

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 6th April 2023 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

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

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 2nd March 2023 meeting. **PS** noted that the function of these minutes was only for information, as this body has no formal powers. 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. **SM** gave a run-down of current RealBridge organised games, noting in particular
 - The popularity of the Women's Coaching sessions supported by the EBL.
 - The first national 9-High event being run on Realbridge (others were all on BBO), by Cumbria, on 29th April.
 - A series of testing deals ("Find the Ace" / "Find the King" etc) are in preparation and will be made available for use soon.
3. She told us about the following changes to the RealBridge software
 - The ability to introduce arbitrary scoring adjustments (eg for a weighted score) to the results list. This can also be used for bonus points (eg for notice players).
 - The ability to group results by category, so that for example a non-Expert listing can be produced on the fly. It was noted that where being a "rookie" was treated as a badge of honour (as it sometimes is), a results list by category would be more attractive.
4. We discussed the question of whether use of screens provided a more sociable game than without, the argument in favour being that you could chat happily to one opponent without disrupting the table. It was suggested that unfamiliarity was the main reason that most club players preferred no screens, and that practice sessions with screens (which **SM** was happy to run) might be useful.

5. It was noted that some clubs (Bedfordshire being home to a fine example) had succeeded in sharing online games and making them more attractive as a result. **JS** reported that Nottinghamshire is running its Pachabo-qualifying event online (to match the Pachabo), but its other annual events are all face-to-face.

ITEM 4: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

6. All confirmed that the return to face-to-face bridge was continuing, **PS** reporting that at Cheltenham Bridge Club (which has only cut back its online games where there was poor attendance) about 78% of player sessions are now live with only 22% online. **JP** reported that in the city of Derby, all games were face-to-face. **JF** highlighted an issue in Hampshire with lack of face-to-face directors/scorers – which in Derbyshire has been remedied by the County TD running training sessions.
7. **FD** reported that at the recent Norfolk Congress the numbers were much lower than pre-Covid times and only just viable. It was suggested that the main issue is that players have got out of the habit of travelling for a bridge game, and for that reason (and the increased cost of travel) a live event needs to have a positive selling point that goes beyond the bridge.
8. **MW** made the point that individuals will make their own decisions based on cost and often on the time involved – and on both fronts online can be more attractive than face-to-face. He also noted that the online competition comes not just from our own games, but also from games organised by others in this country and in other countries.
9. There were positive reports (eg the Nottinghamshire County Pairs, qualifying for the Corwen) and negative reports (the Hampshire equivalent) – but the former was attributable in part to making the event free of charge for county members. **MW** worried that this hinted at a race to the bottom in terms of pricing; **JF** and others pointed out that lowering prices suggests low value for the game (evident particularly in lessons pricing) and experiments with short term cuts have not been successful in generating momentum beyond the immediate event. **SM** suggested that getting people to buy into a series of events (paying up front) was a way to make prices attractive and hold the players' attention.

ITEM 5: BRIDGE TEACHING

10. **PC** reported that Newcastle BC had just complete a learners' and an improvers' course, and was now embarking on a Pro-Am event to get these people playing with club players. **RM** and **PS** reported on "Beyond the Basics" course which were receiving substantial interest from existing players. **JS** reported that NCBA plan to run further free seminars on card play over April-June.
11. **SM** reported on an initiative in Essex (led by Mark Chawner) which is very attractive – a set of 27 prepared hands are played and the results collected and then the analysis of the hands is distributed. The latest analysis can be seen on the [Essex CBA website – click here](#). **SM** indicated an intent to re-package the deals and make them available for re-use. It is also worth noting, from the same stable, the style of the [Essex Bridge Academy website](#).
12. **PS** asked about successes with online teaching; **MW** described the Worcestershire success in 2022 with this, which worked and led to new players coming through. **FD** highlighted the need for a hybrid approach, building on online lessons with club activities.
13. **SM** described several RealBridge-sourced activities of potential interest to teachers
 - Demonstrations of the use of RealBridge will be done for ETBA members twice this month.

- A one-off magazine for teachers is in preparation.
- There is now a set of “find the missing card” puzzles and more are in preparation. A print of the first collection has been done and means of distributing these are being investigated. There are tricks available to allow such puzzles to be displayed on the Realbridge card table before play starts, to exercise the players who are waiting for the game to start. Go to <https://realbridge.online/dropped-card-puzzle.html> for more information.

ITEM 6: THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES LEAGUE

14. The notes from the Team Managers’ discussion had been circulated and were summarised as a desire to maintain the mix of online and face-to-face games, and to continue making things easier for, and to encourage face-to-face matches. Despite the extra work that the face-to-face matches involved, all reports from these have been very positive.
15. One suggestion made at the Team Managers’ discussion was holding an MCL day (probably October) where all matches were hosted live at the West Midlands Bridge Club. [Later checks suggest that there are space and catering issues which make this impractical]. At least two Counties voiced the difficulties they have in turning out a team for any face-to-face match, and **PC** noted that the travel for some of his most distant players is an issue even for live home matches. Derbyshire have enough volunteers in the squad to be able to have three teams to play either F2F or on BBO, but playing on Realbridge still remains a hurdle for the DCBA. The success of Derbyshire, Leicestershire & Nottinghamshire in managing their (local) matches face-to-face was admired by the others.
16. We agreed to allow more time for feedback, and to finalise the arrangements at our June meeting.
17. Following feedback from the Team Managers, it was agreed to take a chance with running a Midlands inter-county Mixed Teams Championship, along the lines discussed at the last meeting, on the 9th of July, on Realbridge. A flyer for this will be prepared soon.
18. **JP** reminded us that there is a face-to-face Midlands Mixed Pairs Championship happening at Spondon on Sunday 30th April. All are welcome; for [details and contacts, click here](#).

ITEM 7: THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES NO FEAR SWISS EVENTS

19. The numbers attending on the 25th March were satisfactory but not great, and a small loss was made on the event. **JS** reported positive feedback from the six Nottinghamshire players about the game and about the Ben Norton session which followed. The year-to-date accounts were circulated before the meeting, and these record the donation of £350 to the EBU’s Junior Squad fund-raising efforts, and a current balance of just over £200. **MW** raised two questions
- Was the use of Ben Norton and incurring a small loss a good use of our funds? The answer was ‘yes’.
 - How should we be driving numbers up to avoid any loss from these events? It was noted that with an increasing set of options available, players are becoming more selective about which event they choose.

20. The issue of extending events to include other counties to raise numbers generated a wider discussion. **PS** was able to report that the EBU's Competitions Working Group is actively looking at what the year-long programme is for the less experienced players with the intent of developing [the existing webpage](#) into something which gives these players some sort of roadmap through the year. The Cumbria-hosted event mentioned earlier forms part of this. We agreed that this was a topic worth revisiting, and coordination of our series with any EBU series would be useful.

ITEM 8: OTHER MATTERS

21. On behalf of the Warwickshire teams which might be playing, **MT** reported his disappointment at the amount of time spent not only by himself, but also the Club captain, in trying to uncover details of the arrangements for the Regional Finals of the Garden Cities competition. It was noted that an earlier start for the National Final than for the Regional Finals which involved less travelling, seemed odd (different catering arrangements were cited by **PS** as part of the background to this). **PS** reported that the timing arrangements would be looked at during next week's EBU Competitions WG meeting, and that the details of the catering arrangements are being chased down and will be made public. **MT** also noted the great variety of strategies adopted by the counties in selecting their representative team.

22. All those present were asked to consider what topics would be appropriate for the next and next-but-one meetings of the County Chairs – the quarterly get-together orchestrated by the EBU. Answers please to **PS**.

23. We had no time for a round-robin but received an email from Derbyshire:

- DCBA do not run any on-line events, and F2F sessions are back to about 90% pre-covid levels. One club has not returned to F2F; each week only four on-line sessions take place in DCBA clubs whereas sixteen F2F sessions are being run. There is no Realbridge played in Derbyshire.
- Garden Cities finals: getting a team to play in the Garden Cities event has only happened a few times in the last 12 years. The winner of our Inter-Club Division One is invited, but of the two clubs that can win the division, neither are normally able to make up a team for the event.

24. We agreed that the next meeting will be the first Thursday of the month, on 4th May 2023, again at 1030. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES