



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 3rd March 2022 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)

Apologies: Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Kathy Talbot (Oxfordshire), Malcolm Pryor (Suffolk), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), John Fairhurst (Hampshire), Dean Benton (Leicestershire), Ian Sidgwick (Gloucestershire), Lucy Cross (Wiltshire), Rodney Mitchell (Lincolnshire).

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 3rd February 2022 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3: New Experiences with Online Bridge

2. We discussed the value of exchanging System Cards when playing online bridge; it is an option used primarily in County matches and little elsewhere. With announcing of bids, the only really relevant part is the carding agreements.
3. In response to a question, nobody could identify any current users of Pianola Play (the hybrid capability offered by Pianola). We have heard that RealBridge is to introduce a mechanism to handle triples (triellas) in Swiss Teams events, which will make that platform more attractive for such games in the future. We noted that Bridge + More (the desktop dealing machines) have been developing over the past two years, but remain incompatible with English scoring systems and so have not been taken up in this country. We heard a report of one (admittedly small) club which was playing face-to-face but with tablets rather than cards.

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

4. The impression (anecdotal and local, no EBU-wide numbers being available) reported by multiple attendees was that numbers had risen slowly but had now plateaued and were generally about 33% of the numbers common pre-Covid. Our lack of knowledge about seasonal effects (which have probably changed anyway) makes this difficult to interpret. **PS** also reported a drop in the numbers at GCBA online events, which he attributed to the greater number of online offerings available in 2022 compared to 2021 and 2020.
5. Nobody felt able to forecast what numbers would be like in six months' time, and the most preferred choice of venue type for an October congress was unclear. Leicestershire CBA has just cancelled its planned live congress (5th March), but the Manchester game the same day has the 12-tables of entries which the venue can accommodate and will proceed. **PS** indicated the Gloucestershire plan to continue primarily online but try (from say June) to introduce a monthly face-to-face game.

6. It was noted that the top players were often missing from the return to live bridge, and questions were arising as to how to maintain a sense of community amongst this group. It might be that groups of adjacent counties will need to work together to generate the critical mass for a game at times. It was suggested that a continuation of this trend would make the EBU's UMS model unviable.

ITEM 5: The Future of Teaching

7. **PS** noted that the work on SmartBridge continues, and that Kent CBA is engaged in the pilot county rollout. The SmartBridge concept builds on the Yorkshire CBA experience – the core differences being the technology in use (Zoom rather than Google Classroom), that the course is much shorter, and that recordings of it are to be available. Yorkshire CBA has now produced a second course for which recordings are available.

ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Online League

8. **PS** suggested that now was the time to start consulting with players, with a view to a discussion at the MCWG in May and a decision on the next season in June. Those present concurred. It was noted that most counties had some 2019 MCL players who did not play online, and some online players who will not return to face-to-face. **RP** made a plea for an online National Inter-Counties League.
9. [LATER: all MCL fees for the two outstanding years have now been paid by all counties]

ITEM 7: The Midlands Counties Restricted Events

10. Some uncertainty was expressed about the level of enthusiasm we will find for the 9-High Swiss Pairs game on 26th March, but there was also some positive feedback. [It was noted that while the higher ranks in the Ranked Master Pairs had numbers close to those of 2021, in the Masters Pairs the numbers were massively down – which was concerning]

ITEM 8: EBU County Meeting on 23rd Feb

11. The meeting was deemed useful, but there were no matters arising to discuss here.

ITEM 9: EBU County Meeting on 23rd Feb

12. **PS** raised the question of where we thought Duplicate Bridge would be in five to ten years' time; he explained we could not expect any answer at this time, but given the pace of technology over the past two years and the fact that much work is ongoing, should we be thinking about this now rather than drifting into a future we do not control or guide? One question being asked is "do we expect to be handling physical cards in bridge clubs in the medium term future?".

ITEM 10: Round-Robin from Counties

13. A quick run round the table identified the following items which had not arisen in the earlier discussion
- a. **RP** reported that Oxfordshire had adopted the Pairs League format in use for the past 18 months in Gloucestershire, and asked about the optimal division size. **PS** reported that GCBA has started with divisions of six, but moved to eight and feel that is best – larger sizes would average the scores over more tables but then mixed standards contribute to your result, and the fluidity that divisions of eight give is found to be attractive.

- b. **PC** reminded us of the [Staffs & Shropshire Congress](#) coming on 23-24 April. Clubs in the county are continuing to run online games, and the County is running a Wednesday evening online game and obtaining 9 tables (not achievable in F2F days).
- c. **PS** reported that at Cheltenham Bridge Club there was a waiting list for lessons, suggesting that there was demand out there if it can be found. He also reported that CBC has a group looking at its long term strategy; one question emerging is what the online profile should be in the future – one extreme being just enough to support the club members who cannot attend live games, the other being running games open to the whole world. What target do you set and what does that mean for the concept of club membership and a volunteer community?

14. Offline reports were:

- a. John Fairhurst from Hampshire: the County is still struggling whether to make competitions F2F or online. At the moment County events and competitions still online. Most clubs in the area have introduced at least one F2F session in their calendar while retaining online games also. The return to F2F still quite sluggish. John has been invited to play on a new platform, [IntoBridge](#), from New Tricks.
- b. Keith Stait from Herefordshire: six clubs are continuing with F2F, but most are experiencing reduced numbers. A number of County events are scheduled to be face-to-face over the next two months.
- c. Jim Parker from Derbyshire: no changes - county F2F sessions continue and there is a full county calendar until Sept. He noted that LCBA v NCBA match in the MCOL was planned as a face-to-face game but one team cannot fill that and so it will be online. Eight regulars at Spondon BC face-to-face games have tested positive for Covid in the past week.
- d. **RG** from Wiltshire: the entry for the online GP event this coming week-end (100+ Pairs, and almost as many players for Teams) looks good, and there are two F2F county events in the next few weeks to round off the season. More clubs are getting back to play F2F with members gradually returning, but not necessarily in the same numbers. A survey of the wishes of members for future events has been undertaken, which together with feedback at the AGM in April will help determine the balance between F2F and On-line events in the autumn and beyond.

ITEM 12: AOB and NEXT MEETING

15. We noted that YCBC (live) and Manchester Events (on RealBridge) are holding fund raising events in support of Ukraine on Sunday 6th March – the EBU position and links to these events (and any others which emerge) are available from <https://www.ebu.co.uk/article/statements-about-ukraine>.

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

END OF MINUTES