

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call

on Thursday 7th March 2024 at 10.00am

PRESENT:

Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Nottinghamshire	Julia Staniforth (JS)
Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	REALBRIDGE	Shireen Mohandes (SM)
VISITOR : Steve Carter, U3A Bridge Coordinator (SC)			
Apologies: Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Rob Procter (Oxfordshire)			

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEM 1: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We welcomed Steve Carter to our meeting. We approved the minutes from the 1st February 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.

ITEM 2: BRIDGE IN THE U3A

2. **SC** pointed out to us that the U3A is an international organisation, with over 1000 branches in the UK and within those it is reckoned that about 70% have some bridge activity. However, as a bottom-up organisation, it is hard to identify/contact all those bridge-playing groups. **FD** (accompanied by a local U3A bridge lead) pointed out that the social aspects of these groups was the most important part, and some groups had grown in size since the pandemic.
3. **SC** explained the U3A now has [a BridgeWebs site](#) and is running an online beginners course; this started with adverts for students and teachers late in 2023, and there are now 37 people learning plus a waiting list. They are spread all across the UK, and supported by three teachers and five helpers. The learning makes use of [NoFear Bridge](#) and of [RealBridge](#) facilities. Preparations are now being made for a “returners” group.
4. **SM** pointed out, and others agreed on, the need for more online courses, particularly to cater for people starting to learn in months other than the traditional September. She also recommended that while videos of lessons can work, it is important to make the first lesson for a class sufficiently interactive to make the group build a sense of community.
5. **SC** mentioned that the current course includes 4-5 weeks of MiniBridge. Others endorsed this and the suggestion was made that we need to get more bridge players to understand Minibridge – as then they can more easily get their friends playing some form of the game. It was noted that NoFearBridge offers MiniBridge Certificates for those who complete their MiniBridge training. Watching which learners gather certificates can be a good indicator of their level of keenness.

6. **SC** showed us how to identify U3A bridge activity (comprehensive but not complete) – search on “bridge” at <https://u3asites.org.uk/oversights/show.php?page=groups>. **SC** offered his email as a contact method for anyone interested in more information. The email is u3aBridgeGroup@hotmail.com.

ITEM 3: BRIDGE TEACHING

7. **MW** reported that the learners from the most recent weekend course in Worcestershire had acquired their own bidding boxes and were now meeting fortnightly. This was deemed a sign of success.
8. **PS** asked about how much Youth Bridge activity was going on in the counties represented today, and learned that Gloucestershire has schools in multiple parts of the county active, some junior schools and some senior schools, but elsewhere things were quiet. The feedback was a sense of greater resistance within schools since the pandemic, and that volunteers had found the need for DBS checking off-putting.
9. It was suggested that we need to:
- Investigate offering courses in teacher training colleges, to build a cadre of teachers hooked on the game, and
 - Create some videos featuring current players who learned at school, explaining why they found it such fun.
10. **SM** pointed out that there were many useful pointers to tackling Youth Bridge in the videos from [last year's teachers conference](#), notably the presentation by Patty Tucker.

ITEM 4: ONLINE BRIDGE

11. **SM** reminded us of a variety of events on Realbridge that are deserving of advertising:
- The new “[Generation Game](#)” (child + relative) has started and will continue monthly, and had ten tables last month.
 - The new [world-wide bidding competition](#) managed by Marc Smith (author of many books) and hosted by RealBridge continues and is a useful learning tool for any level of player.
 - The recent run of the [World Bridge Federation's Women's Online Teams](#) was a success, running at a small profit while keeping the entry fee down to €40/team, and with a number of teams from this country participating.

SM had also attended the recent [EBL NBO Officers' Seminar](#), which majored on the future of Women's Bridge and the EBL is planning an [EBL Online women's Championship](#).

12. **PS** asked if we were taking best advantage of the online events which support spectators such as the recent Camrose weekend which was available on RealBridge. The advertising done by most CBAs on this is very limited (but **JF** did report Hampshire reminding members by email). **SM** pointed out that those who do attend report the experience as very satisfactory.

ITEM 5: FACE TO FACE BRIDGE

13. Recent face-to-face Green Point events (Leicestershire, Wiltshire) have seen a continued small increase in numbers – but **JF** reported that a Hampshire event had to be cancelled for lack of entries. **FD** reported playing in the Norfolk Congress recently, where there were 14 tables, unlike the 39 tables from pre pandemic days. What was attractive however at that event, was the presence of a number of players from the Junior Squads – something of which not enough fuss was made.

ITEM 6: MIDLANDS COUNTIES GAMES

14. There was nothing to report on the Midlands Counties League. **PS** has asked the team managers to solicit feedback from the players before next year's plans are made.

15. In discussion about the 9-High Swiss Pairs, **MW** expressed the thought that we were not getting enough attendees from any one county to retain the character of the event as an inter-county event. He offered to bring to the next meeting a comparison of these events against the J-High events, so that we can consider whether any changes are needed.

ITEM 7: BRIDGE IT'S A BIG DEAL – THE SEPTEMBER FESTIVAL

16. **PS** asked if there were any useful ideas of how during the Festival we best promote the game. **FD** reported that clubs were now putting the dates in their diary and sounded enthusiastic. **MW** made the point that we must not be too focused on today's addicts, and that the Festival needs to be outward looking (players in non-affiliated clubs and non-players) for it to be a success – we must not get fixated on just the fund raising. **SM** suggested that counties investigate having A3 posters printed, and suggested we coordinate this as bulk printing will be much cheaper.

ITEM 7: COUNTY UPDATES

17. In general, there was little new to report, but, reporting online:

- i) Warwickshire: **MT** noted that recruitment into committees at both County and club levels remains a major headache. Warwickshire CBA has lost several key personnel from important roles this year, notably player and youth development, teaching and competitions organisation. The impact will continue to be felt until we can obtain commitment from more players: ideas to overcome this would be welcomed.
- ii) Nottinghamshire: **JS** reported that a further free seminar on declarer play took place at the end of February; although attendance was less than at the previous ones it was very well presented and received. The County Knock-out for the Pachabo has taken place and a team of six selected. The County Pairs championship takes place in March and there are 22 pairs entered to date.
- iii) Leicestershire: **DB** reported that does not seem any appetite for teams of 8 anymore and teams of four are not going that great - traveling one main issue.

ITEM 8: AOB & DONM

18. The next meeting will be the first Thursday of the month, 4th April 2024, now at 10:00am. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES