

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call

on Thursday 2nd March 2023 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Avon	Sue O'Hara (SO)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Nottinghamshire	Julia Staniforth (JS)		
Apologies: Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Shireen Mohandes (RealBridge)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 2nd February 2023 meeting, noting that the function of these minutes was only for information, as this body has no formal powers. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3: ONLINE BRIDGE

2. **PS** raised the question of how to settle the argument when two teams wanted to play their match on different online platforms. **JS** noted that this issue is encouraged when, as in Nottinghamshire, clubs develop a dependency on just one platform. **KT** reported that in Oxfordshire the choice of platform was always RealBridge, except for an event where robots might be needed. **MW** suggested that designating home and away teams and giving priority to the home team's choice might be the way forward. **PS** noted a recent example where a match on RealBridge was switched to BBO when one player moved house, lost their internet connection, and had to play from their phone.
3. On a quick check, nobody had tried to make use of the audio/video capability within BBO, perhaps turned off by early failures which were reported. Nobody has yet tried [IntoBridge](#), although two reported inspecting it and being impressed.
4. **SM** had provided some information about RealBridge events to share (distributed by email), and **PS** highlighted from within that Technology Workshops happening in the next few weeks discussing browsers, browser extensions and connectivity. These are accessible through the www.tinyurl.com/TechnoFebMar link.

ITEM 4: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

5. Numbers at face-to-face club events continue to grow slowly. **PS** asked whether the audience thought that the EBU was striking the right balance between online and face-to-face competitions. A number of those present commented on the convenience of online for inter-county matches, where travel can become a deterrent to involvement. The dilemma is balancing the convenience of no travel with the concept that an online final (eg for the Corwen) is just another online game and not very appealing.

ITEM 5: BRIDGE TEACHING

6. **PS** asked for reactions to the two seminars recently organised by the EBU on teaching (from 01 Feb and 23 Feb, [available on EBU youtube channel](#)). The impressive presentations from Yorkshire and Suffolk were commented upon. It was thought that online learning with Assisted Play sessions was a very efficient approach, but that still the enormous bias is to face-to-face learning. Leicestershire and Worcestershire reported on recent “Bridge in a Weekend” events, and **DB** commented on the links they had provided into four teaching clubs as a next stage. **PS** commented on the issue with timing of courses, and the ability to take on newcomers at any time of year. **RM** suggested the idea of feed-in-games in which players move up the ladder as they have taken more lessons, and that it is only in playing that people learn – making videos almost redundant.
7. **SM** had (offline) offered a pointer to some puzzles related to bridge which were becoming available as a teaching aid – and might be attractive to offer to newcomers to test their understanding. You can see some [examples on BridgeWinners](#).

ITEM 6: THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES LEAGUE

8. It was noted that the last match in the current season comes this month; **PS** will arrange in the weeks following that a gathering for the team-managers to get thoughts from them on how the MCL should be organised next year.
9. **PS** presented a suggestion for an inter-county Mixed Teams Championship,
 - a. Mixed Team in this context is two Mixed Pairs
 - b. Event will be held online on Sunday 9th July, on RealBridge, and run 1400-1800
 - c. Counties can enter as many teams as they like, and the charge is £12 per team
 - d. Format will be all-play-all if practical given the numbers, or else Swiss Teams.
 - e. Event will be about 30 boards in length.
 - f. Teams will be given ranking points, from the bottom (who get 1). The county score is the sum of the three highest ranking points scores of their teams.

It was agreed to discuss with the team managers the likely appetite for such an event, and come back to discuss the proposal at our next meeting.

ITEM 7: THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES NO FEAR SWISS EVENTS

10. The next event is on 25th March, and we are planning on Oliver Cowan as TD-in-charge (after some frustration with the registration of results), and to have Ben Norton repeat his well-received commentary and discussion at the close of the game. If we repeat the numbers there will be a small loss on the event, but this is dwarfed by profits from earlier games. Since last meeting, £350 from the kitty for this event has been donated [to the Junior International Funds](#). It was noted that the Oxfordshire approach, with an entry form on the county website, had worked very well in building entries last time.

ITEM 8: COUNTY ROUND ROBIN

11. A quick run round those present revealed that:
 - a. AVON: numbers are rising and particularly at Bristol BC the emphasis is on “social bridge” with meals and drop-in options as the attraction. Lessons are going well.

- b. OXFORDSHIRE: face-to-face numbers are slowly rising, and as a pre-cursor to a rationalisation of bridge timetabling in the county, a recent survey of clubs got an 80% response rate, so the engagement level is good.
- c. WARWICKSHIRE: attracting the better players back to face-to-face games remains difficult. The number of teams entered for this year's Garden Cities heat is currently disappointing: only about half of last year's entry. Whether this is, once again, due to the reticence of higher-ranked players to participate, is not clear.
- d. WORCESTERSHIRE: with the ease of online bridge, **MW** suggested that the County games are unfortunately sandwiched between club games and national games, and if they disappear the development path for new players will have a gap. Although the higher attendance games are lower rated, there is some evidence (eg 56% NGS games) of the better players returning.
- e. LEICESTERSHIRE: **DB** asked about the effectiveness of different forms of congress advertising, and about EBU News in particular. **PS** replied that – because it was marketing itself as a holiday congress – the Cheltenham Congress (which this year has had to be postponed) had found such adverts productive, and suggested that it might need that sort of vibe to be worthwhile. **DB** asked what bridge competitions counties offered now; **MW** reported that Worcestershire's most successful was an inter-club team-of-4; **PS** reported that Gloucestershire in the past offered 19 trophies during the year, but since Covid had only played about 5 of these and the appetite for more was not there; **KT & PC** reported a similar position, with some (particularly Mens' and Ladies' Pairs) no longer being viable.
- f. NOTTINGHAMSHIRE: Sadly another club has disaffiliated but not unexpectedly as they only affiliated in 2020 apparently to play online and were formed as a charity making organisation and now have returned to F2F (presumably feeling that the UMS is better served for their fundraising).
- g. LINCOLNSHIRE: **RM** reported that the county was struggling to put together a team for the President's Cup, which last happened face-to-face in 2019 but is now running online and with a wider catchment area. Lincolnshire would welcome an approach from any other county that would like to form a joint team.
- h. SHROPS & STAFFS: **PC** raised the question of how people handle restricted standard events – by Master Points limits or by NGS limits? Examples were given of both approaches and of a combination being used.
- i. GLOUCESTERSHIRE: **PS** reported that the county had kept nearly all its players engaged on a regular Monday evening online game since 2020, and had in the past year transitioned one Monday a month into face-to-face and everyone had returned to that. An attempt at a second day (this time a Thursday) every month has not yet got off the ground.

ITEM 8: OTHER TOPICS

- 12. **PS** asked about the lack of a Midlands County offering to run the relevant heats of the National Pairs; no reason was forthcoming but there were offers to run it if necessary (the EBU are running these two heats now).
- 13. **MT** asked about progress on the promised EBU website publication of the EBU Policy on Funding of National Representative Teams. **PS** reported that it should appear shortly after the next EBU Board Meeting (later in March).

14. We agreed that the next meeting will be the first Thursday of the month, on 6th April 2023, again at 1030. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES

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