



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 2nd September at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Wiltshire	Lucy Cross (LC)
Nottinghamshire	Mark Goddard (MG)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)	Worcestershire	Eddy Blackburn (EB)
Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)		

PLUS : Shireen Mohandes (SM, RealBridge)

Apologies: John Fairhurst (Hampshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Myra Scott (Warwickshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 5th August meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website. We welcomed Shireen Mohandes from RealBridge who had come along to give us an update on that platform, and Eddy Blackburn attending from Worcestershire to catch that update.

ITEM 3: Update from RealBridge

2. **SM** (whose slides are provided as Appendix A) first talked through the business model for RealBridge highlighting the fact that its direct customers were organisers of bridge games and teachers, rather than players – so they are working alongside rather than in competition with clubs (unlike other platforms, and this is where they intend to stick). RealBridge has a very international clientele. Prices are per board played and independent of who is organising the game. She explained that RealBridge has adopted an Agile Development methodology which involves regular releases of new features, and that they used widespread consultation and testing to support that. Importantly, they are very conscious of the needs of the playing director and the playing teacher.
3. Points which **SM** mentioned that will be worth remembering included:
 - More use could be made of table notices, for example to announce at the start of a session who won the previous week's game, etc.
 - As well as providing all necessary training for free, RealBridge also provides top-up training and training in IT tools which can be helpful to any bridge organiser – all for free.
 - The ability of the platform to support short games (8 or 12 boards) was an opportunity that clubs might want to take up, making it easier for their members to play when their time availability was limited.

- The TD/teacher has the ability to create a second conversation group at a table, including whoever is appropriate, and being able to give these “private” conversations has proved useful in both playing and teaching contexts.
 - RealBridge is supporting town twinning events (done recently for Cheltenham, with decent publicity at both ends) through the provision of free services for matches between the towns.
4. Noting that there are already a number of features supporting teaching, **SM** described the approach being taken to MiniBridge and offered us a screenshot. The highlights (in this early prototype) included:
- A bidding box in which only MiniBridge contracts were represented (ie one for each denomination at part-score, game, small slam and grand slam level).
 - A display of cards, partner’s face down and yours, which would let you diagnose the size of the available trump fits, without being distracted by the presence orf absence of high cards there.
 - **SM** explained that in Denmark, where masses of teaching happens, they are doing their online teaching on RealBridge, and that includes teaching in schools. They are also investigating an online MiniBridge course. There is some use of RealBridge for teaching in schools in Scotland (and even pockets in England). **FD** pointed out that details of any specific instances could be very useful in marketing the introduction of MiniBridge to schools in this country.
 - Various options were also being considered which would “reward” a player for success in a given contract – as a tool to enthuse both young and adult learners. **SM** reported that the introduction of doubled contracts resonated well with practice in many computer games and was particularly popular amongst the young (and helps with numeracy skills!).
 - The possibility exists of having matches where one table plays MiniBridge and another tables has full bidding and play, a useful tool for integrating newcomers into the game.
5. Other steps being taken in support of teaching include:
- The ability (much appreciated) for a teacher to rewind the bidding or the play to an earlier state, which is ideal when learners have strayed from the planned path.
 - The short format game, as exemplified by the samples produced by Andrew Robson, David Bird and Simon Cocheme was a radical departure from past practice and had proved to be very popular. It was however a lot of work to organise individual deals with multiple learning points and key decisions for the four players, whatever their level of play (as Eddie Kantar has done for the ACBL over the years). When prompted, she suggested that sharing of materials of this nature (ideal for lessons) was a topic for a “trade association” (eg ABTA or EBTA) and not for RealBridge as the platform provider to manage.
 - Investigating theatre-style communications (for which there are varies gotchas still being overcome).

6. In response to questions from a number of those present, **SM** reported that
- She is in regular contact with Giorgio Provenza to address commonality of interests with EBED.
 - Robots have been considered by RealBridge but those commercially available at this time are not the ideal. Until such time as an attractive option arises, RealBridge as a company will focus its bounded resources on the human side of bridge play. Where gaps exist in a tournament, human reserves are often found to be an adequate alternative to using robots, and many players prefer a sit-out to a robot which plays SAYC.
 - Handling triples in Swiss Teams etc: the five possible approaches all have disadvantages and RealBridge is investigating options with Ian McKinnon, and have a movement in mind, but it is not yet implemented.
7. We expressed our great thanks as a bridge community for what RealBridge has brought to us in the past year, and equally our gratitude for her time today to give such an informative briefing.

ITEM 4: New Experiences with Online Bridge

8. We confirmed that there were no experiences yet of the use of Pianola Play.

ITEM 5 : Experience of the return to Face-to-Face Bridge

9. Some who had returned were surprised how normal it felt; **GW** reported that despite the small numbers at Eastbourne, all present were glad of the experience, and only one player is known to have caught Covid during that week (from outside the event). As Eastbourne the ventilation at the venue allowed wide spacing, and few other mitigations were needed.
10. The general impression is that the re-opening of clubs is very gradual. **DB** reported that most Leicestershire clubs plan to restart in September, but the one which had started had not increased its numbers over the past five weeks. **PS** reported that Cheltenham started with a booking system to avoid over-crowding but low numbers led to that being dropped, and then there were two night where two tables more than planned for turned up (and could be handled, as it happens).
11. Clubs are now talking about if/when they drop their online games; a concern was expressed that clubs which do that will lose these players. Getting the right balance of online and face-to-face is vital for the health of both. **PS** suggested the answer is to make face-to-face games special.
12. **MP** reported that in Suffolk most clubs are re-opening in September, and that two were planning hybrid sessions. **KT** said that three clubs in Oxfordshire were playing hybrid sessions using RealBridge. Suffolk had been concerned that the appetite for online bridge might drop, but entries for the online league – about to start a new run – have kept up. **FD** reported that Lincolnshire had decided that their county league would be online by default, but if a team wanted to play face-to-face they could, but would be treated as the AWAY team and be forced to travel. **MT** reported from Warwickshire that September is being chosen as the re-opening month.

13. **JP** reported on Derbyshire's first county night, at which half the pre-Covid turnout was achieved. There had been three free Tuesday evening sessions before that to reintroduce players to the club and other players they had not seen for 18 months; that started with 7 tables and it increased to 9+1 (the +1 being a table of novices playing the same boards but not in the main event) on the other two dates. **PC** reported that from Staffs - most clubs are now holding F2F sessions with numbers much less than pre-covid, the bad news is that currently the numbers don't appear to be creeping up.

14. The pattern of daytime face-to-face games and online in the evening looks set to stay.

ITEM 5: The Future of Teaching

15. **PS**, in a group looking at teaching, had identified two key problems with most teaching – one is that the start time often comes around only once a year, and the other is that the course takes so long to generate a club player. Online approaches solve that. **MW** suggested that hybrid teaching courses were the best opportunity for the future.

16. **SM** reported an earlier experience of clubs coordinating their class commencement, so that for a newcomer who came late, or missed a session, there would be options for joining on a different club's staggered start – and adjusting the pattern later.

17. **FD** reported how a second run of their online course had needed buddies to make up play tables, and players from the first course who were invited to help and did come, found it enormously useful to recap all the material.

ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Online League

18. Three questions needing resolving had been identified for the series starting on 12th September:

- Default configuration for RealBridge games: it was agreed that, unless the two captains agree otherwise (and they are allowed to), the match would be played with self-alerting and screens.
- We noted that investigations in the middle of last season revealed that we could submit the MCOL results for NGS processing, but it was late in the season and we never got started. We confirmed that – mirroring practice in the original MCL – we would not be submitting for NGS this year.
- We noted that the style of scoring is different in the face-to-face matches (multiple cross-imping) from online matches, and agreed it was best just to leave that as it is.

19. We discussed the outstanding MCL match from the 2019-2020 season. Enthusiasm for playing the match varied considerably across the counties, and it was agreed that if the two counties concerned wanted to, they were encouraged to play the match and could do so either face-to-face or online, at a date agreed between them. The counties in contention for a win are likely to proceed.

ITEM 7: The Midlands Counties Restricted Swiss Teams

20. **MW** has produced two flyers – one for the series of events, and one for the immediate event, and these are being delivered with these minutes to the relevant counties. The flyers need to be tailored by the county using them to advertise.

21. **MW** investigated the possibility of Sarah Amos collecting the entry fees for this competition but concluded that it would not be cost-effective to do so, and that arrangements should continue whereby each county coordinates its own entries and submits the fees to the Gloucestershire CBA who manage the fund. This was agreed.

ITEM 8: Round-Robin from Counties

22. The following inputs were received by email

- **HAMPSHIRE:** John Fairhurst reported a number of points
 - i. The Euro qualifier went very well on RealBridge and was easy to follow and was enjoyed.
 - ii. Several clubs are going back F2F with restrictions and the first Hants county event F2F is 3rd October. Basingstoke BC is not at full club capacity for F2F, with the distancing restrictions as people seem to be a bit wary still. Hopefully a club weekend away start of October might kick-start things.
 - iii. One of the flagship clubs in Hampshire, Badger Farm, where a lot of the stronger players chose to go, is closing. This was run by Fred Hotchen who never chose to take the club online. His first few F2F sessions were poorly attended, so with the overhead hall hire charges, he has closed the club.
 - iv. Dorset are doing "Try a 9-high" F2F on 19th September.
 - v. On the teaching front some students from our online course are choosing to learn F2F as it is an overall better experience, and are dropping out of the online learning. Early days.
- **LEICESTERSHIRE:** Dean Benton reports that
 - i. Leicestershire will be holding the AGM on the 15th Sept; initially it was face to face but then LCBA decided to change to Zoom. Most Clubs are starting to go back to face to face except where premises are still not available. Looking at the first sessions, there is a very small number of tables.
 - ii. He noted that UMS-driven LCBA Membership from last year has increased from 833 to 964.
- **DERBYSHIRE:** Jim Parker reported that
 - i. There are still problems in Derbyshire getting enough players to play on RealBridge – only a quarter of County event players who had the offer opted to play in the Edgar Foster on Realbridge. Three regular county players have computers not compatible with the platform, and a married couple that play county events struggle to get their devices far enough apart to play on RealBridge without feedback problems.
 - ii. The county has shut down its BBO events and started playing F2F, but is allowing teams to play their knockout team-of-4 matches online by captains' agreement. The County still very much prefers BBO.

- STAFFS SHROPS: Paul Cutler reported that
 - i. The County AGM is on Zoom this coming Sunday (5th Sept). The County League is staying online for the coming season, and fixtures have just been circulated.
- GLOUCESTERSHIRE: Patrick Shields reported that
 - i. The regular County Monday night games were going to stay online for 2021 but that two weekend dates were being planned for face-to-face games for the same community. The online biweekly Swiss Teams and Swiss Pairs were continuing throughout the autumn.
- WILTSHIRE: Lucy Cross reported that
 - i. Some clubs are now playing F2F, however numbers appear to be down a little. This may be due to summer holidays. Other clubs have postponed returning F2F until September.
 - ii. A new bridge beginners' course is starting in September, to be online using BBO and Zoom, but there will be a F2F meeting prior to the start to ensure everyone is familiar with using the technology.
 - iii. The first County F2F event is due to be on 19th September, but numbers are not looking hopeful despite promotion via email, website, Facebook.

ITEM 9: AOB and NEXT MEETING

23. We agreed that the next meeting will be in five weeks' time, and that our pattern would be the first Thursday of the month, and therefore Thursday 7th October. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES

A business-to-business company

- Our **customers**: Clubs, teachers, independent TDs, Counties, NBOs.
- We **work with clubs**. We're not in competition with them.
- **How many?** 1000+, more than 50 countries. 14 languages now, more in the pipeline.
- Great for **running long/major events**. Out of the 8 zones, 7 are running qualifier events on our platform.
- We are a **British team**, with some contractors in Canada and Italy.
- We run free **junior international** events several times a year, on Sundays.
- Via kind help of Gonzalo Goded, **100% blind people can play** on RealBridge.

Training, consulting, explaining, encouraging

- We at RealBridge **train everyone**, for **free**. Our **website** describes our system. Our **release notes** update the users (customers). **Top up training** is provided.
- Ongoing **consultations** help to shape our product. eg TDs told us "we don't like taking boards away". Seven countries consulted on **Mini Bridge**.
- **New features every 2 to 3 weeks**. We encourage our customers to learn more skills.
- We **always consider the playing director and playing teacher**.

How we help teachers and learners

- We have tools for teaching, right now. And we are adding more.
- Mini Bridge in test today. Can play teams too!
- Further teacher tools coming up soon. Mainly regarding theatre style and two-way communications.

Teaching & learning

- Getting the most out of **supervised practice**. Emphasis on communication.
 - Text announcements
 - Video announcements
 - Private video chat to 1, 2, or all at the table
- Ability to **rewind** one action, back to opening lead, or opening call.
- **Loading teaching hands** via PBN is very easy.
- Using **table notices** to emphasize teaching points.
- Making **short format** games accessible and interesting (reference Andrew Robson, David Bird, Simon Cocheme deals). All free.
- Helping clubs and teachers to **promote themselves**.