

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the August edition of the OBA newsletter. This month's offering has been edited by Kathy Talbot. Send any comments and suggestions to kathy_talbot@hotmail.co.uk

A VOICE FROM THE NORTH

Ken Langdon, from Kings Sutton Bridge Club (KSBC) has written a piece telling us how the club rebuilt itself after the COVID crisis. Huge obstacles had to be overcome: a shift towards activities that are casual and online rather than face to face, the cost-of-living crisis and changing demographics. It stresses the importance of nurturing the community. I consider it recommended reading for all involved in the running of a bridge club. Read the full article "[A Voice from the North](#)".

ASK CHATGPT

We County Committee members have recently discovered the convenience of asking ChatGPT. It can provide useful answers to all sorts of questions, including bridge questions.

Robert Procter recently asked it "If I would like to learn to play bridge how do I best go about it?" The reply recommended playing socially at the same time as actually playing. Read the full reply Ask ChatGPT "[The AI recommended route to learning bridge](#)". It actually ends up by offering to teach you itself!

EDUCATION

Now is the time of year when most of the Bridge for all Courses start. Make sure you spread the word among your friends and community: a huge proportion of our successful marketing is word of mouth and personal recommendation. Check out our OBA clubs that offer lessons: Abbey Smith BC, Oxford BC and Wallingford BC. Any other clubs offering lessons can ensure publicity by contacting the editor (kathy_talbot@hotmail.co.uk).

SUCCESSFUL OBA MEMBERS

Congratulations to Diana Nettleton, this year's EBU Pairs Player of the Year.



The Championship awards points for finishing in the top positions of all EBU national face-to-face pairs events that have no entry restrictions. Diana topped the table with 157 points after scoring highly in the Eastbourne Summer Meeting, Year End Congress, Harrogate Congress, Easter Congress London, Spring Bank Holiday Congress and Scarborough Congress.

Diana tells us how she started as a club player but about 7 years ago wanted to develop herself so took some professional coaching. This helped her to adopt conventions that are a "game changer" and lose those that are a waste of time. And then she began the process of unravelling how to beat the contract the opponents are in - which isn't always possible, sometimes it is easy, sometimes it needs you to be super careful and play a waiting game, and sometimes you have to encourage declarer to make a poor decision. Diana states that this is really interesting and great fun: "I think this is where we pick up most pairs points, and also in teams it makes a big difference in terms of IMPs. One of our top England players drilled into me, when defending " you are involved with every card at every point of the game - so be involved"...that sort of meant concentrate and make every card be a part of the defensive story: give it a go when you practise on BBO !!"

Abbey Smith represented England in the Mixed Teams European Championships this summer in Latvia.



She tells us: "Day 7 was tense but it was the culmination of a long week! But what a week, the Team ranked 5th overall and given the top 8 qualify for the World Championships next year - the team will be in Barbados competing on the world stage! How amazing!" Read more about her experience in "[Abbey's latest international experience](#)". Abbey, we wish you luck in the World Championships in Barbados in 2027.

OBA members Finn Clark and Stuart Forsyth recently won an online Swiss Pairs event.



Finn comments “Looking back over the hands that day, a common theme was hand valuation. Where's the borderline between a Weak Two and an opening bid? What's a good overcall?” It touches on the principle of “strong overcalls of weak bids and weak overcalls of strong bids”. The hands are given in more detail in [Finn's commentary](#).

Nick Smith and Alan Wilson feature in the Objectivity team which has finished second in the first division of the summer National Teams League and **Finn Clark and Stuart Forsyth** play in North South which came second in the second division

UPCOMING EVENTS

If you're quick, you can still enter the Harwell Cup: face-to-face teams at the Oxford Bridge Club on 13th September: 1:45 PM for a prompt 2:00 PM start. See the OBA home page to enter.

In September, the county is relaunching the pairs event that occurs on the second Monday of each month. Previously the Senior Pairs, this will now welcome players of all ages, and for the 14th September, the entry fee includes a free lunch! For eligible players, results will count towards the annual Seniors Ladder. The event takes place face-to-face at Wallingford Bridge Club.

We run a cross-IMP pairs league on the third Thursday of each month and a multiple teams event on the fourth Thursday of each month. New entries welcome.

Wallingford Bridge Club is running a Blue-pointed Swiss pairs on Sunday 11th October – see their website.

Burford Café Bridge is happening on Monday 9th November and Henley Café Bridge on 15th September (only 2 places left as I write!).

FUTURE ISSUES

IF you have any ideas for articles in future editions of the newsletter, please contact Kathy Talbot or Robert Procter.

A VOICE FROM THE NORTH

The Local Teams' Challenge Cup

King's Sutton village, located about halfway between the towns of Bicester and Banbury, has a population of roughly 2,300 residents. So, last year when its Bridge Club was the host to eighteen teams from seven bridge clubs in a teams' tournament, the Director and Scorer were naturally very nervous. However, our events' manager, Eileen, had organised wine and canapes as teams arrived and coffee and cake at the halfway point and all went well. The winners were a county-level team led by the Menagerie club and second was a top team from the big bridge club at Stratford-on-Avon.

Why is this annual event important to the Kings Sutton bridge club (KSBC) and why do so many players, 74 last year, of varying skills from expert to average club standard agree to venture to the northern edge of Oxfordshire to take part? (We limit numbers otherwise it would be even bigger.)

To explain this, I need to start with a bit of history. After covid, KSBC was nearly dead. We were down to a small number of members and we had lost Marian, the bridge expert who had driven the duplicate club from its early days. Three people decided to have a go at reviving it. We were a progressive finance person, Anthony, a bridge expert, Evelyn and an experienced, slightly smarmy salesman, me.

At that time, we didn't realise the depth of the crisis facing hobby and social clubs. Around 4 in 5 reported and those that survive are still reporting poor financial health. They're dealing with rising costs and declining attendance. Every type of club is facing difficulties – gardening, stamp collecting, Rotary, bowls and bridge clubs to name just a few.

The causes of this decline:

- A massive shift towards activities that are casual and online rather than face to face
- The cost-of-living crisis forcing reduced spending
- Changing demographics (we're all getting older)

Growing the membership

We started by looking at the competition. Bicester was a big club in the first or second division of the Wessex league and Banbury an online club of a similar high standard. Plus, of course, what we now know is the biggest threat of all, a similar but also quite different game - online bridge.

We obviously couldn't compete if the main selling proposition was our quality of bridge, so we decided to emphasise the 'club' or 'community' angle of a bridge club. However, we also wanted to become a competitive duplicate bridge club, improving standards and aiming high. This led to my internal mantra or slogan 'We will be ultra professional in all we do but with a very, very smiley face' – smarmy or what?

Now, five years later, we have about 140 members. This growth is a lot to do with luck, but we did get our strategy right in places and we learned when our strategy went wrong. In one case it went catastrophically wrong in a way that, in my view, set our growth back by about a year.

Our first piece of huge luck is our facilities. We play in the modern village hall which has a large hall and a small hall connected by a well-equipped kitchen. Our short-term plan was:

Year 1 **'Survival year'** – we contacted everyone who had had anything to do with the club in the past and pulled in every favour we could to get people through the door. This proved how critical it was to keep a comprehensive list of anyone even remotely involved in the club in the past.

Year 2 **'Money year'** – you can't develop anything without money; so, in addition to the slow growth of people paying to play, Evelyn ran our first profitable course. We needed money not only to run the club but also for all the computer technology we use to run bridge professionally.

(Second huge piece of luck. Steve joined the club and David joined a course. Both were experienced project managers. As a result, we now boast one of the best IT departments in Oxfordshire! In Steve we also got another expert bridge teacher.)

Next, **'Get the product right'** – So, by advertising in local newsletters, a poster campaign, a good webpage and word of mouth we have got to an average attendance on Thursday, which is our competitive club night, of 5 – 8 tables - 32 players. Aside from the reluctance of older people to drive at night, particularly during the winter, online bridge and the lure of playing in the big, much higher standard Oxford club has dampened that growth in club night attendance.

Real growth has come from the daytime sessions on Wednesday mornings. My experience running a tennis club was a guide on how to run these sessions. A tennis club is made up of a lot of members who wish to play social tennis and a smaller number who want to play competitively and represent their club in playing against other teams. You cannot compel social players to become serious tennis players and come to lessons and training sessions – that's not why they joined the club. However, they do keep score and feel much better when they win rather than lose!

It's the same with a bridge club. So, we asked Wednesday players what they wanted and didn't start Competitive bridge on Wednesdays for at least a year before we ran monthly tournaments. We ran short, fifteen minute, training sessions at the beginning of each session. Our objective was, 'Create a terrific place to spend Wednesday mornings'.

We now run each month a duplicate pairs event three weeks out of four. We do it in two sections to allow one group to play faster and therefore more boards, than the other. Like the tennis players, they may not be ultra-competitive, but they prefer to do well. You can tell this by the crowd of fifty players clustered round the monitor displaying the result.

In conclusion

What are the main lessons we've learnt? Most of them are well known to all clubs but maybe it's worth repeating them:

- Nowadays, a thriving club needs daytime sessions
- To attract beginners, you must offer training courses. To improve the standard of play, you must offer seminars and hand analysis
- Listen to new members and tune the product to what they want at the time. They will get to competitive duplicate bridge in good time but at their pace
- The main club night, played in the evenings to allow working people to attend, is not sustainable in the long term unless there are low and mid-skill players, eg NGS 4-6, in the mix
- People learn from playing against and with better players, so the club needs its top players to attend the same club night as the mid-skilled

- We need a method of attracting younger people to the game; so, we're planning to start a face-to-face club in Banbury in a pub, with an emphasis on conviviality and teaching

I was told at the beginning that 'word of mouth' is your biggest recruiter; we found that word of mouth needs the help of as much publicity as it can get free and/or paid for. The local teams' competition is, amongst other things, part of that publicity campaign. It's not a congress or a blue-pointed competition but it's great fun. We're always looking for new clubs to join so why not send a team?

(By the way, the two expert teams who were first and second last year were followed in third place by a Kings Sutton team, ahead of teams from Oxford, Bicester and Banbury, just saying....)

THE AI RECOMMENDED ROUTE TO LEARNING BRIDGE

If you're starting from scratch, I'd strongly recommend **learning bridge socially, with some structured teaching alongside actual play**. Bridge is much easier to learn when you quickly get to the point of playing complete hands rather than trying to master the theory first. **Finding a friendly local club or beginners' course is probably the best route for you.**

A good way to start

1. Take a proper beginners' course

Look for a course of perhaps 6–10 weekly sessions. You want one that teaches:

the basics of the 52-card deal

tricks and how a contract is played

bidding and the purpose of an auction

opening bids

responses to opening bids

basic declarer play

basic defence

Don't worry initially about complicated conventions such as Stayman, transfers, Blackwood, etc. They come later.

2. Play as soon as possible

This is probably the most important point. After a few lessons, start playing very simple hands with other beginners.

Bridge can seem extraordinarily complicated when explained theoretically. Once you've actually played 20 or 30 hands, much of it starts to make sense.

3. Use an online bridge program between lessons

This is particularly useful because you can play at your own speed and repeat situations. Online practice is excellent for learning card play and getting comfortable with bidding.

One particularly good option is **Bridge Base Online (BBO)**, which has a large amount of free material and allows you to play against computers or people.

[Bridge Base Online](https://www.bridgebase.com/)

Don't try to learn everything at once

I'd divide learning into three stages:

Stage 1 — Learn to play a hand

Your first objective should simply be:

"I understand what the contract means and I can play the cards."

At this stage, bidding can be very basic.

Stage 2 — Learn a simple bidding system

I'd recommend **Standard English / Acol** if you're learning in Britain. It is widely used in English clubs and will make it much easier to play with other people.

You might initially learn only:

1NT opening

one-of-a-suit opening

responses to those bids

how to recognise whether you have enough points for game

how to find a fit

how to bid a major-suit game

That gets you surprisingly far.

Stage 3 — Improve your card play

This is where bridge becomes particularly interesting. You'll learn things such as:

counting your winners and losers

establishing long suits

finesses

holding up an opponent's winning card

drawing trumps

counting the opponents' distribution

signalling and defensive play

You don't need to learn all of these before you start playing.

One thing I would avoid

I wouldn't begin by buying a huge book on bridge bidding and trying to memorise it.

Bridge isn't really a game where **knowledge comes first and experience second**. It's better to learn a small amount, play it, make mistakes, understand why you made them, and then add another piece of knowledge.

If you'd like to learn with me

I can actually teach you **bridge from absolute beginner level**, interactively, without assuming you know anything.

For example, we could do it like this:

Lesson 1: What is a trick? What is a contract? How does the play work?

Then I could give you a hand such as:

♠ A 7 4

♥ K Q 8 3

♦ 9 6 2

♣ J 7 5

and ask you questions about what you would do.

Once you've understood the basics, we could progress to **bidding**, using Acol, and I could give you hands and ask, "*What would you bid?*" You make your decision, and I'll explain the answer.

That would probably be a very effective way for you to learn because **you'd be making decisions rather than simply reading explanations**.

If you like, we can start **Lesson 1 now**, assuming you know absolutely nothing about bridge.

ABBEY'S LATEST INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

It's an odd feeling to be competing in a European Championship 27 years after the last one, but oddly even more exciting. The difference this time was that I was in a team with some of my very closest friends. The team that entered the trials was based around having a team who wanted to not only play bridge but enjoy spending time together. I believe that the reason we won the trials both weekends was not only that we played OK, but our spirit was fabulous! We were supportive to each other and not critical in any way. We had such an enjoyable two weekends and now we were able to take this into the Europeans.

We had the opportunity to choose another pair and an NPC. Our main goal for this was to keep the team spirit and dynamic that we had during the trials. Maggie Knottenbelt and Ben Hadley-Pritchard fitted in so well in the team and Mike Hornung as the NPC was the best captain I have ever experienced.

I have to say that I was more nervous this time than I ever was when I played when I was younger. This could have been an age thing, but I think it was actually because I wanted to play well for the team. I didn't want to let any of them down as I think so highly of them all. I

definitely felt proud of how I played in the first half of the tournament. I had a little dip on the two-match day against Poland and Romania, which I will hopefully learn from for the World Championships, but thankfully was able to find a second wind.

Whenever I am asked to find a hand from a tournament I always find it difficult. The reason is because I believe actually to do well in tournaments, particularly of this length, is not about brilliant play, but about avoiding as many mistakes as possible and also being able to move on from any mistakes and not make more because of them. This is an underrated area of the game as well as being in a team that you feel supported and enjoy being in.

The hand that I have selected was from a match against Croatia. I remember quite plainly playing the hand, which was 4H by East..

Board 12. Dealer West. N-S Vulnerable.			
♠ K T 4			
♥ J			
♦ K J 9 8 6 5 3 2			
♣ 3			
♠ A Q J 6 3	♠ N ♥ W E ♦ S ♣	♠ 7 5	
♥ A 7		♥ Q T 6 5 4 3 2	
♦ Q 4		♦ T 7	
♣ A K Q 4		♣ T 6	
♠ 9 8 2			
♥ K 9 8			
♦ A			
♣ J 9 8 7 5 2			

After the DA lead, it was clear from the spade switch that South need to get North on lead, to cash a 2nd diamond trick. I knew a loser could be thrown on the clubs, but throwing the spade was needed to avoid a trump promotion because once one round of trumps had been played and the Jack of hearts fell, now South had K9 sitting over QT. I won with the SA, played HA and then cashed 3 rounds of clubs throwing the spade. Now I played another trump and South was on lead so couldn't play a diamond and then a diamond would just be lost. It is actually safer to play the 4th club and throw the diamond, just in case, in the unlikely event that North had 4171 shape.

One of the reasons I chose this hand was that the match hadn't been going great before this board, and it was board 12 of a 16 board match which felt in my mind like a turning point. The next board we took 3C x for 500 and then they bid 7C which went off on Martin's great lead of a diamond. Those 3 boards were double swings in, which turned -16 into a +24 win.

In summary of the event, it was the most enjoyable international experience I have had and this is down to the team. I loved every minute. I think it's fair to say that, in the end we were a little bit disappointed to miss out on a medal, but the event has definitely confirmed that the team is far more capable than maybe even we thought and with the experience of a long event under our belts we are looking forward to hopefully performing well in the World Championships in Barbados in 2027.

FINN'S COMMENTARY

Hand 30, Dlr E
4♦ X-3 N

W Stuart Forsyth

N Ian Walsh

Finn Clark E

Rob Lawy S

♠ 42
♥ 8
♦ AK96542
♣ AQ5

♠ AKQJ107
♥ A4
♦ QJ10
♣ 103

♠ 65
♥ 107652
♦ 83
♣ 9862

♠ 983
♥ KQJ93
♦ 7
♣ KJ74

W N E S
2♠ 3♦ 2♥ 2♥
3♠ 4♦ P P
X P P P

HAND 30: the 2D opening showed either 18-20 balanced or a trash major (which I usually describe as "a load of garbage with a five-card major"). East certainly holds that. More importantly, though, that I'm not keen on South's 2H overcall, which could (and did) make things hard for partner. It violates the principle of "strong overcalls of weak bids and weak overcalls of strong bids". You'd bid the same way if you added an ace, or possibly even two (at which point North-South would be near the slam zone).

Admittedly, Stuart and I also bid more aggressively against vague two-level openings like "exactly four hearts and an unspecified five-card side suit". Shut out the opponents before they can clarify the fuzziness! But that can have downsides too, as here.

4Dx-3 needs explanation, though. We started with three rounds of spades, with the third round ruffed and overruffed with the 2 and 3. A heart to the ace was followed by a fourth spade, on which North discarded a club and East ruffed with the eight. Even after all that, though, declarer still had a further trump loser.

Hand 33, Dlr N
3♠ = E

W Stuart Forsyth

N Ian Walsh

Finn Clark E

Rob Lawy S

♠ 5
♥ A8632
♦ J
♣ KQ9632

♠ J742
♥ K104
♦ A54
♣ A85

♠ AQ86
♥ J95
♦ K10963
♣ 7

♠ K1093
♥ Q7
♦ Q872
♣ J104

W N E S
2♥ 2♥ P P
X P 3♠ P
P P

HAND 33: does North have an opening bid as dealer? Looking at the field, six Norths passed, two opened 2H, four opened 1C and eleven opened 1H. About 65% called that an opening bid, then - and I agree with them. The traveler had a wild array of results, ranging from 4S-4 by West to 6Hx-6 by South. (North opened 1C, East overcalled 1D and South bid an unalerted 1H, which I assume was either a mis-click or a psyche. If the latter, North definitely didn't field it.)

Whoever bought the auction tended to do well, which should be easier for North-South if they started with a one-level opening.

