



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 2nd June 2022 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)
Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Myra Scott (MS)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)		

PLUS: Joan Bennett (EBED Youth Lead), Shireen Mohandes (SM, RealBridge), and Douglas Wright (3Counties Bridge)

Apologies: Richard Evans (Suffolk), Rob Procter (Oxfordshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Kathy Talbot (Oxfordshire).

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 5th May 2022 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website. We welcomed three visitors – Joan Bennett following a not-well-informed discussion last time on Youth Bridge, Shireen Mohandes to tell us about RealBridge developments, and Douglas Wright to explain some new attractive competition structures.

ITEM 3: Youth Bridge in England

2. Joan explained how the arrival of Covid meant that all Youth Bridge stopped in March 2020, and that this was followed by EBU cutting their grant to EBED (to 25% of the previous, over that year), and EBED making their youth officer redundant. Keen and established youngsters did organize to play online but a serious number were lost at this point. Joan had been active in Youth Bridge before, and volunteered to help EBED in April 2021, following which this work has become very much a full-time job.
3. In September 2021 a new (online) inter-schools League was started (20 teams then, expected to be 40 this September) and a [Grand Prix Youth championship](#) was established. The three residential Youth weekends have been re-instated, but attendance has been down. There have been some restarts at secondary schools, but primary schools need local support, and lockdown has disrupted the supply of that. As a remedy, Leicestershire has a group of volunteers lined up for training on school's bridge in September, aiming to be able then to run taster sessions in schools. Others interested in doing this should contact joan@ebedcio.org.uk

4. Joan highlighted the following ways in which County Associations could help Youth Bridge in this country:
 - a. Funding for Junior Internationals (and for Junior Squad activities) has been cut and (outside a limited hardship fund) players in Internationals have to be self-financed, a situation which EBED believes is fundamentally wrong. Any donations to EBED (which can be Gift-Aided) which are clearly marked for Youth Bridge would be most helpful in remedying the current position.
 - b. Funding for the three annual residential Bridge Camps. Three CBAs (in the South-East) each provide £500 towards the event in Tunbridge Wells. The event in Cheltenham has been self-financing until this year, where it is hoped that the loss will be covered by Gloucestershire & Oxfordshire CBAs. Some Counties have encouraged participation by covering some of the costs of attendees from their area; offers of this nature could make the difference between someone taking up the game or going elsewhere – so the more County Associations which choose to advertise these weekends and financially support them, the better the chance of the game surviving.
 - c. Spare kit is held by many clubs and County Associations and with face-to-face attendance down a lot is not currently used; if these were gathered and made available to schools starting to play, multiple school start-ups would become more practical. This has been done already in a handful of locations.
 - d. There are only a handful of active County Youth Officers across the country, and a handful of counties which lack one. We need CYOs to be active, particularly in gathering helpers for schools' bridge – who will inevitably mostly come from the larger clubs which have had recent recruitment. There are some hurdles to overcome (DBS checks, learning Safeguarding Processes) before their helpers can be useful, but for clubs which have become a CIO (Charity) supporting Youth Bridge should be part of their remit, and they should be encouraged by their County Association to tackle this.

ITEM 4: Developments at RealBridge

5. Shireen explained that RealBridge had been talking to many people, ranging from individual teachers to NBOs, about potential support for teaching and over the next release and the one following, there will be a number of new features. Documentation on all of these will appear on <https://realbridge.online/for-teachers.html> as the features get released. The core driver for these features is to enable more straightforward interaction between a teacher and a multiplicity of tables of players.
6. The new features are intended to complement rather than replace the existing five modes of communication which already exist (three forms of broadcast, two forms of messaging). These are:
 - a. Sharing screens, windows or browser tabs, very much in the same style as Zoom allows, but also including an option for subtitles that can be switched on to allow deaf participants to be aware of what is being said.
 - b. The introduction of a "Top Table" to which up to four can be invited, and which is visible to players at all the other tables (who have the ability also to send messages to the Top Table) and from which demonstrations can take place.

- c. Demonstrating a hand, which comes in two modes, either allowing the teacher full control over each step of the play, or using a pre-recorded sequence (in the loaded PBN file) to allow that to happen reliably with less effort. The teacher has options to rotate the table and to hide individual hands, for when that is useful.
7. Tutorials on these new features will be made available, through a 40-minute class covering RealBridge and MiniBridge – [details here](#).
 8. Shireen asked that County Associations advertise these opportunities to their teachers, and expressed the hope that where learners were widely distributed geographically, that this form of online teaching would be an approach a CBA might find attractive.

ITEM 5: Developments at 3 Counties Bridge

9. Douglas explained that he ran a teaching school at 3 Counties Bridge, teaching beginners and improvers, face-to-face and online (using Zoom and Shark Bridge). The school has always believed that teams matches is the best way to introduce new players to the competitive game, and for years they have provided newcomers to the bottom divisions of the Surrey Leagues. When Covid came, these matches moved online, initially to Bridge Club Live, and later to RealBridge. Two innovative services, which could be useful elsewhere, have recently been developed:
 - a. The “Snakes & Ladders” competition, which records the VP result of a match on a Snakes & Ladders board and plots the team position accordingly. An example can be found on the www.3countiesbridge.com website. Teams can arrange matches with whatever opposition they choose, as often as they like, and all have an independent chance of progressing to the top of the board.
 - b. An initiative called “Try Teams” which looks to foursomes who have a game arranged, and encourages them to [register their plans](#); foursomes running in the same timeslot are paired up to generate a match between two teams (on RealBridge). The result of the match (travellers etc) can then be recorded on the website, and a review of the hands played can be organized. Starting small – with just 8-board matches – is considered necessary. This approach can bring together players from many different contexts (affiliated and non-affiliated clubs, and kitchen bridge). Douglas is happy for foursomes from elsewhere to join in – please contact him on douglaswright@3countiesbridge.com, if you are interested.
10. The discussion moved onto the position of Teams play in the learner space. **PS** noted how most teaching clubs are biased towards match-points, and commented on how Teams play and teams results were much simpler than the match-point equivalents, a Good Thing for learners but perhaps reflecting the suggestion that “imps play is a lazy person’s bridge”. **JF** noted the success of some (eg Berks & Bucks CBA) in arranging Team-of-8 Leagues, while others find these very difficult to organize.

ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Online League

11. No changes to the 2022-2023 plans for the league were identified, and we agreed to run with the same arrangements as for 2021-2022, noting that
 - a. the event would be on the second Sunday of the month except for November (one week later because of the Tollemache) and January (one week later because of the Midlands Congress).

- b. Counties would be encouraged, particularly with neighboring counties, to try to make the match happen face-to-face.

12. The schedule, with home team names first, is

Date	11-Sep	09-Oct	20-Nov	11-Dec	15-Jan	12-Feb	12-Mar
Fixtures	GL-DE	NO-GL	WA-DE	LE-DE	LE-GL	SS-DE	OX-GL
	WA-LE	DE-OX	OX-LE	WA-GL	DE-NO	NO-LE	LE-SS
	SS-NO	SS-WA	WO-NO	NO-OX	OX-SS	WA-OX	NO-WA
	WO-OX	LE-WO	GL-SS	SS-WO	WO-WA	GL-WO	DE-WO

ITEM 7: AOB

13. Shireen told us that a bi-monthly game is organized on RealBridge for U3A bridge clubs all over the country.

14. **MS** reminded that there is a [Teacher Training course being run by EBED](#) on 02-03 July at the West Midlands Bridge Club in Solihull. More participants would be welcome.

15. Reports received by email:

- a. Jim Parker from Derbyshire: DCBA is planning to run the inter-club teams-of-8 event F2F starting in October. RealBridge is still not popular in Derbyshire and no players have accepted the invitations to play in the Corwen or Pachabo events. For the MCL, Derbyshire are happy to play F2F or on BBO.
- b. Mike Thorley from Warwickshire: the future for several of the WCBA smaller clubs' viability is of some concern, and two have indicated that unless numbers improve, they can foresee closure within the next 6-12 months. Another with reasonable reserves will continue playing until these are run down. A very worrying situation. Larger clubs are not attracting anywhere near the number of competitive players that they did in the past.

ITEM 8: NEXT MEETING

16. We agreed that the next meeting will be in accordance with our pattern of first Thursday of the month, and therefore Thursday 7th July 2022. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES