



Draft Minutes of NCWG Online Meeting 17 November 2020

County Bridge Associations Present:

Yorkshire - Lesley Millet (Lesley) & David Guild (David); North East - Adrian Darnell (Adrian); Manchester County -- Irene Davis (Irene) and Adam Wiseberg (Adam); Merseyside & Cheshire – Christopher Raymond (Chris) & Richard Alcock (Richard); Lancashire- Jeff Smith (Jeff).

Invited Members:

Ron Millet (Ron)– EBU Director, Tim Anderson (Tim) – EBU Membership Officer, Geoff Morris (Geoff) -Retired member of Manchester CBA, Patrick Shields (Patrick) – EBU Director and Chair of MCWG

Lesley chaired the meeting and welcomed the members of the working party and invited members to this online meeting.

1. Apologies – Kiat Huang as invited member.

2. Previous Minutes - The minutes of the meeting of 6 August 2020 were approved with minor amendments by Patrick which were incorporated into the minutes.

3. County Reports

Merseyside/Cheshire – Report by Chris

A lot of change since last report.

Deva plus five of the seven other affiliated clubs are now online with lots of cross-linking of members between clubs. Two are not interested in forming online clubs but interested members are active within virtual clubs.

Oliver Cowan is assisting Liverpool BC but they are yet to activate online. They may link with another club for an online service.

There is a lot of contact between affiliates and the County's numerous non-affiliate clubs re online activity.

Online events held are attracting greater numbers. The recent Swiss Teams, admin assisted by Adam, that previously attracted 40 tables F2F had 90 tables online.

The Cheshire and Wirral teams of 4 District League is now up and running. Also, clubs are submitting teams to the Manchester League. Both leagues are doing well although not profitable.

Realbridge is not yet having positive effect on social bridge in the County.

Lancashire – report by Jeff

The County is increasing online activity at a pace.

The established County League is now in its third 2 monthly cycle. There are 5 divisions of 8 x teams of 4.

Recently ran a very successful online congress with 74 pairs attending.

Online clubs are moving at a pace and several have multi-sessions per week but 4 out of 10 need assistance re: how do their less technically adept members become better familiarised with their IT equipment, using bridge platforms, online presentations etc

Bolton BC are to run a RealBridge session for members every week.

Manchester County – Report by Irene

All clubs are online apart from Prestbury. Some clubs are working together to offer an online service and there is participation by some non-affiliate clubs. Clubs are presently using a mixture of BBO and ReaBridge. There is an improvement trend in the level of play sessions being offered.

Adam has created his own Virtual Club which is successfully bringing in diverse participants. Adam is also active in online directing both affiliate and non-affiliate clubs with some non-affiliates attracting good table numbers, one at 15 to 20 per weekly session. Adam sees benefit in RealBridge for social play and is developing this route. Tim said that YourBridge also serves this purpose.

(An open discussion followed on non-affiliates:

Tim said that he has found some non-affiliates on his own platform but they were paying UMS.

Patrick said that non-affiliates make up 50% of clubs (lower membership number) in the Midlands but they are not involved in online activities. Tim said that they are parochial and Ron agreed that they do not network. Adam said that it is a massive challenge to see what the EBU has to offer non-affiliates. Ron said that a wider issue is that we need to attract players who see bridge as one item in their personal multiple social activity programme and not as their sole recreation activity).

They are following the F2F County Events calendar for offering online events. There has been some events scheduling conflict with Manchester City. *(The meeting briefly debated the issue of the increased likelihood of online clashing of events for close Club/Club, County/club, County/County and National/County as all step up their online events activities and location is less relevant. Yorkshire said that they recently had to reschedule their Christmas event due to clash with EBU Year End Congress and it then became evident that the reschedule date clashed with the Manchester County scheduled New Year event. So, the schedules are becoming more overlapped).*

Irene said that their recent green-pointed County event was successful but noted that recent attendance at County events has generally decreased and that this may be due to increased club events. Adam added that some members play only in the County sessions as the NGS level is higher than Club events.

As reported last meeting, The Manchester County League is very successful with over 40 teams of four and it is now on its fourth cycle. Also, Adam has organised Inter-County competitions with Glos. and Sussex to date.

The County is very active in bridge education. A Zoom meeting with teachers was well-attended. Of result, a County-led teachers' online upskilling programme is now in place. The recent marketing

recruitment initiative to recruit beginners has resulted in 60 responders. Six new online beginner learner groups have been formed. Most are using Zoom and BBO as Realbridge is not yet ready for teaching. Teacher prices vary; charging from nothing to £20/lesson. Also, two teacher groups have been reset online for Continuing Bridge.

North East – report by Adrian

Of their 24 clubs, seven are now also virtual clubs. Members of those clubs not virtual gravitate to those offering an online service. (Adrian sees an issue of mixed club loyalty post covid).

As reported by Nigel last meeting, there was little enthusiasm for a County Pairs League. The virtual clubs' Interclub Pairs League is successful and is now on cycle two with 15 teams of four across two divisions. Durham BC have written to non-affiliate clubs to offer access to inter-club online play under Durham BC banner if they wish to submit a team(s). To date there have been no positive responses.

Yorkshire – Report by Lesley

The County's Teams of 4 League has proved very successful with 128 teams across 16 Divisions. The first Cycle has one match to complete and will likely expand when restarted as cycle 2 in January.

The County has been active in matching the F2F County Events Calendar to online and events have been marginally profitable to date. We have been innovative in adding new formats. One successfully trialled is the Elevenses "social play with a coffee break" format. Also, by January to have "9 high" and "5 high" events. Our Members Online Meeting is 22 Nov and this will be used to poll other member interest.

The number on our Board has been expanded. The new County Youth Officer is now moving into position.

The County is aware that more needs to be done to generate teaching and has set up a team to best contact all clubs (and teachers) to upskill and motivate them. David has been teaching beginners using the English Bridge School materials and will lead this team.

4. Online Platforms

The meeting discussed pros and cons of online platforms but quickly steered into the "cheating" issue. This is reported under Item 8.

The BBO platform does not support teams. It has complex entry admin that is an initial barrier to students and teachers. Adam said that he introduces robots for half tables when playing but there are issues when the robots win and he has to build a results penalty in for the robots! Another issue is the need to use in parallel audio support for teaching, either on Zoom or such as What's Up.

Realbridge currently is under heavy development and currently supports Swiss, Head to Head and Round Robin. It is much easier to TD and, with full audio and video, it offers a powerful social bridge platform. It can also be set to competition mode to have self-alerting and a half table screen as in F2F high level competitions. A broadcast function is to be developed to assist teaching but the platform has the teaching disadvantage that Kibitzing is time delayed to limit cheating opportunity.

Tim is developing his YourBridge site which is live and we have yet to see the announced developments from Bridge Club Live (BCL) and Pianola.

In Yorkshire, Jim Edwards, webmaster for LearnBridgeYorkshire site, has developed a Bridge “teaching only” platform. This has trialed successfully by Leeds BC and has both access simplicity and kibitzing functions. It is available for other clubs to trial.

David said that the English Bridge School (EBS) programme will make a difference to online teaching as it offers lessons content structure and is very time saving for teachers but to date the EBS programme has been lightly marketed and few are aware of the potential.

There was agreement that online teaching has a lower student/teacher ratio than F2F teaching. Adam said that he has five classes of four, using BBO and Zoom, as it is difficult to play supervise/learn with more than one or two tables. David said that a model of teacher presentation and then teacher plus helpers for practice play is a possible solution. It does though affect the remunerated teacher financial expectation as class size will be a lower ceiling.

5. The Post Covid Situation

Ron said that the stats showed that approx. 50% of EBU members are not playing online bridge. Adam disagreed as he felt that lots more are playing socially online under the radar. Adam also said that his experience is that the number of online players continues to grow.

The meeting questioned the EBU expectation on loss of clubs, hybrid online/F2F clubs, support for clubs in jeopardy and EBU guidance. Ron said weekly executive meetings were in place and that a lot of work was being undertaken by both the executive and teams focusing on specific topics but at the moment there is a lot of uncertainty. David said that regular communication from the Board and working group responses would be beneficial as we come nearer to being out of Covid.

6 Teaching

As already discussed previously in this meeting, this topic was not separately covered.

7. Membership development

Ron said that very little was being done nationally at present. The real challenge is to retain membership:

1. To get all those not playing online to do so. Otherwise they risk losing the habit of regular bridge play post Covid.
2. Reactivating presently moribund clubs
3. Converting online only players into F2F clubs post covid.

Membership development is commensurate with teaching beginners. Patrick highlighted the lack of teachers versus the membership task ahead due to lack of teaching skills. Irene said that the lack of IT skills is also a barrier to teaching and learning.

Adam’s video on getting onto BBO was agreed as excellent. Richard questioned how do we get the video message out to the members who may be technophobic and not Zoom users?

8. Points of Discussion on the AGM for 25 November :

8.1 AGM Treasurer’s Report Item 6

David said that whilst in agreement with the first part of the resolution concerning the freezing of UMS fee for 2021/22, he did not understand the supplementary text and Yorkshire would raise an AGM question on this. This was seconded around the table. Patrick explained that for a few clubs,

online UMS payment had been capped at prior year total fee payment as these clubs felt online to be too volatile to use and that this would cease April 2021. David thanked Patrick for the clarification and said that the question would not be raised. Ron said that he would make Jerry Cope aware of the need for text clarification within the resolution.

8.2. AGM Treasurer's Report Item 7 – Need for mid-Year UMS Increase

This concerned the exceptional need for the EBU to raise UMS by 1p mid-year 2021/22. It was agreed by the NCWG that an explanation to shareholders should accompany an EBU notice of impending exceptional fee increase. Lesley to write to the EBU accordingly within the one week questions deadline.

8.3 AGM – Change of Bye Law re Member Suspension pending Disciplinary Hearing

Ron said that online cheating by better players is endemic and could carry over and blight future F2F play. Richard said that hesitations in online play are not being addressed. Adam suggested that if using BBO, then autoplay can be set for singletons. Tim mentioned that in Chess, computer assistance is an issue and that this could also apply to high level online bridge competitions together with highly complex convention cards with phone assists.

Patrick said that there is International discussion as to whether offline regulations are the right regulations for online competition and that this includes online disclosure and hesitations.

Patrick also said that the accused has ability to extend the proceedings process. Ron said that threat of legal action against the EBU extends both the timings and repercussions.

Jeff said that he had 25 years' experience of being on the Disciplinary Committee and he felt that online play investigations are extremely complex, taking a huge amount of resource and cost and are not a good use of EBU involvement. He would take a more pragmatic view for online issues.

Irene said that Manchester would vote against this change preferring to rejig the process to obviate the delays inherent. Adrian agreed that there needs to be a more root and branch approach to this problem.

Adrian suggested an amendment that embodied a more exceptional suspension pending investigation within the sole discretion of the L & E Committee. This was agreed by the NCWG and Lesley to write to the EBU accordingly within the one week questions deadline.

9 AOB

1 Competition Pricing

Jeff illustrated the current entry price gap in recent national and green-pointed County events (Autumn Congress £35, Lancashire £12 and Merseyside £8) and the forthcoming Tollemache qualifier at £42/player. Jeff felt that the EBU are using online national events for substantial revenue generation and questioned how the pricing structure is derived. Adam agreed, saying that the world changed last March and online bridge competitions are the future. David said that whether the price is right for the marketplace will be decided by players voting with their feet.

Patrick pointed out that we are in a crisis period during which the EBU have to cover their overheads and the trend in EBU price points for competition entry is downwards.

2. Soft structure Competitions

Jeff suggested that dip-in-dip out (Dido) bridge is explored further.

Bridge Club Live run a successful day long Dido competition with a pre-loaded hand set and people play a minimum of 12 boards. Rankings are calculated at the end of the day. Funbridge also run a regular Dido competition.

The suggestion is that a Dido competition on Realbridge should be considered by the EBU.

Next Meeting: To be confirmed for a day in the first week of January 2021.

End