

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 4th May 2023 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	REALBRIDGE	Shireen Mohandes (SM)
PLUS: Ken Johnston from Cumbria			
Apologies: Julia Staniforth (Nottinghamshire), Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 6th April 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 3: ONLINE BRIDGE

2. **PS** mentioned two new online platforms which are becoming more visible:
 - [Bridge Champ](#) : this is a newcomer to the online-play world, and it comes with a new set of robots for your entertainment, but there were suggestions it was not quite ready yet for regular use.
 - [LoveBridge](#) : this is a system for playing on tablets in a club, and it is in use by the USBF for their international trials: it provides [a Vugraph service](#) this way.
3. **SM** reminded us of some recent RealBridge activity, notably the successful J-high tournament run by Cumbria CBA (21 tables then 24 tables) and the Vugraph presentations from the Lady Milne event and the Spring Fours. She reported that the puzzles illustrated at previous meetings have now been printed (and at a good price) and were being distributed with orders from the EBU Warehouse, where doing so did not increase the postage costs.
4. **PS** reported that locally in Gloucestershire about 80% of the bridge being played was now face-to-face, but **MW** saw a different pattern in Worcestershire with online dominating. Comment was made on how a two-day event played face-to-face with 48+48 boards did not seem as tiring for some as two days playing those boards in front of the computer, despite the ability in that context to leave the table when you were not needed. **SM** suggested that other countries played rather more than 48 boards in a day.
5. **FD** asked if anything definitive was known of the amount of casual bridge being played on BBO; **PS** undertook to seek some statistics. It was suggested that many players found the ability to play without having planned a game was very attractive; the EBU's RealBridge lounge offers the same facility if you can organise just four players for the same timeslot.

6. It was noted that several clubs have merged their online games, making these more attractive as a result. Discussions are taking place more seriously now between clubs about how to timetable their games to avoid competing.

ITEM 4: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

7. Ken Johnston talked to us about some aspects of holiday bridge – something that a few of those present had some experience of. **GW** and **KJ** have been active in the past working for Mercian Bridge on bridge holidays over the winter season. Organising bowling (in the morning) alongside bridge in the afternoon has been very successful. It was notable that a large proportion of attendees make repeat bookings, and that the system made it easy for a bridge club to organise an event for their members.
8. **GW** confirmed that the offerings from Mercian were well received, and suggested it was the fact of a community presence that make these events attractive to many players. The market is such that any club or County Association organising a bridge holiday is likely to find plenty of takers. **SM** commented on the affordability of these events, and suggested more clubs might engage if their County Association were to encourage that. **FD** reported planning five holidays at Lytham St Anne's this year for his club. It was noted that some holiday bridge players are not yet playing face-to-face at their home club.

ITEM 5: BRIDGE TEACHING

9. There was little to report on teaching activities, as might be expected at this time of the year. A question was asked about teaching of 4-card majors or 5-card majors, and the general view expressed was that a 4-card majors' approach was much simpler for newcomers and 5-card majors should only come in later – after the people concerned were hooked on the game.
10. **PS** commented on his disappointment on viewing some of the YouTube offerings of first lessons in bridge; they seemed likely to confuse any newcomers. He was not alone in this view. **SM** commented on FFB success in getting newcomers into the game quickly, with a focus purely on card play, pushing bidding back to a later date.

ITEM 6: THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES LEAGUE

11. We noted our intent to finalise the plans for 2023-24 at our next (June) meeting.
12. The Inter-County Mixed Teams will go ahead on 9th July on RealBridge as planned, and a flyer for this event will be distributed shortly.

ITEM 7: THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES NO FEAR SWISS EVENTS

13. We noted that we had no plans for these over the next few months. **PS** reported that the Competitions Working Group in the EBU is looking at how to build a calendar for 9-high events across the year, to give players in that category a plan to build on. **MW** agreed to engage with the CWG on how to integrate our events with that.
14. A short discussion took place on whether restricted-NGS events should be 9-high or J-high. It was noted that if you are focused on the average grade of the participants, then a J-high average can allow in players graded Q or K.

ITEM 8: ROUND ROBIN & OTHER MATTERS

15. We heard reports from a variety of counties:

- **GW** from Wiltshire: the Green Point weekend at Bath University at the start of March had been successful with 25 and 29 tables on the two days. The impression was that the top-end players were returning to congresses but that it was not so for the lesser players.
- **MW** from Worcestershire confirmed that there was plenty of online bridge in the county, but that evening face-to-face games were struggling.
- **RM** from Lincolnshire: was seeing that same pattern, with RealBridge evening games doing well. There was reluctance in the county to play for two days online in the Pachabo.
- **MT** from Warwickshire noted that the original Warwickshire club qualifiers for the Garden Cities had had to withdraw due to a combination of circumstances. The lack of available information and communication with the EBU about the heats (notably timing and catering) were major contributory factors. He requested that the EBU significantly improve the availability of information and their communication with qualifiers in 2023/2024 via their Competitions Administrator.
- **DB** in Leicestershire had recently organised a team-of-4 competition, and several problems arose – perhaps as a result of trying to be too flexible and too open to new participants. The CBA is pondering what selection of competitions it should offering in the future be at the county level.
- **FD** from Northamptonshire: problems are emerging in finding volunteers willing to commit the time needed to run the County Association. Persuading clubs and club members to engage is very difficult – and for a large club there are only a small percentage present at any one event and managing communications in a manner that maintains the sense of community is very difficult. **GW** highlighted the usefulness of Bridgewebs for sending out bulk emails. The issues of finding volunteers and succession planning within a CBA were echoed by others, and it was suggested that the role of the CBA in the world of bridge needs further examination.
- **PS** from Gloucestershire: Cheltenham BC has a collection of honours' boards reflecting the long list of competitions the County Association ran pre-Covid. It is very likely that many of these will be dropped from the schedule (because the appetite is not there). The timing of updates to these has highlighted that the future of honours' boards and trophies is a topic that needs discussion. He also reported that persuading players to turn out for representative events is difficult – as many players are finding their bridge appetite satisfied elsewhere. **PS** reported that the CBA is seeking a dedicated Publicity Officer at its next AGM.
- **FJ** from Cumbria: their County Association is struggling, with inadequate entries for every event it tries to run. Curiously, evening bridge is happening at clubs but daytime bridge has not taken off. Casual online bridge is very popular. A face-to-face congress was held this year with 23 tables (down from 40 in the past, but successful at that size).

16. We also received one email update, from Derbyshire:

- In Derbyshire things are much the same: F2F continues but we need to look at how we can create handicapped events such that all players play on a median platform. Any suggestions they would be thankfully received.

- The Midlands Counties Mixed and Fritch had to be cancelled due to the actual entries received being below minimum required for a catered event. Our lesson learned is that although an event has been perpetually run on same annual weekend, it is dangerous to organise events on a bank holiday weekend (or special weekends, having postponed an event originally set on Mothering Sunday).
- For those looking for bridge on a tablet or mobile phone where you can pick up or put down the game at will, Tricky Bridge is worth a try. It also offers an introduction to the game for those who cannot play.

17. **MT** asked about the publication of the EBU Policy on Funding Internationals and the delay in its publication (promised several months ago). **PS** explained that some discussions were still ongoing, and he would push for publication.

18. We agreed that the next meeting will be the first Thursday of the month, on 1st June 2023, again at 1030. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES