



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 1st September at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)		
PLUS: Shireen Mohandes (SM, RealBridge), and David & Lesley			
PLUS: Sylvester Riddell from Auckland Bridge Club in New Zealand			
Apologies: Dean Benton (Leicestershire), Lucy Cross (Wiltshire), Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Rob Procter (Oxfordshire), Ian Sidgwick (Gloucestershire), Julia Staniforth (Nottinghamshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 11th August 2022 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3: DEVELOPMENTS AT REALBRIDGE

2. Shireen had come along to brief us today on the latest developments. She highlighted:
 - a. The ability for teachers to illustrate a line of play, by broadcasting their view of a hand-record to all other tables, and then by stepping through the play one card at a time. A pre-defined sequence of play can be included, and moving back to, and forward again from, a selected point is easy. Alongside the video broadcast, this means a teacher can do all that is required without a separate Zoom session.
 - b. The ability to import a result list, to which the current score instances will be added. This allows live merging of sections, but also enables replay of games from history together with the ability to see the scores when the boards were first played. Thousands of board sets are available – from [RealBridge](#) and a variety of other sources, eg [this Dutch site](#), [this Swedish site](#), or [the Vugraph Project](#) which has World Championship material from 1955 onwards. This capability also supports some forms of instant match-pointing.
 - c. The ability to bring spectators to a table without needing to use the TD/dep-TD links. This enables lessons to involve more than four people, as well as allowing teams of more than four to congregate and discuss the boards after play has finished. This has attractions also in support of TD training, and in allowing newcomers or returners to see what an online game looks like.
 - d. The facility to display hands in a meaningful manner, with selected cards highlighted. Examples can be seen at <https://realbridge.online/display-one,-some-or-13-cards.html> and the images can be used in many teaching contexts.

3. Shireen also reported on the enormous variety of takers for RealBridge – from small clubs who could not afford to hire premises, through to the Canadian Championships which were held on RealBridge last year, with considerable savings in travel for many players.

ITEM 4: EBU BOARD OUTPUTS

4. Concern was expressed by **MT** that the most recent consultation from the EBU gave the impression that the decision on the future of One Day Green Point events had already been made (“*When the EBU assumes control of ODGP events*”); this was extremely disconcerting. **PS** suggested that it was just careless wording that caused this. He pointed out that County Associations could still run face-to-face and online games, and could run Green Point events and others, and the proposal was to rule out just one combination – online and Green Point at the same time.
5. In planning its own GP Congress, the new organisers in Gloucestershire were asking why County Associations ran congresses, so that they could test whether the aim was being achieved. Around the table today, the consensus was that the intent has always been to satisfy players’ appetite for a game that was different and more competitive than their club game. More recently these events have become the most significant strand of revenue gathering by many counties, although **PS** indicated that in Gloucestershire regular online games, charging at a rate that matches local clubs rather than at cost, had replaced the congresses in this respect. **FD** reminded us that players were finding commitments to a League, for example, much more difficult these days than in the past, and that can affect the routes available for a player to progress.
6. **PS** had suggested to the EBU Board that “the concept of Regional Counties Working Groups has been overtaken by the quarterly County Chairs meetings and therefore the primary function of the RCWGs is no longer valid” and asked the company for their view of the function of this group. The consensus homed in quickly on the fact of Information Exchange, and its ability to enable small counties to engage with others in thinking about the future, and to enable one county to learn from others. **PS** noted that RCWGs had never been accorded a formal role in EBU decision making, an issue compounded by the fact that there is now only one functioning RCWG, even though it has a wide reach.

ITEM 5: ONLINE BRIDGE

7. The only item to note was the emergence of INTOBRIDGE as a new playing platform, offering free play with audio/video from the Beta Release at this time. **RM** reported looking at an earlier version in the past, at a time the audio/video was quite flaky. We agreed that it would be surprising if the playing population had the appetite to familiarize themselves with a new platform at this time.

ITEM 6: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

8. It was noted that those managing the coming autumn congresses are positive but nervous about likely attendance numbers. **RG** and **PS** confirmed that the thinking on the Wiltshire and Cheltenham Congresses for next year was being based on an appetite lower than before (a position confirmed in NZ by Sylvester), and venues are being selected accordingly. **PS** reported that the Chess world had seen a similar dip in Over-The-Board activity during pandemic but has recovered almost to 2019 levels; a contributor to that recovery is the fact that Chess has confirmed the balance between OTB games and online games many years before, and they were returning to a known position. **SM** noted that some clubs are actively booking off-season hotels for congresses and finding that the demand for these is far greater than for face-to-face club games.

ITEM 7: BRIDGE TEACHING

9. A number of those present reported a surge in the teaching of newcomers, with the majority of that happening face-to-face. **PS** reported that the EBU's Education WG had concluded that to satisfy the demand we want for new players, face-to-face teaching will not cope, and so we must establish a parallel strand with online teaching. **MW** reported that Bewdley was successful in teaching purely online, using RealBridge, and **KT** reported that Oxford Bridge Club had done the same. It was suggested that where online teaching was established it might be possible for them to take on learners associated with clubs which lack teaching.
10. **SM** noted the success of the SBU's Summer School which allowed continued development for newcomers whose classes had ended in the May-June timeframe. This also (to some extent) addresses the issue of losing touch with learners after lessons finish – and important topic for any teachers to consider. **FD** noted that online teaching has a national rather than local flavour to it, and **PS** suggested that involving club players as mentors in any Assisted Play sessions was the way to mitigate that, and to build a relationship between the learners and the club.
11. **FD** reported that three of Northamptonshire's big clubs were running face-to-face courses and they all declined the idea of online learning, for concern that they might then not fill their face-to-face sessions.

ITEMS 8/9: The Midlands Counties Online League & No Fear Swiss Events

12. The MCOL starts later this month.
13. For the No Fear Swiss events still lacks a volunteer to support Mike Willoughby. All counties should be pushing out adverts for the session on Saturday 24th September.

ITEM 10: ROUND ROBIN OF NEWS

14. From those present, in aspects not already covered, we had:
- Sylvester reported that although they had wonderful premises in Auckland, the drop in face-to-face numbers was making that unviable, and they were considering merging premises with another nearby sports club (bowls as it happens).
 - PC** reported that Staffs & Shrops are to hold the County AGM next Sunday on Zoom, and that the County League will be played online in this coming year.

- c. **JF** told us that the experiments with “bridge & chips” (pub lunch with bridge before and after) continues to be amazingly popular. Games built around cake had not proven as popular. Other venues such as curry houses might also welcome this sort of activity.
- d. **FD** asked if anyone had redundant BridgeMates, that might be donated to a Northamptonshire Club which was now trying to move into using this technology.

15. And by email we had one report

- a. Jim Parker from Derbyshire reports that a County/Club meeting has been called for 4th Sept to talk to DCBA affiliated clubs about how county and clubs can work together to help players improve and to play in county/regional/national events. DCBA is also reinstating the inter-club league and take up is about 60% of what we had before Covid.

ITEMS 11/12: AOB and NEXT MEETING

16. **PS** asked if there was any interest in the Facebook Group which was created for the MCWG a few years ago. It was agreed that as a closed group for discussion it was not needed, but that having a Facebook Page, through which clubs in any of our counties could track what the MCWG was doing, would be useful. **PS** will investigate the options.

17. We agreed that the next meeting will be back to the first Thursday of the month, on 6th October, again at 1030. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES