



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 7th April 2022 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Somerset	Tony Russ (TR)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Suffolk	Richard Evans (RE)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)		

Apologies: Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Malcolm Pryor (Suffolk), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Gayle Webb & Richard Gwyer (Wiltshire).

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 3rd March 2022 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website. We welcomed Richard Evans replacing Malcolm Pryor as the Suffolk representative.

ITEM 3: New Experiences with Online Bridge

2. There was little news on the new [INTOBRIDGE platform](#); **JF** reported that the invites he had received had not proved convenient, and **PS** reported that it has been discussed/announced on [Bridgewinners](#).
3. There have been further developments at RealBridge and some seminars this week, but nobody was able to report on the latest changes.
4. There is a general picture of numbers dropping off. **MT** reported numbers well down in the Warwickshire Garden Cities qualifying event.

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

5. The reports of returns to live bridge were mixed -
 - a. **RE** reported that Ipswich BC was restarting face-to-face and of another club whose break for refreshments mid-game had made its live games very successful. **MW** reported good attendance at daytime live events. **JF** reported U3A gatherings for live bridge were going well (despite a spread of Covid, a pause, and a restart). **DB** reported that his club's new social (Chicago) bridge session was face-to-face, and well supported.
 - b. **RE** also reported on some clubs closing for lack of numbers. **JF** identified some clubs struggling for numbers. The EBU is scaling back on its plans for live events, because of the danger of a serious financial loss at these (Easter Congress in a smaller space at the same venue, Summer Congress now 4 days and not 10 days).

6. We discussed how this club-oriented picture translates into County activities. **MW** indicated that Worcestershire still had a dilemma about their October congress. Leicestershire CBA had run its first social bridge event live and this was well attended. While clubs might well refocus themselves on the social trimmings associated with Duplicate Bridge, and build a following from that, the more competitive players for whom the County Associations usually run games are both less attracted by that aspect and have more to gain (record keeping, analysis tools) from online games. Whether congresses as we knew them will ever return is unclear. The suggestion was made that there might be an excess of supply over demand for the competitive community; the idea of pruning programs was suggested (something Suffolk CBA has already done).
7. **PS** pointed out that national Knock-Out events had taken a big hit with Covid, and that in the last year entries were only about 50% of the pre-Covid numbers – even though the fact of online play made matches easier to arrange. It was suggested that one cause might be that the lack of personal interaction in online games took away the opportunities from players to discuss forming teams for these events. Within Gloucestershire, discussions on how to persuade a greater involvement in the NICKO is underway – any ideas welcome.

ITEM 5: The Future of Teaching

8. A number of ongoing courses were mentioned, and **DB** reported on an effort in Leicestershire (which benefits from the presence of Paul Bowyer) to massively increase the numbers and presence of teachers in bridge clubs.
9. We discussed how quickly newcomers transition into independent play. While there was the occasional exception, it was felt that most instances of Bridge-in-a-Weekend, or a first 10-lesson course based on the Red Book, only acted as mechanisms to get people enthused about the game and they never became club players until further courses had been attended. Advertising “Year One” and “Year Two” as courses is deemed to be off-putting to a newcomer; **TR** advised breaking it up into smaller chunks and marketing these one at a time.
10. We discussed how most of us had learned the game without any lessons – primarily by playing, talking to others and reading. It was agreed that an older generation of learners might naturally prefer structured lessons to that approach – but that it was really when thrown into a club environment that we see the fastest development of a player’s skill.
11. A problem with many sequences of lessons is the lack of bridge activity in between lessons, something which online play could help to remedy. **JF** reported that Basingstoke send regular quizzes etc to learners to work through between lessons.
12. **RE** reported that he had made very successful use of the [Zeb Stocken](#) set of bridge teaching materials, including the Compass Cards. There is a price to pay but it has provided a very worthwhile investment over the years.

ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Online League

13. **PS** reminded those present 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.
14. The fact that the [National Inter-County League Playoffs](#) were happening online this year, and pulling in winners from two years of competition, was noted. Warwickshire CBA have taken ownership of the event, and Ian Mitchell is running it. The entry fee is £100 per team and there is prize money of £120 and £80 to the leading teams in each division of 6 teams. Some disquiet was expressed at the amounts involved, which **MT** noted.

ITEM 7: The Midlands Counties Restricted Events

15. **MW** reported the event on 26th March has been successful with 31 pairs partaking (and 11 of them from Worcestershire) – smaller than in the first days of lockdown but well worthwhile. It was agreed that as we go forward:
- a. Although some Counties have some restricted-NGS events of their own, most do not and this series provided a critical mass for these games which one county cannot supply.
 - b. The series will run Winter only, with the next game in September.
 - c. We will look into making the event monthly, to keep the 9-High limit, and to retain a mix of Pairs and Teams events.

ITEM 8: Round-Robin from Counties

16. A quick run round the table identified the following items which had not arisen in the earlier discussion
- a. **MW** reported on recent success in managing the classroom to clubroom transition for recent learners.
 - b. **RM** reported that Lincolnshire has no teaching happening but their recent championship teams had the largest entry in recent years.
 - c. **IS** reported that Gloucestershire CBA is looking at a mix of online and face-to-face events as it moves forward, and that he has organized a gathering for clubs in one corner of the County for next Sunday to talk about bridge futures and to distribute the EBU marketing materials.
 - d. **JF** told us that the Hampshire Green Point weekend took place recently, online, with 32 tables compared with 40 the previous year.
 - e. **DB** reported that the County Association now has a new and dynamic chair to the Education Committee.
17. Offline reports were
- a. Jim Parker from Derbyshire: F2F continues to grow in popularity and all but 3 affiliated clubs have returned to the bridge club. Three clubs are keeping their successful BBO club sessions going whilst holding separate F2F sessions. One club that has fewer attending F2F sessions than their BBO club night has intimated they will be seriously looking at running hybrid events at some point in the future. The County have just started their Summer Swiss event (12 events run fortnightly) and twelve teams played in the first round.
 - b. **MT** from Warwickshire: WCBA is sorry to have to report the passing of John Pyner, one of the stalwart members, a well-known National Tournament Director who was heavily involved in TD training. There does not seem to be any significant upturn in the numbers attending face-to-face sessions at many of our clubs: whether the recent sharp increase in Covid-19 numbers is a contributory factor is difficult to assess.

ITEM 12: AOB and NEXT MEETING

18. **PS** relayed word from the editor of EBU News that articles from any County which were of general interest to the playing population, would be warmly received.
19. **TR** reported on discussions he had been undertaking with other Mind Sports (and Croquet) about cross advertising each other's activities – links on websites, articles in magazines, etc. This is looking attractive, and could be beneficial if mirrored at the County or even more local level. It was noted that there are instances of venue sharing between Mind Sports already, such as Go being played at the Young Chelsea Bridge Club. **RE** commented on Suffolk plans for a joint bridge/golf event in the future.
20. We agreed that the next meeting will be in accordance with our pattern of first Thursday of the month, and therefore Thursday 5th May 2022. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES