



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 21st January at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Avon	Sue O'Hara (SO)	Oxfordshire	Robert Procter (RP)
Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Essex	Cath Fox (CF)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Herefordshire	Keith Stait (KS)	Worcestershire	Mike Vetch (MV)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)

Apologies: Dean Benton (Leicestershire), Mark Goddard (Nottinghamshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 7th January meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3a: Experiences with Online Platforms

2. **PS** reported that on the previous Sunday Gloucestershire & Lincolnshire had run their MCOL match on RealBridge and that this had proven very straightforward, with everything running to time and finishing at 1830 hrs. This involved 12 tables playing 32 boards. The experience has been reported to the MCOL Team Managers, who will decide if and when the league will make any change of platform. Use of RealBridge will require agreement of the Team Managers for the teams involved, who in turn will be consulting their players. Gloucestershire also used RealBridge for its county league (12 tables) the following night.
3. **SO** and **KS** reported that the Western League had their first online session last Saturday on RealBridge and that had not run to time. There were 8 counties involved and 40 foursomes, with each foursome scheduled to play 12 boards against two other foursomes (swapping opponents after each six boards). Contributions to the long waits included a pair not turning up, people not reading/understanding the movement instructions, and people returning to the wrong table after the break. The plan was (too?) ambitious and at times the TDs were overwhelmed with issues to resolve.
4. **MW** asked about playing and non-playing directors; **PS** replied that he had been a playing TD for the MCOL match, and that in RealBridge it is more awkward to avoid seeing the bidding and cards at a table being visited, but that the speed of play at his table and the paucity of calls allowed last Sunday to be problem free. **MP** reported that in Suffolk they had come to believe that a non-playing director is essential.

5. **MW** commented that in using BBO for county matches, some Worcestershire players who regularly use Bridge Club Live found the alerting/announcing differences to be a struggle. **PS** explained that on RealBridge there are two options which can be switched on/off, viz
 - a. Self-announcing of bids (just like on BBO)
 - b. Screens (which when used, from the first bid to the last card hides your partner and one opponent, and you can freely, audibly, explain the bidding to the opponent you can see)

The MCOL match last Sunday had run with both off, which closely simulated face-to-face games, but a number of players found this tricky as they were so accustomed to self-announcing. It was agreed that the extent of the variety of options on offer was bad news, particularly for beginners to the game, and it was suggested that re-iteration of guidance would be a useful habit to get into. It was noted that the plan for the 8-High Swiss Teams is to have screens off and self-announcing optional, and to ask players to be relaxed about the style which their opponents prefer to use.

6. It was noted that a number of iPad users have found RealBridge to be difficult; it was suggested that a Bluetooth mouse was a positive improvement on using “fat fingers” to select cards on the screen. Mention was also made of new “double tap” and the new “double click” options which are being introduced by RealBridge this week. Some competitive players prefer RealBridge because they see cheating as more difficult there.
7. **JF** reported that Basingstoke BC had been using RealBridge for a while, and after teething problems at the start it was now running quite smoothly. Having two Directors helps as the less busy one can deal with issues which arise. Basingstoke BC are trialing use of a RealBridge Lounge which allows any foursome (who have signed up) to drop in anytime during the day and play up to 32 boards in a non-competitive mode. Others are trialing the same, and this form of drop-in, drop-out bridge game could become a part of our future.
8. **JF** noted that typing of names when a player logged into RealBridge was proving too difficult for some, with mistyping and wrong numbers creating a lot more work for the scorers.
9. **MP** reported that the first RealBridge session in Suffolk had received a positive reception, and that the county was planning for use of screens and self-announcing for championship events in Suffolk, but emulating the face-to-face practices for relaxed games.

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

10. There was clearly nobody making plans for this return yet, but **PS** pointed out that clubs cannot expect the same footfall as they had in 2019 once the pandemic disappears, and many will have to re-invent themselves in order to be viable. Online games will continue and we have to work out how best to combine online and face-to-face to satisfy the needs of bridge players. Players will want to return to clubs, but strongly competitive games benefit from the online environment and might stay there. Our current offering, regulations and practices are all geared to the competitive game, but the future will see a greater density of social bridge in face-to-face clubs – an imbalance that we might want to address. Some of the re-invention clubs need should be pondered now, as some aspects may have longer lead times than others.

11. **MP** pointed out that many of his players would rather play online than have winter evening travelling. **MW** noted that the transition to online play was painful, and we should expect that the transition back will be difficult too. We need clubs to be thinking about their viability, and about cooperating (even merging) with other clubs rather than competing with them. Hybrid games (some players online, some face-to-face) are still attractive to some groups and may be necessary in order to achieve a critical mass.
12. While many counties had shunned online games for trophy events, that is now being considered by most. The Corwen and Pachabo and Garden Cities trophies are coming in June, and the EBU will be looking to counties to identify qualifiers. Some counties are preparing for this, but others have not yet started.

ITEM 3c: The Midlands 8-High Swiss Teams

13. **PS** asked about how entries were coming in and reports were noted of some counties with five or six teams coming. We discussed what comes after this event and agreed that options should be put to the field on 30th January to gauge popularity. It was agreed that single session events would prove easier to manage and would be more popular, so we would stick to that rather than a league like the MCOL, and that we would go for a frequency of every two-three months.
14. There was discussion about the NGS-9/T/J players who were interested (but ineligible for this event), and we pondered the creation of two levels of competition, perhaps NGS-2to8 and NGS-8toJ in the future.
15. We noted that no discussion had happened on the Midlands Counties Bowl (usually June/July) and the Edgar Foster Cup (usually September), neither of which had happened in 2020. We agreed that we should initiate planning for these in 2021, in their usual timeslots. The next hosts due in rotation would be Herefordshire and Staffs&Shrops – and we should look to these first to take the lead in managing the 2021 events. Other counties need to start considering how they select/qualify their representation in these games.

ITEM 3b: Follow up from EBED visit and the Future of Teaching

16. **PS** reported that Giorgio Provenza had fed back thanks for being invited to “a stimulating meeting”. We discussed how teaching was going in various counties:
- a. **PC** reported that in Staffs, online teaching was not seen as high priority.
 - b. **MV** and **MW** reported that they were starting up an online course next month, aimed at complete newcomers; they felt it less than ideal but necessary to avoid a shortage of players in years to come.
 - c. **PS** asked if anyone had watched any of the bridge now available on Twitch (see <https://www.twitch.tv/directory/game/Bridge>) but nobody had yet looked.

The importance of online teaching might depend on the final balance between online play and face-to-face play, once the pandemic goes. **CF** reported that she was collecting success stories of online learning, and would welcome more.

ITEM 4: Round-Robin from Counties

17. We received responses of “no change” from Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Worcestershire and at the meeting we learned:

- a. Herefordshire: **KS** reported that the county committee would be meeting next week and discussing all the same topics as we had covered here.
- b. Warwickshire: **MT** reported that the Midlands Counties Congress had a good attendance online this year, and that there was not yet any major RealBridge activity in the county.
- c. Suffolk: **MP** reported that SCBA has held its first event on RealBridge (one of the regular Sunday pairs 20 board sessions) and overall feedback was positive, and one of the four Sunday pairs each month will now be on RealBridge. SCBA is also planning to run relaxed pairs on RealBridge. Several clubs in Suffolk are now trying out RealBridge. The total number of players on line is expected to go up significantly with a combination of BBO and RealBridge.
- d. Oxfordshire: **KT** reported that Oxford BC is running its Gentle Duplicates and Learn&Play sessions on RealBridge and is trialing RealBridge for a full club session. It runs a monthly Multiple Teams on RealBridge as does the OBA.
- e. Staffs & Shrops: **PC** told us that the County KO and County Pairs Championships are now arranged as online games, and one club is using RealBridge in parallel to BBO.
- f. Avon: **SO** reported that Bristol BC moved one of its sessions to RealBridge and a subsequent poll of players showed overwhelming support for moving over.
- g. Hampshire: **JF** reported on the mixing of BBO and RealBridge sessions, including one dual session sharing the same boards. Hampshire CBA is looking to its Green Point congress being online in March (as is Wiltshire).
- h. Essex: **CF** reported that the ECBA is setting up a Youth Bridge site, aiming to help players stuck at home to introduce the game to their grand-children by partnering them in a game. **CF** also reported on work she had been undertaking in creating a calendar to which people could easily add entries and which could be viewed through a variety of filters. We will arrange a demo for the next meeting.
- i. Derbyshire: **JP** reported that in Derbyshire there is nothing happening on RealBridge so the county would resist its use for MCOL. (**PS** suggested that in cases like this CBAs might want to push RealBridge forward so that county players are not disadvantaged in EBU games on that platform). The Spondon centre used by the CBA and three Bridge Clubs is struggling financially, and if there is no return by mid 2021 they may have to sell up. On teaching, there is concern that gaps are widening between the EBED plan when compared with County/Club expectations and plans. JP also reported on issues around kibitzing in a head-to-head match, and on attempts to correct scores after the time limit of 20 minutes which BBO imposes on its scoring system.

ITEM 5: AOB and NEXT MEETING

18. We agreed the next meeting will be in two weeks' time, on Thursday 4th February. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES