



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

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

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Nottinghamshire	Julia Staniforth (JS)		
PLUS: Douglas Wright (3Counties Bridge)			
Apologies: Dean Benton (Leicestershire), Lucy Cross (Wiltshire), Richard Evans (Suffolk), John Fairhurst (Hampshire), Richard Gwyer (Wiltshire), Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Rob Procter (Oxfordshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Mike Willoughby (Worcestershire)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 7th June 2022 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website. We welcomed a repeat visitor - Douglas Wright from 3CountiesBridge (a teaching school focused on Hampshire, Surrey, and Sussex).

ITEM 3: BRIDGEWHIZ

2. Douglas Wright has been engaged with the BridgeWhiz programme for the past year and explained to us what it was about. It is an online teaching course built for teaching youngsters, best suited to the 11-15 age group, and is designed to fit into an after-school timetable. It was initially developed by Al Bender in California and has been taken up by the ACBL Education Foundation. It is offered free in North America, although there the ACBLEF pays the teachers. The course is based on 5-card majors - an approach which is increasingly common in this country (and online), and which is less of a downside than some might think.
3. A key problem with schools' bridge in this country is that when a Primary School class learns to play but then gets dispersed into Senior Schools, the bridge activity disappears. With the online focus, this approach offers the chance for those learners to continue after changing school, ie as year 7 pupils. Recruitment of players is done by contacting parents via schools, and asking the parents to sign up their children. Having a parent or teacher "[ambassador](#)" is still important, but this is not as large a task as in the face-to-face class approach. A champion within the school is a great help to ensure continuity.
4. The 'Basic Bridge' course (there is also 'Improvers', and 'Intermediate' is being developed) of BridgeWhiz covers 21 lessons, and these mostly comprise active participation by the students, using Shark Bridge. Shark Bridge makes it very easy to give all participants the same problem hand at the same time. The lessons are supplemented by pre-class recordings and post-class handouts; Douglas also uses NoFear Bridge for activity between lessons. In the US, over 2000 students were recruited last year (with 49 classes); there is currently quite a high attrition rate but ways to mitigate this are being investigated.

5. Douglas is leading the introduction of BridgeWhiz in the UK, and has used it himself for a year. The intent for the coming year is to offer 8 parallel courses, with 2 classes on each of Monday through Thursday (1630-1800), for newcomers and for people who have learned MiniBridge at Primary School. The effort needs multiple teachers (two per class per day), either delivering this for the benefit of the game, or paid perhaps by the EBU or EBED (who cannot afford this) or by County Associations. There is a well-defined process for the training and accreditation of teachers involved in BridgeWhiz. The teacher needs good quality IT facilities, but nothing unusual. A safe play environment for learners is also provided.

ANYONE INTERESTED IN BECOMING A BRIDGEWHIZ TEACHER
SHOULD CONTACT DOUGLAS ON douglaswright@3countiesbridge.com

6. **KT** asked about course use with adults, and Douglas reported that he has used the SharkBridge teaching console with multiple classes in the period since the pandemic, and that has worked well. Douglas offered to share the templates he has for showing local face-to-face teaching by days of the week, and suggested that an online equivalent, coordinated across counties, could be a very useful tool. **PS** commented that while most learning is naturally club oriented, teaching youngsters needs to be County-driven.

ITEM 4: ONLINE BRIDGE

7. It was agreed that we seemed to have reached a steady state, with a decent number of online games on BBO and on RealBridge (and some on BCL) and it was likely to stay that way from now on. None of those represented could report on any use of robot bridge games. **PS** and **PC** reported discovering lots of casual BBO play taking place by club members – the flexibility of dropping into games seems to be appreciated.
8. **PS** reported that the latest “hack” from BBO (using “+hd” in the instructions) would cause the human to be swapped from dummy to declarer when their robot partner had won the contract (a feature Shark Bridge has always had). This might make partnering a robot more attractive. **JS** noted that some players’ dislike of robots was being addressed by the gradual drift towards RealBridge.

ITEM 5: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

9. The general picture is a continued gradual increase in numbers playing face-to-face, but the UMS numbers for that are still slightly less than for online games (and together they are about 85% of pre-Covid levels). **FD** reported a clear difference in the club’s confidence level depending on whether they were small or large.
10. **JS** noted that the Yorkshire CBA had run their congress successfully (12 tables and then 15 tables, at York Bridge Club) and that Oliver Cowan had also been successful with face-to-face weekend events.
11. The prices of face-to-face one-day Green Point events was much higher than people have been paying recently, and could represent a problem. **KT** reported that even online ODGP events are sometimes a poor return on the amount of volunteer effort they absorb. It was suggested that the EBU plans for increasing GP licence fees is an unsustainable model, as the price increases will drive people away from these games.

ITEM 6: BRIDGE TEACHING

12. Douglas made an offer to run a familiarization session (followed by training if wanted) on [SHARK BRIDGE](#), which he has been using for almost two years. We agreed that would be worthwhile, and – despite the short notice – decided that we should go ahead with this on Friday 15th July (to allow for time for full training, before use in anger in September).
13. **KT** reported that Oxford BC do teaching both online and face-to-face, but the other parties present only saw face-to-face teaching happening in their area.
14. When asked whether we have enough bridge teachers there was a mixed response, suggesting that some parts of the country are in a different place to others. Cooperation between teachers, which is now being seen in some places, is much preferred to a sense of competition between teachers.
15. We discussed funding of Youth Bridge, **PS** noting that two County Associations and one club have made useful contributions to the [EBU's fund raising venture](#). **KT** noted that Oxfordshire is planning a fund-raising venture for Youth Bridge.

ITEM 7: The Midlands Counties Online League & No Fear Swiss Events

16. We noted that plans for the MCOL have been agreed. We pondered the need for friendly inter-county matches, to allow a wide range of abilities to contribute, but decided to focus those players on the No Fear Swiss games which we are also organizing. Douglas told us that Surrey & Yorkshire run an inter-county event with the full range of standards; it was felt that the size of those counties made that a lot easier than it was for some others.
17. We confirmed our intention to run No Fear Swiss on the last Saturday of September (Pairs), October (Teams) and November (Pairs). We will ask Mike Willoughby if he is willing to continue as organizer for this, and once supplied with an advert, we will all undertake to drive up entries.

ITEM 8 ROUND ROBIN OF NEWS

18. From those present, in aspects not already covered, we had
 - a. Nottinghamshire: **JS** reported that the County Association and some clubs had been struggling, but new volunteers are now active and activity levels should increase.
 - b. Oxfordshire: **KT** reported that there had been some calls for help from clubs in Oxfordshire and the OBA was in discussion with them now.
 - c. Lincolnshire: **RM** reported that – working with Charlie Bucknell – the County Association was aiming to help mid-level players improve, using weekend events and Zoom reviews following playing sessions. **KT** reminded us that [Oxford BC has a very good model](#) in place for learning at all levels.
 - d. Staffs: **PC** reported that the County had run its first live event and achieved numbers very similar to pre-pandemic days. It looks, however, as if the Staffs & Shrops League will be online again in the season coming.

- e. Gloucestershire: **PS** reported that the current GCBA Monday night games were running three times a month online, and once a month face-to-face. In the autumn a similar pattern, with possibly one more night each month running live (or at least with a live option) is expected.

19. By email we received reports that

- a. Wiltshire (from Lucy Cross & Richard Gwyer): there is a slow return to face-to-face bridge, and some clubs are still offering online games but even those numbers are smaller than before. There are several bridge courses starting in the autumn and hopefully this will encourage more people to take up duplicate bridge. The CBA has a mix of F2F and online events planned for the coming season.
- b. Derbyshire (from Jim Parker): the County had 13 teams of four playing last night live in the Summer Swiss Teams (3 others took one of their three options to skip a session). With that successful return, it is now very difficult for Derbyshire to introduce RealBridge. The committee meets on 14th July to formulate the full 2022-23 F2F calendar (Sept-Aug).

ITEM 8: NEXT MEETING

20. We agreed that the next meeting will come **one week later next month, so on Thursday 11th August 2022, again at 1030**. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES