

Bookham Afternoon Bridge Club.

Chairman's Report 18th November 2021.

It is now more than two years since I presented my last Report way back at our last AGM which was held in October 2019. Who could have imagined at that time what we were soon to be faced with? Back then we were still in the middle of celebrating our 50th anniversary. In December 2019 we hosted a Masterclass run by Andrew Robson with the Barn Hall packed to the rafters by members eager to pick up a few tips on how to improve our bidding and play. The following week we held our annual Christmas party with many members again spending an enjoyable day with plenty of food, wine and laughter. Both those events raised funds to swell our Special Anniversary Charity Fund to an incredible total of £2,708. Following voting which took place at our last AGM this amount was shared between three charities, Princess Alice Hospice, Royal Marsden and Kent, Surrey and Sussex Air Ambulance, plus an amount given to Surrey County Bridge Association to support youth bridge throughout the County.

In early 2020 our popularity grew and table numbers at the Barn Hall swelled to a record 27 ½ tables. Your committee was actively preparing about how we might need to send people home due to lack of space. The EBU published their list of most popular clubs as measured by weekly table numbers. For the first time ever BABC entered the top 50 which is amazing for a village club which only meets twice a week. In addition we had a full page spread about our club in the EBU magazine citing reasons why the club was so successful.

And then in mid-March 2020 we were forced to shut - not reopening our doors at the Barn Hall for another eighteen months.

Like many other clubs and organisations, we were faced with an unprecedented situation. Your committee met online regularly and agreed that we must do everything possible to safeguard the long-term future of BABC.

Firstly, we resolved that we should keep in regular contact with all our members, and I hope that you all found the periodic email updates from me interesting and informative. We anticipated that some of our members would never return to the Barn Hall but by keeping in touch with everyone and provoking ongoing interest in the Club we hoped that the number of members not seeking to renew their membership might be kept to a minimum.

Secondly, we believed that our members would support our decision to financially support our paid staff during the closure period and I am delighted to say that, with help from the furlough initiative, we were able to pay both Sandy throughout and Emma until such time as she found alternative employment. This has paid dividends because as soon as we were able to start making tea and biscuits available a few weeks ago we had Sandy ready and willing to provide them for us and I know that those playing again face-to-face really appreciated the return towards a more normal experience at the Barn Hall.

Finally, we decided to launch BABC online. For almost all of us we had never considered, let alone ever played, online bridge. Clearly this was not going to be an easy launch and we wanted to ensure that the experience was neither intimidating nor frightening for those individuals who opted to give it a go. Suffice is to say that this was an overwhelming success and as a result allowed many members to play and maintain an interest in bridge, providing an opportunity to keep in touch with friends, during those long lock down months. When we launched the online club, we hoped that it would not be a significant drain on club finances but not even by our wildest dreams could we ever have imagined just how popular it would be, so much so that the reserves of the Club increased significantly during lockdown. Sue will be illustrating this when she presents the Club balance sheet.

We have had around 180 members and friends playing online. Some played only once or twice whilst others have played over 100 times. Members were able to maintain links with friends and family by playing together whilst not being able to see or visit each other. Some members were able to play online even after experiencing serious illness or accidents. They would never have been able to attend sessions at the Barn Hall whilst recuperating. Players ranged in experience from the most inexperienced up to and including several players with international experience.

Overall, this online initiative in my view was an unqualified success and there are a few people who I wish to thank upon your behalf for making this happen. I mentioned earlier that very few members had ever played online so we were faced with a major exercise in showing members how this could work whilst also giving them the confidence to join a competitive session. I enlisted a few volunteer members who agreed to sit in on a demonstration hand with me. However, I would now like to give a big shout out to my wife Tina – you may already know that Tina only took up bridge lessons with Sue Moss in 2019 so when lockdown came was still a novice bridge player. Despite that I persuaded Tina that she would add glamour and knowledge to any bridge table and so she sat in as my partner on demonstrations / training sessions with many of you who were trying out BBO for the first time or seeking further sessions to gain confidence. So please join me in thanking Tina for her part in the launch of the online Club.

Alongside the practical training which I provided many of you will also have read and benefitted from the teaching and “How to” pages which were made available on our website. We are all immensely indebted to Ron Rutstein who singlehandedly launched these online website tutorials, writing many of the helpful hints and “tips of the day” which so many of you read. Ron kept our website “interesting and relevant”, and I am convinced that without his fantastic efforts that our online bridge sessions would never have been such a success.

I should also like to thank Jonathan Lillycrop from the EBU who held my hand whilst we were starting up the online Club and both Megan Jones and Oliver Cowan who have so sympathetically and professionally directed our games and even encouraged us to try out playing Swiss Pairs rather than the normal duplicate format.

Finally, I should like to thank all those of you who joined in the sessions on a Monday or Thursday afternoon. Having so many of you logging on to play made all our work worthwhile.

Before I finish talking about the online sessions there is one additional thing that I wish to mention about the last eighteen months of online play and that is to highlight how generous everyone has been supporting our charitable events. The accounts for 2020/21 will show that we raised an amazing amount of £4,707 towards charitable causes. Amazingly, contributions came not just from those playing online but also from members who whilst not able to join our games still wished to support these worthy causes. Record donations from BABC were collected towards the annual Children-in-Need and Dorin Salver fund raising SIMs competitions, we raised funds for RNLI and then a further £1,950 was raised towards supporting the Barn Hall which is a venue that we all appreciate, and which was without receipt of any rental income for such a long period. Thank you one and all.

In September 2021 following a survey of members gauging their appetite for a return to face-to-face sessions the committee agreed that we should restart once a week at the Barn Hall. Whilst weekly table numbers are significantly below pre-pandemic numbers the number of individuals who have already attended at least once has exceeded our expectations. A sub-group from our committee, led by Marilyn Clarke, produced a very comprehensive risk assessment which was published on our website. I should like to thank them for their thoroughness in considering all aspects associated with the return.

We are once again indebted to those individuals who ensure that our club runs so smoothly. I have already mentioned Ron Rutstein for keeping the website clear, updated and relevant. To our directors, scorers and card duplimators I wish to express our gratitude for your time and contributions. Without you our sessions would not be so enjoyable and smoothly run. I must also thank our committee who have supported me throughout these last two years and in particular Kate Castree for everything that she has performed in her role as secretary and Sue McDonald who has kept an eagle and careful eye over our finances. They have all helped ensure that your Club could move forward from the anniversary celebrations and look positively towards the next fifty years.

Within any Club there are always certain individuals who take on more than their fair share of the workload and all members will appreciate this thanklessness in giving up so much of their time. We have been extremely fortunate to have benefitted from one such individual for so many years but now is the time for her to take a step back and have a well-deserved break from responsibilities and concentrate just on playing bridge. Sandra Cape, who is stepping down from our committee at this AGM, has led the teams of scorers and directors ensuring that every single session has been resourced. She has also established a wonderful group of members who share the responsibility for dealing the boards for us. Thanks to Sandra's keen eye for a bargain, we now have a second almost new duplimate machine which means that we should be very well placed should either break down at any time. She has assured me that this machine, which was imported from Wuhan after the 2019 world championships, was not responsible for

importing anything else into our country from that locality. Sandra has also taken responsibility for making sure that all our computerised equipment including the bridgemates is kept updated and in full working order, keeping them clean and replenished with fresh batteries when needed.

Sandra, we owe you a very big vote of thanks from all the membership and do please also pass on our thanks to David who has frequently helped you when problems have arisen or when new equipment has had to be set up. I know that you have said that you will always be there to provide advice and guidance when we might be in need, but I personally hope that you can relax and enjoy an extended period of just playing bridge and not having to worry about everything else.

Sandra's parting gift to us, for which we are also most grateful, has been to suggest that we should split out club responsibilities more widely and I am grateful to both Marilyn Clarke who has taken on the co-ordination of the scorers and directors and to Alice Harper who will be leading the teams of duplimators. Thank you both.

I also wish to take this opportunity to thank Kath Green who is also stepping down from our committee at the AGM. Kath is always one of the first to arrive at the hall and irrespective of whether she was duty officer that day would help set the tables up ready for the session. Kath is planning to travel extensively over the next twelve months now that the skies have reopened allowing her to visit family once again.

A plea now from me -we need and are seeking help from within the membership for two roles, which each might easily be performed jointly with another member. Firstly we need someone to take over the maintenance of our computerised equipment and secondly someone to provide some help and backup for Ron in looking after the website. If anyone is at all interested in helping either by yourself or together with someone else, and there would be no requirement to also become a committee member, then do please get in touch with me. If we can share the workload around then the long-term future of the club will be secure.

I want to look forward now and not back. I believe that despite everything that has been thrown at us over the last two years that we are still a strong and happy club. As your chairman my mandate was to maintain the ethos of the club as *"a club which continues to be somewhere people want to come because they can have a good game of bridge, played according to EBU rules in a friendly, non-threatening atmosphere."* I should like to think that jointly with the fantastic support given to me from your committee that we have succeeded.

A quick plug for next year – we shall once again be holding an Andrew Robson Masterclass with the date set for Thursday 3rd March 2022. Full details of ticket prices and the charity to which all profits will be donated will be announced soon.

More dates for your diary. On 6th (online) and 9th December (face-to-face) we will be entering the Dorin Salver SIMs competition. Normal entry fee will apply plus a suggested minimum donation of £3 per session to the charity which once again will be the Queen Elizabeth Foundation.

There will be no face-to-face bridge on either 23rd or 30th December. However, there will be additional online games on both of those dates starting at the normal online time of 1.00 p.m.

And finally – to those of you have returned to playing face-to-face bridge a big thank-you. This will slowly encourage others to make their own return. To those of you who have not yet crossed through the Barn Hall doors – we miss you and look forward to seeing you again but please take your time, do not feel under any pressure to return and only come back when you personally feel that it is safe to do so.

Let's all look forward to a time when we can be together twice a week playing face-to-face bridge at the Barn Hall with the happy sound of contented bridge players filling the rafters.

Thank you

Neil Higgins