



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 18th March at 10.30am

PRESENT:

| | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Avon | Sue O'Hara (SO) | Oxfordshire | Rob Procter (RP) |
| Essex | Cath Fox (CF) | Oxfordshire | Kathy Talbot (KT) |
| Derbyshire | Jim Parker (JP) | Somerset | Tony Russ (TR) |
| Gloucestershire | Patrick Shields (PS) | Suffolk | Malcolm Pryor (MP) |
| Hampshire | John Fairhurst (JF) | Staffs & Shrops | Paul Cutler (PC) |
| Herefordshire | Keith Stait (KS) | Warwickshire | Mike Thorley (MT) |
| Leicestershire | Dean Benton (DB) | Wiltshire | Gayle Webb (GW) |
| Northamptonshire | Fred Davis (FD) | Wiltshire | Richard Gwyer (RG) |
| Nottinghamshire | Mark Goddard (MG) | Worcestershire | Mike Willoughby (MW) |

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 4th March meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3a: Experiences of Online Bridge

2. **PS** noted that, despite expectations to the contrary, in a number of contexts players have shown a preference to BBO over RealBridge, often because they find the video distracting. Some noted that the RealBridge mode of playing with screens significantly removed the amount of distraction (in use in Gloucestershire, but Oxford BC are running with 4-player visibility and face-to-face style alerting). **KT** suggested some of the reaction could be because of familiarity.
3. It was noted that BCL had only recovered some social bridge rooms so far, following the fire at their server location.
4. **JP** and **JF** noted that their conditions of contest did not allow kibitzers; others allow them. A number indicated that the default was to allow kibitzers at team games but that either captain could object and, in that case, there were none. **MP** reported that Suffolk CBA had surveyed players and discovered large support for barometer scoring in teams' games.

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

5. **JP** reported a desire in Derbyshire to restart on the 4th August, but others were sceptical that it could happen as early as that. **PS** noted the experience in Canberra where bridge restarted many months back, but was still being played with significant restrictions because of the pandemic.

6. While one club was reported as planning to give up on BBO once face-to-face resumes, the majority are expecting to continue online in parallel. **FD** made the point that the different length of games might become an issue. **RP** made the point we have seen significant demand for games which never happened previously (eg the 45 teams in the cross-county event in January) and that during lockdown we have a chance to experiment with some forms of game (eg national inter-county league) that would be too difficult to get started on in more normal circumstances.
7. **JP** asked whether there would be an appetite for face-to-face Green Points events in September. [LATER NEWS: DCBA has dropped their September plans] The consensus was that it is too early to tell. **FD** noted that entry fees to GP events have become an issue. **MP** made the point that 12 months of online bridge has transformed the player experience, and it is hard to tell if and how tastes have changed; SCBA has set up a project to obtain feedback and will report back here in due course.

ITEM 3d: The Future of Teaching

8. **PS** asked whether anyone had tried out bridgeplay.uk and it emerged that people had not appreciated that you need an account to be able to investigate properly; accounts can be obtained from Jim Edwards.
9. **PS** also reported on the positive reports about SharkBridge, another platform built specifically for teaching. Nobody has yet tried it – [details are at this link](#).
10. The presentation by David Guild at the last meeting was driven by concerns that with a year's gap in new learners, many clubs would be struggling for numbers in years to come. **KT** reported that Oxfordshire was calling a meeting of all clubs (chairs and teachers) to discuss this issue. **RP** expressed concern on the time it takes to get newcomers playing – and suggested the target should be to make that happen within hours. **FD** and others reminded us of the importance of getting the newcomers comfortable with the technology before moving on to playing the game (and that WhatsApp was a very useful tool in this process).
11. There were reports that some links on the new EBU website for newcomers were dead ends; **PS** reminded all to email to sam@ebu.co.uk with any instances of this.

ITEM 3d: The Midlands Counties Online League

12. The audience was reminded that we need to start thinking soon about what happens for the Midlands Counties League, and the MCOL, in the 2021-2022 season. The MCOL Team Managers have been asked to think about this also. **PC** suggested we consult with Paul Hammond who managed the MCL in the past. Possibilities such as face-to-face games in summer but online in winter needs to be considered. Another option would be for teams to decide which matches are online and which are face-to-face.
13. We still have one outstanding MCL match from the 2019-2020 season.

ITEM 3e: The Midlands 9-High Swiss Teams

14. Payments for this event are to be made to the same account as the previous game; details of this and further instructions will be forwarded shortly to the county points of contact. These POCs will be asked to keep the organisers informed about numbers. **PS** raised some questions about the Master Point allocation, but was reassured that the level of these would not become an issue. It was agreed that any team which entered in good faith would be accepted, and we would not take a hard line about drifts in NGS grades.

ITEM 3f: Role of EBU as a Tournament Organiser/Regulator

15. **PS** asked those attending what they expected of the EBU and how they would express the role of a County Association with respect to tournament organisation. **MP** voiced the opinion that CBAs had a strong part to play in the bridge scene, as evidenced by the demand the Suffolk CBA events were identifying. The county-wide games offer challenge with a wider mix of grades than EBU events do.
16. **PS** noted that the EBU Licensing Regulations had largely been ignored in the past year, because of the need to get everyone playing bridge. He asked how much control these Regulations should enforce? **MW** pointed out that unless the EBU shows a strong sense of direction, other suppliers (with a large price advantage from volunteer effort) will corner the market. **JP** expressed a niggle with the fact of the need for a licence and suggested that fewer restrictions might be helpful.
17. **RP** asked about calendar coordination across counties and how important this was. The issue of Green Point events on the same dates in multiple counties arose recently, and some counties did well, others badly. **MW** made the point that the high availability of online options had the potential to dilute county loyalty as players will have more options for a game at the standard they prefer.
18. **MP** asked about EBU work on Competitions Strategy. **PS** indicated that there was a group tackling this and he was seeking opportunities to expose the thinking as soon as possible; the discussion here will feed into that team.
19. **PS** pointed out to the attendees that an event run by a County Association generally was given twice as many Master Points as a club running the same event – and asked is this right? Some felt it was; others pointed out this gives a CBA a marketing advantage over a club. In practice this is not noticed by players. There is a case for this differential to apply only to open events.

ITEM 4: Round-Robin from Counties

20. We heard from:

- **KS** for Herefordshire pointed us to the Edgar Foster Cup on Sunday 21 September.
- **PS** indicated that Gloucestershire had been planning its programme on a 4-month basis, and is now considering what to run May-August. It is likely that half the games will switch to be face-to-face if/when Cheltenham BC opens.
- **MW** for Worcestershire noted that the BCL fire disruption was actually providing a welcome breather for some players. Many clubs are now running multiple sessions each week, and the members were enjoying this.
- **MT** for Warwickshire asked about top player availability for the MCOL, as WCBA has lost some players. Some other counties reported loss of a few but for some that was very few. In some cases the willingness of players to join in, when travel was not involved, has increased.
- **PC** for Staffs & Shrops highlighted the [Telford Congress, coming on 24-25 April](#).
- **KT** had nothing new from Oxfordshire; ditto **CF** from Essex and **JP** from Derbyshire.

- **DB** reported 5 very active clubs in Leicestershire, and 3 doing teaching. Numbers are holding well, and the plan is for the County League to be online next season.
- **GW** and **RG** from Wiltshire told us that all was settled, and their first AGM for two years was coming soon. The recent Green Point weekend was very successful.
- **FD** reported that clubs were doing fine and the County Association has decided it needs a re-focus and is actively seeking new blood (keen and computer literate) to do that.
- **SO** from Avon reminded us of the [Avon Green Point event in May](#), and told us that the Avon County League was doing better than it ever did before lockdown, but that teaching in the county is disappointing, with no classes of newcomers. Bristol BC is looking to the possibility of opening in June; useful material for that can be found on the Canberra BC and Bath BC websites.
- **JF** from Hampshire told us that they were planning on a Winter League mirroring the face-to-face version. With people so busy on current online games, persuading them to join in replacements for traditional face-to-face competitions has been difficult. Teaching is going well, with U3A inputs. He noted that a first match had happened between Yorkshire and Surrey.
- **JP** reported that Derbyshire are still organising their events on BBO, and will debate the prospects of having some RealBridge events at next Tuesday's Committee meeting. DCBA hopes to resume F2F in the 1st week of August [LATER NEWS: pushed back a month], so it is unlikely to do much beyond running some sessions for members to try the platform. DCBA has a draft calendar of events and now plans to resume F2F bridge in September and plans to run a F2F teams-of-8 inter-club league commencing in October. However, one club has already enquired about allowing them to be run online as an option; this is not Covid-related it is just the lengthy journey to certain venues.

ITEM 5: AOB and NEXT MEETING

21. **JP** had spotted that Bridge will be a component of the [coming Asian Games](#) (due September 2022).
22. **RP** asked about the "Red Nose" day idea that was suggested some months back. **PS** suggested that the idea was not lost but that some stepping stones were needed for a possible attempt at this in 2022.
23. We agreed the next meeting will be in two weeks' time, on Thursday 1st April. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES