment of Stuart Staveley, the husband of Anne who had been the Master Points Secretary since 1965. The Staveley residence, 81 High Street, Thame, became the EBU HQ, with the ground floor given over to bridge, and for a few years the Staveleys were synonymous with the EBU. In 1974, a permanent office was found at 15B High Street, with the move to the current – and far more suitable – premises at Aylesbury following later, several years after the Staveleys had retired. From a cottage industry (literally: the Staveley address was Maytree Cottage

when Anne took over Master Points), the EBU had been transformed into a professional organisation.

NBO Status and After

It had long been an aspiration for England to have its own representatives in international events but, ever since the first European Championship in 1932, there had been one team for the whole of Great Britain (Northern Ireland was, and still is, included in an all-Ireland team). From time to time, moves had been made for the home countries to be recognised in their own right as National Bridge Organisations, but such overtures had always been rejected, most recently in 1998. Not long afterwards, the BBL delegate to the European Bridge League (Bill Pencharz), again pressed the case, this time with success. Formal agreement was given in 1999 and most of the functions of the BBL were devolved to the home unions from January 2000, with Bridge Great Britain coming into existence to handle competitions (home internationals, simultaneous pairs and the Gold Cup). The EBU was at last an NBO.

It is not overstating the case to say that this came as a surprise, and no preparations had been made for the eventuality. A particular issue was the Selection Committee, since its sphere of responsibility had been massively expanded. It was an interesting time but not an unsuccessful one: the England open team (David Burn, Brian Callaghan, Joe Fawcett, Gunnar Hallberg, Glyn Liggins, Colin Simpson, David Bakhshi coach, John Williams N.P.C.) competed strongly in the 2000 Bridge Olympiad, losing to ultimate champions Italy in the semi-final, the best performance since the bronze medal win by Great Britain in 1976. Subsequently, there have been several international successes, most notably the triumphs by our women's team in the 2008 World Bridge Games and by our senior team in the 2009 Senior Bowl.

Since then, there have been two significant developments. In 2005, the Council voted to dissolve the unincorporated association, and in the process terminated its own existence, all subsequent operations being carried on by the limited company. As a practical matter, this has made little difference to the way that the EBU has been administered, though the regular meetings are now of shareholders rather than Council members.

Finally, Pay to Play was instituted in April last year. This is covered by Sally Bugden in her article on pages 17-18. □