

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call

on Thursday 1st February 2024 at 10.00am

PRESENT:

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

CHAIR: Rob Procter

ITEM 1: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 4th January 2024 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. **RP** reported that following on from discussions at earlier MCWG meetings, a few (KT, MW, PS, RP) had been engaging in an email discussion sparked by the desire to engage better with social bridge players. The discussion came to this conclusion:
 - “The game of bridge is receiving less and less attention as years go by, because of the myriad of other opportunities available to people.
 - Despite this there are still a large number of players in the country, although the bias is increasingly towards the less competitive end of the spectrum.
 - To be successful in promoting the game, it must help for all bridge players to work together on that, and someone must take the lead if that is to happen.
 - The only structure in this country we have beyond individual bridge clubs is the EBU/EBED and its County Associations. It is hard to see the necessary promotion of the game happening unless they lead.
 - The coming Festival of Bridge is the best opportunity we can imagine for getting all existing players engaged in promoting the game.
 - If we are to achieve the reach we desire in promoting the game, then the Festival needs to reach beyond existing bridge players, to all potential bridge players as well.”
3. The meeting accepted the principles in the above words without comment. These words have been passed onto Tony Russ (the EBU lead for BIABD, the Festival). **MW** made the point that while the resource for the Festival are existing club players, the target of the Festival is larger - all players and potential players.
4. **RP** made the point that there are multiple tasks involved in keeping this group running, and it would be a Good Thing for our own resilience if these were shared out. We noted that Zoom now has facilities to transcribe and to summarise meetings; **MW** offered to investigate these. A number present volunteered to Chair the meeting future date, and we agreed on **PS** as Chair for March.

5. We discussed the group's Terms of Reference (circulated with the agenda) which were created in 2017. The following points emerged in the discussion:
- a. The need felt in 2017 to create specific conduits of communication with the EBU Board has decreased in recent years, with the introduction of more County Chairs' meetings and the Board Buddy system (whereby each County Association has a specific Board member assigned as a friend).
 - b. The formal control over the EBU Board is by the shareholders, but the structure of the relationship between shareholders and the County Association they represent varies enormously. The question was asked whether being a Member of Parliament was a good analogy to being a shareholder.
 - c. It was agreed that it was useful that both formal and informal dialogues exist between the EBU Board and the County Associations.
 - d. If we as a group wish to convey a message to the EBU Board, we need to be careful that we all interpret the same from the words used. **JS** volunteered to act as scribe for such messages when the need for this arises, taking measures to ensure it reflected what the MCWG felt.
 - e. It was agreed that there was significant redundant material in the current TOR. All counties are invited to provide suggestions for change to mcwg@gcba.org.uk, and PS will collate and distribute suggestions for change.

ITEM 2: BRIDGE TEACHING

6. **JS** noted that classes in Nottingham were proceeding well and everyone involved was enjoying these. **MW** reported involvement in recent weekend classes where the enthusiasm level was very high.
7. **RP** suggested that clubs large enough to host sessions for learners were doing well, but many smaller clubs were in denial about the dangers of having no teaching. He noted that the suggestions made on the [EBU's Festival webpage](#) were numerous enough and varied enough to enthuse anyone with an inkling to spread the word about this game.
8. **PS** reported that his U3A Minibridge group now has some attendees who are attending bridge lessons in parallel but come along to work on card play. Others endorsed the value of MiniBridge as a learning tool. **SM** reminded us that Paul Marston in Australia teaches bridge bidding with four simple rules ([watch here to learn more](#)) and is one of the most successful advocates for the game in that country.

ITEM 3: ONLINE BRIDGE

9. **SM** reminded us of a variety of events on Realbridge that are deserving of advertising:
 - (1) The new "[Generation Game](#)" (child + relative) has started and will continue monthly, and had ten tables last month.
 - (2) The new [world-wide bidding competition](#) managed by Marc Smith (author of many books) and hosted by RealBridge had 1321 entries for January. It is a useful learning tool for any level of player.
 - (3) The U3A run several games (nationwide, on Realbridge) and are in the process of adding in some MiniBridge sessions.

In response to a question about why individuals had not already heard about these, SM reminded us that RealBridge is a business-to-business enterprise and not a business-to-customer enterprise, and for that reason RealBridge marketing goes to bridge organisers and not directly to bridge players.

ITEM 4: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

10. **PC** suggested that the increasing numbers attending club sessions had plateaued, and **PS** reported that EBU figures for club bridge had shown figures in the months of 2023 consistently higher than in 2022.

ITEM 5: MIDLANDS COUNTIES GAMES

11. There was nothing to report on the Midlands Counties League.

12. **MW** reported that after cancelling the September 9-High Swiss Pairs, the December and January events had been successful (40 pairs, 25 pairs) and that the latter had seen a surge in entries once the bulk entry from a certain Worcestershire club gave people confidence that the event would be viable. It was suggested that all CBAs need to push this event more and that they and the EBU should be using targetted emails to remind potential players. **PC** did report that from his recent experience, targetted emails did not always work.

13. **MW** noted that the Q&A session on Zoom following the game was not well attended (around half dozen players, though it was very well done). It was agreed that a written commentary would be a better choice in the future. Three suggestions were made around this:

- a. We look to having a professional prepare the commentary for us, as an alternative to asking every county to contribute one every other year.
- b. The commentary focusses on 4-5 deals rather than on every deal.
- c. We investigate creation of a video commentary. (**SM** is shortly running a course for EBTA teachers on how to do this – potential dates are 22 Feb and 09 Mar).

ITEM 6: NATIONAL PAIRS – REGIONAL FINALS

14. **PS** asked if any counties were planning to take on the running of the Midlands regional semi-finals of the National Pairs. Nobody was. **SM** reported that she had sent laminated posters advertising the National Pairs to London clubs to encourage participation.

ITEM 7: COUNTY UPDATES

15. In general, there was little new to report, but we heard from:

- i) Staffs & Shrops: **PC** reported that he had recently attended the Chester Congress, but while numbers were up on the year before, they were well below pre-pandemic levels.
- ii) Warwickshire: **MT** noted that the most successful sessions now seem to be daytime assisted play (a point echoed by others), and that the face-to-face Midlands Counties Congress at Solihull at the start of January did well.
- iii) Worcestershire: **MW** reported that he was experimenting with face-to-face online games (each player at the table having a tablet or equivalent).

- iv) Oxfordshire: **RP** reported that following declining entries for some years, the CBA had changed the pattern for qualifying for the County Pairs Championship to be by attaining 50% or better at a club game over a specified 3-week period. This had raised the number interested to 70 pairs and multiple semi-finals are now envisaged.
- v) Nottinghamshire: **JS** reported that this year (from September last) there are around 70 attending beginners' classes and a similar number attending Improvers courses at venues across the county. The qualifier for the Pachabo was held with 7 teams playing and the top two will play a head-to-head. Sixteen players attended an excellent seminar on defence.
- vi) Derbyshire: (offline from Jim Parker) There was a disappointing turnout for the DCBA face-to-face County Pairs last weekend (only 6 tables, the lowest for some time). DCBA is still working to get players interested in RealBridge and is promoting a RealBridge taster session with all county team players.

ITEM 8: AOB & DONM

16. The next meeting will be the first Thursday of the month, 7th March 2024, now at 10:00am. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES