

Welwyn Garden City Bridge Club

Stan Harding

In 1935 the founders of the Club could always be found on the morning commuter train having their first daily Bridge fix. The picture on the right was labelled 'Three Discards and a Ruff' and hung in the Club when it was first formally established. On the right is JG 'Griff' Hartley the first Chairman and Bridge correspondent of the Times. On the left is AJ 'Tony' Smith author and Bridge correspondent of the Daily Telegraph and the inaugurator of the Telegraph Cup which was an annual 'Team of Four' competition among the Home Counties that ceased only a few years ago.

The Club's first regular home was on top of Welwyn Stores. The lower floor consisted of a lounge, bar, kitchen, two snooker tables and two squash courts. The kitchen served excellent meals to welcome the commuters home before they went upstairs to the Card Room. This room had no windows, two skylights, a width that just took a couple of tables and the length a tight squeeze for 7 tables. I recall my first visit and on entering the door I could not see the far end of the room for smoke – cigarette, pipe and cigar. I wonder what the reaction would have been if the present smoking ban had been decreed.

The Club was soon put on the Bridge map when Hartley entered a team in the first Gold Cup event and on the way to the final beat the team that represented England. The following year the England Team came to the Club to stamp their authority and did so but not that convincingly. Its standing was further enhanced when



the Club joined with the Harpenden Club to form the HBA to become the first County Association and among the first to be affiliated to the EBU.

In those days and for many years following the war one had to be played in by a Committee member so that 'standards' were maintained. Naturally this was a forbidding ordeal and not surprisingly membership began to fall to well below a 100 and by the mid-fifties 'playing in' had to be dropped but you still had to be proposed and seconded by a member for Committee acceptance. Formal wear was de rigueur and even into the seventies evening dress and penguin suits were expected at the Xmas Party.

In 1966 new owners took over the Stores and they need of the Club premises. At the same time the local Council decided it was time that WGC had a modern leisure centre and Gosling Sports Park (GSP) was planned. This development left surplus space in

the old buildings (huts). The Bridge Club after much heart searching took up residence at GSP in 1968. Not to a dedicated area but well stocked with tables and chairs and with the freedom to come and go at any time. Under the guidance of Chairmen Geoff Turnbull and subsequently George Westlake the Club grew. Helped during the seventies by the launching of a few Bridge Classes around the County, dropping the elitist outlook, and welcoming all standards of player.

In 1982 Jack Wereik took over as Chairman and during his ten years reign he placed emphasis on the social events. Such as the Ladies Invitation when a lady member may invite a male partner with whom she has played no more than three times in the past year. A similar constraint applied to the Men's invitation. A most welcome event initiated by Jack and his wife Mary was the twinning with a French Bridge Club. One year we went to France and the next they came here. Good food and wine was had by all particularly in France. There was a programme of activities for the accompanying non-bridge players and some very friendly inter-club bridge for the others. To fund their visit here he introduced an annual Club quiz but **NO** bridge questions. The twist in the tail is that the winners had to set the questions the following year and so all quiz teams aimed to come second. Sadly the French Club pulled out in the early nineties. However the quiz has

continued up to the present time and raises about £1000 each year for the Isabel Hospice.

I took over as Chairman from Jack in 1992 when he had raised the membership to about 200. It was just after the time when GSP had knocked down the huts and though we enjoyed playing in the newly built Collingwood suite we were at the mercy of GSP management. If they could obtain a more profitable booking we would be thrown out even on the day of a major event. This made the running the Club almost impossible and we started to look for new premises. The most promising possibility was to build our own Club above the WGC Cricket Club in Digswell Park. Sadly the Local Planning authority turned down our application but following criticism of GSP by the local Council we were able to negotiate our present dedicated facilities. We had to financially support GSP to make the alterations and this meant raising a considerable sum of money not only for this but also for architect fees and planning application for the Cricket Club solution. With this experience I would strongly advise Clubs without a firm lease or their own premises to ensure they have adequate funds in the bank for a similar eventuality.

To meet expenses we had to raise Table Money to £2 and I was determined to keep it at this level by increasing membership. So at the end of each season of Adult Bridge classes I

wrote to each teacher around the County to invite pupils to the Club for free supervised sessions under the guidance of Pam and Ron Reed. This proved very successful and we soon had a regular supply of new members. We were able to add a regular supervised pairs on Thursday mornings for Newcomers and Workshops interspersed with Post-mortem Pairs on Friday mornings for the Intermediates. But in the later nineties Adult Education classes ceased or were too expensive and it was time to start classes at the Club. We tried various ways to advertise and one of the most successful was to ask members to put student recruiting leaflets through neighbouring letter boxes. Barbara Kime started classes at the Club and we now have a thriving 5 classes a week two Beginners, two year 2, and a year 3 students class run some by Barbara and some by Peter Clarke. Peter also now runs the Workshops and Post Mortem Pairs.

It is worth recording the way scoring developed at the Club. In the early days at the end of a session a team of five would score an event from the travellers within about 10 minutes of finishing. Three match pointing the travellers and two entering and cross totting the results. In the seventies and eighties this art had been lost and the TD took the travellers home and results appeared a week later (sometimes two weeks) at the next session. Interest flagged except the winning Pair were often quite amazed.

I started in 1989 to score by computer and post the results on the notice board the following day. The Club website was started in 1997 and results became available less than 24 hours later. Scorebridge (2003) and Bridgemate (2006) arrived on the scene and after 70 years we were back to having results shortly after the last board had been played. Another tech welcome was the purchase of a Mk 4 Duplimate dealing machine in 1997. Since then the Club has enjoyed pre-dealt boards and a printout of the hands at the end of a session. A major help in improving the standard of all, whether Newcomer or Grand Master. I retired as Chairman in 2002 with the membership close to 400 and table Money still at £2. I felt I had achieved my aims, one to have a fully equipped Club room dedicated to Bridge and the other to have a facility that could be the focus for HBA activities. The present Chairman, Bill Gordon, took over the reins and in his safe hands the Club has continued to flourish. Apart from the classes there are now eight sessions each week with morning events becoming more popular and for those interested in joining them they are not held on the commuter train.



