

## **Chelmsford Bridge Club – A brief history.**

### **The Early Years**

The Chelmsford Bridge Club (CBC) was formed as a duplicate bridge circle at a meeting in the County Hotel in Chelmsford in November 1952 on the initiative of Mr R Price. A committee was appointed with Mr J Walker as chairman, Mr D R Dickie as secretary, Mr S R Trevillion as treasurer, and Mr Price as tournament director. The weekly sessions in the first year were held at the Army and Navy Hotel in Chelmsford. At the end of the season Mrs Cannon and Mrs Rippon had the highest average score and the CBC won their first inter-club match, played against Felsted.

Almost immediately, finding suitable accommodation for the weekly sessions proved difficult. Over the next few years several venues were used including the Chase Hotel in Ingatestone and Red Cross House in London Road Chelmsford. The club met once a week on Wednesday evenings except during the summer.

In 1957 Mr George Marx became chairman, a post he held until 1968-69, and in 1959 Mr and Mrs Marx presented the club with a silver cup to be awarded each year to the pair with the best average score over the year. Appropriately Mr and Mrs Marx were the first winners and in total they won the cup they donated at least eight times.

An individual cup competition was also introduced and played for on the third Wednesday of each month. A cup for this competition was donated by Mrs Pike and Mrs Douglas. The competition was popular for many years although the precise format changed over time. At one stage there were separate qualifying nights and the final was played at the weekend. Eventually the competition fell from favour and the cup awarded to the individual winning the most local points at the club in the year.

Also, in 1956/57, Mr Price set up a pairs competition open to other local clubs in support of the Red Cross with a cup presented by Mr D Walker and Mr I Waller, the first two chairmen. In its first year it was supported by Felsted, Sudbury, Clacton, and Gidea Park clubs. Subsequently the Red Cross Cup proved a popular annual event supported by many mid-Essex clubs. Eventually it lost support as the Essex Contract Bridge Association introduced more competitions including pairs, teams of 4, and inter-club events. Aspiring club players had plenty of opportunities to compete at a higher level.

Another feature of the early years was the large number of friendly matches played against other bridge clubs. In some years there were as many as eight matches played. Again as the County developed more competitions the need for these friendly inter-club matches fell. Nonetheless the annual match against Felsted has continued every year, although its format changed in 1967 to a pairs competition for the Dick Price Cup - Dick was a founder member of both clubs.

### **Development**

By the 1970s the club was well established and successful. The club met once a week, now on a Monday evening, and it supported the many Essex County competitions. Finding good premises for the weekly sessions was a continuing problem. When Mike Case was the Director in the 1970s the club met in the library of Great Baddow Comprehensive School, but when Mike's career took him to

another school the club moved to a “wooden hut” near Great Baddow Fire Station. Later the club moved to St Augustine’s Church Hall in Springfield and stayed for several years until declining membership led to another move.

The club always attracted good players but it also encouraged those with relatively little experience. For example Bob Cuthbert ran evening classes for both beginners and improvers and a steady flow of his students joined the club. Much of the club’s success was due to the dedication of members who had worked for the club since its beginnings. In addition to George Marx’s contribution, Douglas Dickie was treasurer for 12 years before becoming chairman for 4 years, Bob Cuthbert was secretary for 10 years before being chairman for 6 years, and Dick Price was tournament director for over 10 years.

From the 1980’s, the club has been led by a succession of different chairmen. It maintained a policy of the chairman changing regularly so that each new chairman knew there was an exit date and new ideas were continually introduced. Among those who have chaired the club are George Fox, John Henderson, Malcolm Perry, Audrey Hartley, Richard Eason, John Williams, Julie Payne, Brian Davies, and Cath Fox. But most of the burden of running the club has been carried by other officials, many of whom have served for long periods. Peter Jones was an extremely diligent records officer for 10 years in the era of hand calculation of results before being secretary for another 7 years. Kingsley Matthews was treasurer for over 15 years and Ted Cockle has been tournament director for about 12 years having previously been treasurer for several years. And most of those who have served as chairman also served long periods in other roles, e.g. Audrey Hartley as tournament director, Malcolm Perry as records officer and Julie Payne as treasurer and tournament director.

The programme of events has also developed. In 1973-74, the club extended its programme to the whole year and introduced a summer handicap pairs competition. An internal teams of 4 league and a best of seven rubbers knockout were introduced, both events being hosted in players’ homes. Teams of four events were also introduced on the first Monday of the month (but with pairs Butler scoring during the summer to avoid the difficulty of forming teams during the holiday season). Audrey Hartley presented a Plate for the winners of a best 4 out of 7 sessions played each autumn. In 1978-79 there was a trial of having a second evening each week but it failed to attract sufficient numbers and was dropped.

In 1981-82 the membership reached 95, which was rather more than could be accommodated in the hall being used. Large numbers also made it necessary to use more complicated bridge movements if nearly all pairs were to play the same 24 or 26 boards. This was of course before the era of computer dealt hands and duplicated boards.

The club and its members were achieving some success in wider competitions. In the 1980s Chelmsford teams of four were doing well in the higher divisions of the South East Essex League. But it was not until 2001-02 that Chelmsford won the principal inter-club event in Essex, the Fletcher Trophy. In most subsequent years it has maintained creditable position in that competition. The club teams have also had some success in national competitions such as the National Inter-Club Knock Out (NICKO). And many members have played for the county in the teams of eight competitions between counties in Eastern England.

However membership began to decline slowly in the 1990s. Playing bridge had become more popular but the Chelmsford club was only offering one session a week and that had become quite a high standard. The club no longer had a stream of new players joining from bridge classes run by members and some potential newcomers found the necessary leap in standard daunting. Several new clubs were formed in mid-Essex for largely inexperienced players and bridge sessions became available every evening of the week and on some afternoons. Naturally many experienced and inexperienced players took advantage of these wider opportunities.

## **Recent Years**

Declining membership and failure to attract relatively inexperienced players were serious concerns from about 2008, but options to address the problems were limited by only having one session each week. One of the members Ray Jones started Tuesday afternoon sessions at Great Baddow Tennis Club and quickly attracted a roomful of players. The initiative was so successful that parallel sessions were set up on Wednesday afternoons for players with very little experience. Ray organised a rota of “experts” from CBC to help (organising, advising, and playing if necessary) and to ensure that everyone enjoyed playing in a friendly and instructive atmosphere. Sadly Ray died from an aggressive cancer, but his legacy has been taken forward by Ted Cockle and others and the Great Baddow bridge club thrives with the help of a few “experts” from other clubs. Many of those introduced to the game at Great Baddow now play regularly at other clubs and a few are members at Chelmsford.

CBC eventually moved from its church hall in Springfield to play at the Great Baddow Tennis Club which allowed much joint working with the club that Ray had set up. However after a couple of years hard practicalities forced a further move (the car park could not cope with bridge players and tennis players). CBC now meets at the Falcon Bowls Club (which has a very large car park) in Chelmsford on Monday evenings. In addition to our evening sessions, Ted Cockle has organised instruction and practice sessions for newcomers on Monday mornings and the very latest initiative to widen the bridge playing community is led by Val Poter. He is introducing the basics of bridge to children at two local primary schools. We may have to wait awhile before this initiative produces new CBC members. Both Ted and Val rely on expert helpers from CBC and other bridge clubs to provide their students with the almost individual help that is so beneficial.

With several bridge clubs in the mid-Essex area each offering sessions once a week, many players belong to more than one club in order to play maybe three or four times a week. CBC works with other clubs to offer a helpful service to players on, for example, finding partners, advertising events, and the production of computer dealt hands.

## **Essex Committee Representation**

As well as supporting county bridge by playing in county events and for the county, many CBC members have served on the County committee. These include Ted Cockle, John Williams, Max Wolfe, Betty Telford, Tony Philpott, Audrey Hartley, and Paul and Val Mollison.

## **EBU Dimmie Fleming Awards**

The club is proud of the fact that four of its members have been awarded the English Bridge Union's Dimmie Fleming award for services to bridge. They are Bob Cuthbert (1986), Yvonne Dagwell(2002), Tony Philpott (2013), and Audrey Hartley (2017) . In all cases their contributions have been much wider than just their contribution to CBC. Bob Cuthbert ran bridge evening classes and inspired many newcomers through his energy and enthusiasm, including setting up new bridge clubs when his students needed them. Yvonne Dagwell was one of the early members of CBC and played at a high level for many years before she too started teaching bridge and set up new bridge clubs to meet demand. Tony Philpott was a member of the Essex County committee for over 40 years including 31 years as treasurer and a stint as Essex captain. He was also a very good player from an early age featuring in a trial for the national "Bermuda Bowl" team at the age of 21 and winning several major national competitions including the National Pairs. Audrey Hartley played bridge for many years while working as a teacher and she helped some of her pupils reach a very good standard. On retirement Audrey devoted even more time to bridge and became very successful. She played to a high standard including playing for England in the Lady Milne. She also became a highly regarded tournament director being Tournament Secretary for Essex for three years. Then on Margaret Curtis's retirement she became General Secretary for Essex, a post she held for four years. In addition she played in evening sessions at the Young Chelsea Bridge Club before becoming involved in two of the afternoon clubs that met there. She was the Arbitre of the Club des Francais de Grande Bretagne affiliated to the Federation Francaise de Bridge and she became the manager of the International Contract Bridge Club affiliated to the American Contract Bridge Association.

RJE

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