‘Trumps are valuable coin’.

The title of this article is a direct quote from the late, great, Terence Reese, and, as usual, Reese was right. This deal occurred on-line at Bury St. Edmunds Bridge club recently and is an extreme case of making the trumps work to their utmost. Declarer was congratulated on his play of the hand, but did he really do anything very clever?

	North	
	♠ AQ103 ♥ K92 ♦ KQ4 ♣ A42	
West		East
♠ KJ986 ♥ AJ6 ♦ A ♣ Q873		♠ 752 ♥ 104 ♦ 1098765 ♣ K5
	South	
	♠ 4 ♥ Q8753 ♦ J32 ♣ J1096	

At all other tables, the contract was 2NT by North just making. But things went rather differently at this table. West opened the bidding with 1♠, North overcalled with 1NT and East passed. South also passed and West tried 2♣. North passed this and partner dutifully put West back to 2♠ and this was passed out. The lead was the king of diamonds, and it was immediately obvious to declarer that not many tricks would be made by drawing trumps and that the vast majority of the points would by sat over declarer in the North hand.

Therefore, the plan had to be to prepare the hand in such a way that as many trumps were made separately as possible. Therefore, the opening lead was taken with the ace and the 3 of clubs was led. North has a problem because, whenever she has the lead, she had to lead away from something and so she took the ace of clubs and exited with a small club taken in dummy with the king. Declarer returned to hand with the ace of hearts and discarded a heart on the promoted queen of clubs.

The stage was now set for a cross-ruff. Declarer ruffed a heart, then a diamond, then another heart and another diamond. Everybody followed and 4 cards remained. West held the KJ9 of spades and the 9 of clubs. North still held all her 4 spades and so she was about to be thrown in. Dummy had the 7 of spades and 3 diamonds. Declarer led the 8 of clubs and North had to ruff, but she had to ruff with the 10 so that the 7 in dummy could not over ruff her 3. Now she erred a little. Declarer had to make one more trick, 9 in total, but North decided to lead ace of spades and then the 3 and so 10 tricks were made. 2♠ just making would be a top anyway and so the over tricks were irrelevant, but satisfying.

I have been asked many times over the years, 'how do you decide whether to draw trumps or play for a cross ruff'? The answer is often very simple, particularly at teams. If you can make sufficient tricks to fulfil your contract after drawing trumps, then draw them. If you are a trick or 2 short and can see that more tricks might be available via a cross ruff, or partial cross ruff, then cross ruff. Sometimes, it is a little more complicated than that, but it is a good place to start. The deal below is another extreme example of the value of trumps but this one is an extreme dummy reversal :-

	West		East
♠	KQ	♠	J109876
♥	108743	♥	
♦	AK	♦	5432
♣	AKQ8	♣	743

Through some very poor bidding by an inexperienced West, who knew East was a decent dummy player and thought that he was a magician with the cards and decided that he could make slams on 'tram tickets', she propelled her partner all the way to 6♠ and sat back with a smug look on her face expecting partner to make the contract easily. Luckily, a heart was, any other lead defeats the contract. A trump lead leaves declarer a trick short and any other lead removes a valuable entry for the dummy reversal to succeed. After some careful consideration, declarer realised that, if trumps were drawn, the contract would fail by at least one trick. Therefore, declarer ruffed the heart lead and led a club to the ace and then ruffed another heart. Another club lead and another heart ruff followed and now we come to the crux of the hand. A 3rd round of clubs had to be played and they had to split 3-3. They did and so a 4th heart was ruffed. A diamond to the ace and a 5th heart ruff passed off O.K. because the trump ace was with North and North was reluctant to ruff with the ace. Aces are made to capture kings. So, another diamond was led to the king to ruff the club 8. That left only 2 cards, 2 small diamonds in the East hand and 2 trumps in the West hand. South had to under ruff on the 11th trick. Declarer was bound to make one more trick from the KQ of trumps in dummy, the opponents only winning the ace of trumps.

The alternative line of drawing trumps does not work. Even if the clubs split 3-3, that would only provide one discard and so declarer would have lost to the ace of trumps and either a heart or a diamond at the end. This line works only because the clubs split 3-3 and the ace of trumps was with North who had to follow to 4 heart ruffs. If he ruffs the 5th heart with the ace of trumps and then leads a trump, the contract still makes because declarer can throw a losing diamond on the ace of trumps, take the trump lead, ruff a club in hand and then a diamond in dummy leaving declarer with just master trumps left.

Again, this is not the most difficult problem, you just have to think of it and to find the answer before playing a trick. The secret again is in counting winners to see if the required number are there. In this case, drawing trumps gives declarer just 5 tricks in trumps, 2 diamonds and 4 clubs, 11 in total. Something else was needed.