

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call

on Thursday 6th July 2023 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Nottinghamshire	Julia Staniforth
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	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)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	REALBRIDGE	Shireen Mohandes (SM)
Apologies: Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 1st June 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.
2. **PS** reported that Mark Humphries had to postpone his visit to this group, and it will be arranged for a future month.

ITEM 3: BRIDGE TEACHING

3. **SM** reported that the timetable for the Realbridge-led Teaching Conference was in the process of adjustment, now that people have become aware of the [EBL's session on Youth Coaching](#) which comes alongside the EBL Youth Pairs Championships which comes in Veldhoven this summer ([for earlier EBL coaching sessions click here](#)).
4. **PS** noted the [new search capability](#) the EBU is offering to newcomers, the key feature of which is a promise for a human interaction as a result of filling in the form. There have already been several enquiries through this route, and for clubs and counties which have not got a better alternative – including a link to this on your website's front page is recommended.
5. **PS** asked about the levels of interest around for MiniBridge competitions, as an avenue to introduce newcomers to the concept of comparing results with others. **SM** reported that in Sweden and some other countries MiniBridge competitions were run as an event within bridge congresses. While some teachers use MiniBridge for just 2 weeks or 6 weeks, Giorgio Provenza has reported good results (in terms of quality of card play) by keeping this going for a full year.

6. **RW** reported that he has been putting together a Teaching Strategy for Herefordshire, a county in which the population is low and widely distributed – which makes face-to-face teaching difficult. **FD** pointed out that when looking at online teaching, county boundaries no longer matter. **SM** commented that the Joan Butts offering from Australia, of online learning and teacher support, was very attractive. It was suggested that the Yorkshire CBA efforts might provide the basis for a national offering of online teaching, and if combined with national advertising this could be very useful. **PS** cautioned that we need to have the teaching in place and clubs engaged before that advertising goes ahead. Getting buy-in from clubs is important for any approach, and it was reported that in Lancashire the clubs there are ceding all teaching planning to the County Association.
7. Cooperation between clubs (on teaching and playing sessions) is believed to be in the interests of the community but **PS** reported of a negative reaction from one club about that (“they’ll take our players away ...”) and **KT** reported that this cooperation was being encouraged in Oxfordshire but that it needs effort to make it happen.
8. **DB** suggested that online teaching was not as good as face-to-face teaching and asked about how best to recruit newcomers. Word-of-mouth was the favourite reply, and instances of both success and failure with social media were reported. Notice boards in golf clubs and supermarkets, and the U3A are possible ways to advertise, although the U3A do push for tuition to be free of charge.
9. It was suggested that a clear recommendation from the EBU for online teaching would be helpful. Discussion on how large an online class could be brought out examples in the 10-16 range, and **KT** pointed out that it does depend a lot on the stage at which the learners are in their bridge development.

ITEM 4: ONLINE BRIDGE

10. **SM** reported on some recent Realbridge events, highlighting
 - The popularity of the [EBL-led Women’s Training](#) sessions, which run monthly on RealBridge.
 - The involvement of over 800 players in the most recent up-over/down-under bridge competition between the northern and southern hemispheres. Being able to “meet” (if only virtually) was appreciated by all.
 - Some improved graphics for use in bridge advertising are being developed (with support from some AI tools) and will be available for use – free of charge – on the RealBridge website. These can catch people’s attention much more easily than is possible with words.
11. **PS** reported his experiences with the [“Play Ranked” option in IntoBridge](#). This allows you and three robots to play a hand also held by an opponent of a similar rank to yours, and the outcome of the deal determines whether your rank will rise or fall. The robots involved and the other players provide a sensible game of bridge. It is very easy, and possibly addictive.

ITEM 5: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

12. We noted that numbers continue to grow slowly, and it was reported that several clubs are switching from evening bridge to afternoon, and sometimes morning sessions. **PS** reported that the mixed approach (Lovebridge tablets for bidding, physical cards for play) used in the later stages of the European Open in Strasbourg worked well, and the EBU are considering whether to invest in a trial of this technology in England. **SM** reported that in the USA this technology was in use for top end events, and suggested that for locations where play was spread across multiple rooms, this technology might prove useful.

ITEM 6: MIDLANDS COUNTIES GAMES

13. We noted and accepted the suggestion that the last Midlands Counties League match for the next season should take place on Saturday 9th March, thereby avoiding Mothering Sunday and the other busy weekends. **PS** will inform the team captains of the change and agreed to send out the finalized version of the MCL 2023/2024 fixture schedule to them.

14. The Inter-County Mixed Teams will go ahead on 9th July on RealBridge as planned; nine teams are currently enrolled.

ITEM 7: COUNTY UPDATES

15. At the meeting we heard from

- Wiltshire: **GW** reported that clubs were doing well but that County events were struggling; it was postulated that this might be a mix of a tendency to late entries, and a problem with committing to events which run over several months.
- Staffs & Shrops: **PC** reported on a shortage of volunteers for tasks within the County Association, and others reported the same. **MT** suggested we might need a longer discussion about how to address this. Where the need is for help on the county website, it was suggested that for Bridgewebs sites, sharing ideas with others was a good start, and we might be able to persuade Bridgewebs to put on a course to help newcomers to do a good job.
- Oxfordshire: **KT** reminded us that the [Oxfordshire congress](#) is happening in August and will be face-to-face. She told us of an initiative which is now underway in the county to encourage clubs to welcome visitors from other clubs.
- Lincolnshire: **RM** reported that the county had combined with Gloucestershire to provide a team for the recent online President's Cup making it easier to avoid players sitting for two days in front of a screen.
- Leicestershire: **DB** reported that their recent Green Point event had 16 tables at the County Club and went well, and that Paul Bowyer is running a set of 4 sessions of training for MCL-level players.
- Herefordshire: **RW** reminded us of the [joint congress with Gloucestershire](#) due on 22-23 July; it currently has 20 tables entered for the Swiss Pairs and 26 tables for the Swiss Teams.

- Gloucestershire: **IS** reminded us of the [Cheltenham Congress](#) coming at the end of August. He noted that the teacher training session in Cheltenham this coming weekend is over-subscribed, and that there are two active club clusters now in the county, and a third (which will spill into Worcestershire) is about to start. **IS** asked about the drifting appeal of Sims Pairs, and it was suggested that over-supply and the increased table money were the two main causes.

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

- Derbyshire is trying to develop events that can attract the newer less experienced players. Whereas Swiss was the solution 10 or more years ago, post-Covid these events lack enough of the newer, less experienced teams for this approach to work. An option being considered is mixed ability teams in some of the Summer Swiss – having experienced players playing each other, and the less experienced similarly. If any other Counties have any ideas or suggestions these would be welcome.
- Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire CBAs are discussing organising Joint Blue/Green Point events. DCBA has a date problem for the first MCL match as their F2F venue is pre-booked by Premier League.

ITEM 8: AOB & DONM

17. Mention was made of two recent crime novels with a bridge setting - "Murder by Natural Causes" by Helen Erichson and "Who's the Dummy Now" by Melanie Harris. It was suggested they might be suitable prizes at a bridge event.

18. We agreed that the next meeting will be the first Thursday of the month, 3rd August 2023, again at 10:30am. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES