

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call

on Thursday 2nd November 2023 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Nottinghamshire	Julia Staniforth (JS)	REALBRIDGE	Shireen Mohandes (SM)
Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)		
Apologies: Keith Stait & Rob Wilkinson (Herefordshire)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEM 1: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 5th October 2023 meeting. All past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website, and all meeting notes and papers presented, and a variety of papers distributed by the EBU, and more, are held on an MCWG OneDrive share; any attendee needs only to ask to be given access.

ITEM 2: Bridge in the wider world

2. **RP** told us about the initiative described in Appendix A. In recognition of the growth in social bridge, the idea is to join on an equal footing with social clubs and social players to promote the game, teach new players and run social bridge events. The outcome of this initiative is likely to be that a number of social players will recognise the attractions of competitive bridge and take part in it. It is the developing thinking of a cohort within Oxfordshire and will be discussed by the OBA committee later this month. It suggests that the aspirations of the EBU and of many County Associations are held back by structures which are too oriented to duplicate games. The following thoughts emerged in the ensuing discussion:
 - Starting by seeking inputs from those not in the EBU/CBA fold – particularly the non-affiliated clubs – will generate better ideas for more inclusion that we can generate ourselves.
 - It was noted that if paying fees discourages engagement with the EBU then this could also limit engagement with any new organisation or structure. **RP** suggested membership of any new county venture should initially be free in order for it to become established. **PS** raised a concern that our affiliated clubs might see non-affiliated clubs as their competitors, but some felt that altruism and the desire to support that game would overcome that.
 - Communicating with a wider spectrum of bridge players is of great importance, and we need a combination of information to pass on (a suitable newsletter?) and access to email addresses. Creating the information afresh in every county is a duplication of effort. Existing County newsletters might form the basis for something for all bridge players, but there is often too much jargon specific to duplicate bridge.
 - Reaching players is more important than reaching clubs, but our main route to players is through clubs. Some players are finding the email broadcasts from the EBU too frequent, somewhat repetitive, and unattractive. **SM** commented that tailored emails to past attendees at the Cumbria J-high events (changing depending on when you last played) are working well.

- We talked about making information on bridge available in places like libraries, and it was pointed out that to be effective the information must be useful enough for a person to learn something from, and must include a follow-on contact that they can use.

ITEM 3: BRIDGE TEACHING

3. Very positive feedback was voiced on the Realbridge-led Teachers Conference which happened early in October. All the materials are available on the website at

<https://realbridge.online/teacher-coach-conference-2023-directory/>

Viewings of the 28 presentations – some live but many more on Youtube – have exceeded 5000. We are each encouraged to advertise these to teachers in our county.

4. **FD** raised the question of how AI (Artificial Intelligence) might be useful in bridge teaching, providing tools which prompt a learner towards the right answer and making them think.

ITEM 4: ONLINE BRIDGE

5. **PS** reported that he had been detecting a fall-off in the numbers playing in the regular (club or EBU) online duplicate games. Others reported the same, and noted that some online clubs had folded and some had merged sessions with others. It was accepted that this is possibly inevitable, although when winter comes the numbers might rise again.
6. **SM** reminded us that the online Women's Coaching sessions continue via RealBridge, and that Andrew Robson plans to run an open online session on Wednesday 8th November, discussing the hands from the Children-in-Need Sims Pairs of the previous two days. **FD** noted that some of his players had already made plans to meet up and watch that together.

ITEM 5: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

7. **MW** reported that the Worcester congress had gone well last weekend, with numbers up 50% from the previous year, and lots of positive feedback suggests that the appetite is there for such congresses. Others reported that face-to-face activity was continuing to find favour, and that some charity bridge events were finding themselves over-subscribed.
8. **SM** described to the group a concept tagged "Happy Hour Bridge". The core of the presentation on this is reproduced in Appendix B. In the discussion which followed we noted that:
 - The concept gives players a chance to be competitive (and are they not competitive in all the games they play at home?) without entering the world of formal duplicate bridge. We noted that it takes 3 tables for this idea to work, and that because it is easy to organise and sessions can be short – it also offers attractions to existing duplicate players.
 - **RP** reported that attempts in Oxfordshire to introduce clubs to alternatives to a standard duplicate game had floundered – the clubs were not interested.

ITEM 6: MIDLANDS COUNTIES GAMES

9. On the Midlands Counties League, for which the third round comes in a few weeks' time, there were no issues to raise.
10. We noted the need for further marketing of the next 9-High Swiss Pairs on Saturday 2nd December, and that we were accepting entries either through a County Association, or from the open entry form on <https://www.bridgewebs.com/midlandcc/>.

ITEM 7: COUNTY UPDATES

11. We heard from:

- Warwickshire: **MT** reported on little change, and a continued shortage of volunteers at the county level. He noted that Mr Bridge has restarted his magazine, BRIDGE, after a hiatus since December 2020, with a catch-up issue. He hopes to produce the magazine bi-monthly following invited feedback from readers.
- Northamptonshire: **FD** reported that they now had a new chair for the NCBA, and that he had instigated a WhatsApp group for the committee as a tool to re-energise the group.
- Gloucestershire: **IS** reported the struggle to find a county manager for the Festival of Bridge next September.
- Oxfordshire: **RP** reported that the amount of bridge played in the county is back up to the 2018 numbers but seems to be plateauing there. He asked about the process of EBU affiliation for a new club – does the County involved ever get a say in whether to accept them?
- Worcestershire: **MW** reported on a successful café bridge event and on the high level of enjoyment found by many low-level players.
- Derbyshire: **JP** reported that there has not yet been enough interest to run a taster session on RealBridge, and that their November MCL match will be face-to-face.

ITEM 8: DONM

12. We agreed that the next meeting will be the first Thursday of the month, 7th December 2023, again at 10:30am. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES

BRIDGING THE GAP

(A proposal being taken to the Oxfordshire CBA committee this month)

We believe that bridge is a game for everyone. It can satisfy people's competitive and social needs. Games of bridge can be organised to satisfy either of these needs separately or both together. When we say that we want the EBU to be the national body for all bridge players it is because we believe that it should serve social bridge players' needs just as much as competitive players' ones.

The EBU and counties are currently structured to support competitive bridge. Counties and clubs are restricted from offering much in the way of social bridge by the requirement for them to put events through the Universal Membership system thereby raising funds to finance the EBU.

We believe we could do more to raise the profile of the game and increase the number of people playing by reducing these restrictions. The knock-on benefit from this could be that some of those who start by playing social bridge would be more likely to move on to more competitive games if there was less of a barrier between the two forms of the game.

With these objectives in mind, we are contemplating the following:

1. Lobbying the EBU for a change in its structure and focus via the MCWG.
2. Moving the OBA's Promotion, Education and Social Team to a separate independent organisation aimed at all bridge players.
3. Inviting unaffiliated clubs to participate in the formation of such a new body on an equal footing. We would write to both our members and their members to invite them to be on a mailing list to advertise its activities.

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PROBLEMS & ISSUES – CLUB DUPLICATES

MARKET GAP

- Little opportunity to **draw** social players to clubs.

CUSTOMERS

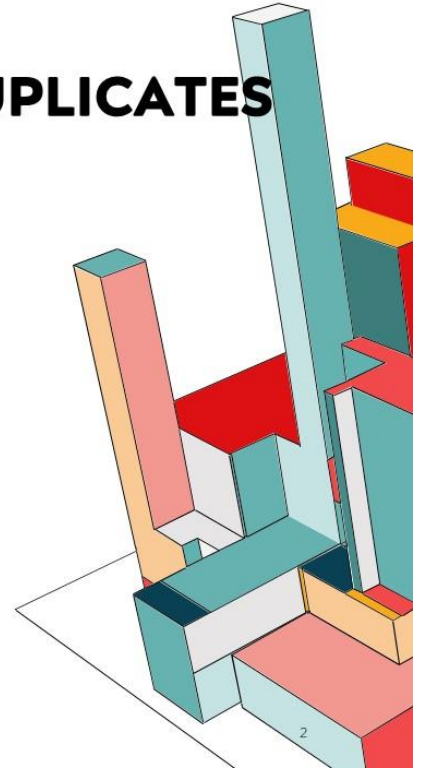
- Fear complexity.
- Low understanding.
- Want to be in the company of like-minded people.
- Experience or witness bad behaviour.

COSTS (travel and dues)

- Time and money commitment (to learning).

ACCESSIBLE

- Not near me.
- No at the time of my choosing.
- Not frequent enough.
- Needs equipment.



SOLUTION

A NEW COMPETITIVE FORMAT

Any amount of time, from 45 mins to 3 hours. Easy to understand. A **reason** to visit a club. Sticky. Make noise, near each other, feel like you are in a party.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Social bridge players - any age, typically 35 +

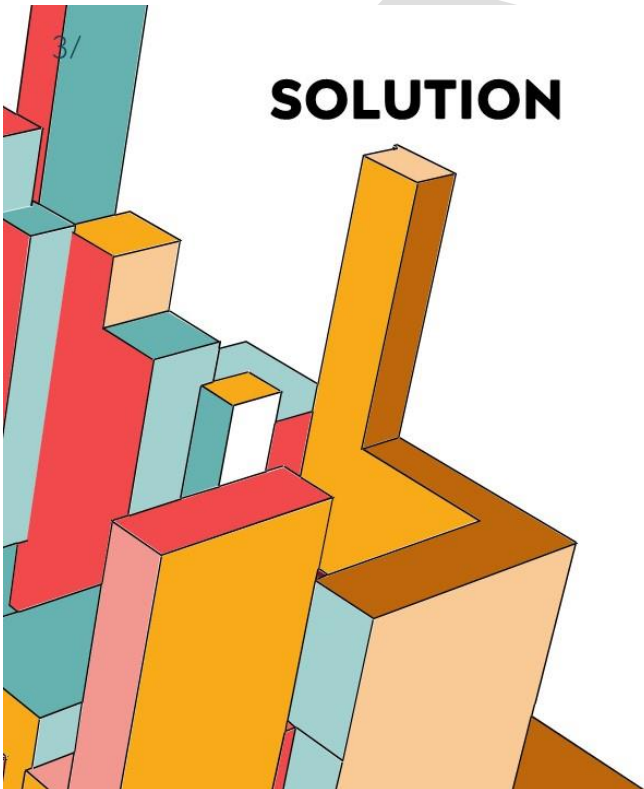
COST SAVINGS

- Inexpensive.
- Anywhere, even on a train. 3 tables.
- Minimal kit. 2 packs of cards, 4 bidding boxes (optional), pickup slips.

EASY TO USE: transportable

- Play this game at any club.
- At any home.
- In any city or small town.
- At work in the lunch break.
- Cruise ships.

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RULES

Winners are the pair that have most points

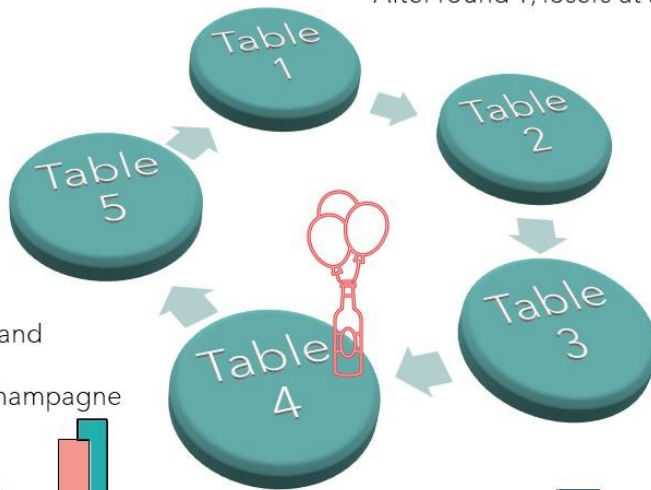
Bonus options

Bridge Buddy Pickup Slip											
N-S Pair		E-W Pair		Contract		Result		Score		Remarks	
N	S	N	S	Contract	Result	Score	Score	Score	Score		



OVERVIEW

After round 1, losers at table 1 go to table 2



During round 1, Table 4 EW bid and made a slam, verified by the TD. They are the custodians of the champagne until somebody else claims it



BONUS PRIZES FOR LARGER SECTIONS



MAKING A DOUBLED CONTRACT

But only if the bidding is sensible.

CLOSEST TO ZERO

There's always something to play for.

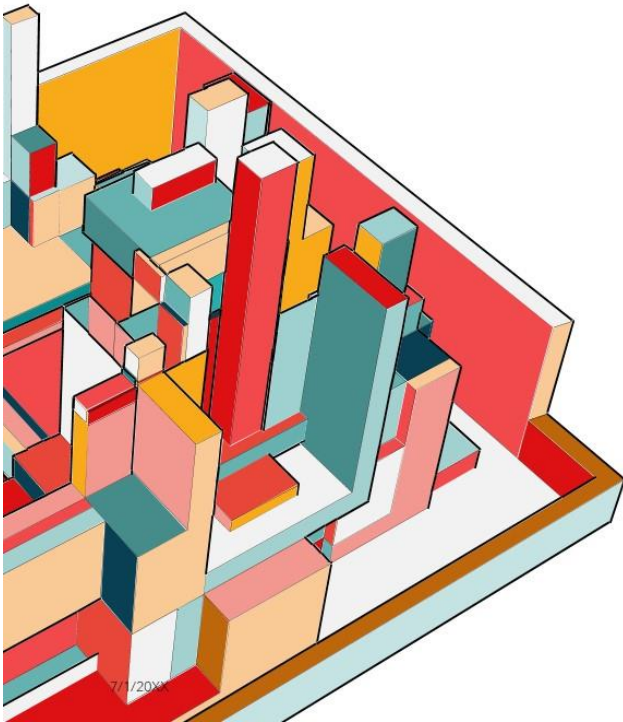
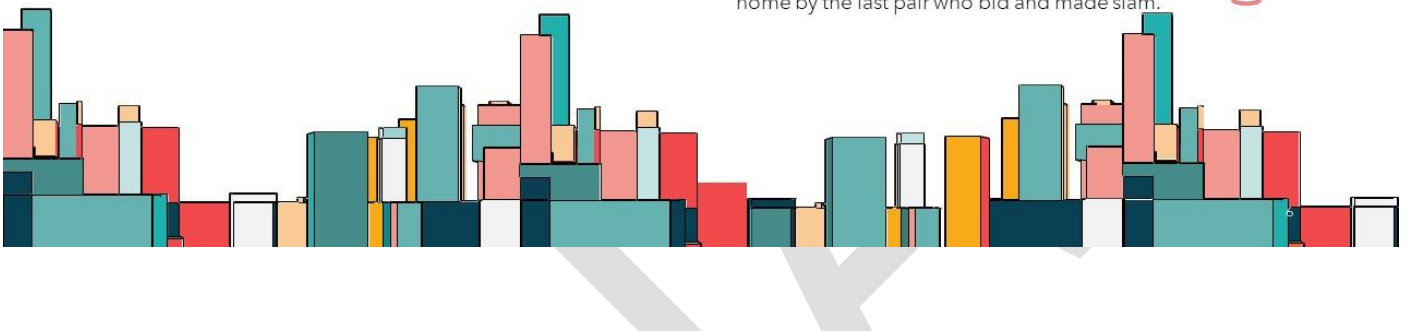


LADDER WINNER - SEASON

Come back next week.

THE MOVING SLAM BONUS

The excitement of the moment. A champagne bottle with a helium balloon goes to the LAST table that bid and made a slam. Tears of joy and sorrow as it moves around the room, and taken home by the last pair who bid and made slam.



SUMMARY

Many pastimes and games are played in a simple relaxed environment, but with the right competitive spirit.

Provide an opportunity to start the funnel in a less structured way, for a group of people who want to dabble in the club game.

Keep them in a fenced prairie. Encourage them to develop.