



# NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call  
on Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> April at 10.30am

## PRESENT:

Essex	Cath Fox (CF)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Warwickshire	Myra Scott (MS)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Lincolnshire	Kiat Huang (KH)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Nottinghamshire	Mark Goddard (MG)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)		

**Apologies:** Keith Stait (Herefordshire)

**CHAIR:** Patrick Shields

## ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 18<sup>th</sup> March meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

## ITEM 3a: Experiences of Online Bridge

2. The first item discussed was BBO's Video offering. **PS** reported that Cheltenham BC had it landed on them unexpectedly one day, and it had caused some consternation. A later trial of it by experienced players, found a number of problems including software bugs which were reported back to BBO. **KT** added that there was also the cost aspect which could affect decisions to adopt. **PC** has been at a club session using it: the consensus was that it was not liked.
3. The lack of enthusiasm for this surprised some, and suggested that those who care about video might already have migrated to RealBridge. **MW** reported that there was some use of video on BCL, but only by small numbers. The BCL Social Room facility is more flexible than the RealBridge Lounge because it obviates the need to book a session, sessions can be very short (four boards) and opponents, or even partners, are easily found (a bit like rubber bridge clubs in the "old days"!).
4. **GW** reported that she had been to a trial of the new RealBridge facility for audio-visual announcements by the TD, and it was deemed a very positive development – useful for teaching as well as catching the attention of players who don't read the text announcements. The only downside mentioned for RealBridge was lack of any kibitzing capability.

5. The interest in online payment systems remains high, and a number reported that they were investigating or using the new BridgeWebs offering. The BridgeWebs approach does not cover payment, but tracks player attendance at an event and will deduct the specified cost of the event from the player's recorded balance. The club needs to update the balance from payments made into the club account, and to check for payments which are overdue. Bath BC is the furthest advanced we know in using this.
6. Other clubs continue to work well with Bookwhen (eg Oxford BC) and with SpadeTickets (eg Basingstoke BC).

### **ITEM 3b: Returning to Face-to-Face Bridge**

7. **KH** reported that Lincolnshire CBA had now put together a calendar which includes face-to-face games, and this kicks off with their AGM in August. **JP** indicated that Derbyshire was steering clubs to an August/September re-opening, but that much depended on government guidance due to be published in June.
8. **MP** reported that Suffolk CBA was doing extensive surveys to understand people's intentions; the early feedback suggests there will be a significant online component to the future at a number of clubs.
9. **PS** reported an expectation that the Gloucestershire CBA would start running one of its weekly meetings face-to-face each month (once Cheltenham BC re-opened) – but that there was a strong appetite in the county players for the continuation of the online games.
10. **RP** suggested that we must plan to cater for all choices made by clubs and by players, and be careful not to be overtaken by events. **FD** made the point that smaller less competitive clubs would have a greater incentive to return than those well-catered for with online games.
11. There was interest expressed in how the panoply of games organised should be spread across the EBU, the County Associations, and the clubs. **PS** confirmed that
  - Online games were a useful source of revenue for the EBU and had stemmed its losses.
  - The EBU is looking at a mixed economy in the future, with some games online where that makes participation easier (eg Tollemache qualifying round) but others will be face-to-face because that retains the special feel of such games (eg the Tollemache final). The work on the next year's programme is ongoing.

### **ITEM 3c: The Future of Teaching**

12. It was noted that RealBridge were offering a trial of Andrew Robson lessons (play four boards, then he discusses one of them on video) but the only player present who had experienced it was not impressed. Oxford BC are trying this out also.
13. We noted that clubs have missed a year's supply of newcomers, and asked whether clubs will need to put double the effort into teaching in the next year to catch up? There is a suggestion that the online facilities work better for improvers than newcomers, and as a result some teachers are preferring to work with the former.

14. From recent experience, it was reckoned difficult for a teacher to manage more than two tables, and indeed the Worcestershire teaching had found it convenient to split the class of 12 into two groups of 6, to make it easier for the teacher to interact with the pupils, even for lectures. **PS** passed on his observation that some successful groups were making a point of distributing the teaching material in advance, and this made online seminars go more smoothly.
15. Both **MW** and **FD** reported success in getting newcomers playing Mini-bridge at the end of their first lesson.

### ITEM 3d: The Midlands Counties Online League

16. **PS** indicated that we will need to sort out our plans for the next season over the coming months. A number of counties reported that they were actively consulting the MCOL players to find out about preferences for what happens in the Autumn. It was noted that while a few have dropped out, at least as many players have been more available when travel is not involved. One option might be to give the choice between live and online to the Away Team.

### ITEM 3e: The Midlands 9-High Swiss Teams

17. All the feedback from last weekend's event (which netted 54 tables) was positive. **MW** felt that the event was remarkably easy to organise, and that it indicated the huge appetite that exists for such games. Aspects of the game which helped it run smoothly included
- Spare players available to fill gaps if connection problems stopped someone returning.
  - County representatives such as **GW** being on hand to help the (new to teams games) teams from that county understand the scoring.
18. **PS** asked who should be organising events of this nature, and from where we should seek participants. It was agreed that the county focus delivered particular benefits – the county advertising and the thought of representing one's county attracted players to play. Teams were able to relate to teams they played when they could identify them with a named county.
19. We discussed the timetable of future events. It was agreed that given the demand we should continue, and that we would hold the next event on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> June. We agreed that we needed to make plans for beyond that, and we will come back to that at the next meeting. It was suggested that a page on the EBU website specifically for NGS restricted events would be useful. [LATER: there is one, and we should advertise it on our CBA websites – [click here](#)]
20. We discussed the grading restrictions for future events; there was concern that a 9-high event was numerically dominated by the higher grades and we might lose significant numbers were we to restrict the game to be (say) NGS-6-high. We noted that there were teams mixing these grades, and they too would be affected. It was postulated that one third of the current field would fall under a 6-high limit. We considered taking entries and then splitting the field according to NGS-grades, but decided some more research on the grades of those playing was needed, and that we would do this and revisit the topic at the next meeting.
21. We noted that these games were very cheap to run, but charging at cost would undercut many other organisations, including the EBU. We pondered whether the EBU should be running these as a revenue raising venture.
22. We noted also that no issues had arisen with complicated and unfamiliar systems – something that was expected to kick in more if we allowed NGS-10 and NGS-J to be playing. We felt that variations such as 5-card majors had to be acceptable.

### **ITEM 3f: Would Counties or Clubs be interested in sponsoring specific international teams?**

23. The first comment made was on how difficult it is to get bridge players to part with their money! The biggest issue identified was the lack of knowledge our club players have of the international players (and how they rank in the world, etc) and of the international teams (and how often England succeeds). A first step is some serious publicity on this front.

24. It was noted that to be successful in finding sponsors, we have to be very specific about what the revenue is paying for, and we have to identify benefits for the sponsors.

### **ITEM 4: Round-Robin from Counties**

25. We lacked time for a round-robin but online feedback has provided the following reports:

- From Herefordshire : although there were a handful of positive comments on the BBO video at a recent session, there were a number of flaws identified (inability to switch off, impact on response times, lack of instructions) and most comments were negative.
- From Derbyshire : DBCA is only using BBO currently but one local club plans to run some Realbridge taster sessions. Many (but not all) members/County officers think once f2f starts online should be curtailed. Some expect that even after a restart there will be further Covid interruptions towards the end of the year. We should consider inter-county team-of-8 games as that certainly is the most popular event for players in Derbyshire.
- From Leicestershire : the only club with its own premises, the County Club at Leicester, has taken the opportunity of lockdown to make structural changes. Teaching is taking place at three clubs. LCBA is debating if a League starting in September is practical and how many Clubs will be able to enter. The first Leicestershire Realbridge competition has a disappointing turnout.

### **ITEM 5: AOB and NEXT MEETING**

26. PC reminded us of the Shropshire Congress taking place on the 24-25<sup>th</sup> April.

27. We agreed the next meeting will be in two weeks' time, on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> April. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES