

KCBA AGM 19th July 2026 Chairman's Report

When I took over from Norman Inniss as KCBA Chairman a year ago, I came into the role as a regular club player in Tunbridge Wells and occasionally Farnborough. I did not have a great understanding of the workings of bridge at the county level. I therefore set myself a number of objectives for my first year: firstly, to build an understanding of the role of the county in supporting bridge in Kent and its relationships with the EBU, the neighbouring counties and the clubs; secondly, with the Committee to support our Kent competitions including increasing the player numbers; thirdly, to develop a plan for boosting youth bridge in Kent, following Anton Mauve stepping down as Youth Officer; and finally, to ensure the administration of KCBA was in the best possible shape. I will address all of these in turn.

Kent is fortunate in having an EBU Board member, Paul Gibbons, as a member of the KCBA Committee. Paul provides an insight into the thinking and workings of the EBU which are not always apparent from the outside. The EBU has made a considerable effort in the past year to involve the counties, for example with regular webinars, which is a trend I hope will continue. The relationship with Sussex is particularly important because of our joint congress each autumn. The leadership in Sussex has recently changed but I will be seeking to continue the relationship, not least because we wish the congress to continue beyond this year. I am less comfortable about the relationship between the County and the clubs. We appear to operate largely independently of each other with little communication between the two. This is not new. Nonetheless, the Committee wishes the County to be seen as a resource that adds value to the clubs and can be drawn on by them in support of bridge in their area. We have just initiated a working group to look into the County's role in more detail, including how we could better manage our relationship with the clubs.

Turning to competitions, in Kent we have about 2,200 members of whom just under 1,700 are active players. These numbers have been more-or-less static for the past three years following the fall in numbers post-covid. We are a little behind the country as a whole which has seen a small uptick over the past year. However, we do have a significant number of associate members, over 160, who have joined to play in our county events, particularly the NGS 9High events and Improvers Pairs Congress, which is very good for our profile and a useful contributor to our revenues. Sharon Baynes and Paul Gibbons, particularly, have been instrumental in attracting entrants and running the 9High events so successfully.

For the major county events such as the Congress we have seen stable numbers over the past year with some promising signs of increased numbers, notably the Corbett Cup in January and the online Blue-pointed Swiss Pairs in May. We experimented by introducing a monthly online Jack High event in November which was well attended. Unfortunately, the numbers declined over the subsequent months and we now run this quarterly. My greatest concern is the decline in numbers for the smaller events such as the George Griffiths and Dyer Smith Pairs. After cancelling the George Griffiths because of low numbers but still proceeding with the Dyer Smith which had poor but doable numbers last year, we decided to move both competitions online with the former on RealBridge and the latter on BBO. The George Griffiths attracted 11 tables which was satisfactory

for a first attempt, although we were told by some clubs that BBO was their preferred platform. We plan to try it on BBO next year. We hope the Dyer Smith will attract larger numbers in October. I would encourage everyone to find a partner and play in this very enjoyable competition. Of course, I encourage everyone to play in all the county competitions!

The geography of Kent has always presented a challenge for increasing attendance at County competitions. Tunbridge Wells Bridge Club has much the best facilities, stores the County's equipment and trophies and is in effect the County's base. We will continue to hold most of our major competitions there. We are, nonetheless, always on the lookout for new venues elsewhere that would be more attractive to players from East and North Kent. In June we played our first F2F 9High event in Hartlip, a location on the North Downs. It attracted 6 tables for two sessions which was a promising start for a new venue. It was particularly pleasing to see good representation from the Medway towns. We will be considering this venue for some future events.

For many players the face of Kent competitions is Stephen Brown. We all owe Stephen a great debt of thanks for the organization and smooth running of our competitions. This year Stephen has been supported by Lindsey Clarke. Although Lindsey is stepping down from the Committee, I am pleased to say she has agreed to continue supporting Stephen with future competitions. In addition, Stephen has been mentoring David Cock through the County TD qualification process. David passed his Advanced TD training in May and I look forward to seeing much more of David officiating at County events.

Over the past year, I have focused on youth bridge more than any other topic. This is the future of our game and for me the most important issue to address. I co-opted Ravi Athwal to help me understand the challenges of setting up a youth bridge programme in Kent, picking up from where Anton Mauve left off. We started from the premise that we would work with English Bridge Education and Development (EBED) to benefit from EBED's own development programme, resources and expertise in the field. After extensive discussions with EBED and other interested parties and discussions within the Committee, I prepared a paper setting out options for developing youth bridge in Kent. This paper was circulated to club chairs and secretaries across the county for comment. I was disappointed to receive almost no response but this did act as a spur to look much more closely at the relationship between County and clubs to which I referred above. At the last Committee meeting we decided to put our ideas on hold for the time being and wait for EBED to develop its proposition to a level suitable for deployment within the County, provided there is a sufficient level of interest and we have the necessary resources, including a new Youth Officer.

I started out the year wanting to satisfy myself that the finances and administration of the County were in good order. As set out in the Treasurer's Report, our financial position is quite strong at the moment. Last year the accounts show we made a small profit. However, this represents a decline of approximately 70% from the previous year. It largely reflects the reduction in numbers entering some of our competitions described above. It should be noted that our profit-making open competitions provide a substantial cross-subsidy for many of the Kent competitions. While not yet an issue, it is important that we do not start to show a significant loss which over time could begin to jeopardise our ability to fund county activities.

Martin Davies has audited our accounts for the past four years but has now decided to stand down. The whole Committee would like to express its thanks to Martin for taking on this role with great diligence. We will need a successor for Martin and so would anyone willing to take on the role or alternatively could suggest a candidate please get in touch with me or Georgina.

Administrative matters that were dealt with last year included some tidying up of our banking arrangements and making sure that we have adequate insurance cover for our trophies and equipment stored at Tunbridge Wells. Many of the trophies are now displayed in a new trophy cabinet in the Club.

Gerald Soper has done an excellent job of digitising and storing the County's records which are very nearly as complete as they are ever likely to be. These can be viewed on our website.

In as much as I have not done so already, there are people I wish to thank: my Committee who have had to put up with someone very much finding his way; Ravi Athwal for the time and energy he has put into youth bridge over the past 9 months; Brian Forty for his organisation and hard work to arrange for the specification and installation of our trophy cabinet, looking after our trophies and other equipment on site and also for the occasional taps on my shoulder with useful advice on matters that have escaped my attention; Christine Thomas, who is retiring, for the service she has provided for Kent events in Tunbridge Wells over many years.

We have a multitude of winners of our competitions over the past year. You will find them all on our website. My congratulations to them all.

Saving the best until last, a few days before I wrote this Helen Erichsen, partnered by Fiona Brown as members of the English Women's team, won gold in the European National Team Championship in Riga and qualified for the World Championship in Barbados next year. What a fabulous result! Congratulations from all of us to Helen and you can be sure we will be rooting for you in the World Championships.

Jonathan Wittmann

KCBA Chairman

13th July 2026