

A New Beginning for Duplicate Bridge

by Sally Bugden



SEVENTY-FIVE years ago the EBU was founded. That is three generations and a whole world away from today. So what's the difference between now and then? A quick trawl through shows us a few things that have changed our everyday lives: television, video, DVDs, satellite TVs with various recording functions, cassettes, CDs, MP3 players. Central heating, under-floor heating, double glazing. No-bag super-suction vacuum cleaners, washing machines, tumble driers, fridges, and freezers. The National Health Service, heart, kidney and even liver transplants, hip replacements, the contraceptive pill. The 1944 Education Act, grant-funded university education followed by loan-funded university education. The internet, the World Wide Web, computers, laptops, electronic communication, mobile phones, Bluetooth, apps, light-

weight electronic readers. 'Enough already!' I hear you scream, 'So much has changed!' Yes, it has and all these various developments provide us with more time and more leisure pursuits to attract us; greater access to education; freedom from the tyranny of housework; and longer lives for all.

Unfortunately, although you and I know it to be false, today's image of bridge playing seems to have been formed by that excellent author Agatha Christie. Bridge resides either in a quaint English village, or a stately home, or both. So much so that even when a tragic and desperate murder occurred very recently, newspaper headlines reflected the tales of Poirot and Miss Marple.

But how does duplicate bridge fit into today's world and how can we show its value to modern society? To answer that question, I need to tell you a story . . .

Back in 2005 the EBU faced a crisis: its membership was dwindling and the average age of its members was increasing. Behaviour was often cited as being a turn-off for new players. The Board and Shareholders (your county representatives) had considered all sorts of ideas to increase membership but none had succeeded and, importantly, nobody had done any effective research into the current bridge-playing situation in our affiliated clubs and the needs and desires of their members.

So in November 2005, a few of us on the Board joined with several likeminded shareholders to set up a group to address these issues and to develop the game and membership of the EBU. This was called the 'Membership Development Action Group' (MDAG). The members of the Board were John Carter, Philip Mason and I; the shareholders were David Graham, Brian Crack and Peter Kaufmann. We did a couple of pilot studies and then between January and October 2006 we visited nineteen bridge clubs from Exeter to Darlington, undertaking three-hour meetings with each club committee and staying on to play in the club afterwards so that we could engage with ordinary club members.

Our research findings confirmed our thoughts and positively identified what a successful club needs:

- Welcoming ambience and behaviour
- Good teaching programme converting students to club players
- Efficient operation, e.g. directing, technology, membership management and communications
- Varied programme
- Publicity and promotion
- Knowledge sharing
- Community/network
- Car park!



York Railway Museum, 2008 – the set for one of the EBU's national 'Bridge Awareness Days'

After we had undertaken this initial project and reported it to the Board, MDAG was asked to work on creating a system for universal membership via our affiliated clubs that would provide development and a streamlining of processes that would ultimately be of benefit to the whole membership.

At the same time, the Board accepted the 'Best Behaviour at Bridge' policy, or BB@B as it has come to be known – ensuring acceptable manners at the bridge table.

So we did even more research, this time on universal membership and how it operated in other European countries and, after looking at three alternative schemes, set on the process that you now know as 'Pay to Play'. But its development still had some way to go and was initially launched for feedback in June 2007. Over the next three months we received over a thousand e-mails which resulted in some positive changes to the original proposal. We then undertook a national club-consultation exercise through our counties. The results were used to formulate the final proposal and calculate the finances and risks associated with Pay to Play, based on the playing sessions reported back to us. Finally, in June 2008, universal membership was approved by the Shareholders and was implemented in April 2010.

We now have 50,000 members and rising, a critical mass which is a force to be reckoned with. This has enabled us to really

embark on a new beginning in the last year or so. In 2009 we set up the All Party Parliamentary Group for the development of bridge under the Chairmanship of Baroness Henig. This group has focussed on two areas:

- The development of bridge in schools through the EBU's Mini-bridge initiative, thus helping to increase the national GDP through various industries which are dependent on mathematical ability.
- The development of bridge to protect against dementia, not just through regularly testing one's mental agility but, very importantly, through social activity, allowing the creation of communities which offer a lifeline throughout the older years.

Both these initiatives have resulted in some very positive actions.

We are very grateful for the funding from the Milton Damerall Trust, which has allowed us to teach hundreds of teachers and school children how to play Minibridge. We also thank the All Party Parliamentary Group which has enhanced this project by inviting a primary school each year to the Houses of Parliament to play a Minibridge tournament, the first visit being from Pembury School, Tunbridge Wells, last November.



Members of the Hitchin Bridge Club bringing bridge to the high street in 2008

At the other end of the spectrum, at national level we met with the Charity Commissioners and provided them with substantial documentation about research and our activities to demonstrate that bridge should be recognised as a mind sport. Our work at that meeting is being held up as part of the Charity Commission's standards for all mind sports, which is praise indeed. Equally we no longer have to demonstrate that bridge is beneficial to all and worthy of charitable status. This, of course, has also been enhanced by the hard work of Margaret Eddleston at Hitchin Bridge Club, which is the first to be recognised and registered as a charity.

So who are the next generation of bridge players? They are 40-plus years of age and we hope that our bridge clubs will get them through the door by using our 'Club Teacher' initiative. And of course, in about thirty year's time, there will be all those youngsters who are beginning to play Minibridge in school now.

This really is a new beginning, but we mustn't take our eyes off the cards. We have to ensure that these initiatives continue and develop, and are promoted to as many people as possible so everybody understands that duplicate bridge playing today has the most spectacularly positive effect on society's health and wealth. And, of course, is great fun too. □



Minibridge at the House of Lords in 2010: the Lord Speaker of the House of Lords, Baroness Hayman, surrounded by children and teachers from Pembury School, with Baroness Henig of Lancaster (front left), Lord Skelmersdale (back left), and Baroness Howe of Idlicote and Baron Harrison of Chester (back right).