



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 14^h May 2020 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Herefordshire	Keith Stait (KS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (BD)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Lincolnshire	Kiat Huang (KH)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Dave Thomas (DT)
Nottinghamshire	Pravin Tailor (PT)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEM 1: Welcome & Previous Meeting's Minutes

1. Two potential visitors (Ian Payn EBU Chairman and John Fairhurst of Basingstoke BC) had sent apologies because of unavoidable clashes. They will both aim for some future meeting. We used ZOOM and everyone connected successfully.
2. The minutes of the previous meetings were approved for publication.

ITEM 2: EBU Central Activities

3. PS reported that the EBU Board was continuing to meet and from this week -
 - a. The EBU (particularly Gordon) is actively considering how to run national competitions online during the remainder of this year; the thinking is that these are unlikely to include Green Point events.
 - b. There is recognition that the events currently being run online by the EBU are populated more by high NGS rankings than low, so consideration is being given to what could be added to the menu to cater for a wider audience.
 - c. The current Lockdown League was offered early and for free, but it might well be the only event of that nature.

ITEM 3: Round Robin on News/Plans/Problems

4. We started with **PS** from Gloucestershire; he highlighted that when the GCBA Swiss Teams completes in two weeks' time they will instigate a re-run, that the 9-High Swiss Pairs will start next week, and the GCBA was approaching clubs in four corners of the county with the suggestion that they join together to form an EBU Virtual Club the formation of which it will support. The GCBA committee has also decided that UMS should be paid on its events, that events already advertised or started will be free, but that from next month they will charge players £10 for the right to play all GCBA online events for 2010, and this money will cover the UMS charges which will be submitted on a game by game basis.
5. For **Staffs & Shrops** we had **PC** who told us that the county was not active but a number of bridge clubs were, with Stafford organised to run on BCL (handicap teams league, pairs league and more) while Oswestry are running as an EBU Virtual Club on BBO; others are also active but with social rather than competitive bridge games. He noted that the upper echelons were keeping away from the online bridge apart from two teams in the Lockdown League.
6. We next had **MW** from **Worcestershire** who noted that there was growing popularity for keeping games to a maximum of 16 boards, and suggested that the EBU charging model should be taking this into consideration as it moves forward. He noted that clubs like Bewdley and Worcester are doing ZOOM-enabled discussions of the hands after some events, and that many in the county were keen on the inter-county games which are being organised. He referred us to feedback from Mike Vetch which pointed out that (a) for some clubs the social and drop-in bridge has grown at the expense of the more competitive, and (b) the BCL revenue model does not match well with the EBU model, and most importantly (c) clubs need to be thanked for the massive volunteer effort that is going into keeping bridge alive. [LATER in response: **KH** pointed out that revenue going to the online providers is revenue which would normally go to bridge clubs & organisations in this country – but is now lost]
7. Now **KT** reported from **Oxfordshire** that events were continuing along the lines reported previously with 5 clubs active and Oxford Bridge Club doing most. The county is active in training more BBO TDs and they have a Junior Online game coming next Sunday. **RP** added that they had started a High-5s event and would not object to players from outside the county but one part of the plan was for teachers to hold ZOOM sessions with their learners after the event – something that would not be available to players from outside Oxfordshire unless some other county organised that. **KH** reminded us that breakout rooms in Zoom offered ideal facilities for small group discussions and allowed a host to flit between rooms.
8. From **Nottinghamshire** **PT** told us that while clubs were active, the start for the County was only going to come when the relevant people met for a Zoom call this weekend. He was keen to participate in the cross-county event on 23rd, and **KH** confirmed that it was a team-of-4 event (but any team could have subs brought in, allowing more than 4 to participate) and that the level was NGS-Q/J, and that more details on the logistics would be published before the event. The spreadsheet showing contacts and details was brought up on the screen; all county POCs have a copy of the link. **PT** thanked **KH** for help in setting up the Nottinghamshire Facebook presence.

9. From **Lincolnshire KH** continued, reporting that they had competed a 7-table match with Gloucestershire, had a match coming with Wiltshire (8 tables) and another smaller one with Worcestershire. He reported work underway on banding three smaller clubs together to become an EBU Virtual Club. He saw the current exposure to teams bridge as fostering a surge of enthusiasm for this which will need to be addressed when face-to-face bridge returns. He made the point that being forced online was not just a concern for the game but an opportunity, and could lead to an increase in the bridge playing community.
10. From **Suffolk MP** reported that they had just finished their first season of their teams league (21 teams from their 1000 members) and were about to enter season two with a further three teams. He had surveyed the team captains and they had agreed to stick to 20 board matches but were now going to swap opponents at half-time. The county is explaining their approach at a webinar on Saturday morning (1100 hrs, advert on EBU website) to which all counties have been invited. He reckons 40% of the county is covered by existing Virtual Club rollout and the finding is that the average number of tables of duplicate bridge per week is above that from the days of online face to face bridge.
11. We continued with **KS** from **Herefordshire** who had confirmed that the majority of players who have recently represented the county are playing online, and he intends to approach the others with offers of help. He will provide a team for the inter-county game on 23rd, noting that the new level make this easier for him.
12. Then **MT** from **Warwickshire** told us that lockdown activities were continuing on three fronts, with Darren Evetts leading on match-pointed pairs for the West Midlands Bridge Circle (getting spectators as well as players, and players from as far afield as New Zealand too!), Roger Bryant leading on teams, and that he (MT) was liaising with players wanting casual games on-line.
13. From **Derbyshire** we heard from **JP**: they have two clubs starting up as Virtual Clubs next week and have some lined up to follow.
14. Finally, from **Northamptonshire** we heard from **FD**: the pattern remains steady with the big clubs all active and the small clubs giving little feedback at all. Stamford BC is accepting visitors and is now running a Pairs League with 52 pairs across four divisions (one match every four days), as well as a Pairs Ladder (30 pairs) and a Swiss Teams (12 teams). There is a positive preference in to the county for BBO over BCL, with the larger numbers on BBO making it more likely you find your friends there and then more likely you are found there too, etc.

ITEM 4: MORE GENERAL POINTS

15. **DT** reported that he and many others (in the county, and at this meeting) thought that the EBU approach to clubs about UMS payments should have proceeded in consultation with the County BAs and/or shareholders first and that it is receiving a less-than-favourable reception because of this.
16. The question arose during discussions about what pattern of bridge might be wanted once the current crisis abates. **RP** suggested a survey would be helpful and that the current online bridge platforms might provide an avenue for catching players to get their views. **KH** pointed out that there are many free survey tools out there which can be used, and **FD** pointed out that Stamford had done three surveys this year and obtained from them responses unexpected – both in terms of volume and of content. The following points were made

- a. The EBU could easily benefit from such a survey, and perhaps should lead it. **PS** and **KH** agreed to bring it to the EBU Board, and it was suggested that if the EBU did not act quickly enough then the MCWG could take the driving seat.
- b. The audience could be enormously wider than just the bridge players to whom we feel responsible, which offers some advantages and some disadvantages.
- c. In carrying out a survey, much care needs to be given to the timing, to understanding what we want to learn/achieve from it, and to the phrasing of the questions; we must also be able to explain to the audience how the results will be used for their benefit.

17. **MW** pointed out that the current surge in online bridge offers an ideal opportunity for someone to highlight to the national press the value of the game. We are missing a chance here!

ITEM 5: OTHER SNIPPETS

18. These didn't get mentioned but have been noticed recently and might be worth being aware of
- a. Nicky Bainbridge is actively teaching from Rugby Village BC, supporting social bridge on BCL (including timed gatherings for the club to help people meet up), and looking at inter-club matches.
 - b. BBOextractor is a new tool available for converting BBO results files into a form suitable for uploading to Bridgeweb. This task is covered by the director on an EBU-VC game, but this could be useful for others.
 - c. Two more platforms for online bridge have come to light : Playbridging encourages you to play online but with a pack of cards in front of you and the laying out of dummy after the bidding has finished : Stepbridge.co.au seems to be an Australian BBO equivalent.

ITEM 6: FUTURE PLANS

19. We confirmed we will not meet next week as the EBU Chairs meeting is taking place on Wednesday (1400 hrs), but we will meet again in two weeks' time (28th May). The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES