



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 4th March at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Avon	Sue O'Hara (SO)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Essex	Cath Fox (CF)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Warwickshire	Myra Scott (MS)
Herefordshire	Keith Stait (KS)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Lincolnshire	Kiat Huang (KH)	Worcestershire	Mike Vetch (MV)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)	Yorkshire	David Guild (DG)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)	Yorkshire	Lesley Millet (LM)
Somerset	Tony Russ (TR)		

Apologies: Jim Parker (Derbyshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We welcomed back David Guild & Lesley Millet from Yorkshire, and for the first time Richard Gwyer from Wiltshire. We approved the minutes from the 18th February meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3a: Learning Bridge in Yorkshire

2. **DG** briefed on a venture which started in YBCA in December 2020, following the recognition that the recent hiatus in teaching (when combined with an ageing population and people getting out of the habit of playing bridge) was likely to lead to a serious drop in the numbers attending bridge clubs in the future. It therefore raises issues about the viability of many clubs.
3. **DG** had been working with the English Bridge School material created by EBED. The lessons, as supplied, are digitised replicas of the face-to-face approach of the Red and Green books, but in that form there are some problems with online usage. In particular, the lesson lengths are too long and they involve switches between lecture mode and other modes, and this mix is very disruptive online. With EBED approval, **DG** has been trimming and tailoring each lesson to be 45 minutes of lecture followed by exercises.
4. The second stage for **DG** was using Jim Edwards' play platform (at bridgeplay.uk/help) built specifically for teaching. It is much easier to use than other platforms, and allows for both mini-bridge and for students kibitzing others. The bridgeplay.uk platform is being given free for the YCBA venture being described, but generally costs a teacher £60 per year (for access for all their students).

5. When exposed in December 2020 to them, it was hoped that the combination of these two would be taken up by teachers in Yorkshire, but the feedback was disappointing. So **DG** proposed a different model based more on university teaching – step one is a lecture to students en masse, and step two is tutorial style, doing Assisted Play in small groups. This model is very attractive to clubs, where teachers might be scarce, but the helpers needed for Assisted Play are more readily available. After negotiations with EBED (who have valid worries about copyright, and their revenue sources) it was agreed the students could have a 12-week voucher if they registered for EBS and that **DG** could use the EBS material in this mode. This would give students a free-of-charge starter.
6. **DG** prepared a guide for Marketing in a Digital Era (included here as Appendix A) and offered a poster creation service which provided clubs (to whom the marketing was delegated) with an eye-catching advert to place on websites and social media (it also reached two local radio stations too). Most clubs were oversubscribed, and numbers have been limited by the availability of helpers for the Assisted Play. Of the 33 clubs under YCBA, 16 took an initial interest and 10 (covering over 50% of the current membership) have stayed the course; a total of 348 students signed up. The number of students has held steady at 350 as the few drop outs have been replaced by clubs from their waiting lists. The first lecture took place on 23 February, three weeks after the start of the advertising campaign, with 310 attendees (next lecture had 272). We anticipate this early days drop being due to the very basic material covered that may be too fundamental for some students. Clubs organised their own Assisted Play sessions, some going immediately after the lecture and some later in the week (with some running multiple Assisted Play sessions).
7. There were considerable administrative overheads in creating this scheme (eg EBED insisted on checking EBS membership against the attendance at the Zoom lectures). Jim Edwards provided intensive training not just for his playing platform, but also for the technology in general for those who were not comfortable with it. Feedback from the clubs has led to each lesson happening twice (Tuesday at 1000 hrs. and repeated at 1800 hrs.). Each lecture is currently delivered by a different (EBTA) teacher, based on a draft prepared by **DG** from the EBED lesson. All these arrangements are free of charge to the club initially, and a discussion on the future funding will take place with the clubs after lesson five.
8. In the discussion the following points emerged,
 - As in much online teaching, the lecturer lacks any direct feedback from the audience.
 - The Google Classroom provided under EBS is a great service but using Google Meet was problematic, and Zoom has been used instead.
 - The plus side of being free-of-charge is the removal of a (perceived) hurdle but there is concern that people will give less respect to a free offering than one they pay for. If the newcomers become regular bridge players, future participation by these people in bridge events will lead to any subsidy being a good investment.
 - It is possible that lessons could be made available to buy online, but EBED are keen to retain ownership, and while agreeing to modifications, EBU and EBED have been careful to retain copyright.

ITEM 3b: Experiences with Online Platforms

9. **KT** reported (re-enforced by **LM**) that while it worked, PianolaPlay was in its very early days and more work was needed before it could become mainstream. There is a plan for PianolaPlay to be integrated with an enhanced Bridgemate (think of it as a scoring tablet at café bridge) to allow sessions which mix players with cards and players connected electronically.
10. It was noted that too many platforms will confuse and may divide the community.

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

11. The first point noted was that there will be a mixed economy of live and online bridge played in the future. **PS** postulated that the balance between the two could well be different for games organised at the international, national, regional, county and club levels. In discussion the following emerged
- In considering hybrid games, the conflict in preferred game lengths (18-20 boards online, 24-27 boards live) was noted as a problem.
 - **LM** voiced the concern that even when it becomes possible, it may take some time to coax many members to return to play in clubs. The issue of appetite to return had been visited in a number of surveys run recently by CBAs but the surveys had not explored the conditions under which people will return, and many months have passed since these took place. **KH** voiced the need to make a positive thrust on membership given the expected drop in numbers.
 - **DB** raised the issue that if footfall is cut by half to accommodate social distancing, then many clubs will find their premises unaffordable. There may well be circumstances where a club's online activities subsidise live play for some years to come.
 - The transition from classroom to clubroom has proved easier for many online than it was live (many messy issues like LOOT are avoided, or perhaps it seems less intimidating this way); is this something to be taken advantage of?

ITEM 3d: The Future of Teaching

12. This had been covered in the earlier discussion, but **KH** reminded us that different age groups often had different learning styles, and we might do better attracting younger players into the game if we could get some of our top youngsters doing the teaching.

ITEM 3e: The Midlands Counties Online League

13. No changes are currently proposed, but we need to start thinking about what will happen to this and the Midlands Counties League in 2021-2022, when live bridge becomes a possibility. **KH** suggested that we ought to be marketing the successful MCOL format to other regions of the country.

ITEM 3f: The Midlands 9-High Swiss Teams

14. In response to two questions, **PS** confirmed that counties should deliver the payments for their teams to the same bank account as used in the last cycle, and said that while we were working with average NGS-grades for a partnership, it had been made that way to accommodate a drift of an NGS-9 into NGS-10, rather than to allow NGS-K to play with an NGS-6.

ITEM 4: Round-Robin from Counties

15. With very little time to spare we heard only from:

- **RG** for Wiltshire: online bridge in the county is very active, and the county is engaged in the Wessex (inter-county) League which now runs online. He pointed out that the Wiltshire Green Point event was this coming weekend; all the arrangements including the collection of entry money are being handled by Gary Conrad. There is a clash with Merseyside events the same weekend, but the Merseyside game seems to be losing out in terms of attendance numbers. Players' attitudes to county loyalty seem unclear. A request to merge the two events was rejected by Merseyside.

16. There was one offline update from Derbyshire: Jim Parker reported that

- Players in Derbyshire are sampling RealBridge and as yet there are no plans to use that platform in the County. The county committee has both RealBridge and F2F bridge are on the Agenda for its 23rd March meeting.
- Teaching in Derbyshire for many years has been privately run in the same Bridge Club that is the home for three Bridge Clubs and the DCBA; this helps students integrate into a club. In the DCBA calendar there is a Play with an Experienced Player game (once a year, early March where students and Experienced players are partnered via a random draw and this often the first bridge event most students play). At the end of their course most students normally choose to enter the DCBA Inter-Club Teams of 8 event and this for many years has been the most popular event in the county.

ITEM 5: AOB and NEXT MEETING

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

END OF MINUTES

APPENDIX A

The Club's Digital Recruitment Campaign For Bridge Beginners 2021

Digital campaigns are of short duration and almost no cost. They can be set up very quickly and have immediate responses.

Whilst the YCBA will carry out County-wide marketing, the campaign success or otherwise is going to depend almost entirely on the local efforts of participating Clubs.

Don't limit your team to the "usual few"; people like to help provided they know their commitment is limited. You need to **ask for help from your members**. This is especially true for the practice-play sessions that follow recruitment; the more "helpers" then the better. Ask early and you will also engage them in the recruitment marketing. Preferably you need a team member with digital familiarity but not an expert.

Success will depend upon the extent that Clubs engage and motivate their own members to communicate the recruitment messages. We know that campaigns are most impacted by "word of mouth" from club members acting as advocates. So, the first Club action is to **send out a members' email(s)** asking your members to spread the word and undertake specific actions.

You will need a **Digital Recruitment Poster** to get your message across. An example is attached which can be converted instantly for use by your Club. Or, you may like to design your own poster. Make sure that you issue the poster in **jpeg format** so that it can be distributed easily.

The poster can then be **placed:**

By your own members who have email addresses via email to their friends. Or by word of mouth.

- **On community chat sites and Facebook pages** . Every village/town has at least one. Your members who live there are best to place the poster. (Barriers occur if from outside). Make sure that you cover all villages and remember you can widen your catchment online.
- Some of your members will be in **Nextdoor.co.uk which is for their local neighbourhood**. Ask them to post the Poster on the site if they are. Also, contact the Nextdoor councillors directly.
- Other members will be in **friendship groups on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp**. Again, ask them to spread the word and the poster. Do not spend on Facebook marketing campaigns.
- Also, members will be in **other social activity clubs** that have a digital presence. Suggest that your members put the poster on their other activities club sites including parish sites.

Make a splash on your own website and, if you have one, your **Club Facebook page** and make sure that you have the contact **unique email address prominently shown for this campaign**. You do not want hits on your General Enquiries system. Place the poster on your home page to achieve this.

The **local press** is hungry for news at present. You have a strong story to tell, Bridge has recently seen major growth online and your offering is ten weeks free to those who want to learn and play. So, try to **have an article published**. A delay to running could be a problem, so, aim for the online version and it may spill over to the paper. You may also get free press advertising. Timing is really important. Also as tempter, float the Club opening post Covid when may need advertising spend.

Local Radio is also hungry for content. York Bridge Club has already had radio interview success and other clubs should follow their lead.

David Guild – January 2021