



# NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call  
on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2022 at 10.30am

## PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC) ✓
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Somerset	Tony Russ (TR)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)		

**Apologies:** Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Rob Procter (Oxfordshire), Malcolm Pryor (Suffolk), Keith Stait (Herefordshire).

**CHAIR:** Patrick Shields

## ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 6<sup>th</sup> January 2022 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website. **PS** reported from Malcolm Pryor that he will be standing down from Suffolk CBA shortly (off to live in Devon) and will be replaced by Richard Evans; Malcolm wished to express his thanks to all MCWG membership for what has been “a fantastic medium for sharing ideas and best practice, particularly over the extraordinary times we have seen recently”.

## ITEM 3: New Experiences with Online Bridge

2. It was noted that StepBridge is (inevitably) changing from a free-to-play platform (4 days every week under the WBU, and more) into a pay-for-play platform, along the lines of BBO competitions. **PS** reported that some new kibitzing capabilities were now becoming available, both on RealBridge (ability for voice over, etc) and on BBO (delayed vugraph).

## ITEM 4: Experience of the return to Face-to-Face Bridge

3. **PS** reported that he had just experienced three days of face-to-face bridge and found the return to a clubroom easier than expected. The general experience was that a number of clubs are returning but that they are all struggling to get the numbers they had obtained in pre-Covid days. **KT** pointed out that where numbers are low, players will often self-select to play somewhere else. A number of areas reported a bias of daytime for live sessions, and an online preference in the evening (which can be awkward for those at work). **MT** confirmed that West Midlands BC is not achieving the colossal numbers in attendance that it used to achieve. For most clubs, online games are more profitable than live games, and will often be subsidizing them. A club with its own premises might expand into other mind sports (as where Basingstoke shared with the Chess Club). **GW** reported how much the players at a recent holiday had enjoyed the live bridge, but this had not created the urge in them to return to live games at bridge clubs.

4. **PS** made the point that live bridge clubs provide two services – organizing duplicate bridge, and allowing people to socialize. For different people one or other aspect might be a lot more important than the other. The absence of some better players from the restart of face-to-face might reflect the relatively greater importance of the organized game for them – something they can obtain easily online. **RM** suggested that while a number of clubs are managing to survive post-Covid, the quality of bridge is lower than it once was.

#### **ITEM 5: The Future of Teaching**

5. **IS** noted that a delay had been announced in the plans for Smart Bridge (the new EBED product, a 12-week course with pre-learning, Zoom session and a post-lesson play on RealBridge) which would not be available for general use until the end of summer 2022. **TR** & **GW** have attended one of the trial lessons, and relayed a request for helpers for the Smart Bridge project – proof-reading and the ability to create PPT shows were the key needs. Any candidate students for the second trial run (starting late April) would also be welcome.

#### **ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Online League**

6. **PS** confirmed that where teams are playing the match on BBO, then the spreadsheet [at this link](#) is still in use, and asked what the expectations were for the future of inter-county leagues. Uncertainty about how quickly face-to-face returns was raised as an issue; if online continues then a national league (taken up by many other sports) becomes an option – but not all counties favoured that. The fact that the relevant players have only so much appetite/time for inter-county games means that a multiple inter-county league is not viable, and there is the impact on club activity to be considered if more county-led games are created. [LATER NOTE: the leagues from the 2019-2020 season have now been finalized and the bills will be delivered to the participating counties shortly].

#### **ITEM 7: The Midlands Counties Restricted Swiss Teams**

7. Although there were some concerns about numbers, we had 15 teams from 10 counties for the January 29<sup>th</sup> game and it was much appreciated by all who played. Because of the sit-out it was run as 8\*3-board rounds, and that worked well. It was agreed that a 6-high game next was too risky (numbers-wise) and that we would make it also a 9-high game but that this will be a Swiss Pairs game, for variety and to make it easier for players to organize entries. We have a new treasurer (Dennis from Worcestershire, for which many thanks) and the handover is being organized. Many thanks to Mike Wignall from Gloucestershire for the past two years of service. **MW** will prepare a flyer for the next game and circulate it shortly.

#### **ITEM 8: TD Training**

8. **PS** reported that the question had been raised – do we have a need for (formal) TD training in the Midlands? **KT** reported that Oxford BC had run a refresher course for existing TDs, and **GW** reported that – following an initiative in Somerset – she was in conversation with Richard Banbury about a TD & Scorer refresher course. Little appetite for a course was identified.

#### **ITEM 9: EBU County Meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb**

9. **TR** explained how, in an effort to help EBU-central communicate better with County Associations, an EBU Director has been assigned to be a buddy for each CBA, and a six-monthly County Association meeting being run by the CBAs has been established, starting with a meeting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February. The coordination committee for the coming meeting includes **KT**, who explained that the agenda will be settled in the next few days – but that how to help the restart of face-to-face might well be a top priority.

## **ITEM 10: Round-Robin from Counties**

10. A quick run round the table identified the following items which had not arisen in the earlier discussion
- a. **TR** reported that alongside half the clubs in Somerset playing face-to-face (and some doing online as well), the Somerset Barbarians online club created early in the pandemic continues to thrive.
  - b. **DB** reported that Leicestershire is proceeding with its face-to-face Green Point Swiss Pairs on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> March, and that the County Association is active on the question of engagement with non-Affiliated clubs.
11. Offline reports were
- a. Keith Stait from Herefordshire: the 6 active clubs have been running 2 sessions online and 8 of F2F each week, from now online sessions hosted by Ross will revert to F2F. One of the clubs who suspended activities has scheduled a meeting in March to discuss whether and when they should restart. The county association has continued its weekly online session. The Championship Pairs event (qualifier for the Corwen) will be F2F and has been scheduled for Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> March. Interest in a Teams of Eight competition (qualifying for the Garden Cities competition) is being sought. An initial series of 10 tuition classes for Novices / Beginners commencing immediately after Easter has been arranged. Interest has been encouraging with 14 applications confirmed to date.
  - b. Jim Parker from Derbyshire: things in Derbyshire are still very much F2F orientated. DCBA held the County Pairs event at the weekend and managed 12 tables (8 in the county pairs; 4 in the consolation plate). Next week, DCBA is holding a play-with-an-experienced-player event as an introduction for beginners to competitive bridge; although it has been a struggle, some willing students have been found.
  - c. **RG** from Wiltshire: in response to low numbers committing, the County GP events (due 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> March) have been moved online (to RealBridge), and have received a flurry of entries since that was announced. Wiltshire welcomes entries. [Details here](#).
  - d. **MT** from Warwickshire: the number of smaller clubs having reduced numbers of tables at face-to-face sessions is worrying: several have suspended sessions, and some are running with numbers which cannot be economically viable in the long term. Scrutiny of results from face-to-face sessions suggest that many of the County's top players are not participating in face-to-face sessions: this is a concern.

## **ITEM 12: AOB and NEXT MEETING**

12. We agreed that the next meeting will be in accordance with our pattern of first Thursday of the month; next month's will be on Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> Marchy 2022. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES