

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call

on Thursday 3rd August 2023 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Nottinghamshire	Julia Staniforth
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Herefordshire	Rob Wilkinson (RW)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	REALBRIDGE	Shireen Mohandes (SM)
Apologies: Ian Sidgwick (Gloucestershire), Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEM 1: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 6th of July 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: Informing Members about the EBU

2. **PS** reported how, in a survey and by asking at the County AGM, it had emerged that the understanding of the GCBA membership about the structure and role of the County Associations and the EBU was very weak. In Gloucestershire a few lines about this have now been emailed to every member, with a link to [background information on the county website](#). **FD** has done a similar venture in Northamptonshire (already copied to attendees) and intends to follow this up with a message explaining how the NGS process works.

ITEM 3: The 'Bridge Passport'

3. **SM** briefed the meeting on a proposal currently running with the title 'Bridge Passport': it is in the form of a small booklet, in which several bridge related activities are described. The intent is to give players a set of achievable targets to reach in any year and avoid the frustration that comes when a Master Point grade is reached, and the next step seems to be many years away. Achievement result in a 'stamp' in the passport and generates recognition of achievement in the same way as the Duke of Edinburgh scheme does. The concept can be applied at different stages in a bridge career, with a different set of targets for a learner, for a new club player, or for an established player (bronze, silver etc levels).
4. It was noted that such a scheme could highlight what it means to be a good club member (by including volunteering targets) and it could generate healthy competition within groups for completing all the options. **DB** and **KT** reported that each year awards are given for the most improved players in Leicestershire, and in Oxford Bridge Club. **FD** likened the proposal to the tick-lists provided in the Liz Dale teaching books.
5. We agreed that the concept was worth trying as a vehicle which could encourage greater levels of engagement from the membership. It was suggested that we look for opportunities to test out the concept at different levels and compare notes on progress in three months' time.

ITEM 4: BRIDGE TEACHING

6. **SM** reported that the timetable for the Realbridge-led Teaching Conference has now been confirmed (7-8 October) and that information about this is [now available from the RealBridge website](#) (under the Events menu) and people can sign up for the event there. She noted that the event is very much about people skills and not about demonstrations of software products, and that there are 15 live presentations plus some which will have been pre-recorded.
7. **JS** reported that Nottinghamshire teaching is now in the planning cycle, and **DB** reported that in Leicestershire it starts in September with a taster and then 12 lessons. **PS** reported that in Gloucestershire there were Youth Bridge sessions running weekly during the summer, and that one of the county's clubs will be trying out EBED's Smart Bridge in the autumn.
8. **JF** asked about copyright issues with the use of EBU/EBED materials. **SM** told us that any set of dealt hands is not copyright but the analysis which goes with it can be – and the position varies across different countries. There are some offerings known to be free (eg those of the New Zealand Bridge Federation or Eddie Kantar) but before using material it is best to obtain explicit permission as well as acknowledging the origin.
9. **JF** asked about the introduction of players from lessons into clubs. It was noted that while clubs want this to happen as fast as possible, doing it too fast can be counterproductive. **KT** reported that Oxford BC runs games at different levels for players as they progress. **FD** reported on having the beginners in the same room as the regular duplicate, but at different tables and with the same boards to play. It was noted that while pairing a newcomer with an experienced player is one way forward, finding the volunteers amongst the experienced players can be difficult, and not all have the temperament for such games. **SM** suggested more use of teams' matches might help players progress, and **PS** suggested the use of pupils one year more advanced as mentors.
10. **SM** reported of a venture to engage with the U3A on teaching and coaching bridge, with twelve mentors being trained and a big drive on this coming in the autumn. 'Secondment teaching' was mentioned and **PS** reported that recently in Gloucestershire an agreement has been reached amongst four clubs, none of which was confident to start teaching, to form a teaching programme as a group, with the teaching lead from one club and the helpers from others.

ITEM 5: ONLINE BRIDGE

11. **PS** reported that he was currently enjoying online bridge with three different platforms, alongside face-to-face games, and every platform offered different options. **RM** reported that first experiences of using screens with RealBridge had gone down very well in Lincolnshire, and others concurred that this was the best of the available arrangements.
12. **SM** reminded us that the EBL continues to offer [Womens' Coaching sessions](#) and that there are often unused places (next session 21 August). County Associations are encouraged to advertise this to their top female players, who should contact roswolfarth4901@gmail.com if they are interested.

ITEM 6: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

13. We noted that numbers continue to grow slowly, and **JS** reported satisfactory numbers at recent congresses, a trend confirmed by **MW** following the Ross-on-Wye weekend.

ITEM 7: MIDLANDS COUNTIES GAMES

14. We noted that the first Midlands Counties League match of the new season clashes with the EBU's National Handicap Pairs, but accepted that this would not cause many problems.

15. We noted that the Midlands Counties Mixed Teams had done reasonably well, with a turnout of 9 teams; the event was won by Oxfordshire who took first and third places. We agreed that it should continue. Derbyshire have given up now on running the Midlands Mixed Pairs and there is a trophy from that event which now needs to find a purpose in life.

16. **MW** reported that he (and **PS**) had been engaged in discussions about if and how the 9-High series of Swiss (Pairs) events we have been running should be combined with similar events run by other counties into a calendar of events suitable for all players in this category. His proposal is provided as an Appendix to these minutes and all counties are asked to consider the two questions embedded therein and to feedback their views as soon as possible. There was some concern expressed about how best to ensure that players were of the appropriate NGS grade, and **PC** suggested that if we are awarding Blue Master Points then we might need to be stricter than we have been in the past.

ITEM 8: COUNTY UPDATES

17. At the meeting, in addition to the above, we heard from

- Warwickshire: **MT** highlighted the issue of a shortage of volunteers (a point many others also reported) and that daytime bridge sessions were picking up, but evenings less so. **SM** noted that the SBU had been surprisingly successful in advertising across their membership for volunteers, and that advertising for specific tasks was much more likely to get a response than is anything vague.
- Lincolnshire: **RM** noted that chess.com had just been given £500k by the government to promote the game, but bridge did not have this sort of money. **PS** challenged the company on how we would advise using such a windfall were it to happen; the one suggestion which came back was to finance peripatetic bridge teachers, to help fill the 'bridge deserts' which are sprinkled around the country.
- Herefordshire: **RW** reported on one local club with £22k of reserves and few ideas of how to invest this; the members were informed that if the club folds the money will go to the County Association – and this stirred up concerns about how to proceed.
- Staffs & Shrops: **PC** reported that last week one club (Newport) had closed. He asked if there were concerns about CBA members who play in very few (if any) club events and about their contribution towards County finances if no UMS is ever collected from them. [It was confirmed later that the County UMS collected from an event goes to the CBA of the tournament organiser, rather than the county of which the player is a member]. **KT** suggested that a direct, paid membership of the county might be appropriate for such players. **PS** reported that in Gloucestershire there was some disquiet about players who did not play in any county events but who represented the county.

18. Offline, by email we heard from Jim Parker in Derbyshire:

- Things in Derbyshire are much the same; DCBA was planning a Green Point event in the later part of year but venue staff availability issues have meant that it is now looking at organising two one-day events instead.

ITEM 9: AOB & DONM

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

END OF MINUTES

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APPENDIX A

Proposal for the MCWG 9-High Series

The series will continue to run, as previously, on the fourth Saturday of September, November, January and March.

The EBU is, like the Midland Counties, keen to promote 9-High, Jack-High and similar events. It is, therefore, creating a calendar of these to enable the relevant players to easily find them. The question that we need to address is whether we want our 9-High series to be on that calendar or whether we would prefer to restrict it to the Midland Counties.

Putting the event onto an EBU calendar really necessitates changing our approach to entries. Hitherto, entries have been to county representatives who then pass them on to Mike Willoughby. This is to maintain the connection between the counties and the events so that the counties have a degree of ownership of the events, the entrants and the recruitment process. If we opened the events to all Counties, it is unlikely that this approach would continue to be workable and so a likely approach would simply be to put an entry form on the Midland Counties Congress website. Entry fees would continue to be paid into our bank account and we could continue to do as we wished with any surpluses. Currently we direct them to the support of junior internationals and I would like to see this continue.

Another consideration is the degree of formality that we exercise. For their events, Kent diligently check the NGS of every participant and refuse them if they are too high. I would propose that we do not do this (partly because NGSs can move significantly in a short time) but, perhaps check those of winners and runners-up. Finally, we would propose the entry fee to £4 per player, simply because it does not benefit anyone for bridge events to be seen as too cheap!

Leaving aside the details, comments upon which would be welcome, however, the questions that we need to be answered in the next two weeks are: -

- Whether we want our series to be put onto the EBU calendar, taking into account the slight changes set out above that would result from doing so.
- Whether we want to increase the entry fees to £4 per player.

Mike Willoughby

6/8/23