

Summertown Monday Bulletin No. 28

I have really enjoyed all the bulletins. It has been very interesting getting to know a little more about the lives, loves and accomplishments of our members. From snippets of information, it seems that very few of the SBC members are from Oxford originally. Most of us have arrived here by chance. I am no exception.

We came to Oxfordshire in 1970 because O follows N in the alphabet and in those days, teachers' jobs were advertised alphabetically by local authority. I was teaching History, English and Liberal Studies in a college in Nottingham and was looking for a job which had an increased salary (via an increased level of responsibility) so that we could start a family. Those were the days when it was normal for women to take a career break when starting a family.

The job was in Banbury, or was it the moon? It was in any event a very different environment from the industrial conurbation of over 300,000 of greater Nottingham; much more rural, higher house prices, fewer amenities and long "A's" as in bath and past. To teach in Further Education in those days did not require any teacher training and for the majority of the teachers of technical subjects it was unrealistic to go away to one of only four full time specialist FE teacher training institutions. In 1973 a Parliamentary Committee agreed to set up day release training for post-16 teachers.

But that is jumping ahead. We did start a family and two of our children were born in Banbury (the third was born in Oxford in 1977). I played bridge once a week (having learned the rudiments at school) at the Banbury Bridge Club which met on alternate Thursday and Friday evenings in a room above the Unicorn Pub. I seem to remember we bid verbally or we pointed to a board; no bidding boxes with cards in those days.

The FE teacher training to which I referred duly came to pass in Oxford in 1974 at the Polytechnic. We moved to Oxford as I now had a job at the CFE and bought the house where we now live in Iffley Fields in 1976 on one income and having by now three children. Those were the days. I never thought I would stay, imagining that Preston or Rotherham or Sunderland would eventually beckon. But here we are.

But no more bridge once we settled in Oxford. Work, family, house and garden and other interests were all-consuming. Then one day in 2000, a colleague and friend Diane Pearson, came to the house with her new(ish) husband Ian whom I scarcely knew. While Heather and Diane went down the garden talking plants, I chatted to Ian, asking how he was finding life in Oxford. He said he was enjoying painting, playing golf, jobs around the house, being married and that he played bridge. He asked if I had ever played and I said "yes, the last time being in 1973". He suggested that I play with him at OBC and we became bridge partners and firm friends. We still see Di and Ian every week, mostly on FaceTime but sometimes in the garden. Ian is still the same Ian that you will all remember.

Bridge in 2000 was nothing like its ancestor in the 1970s. On my first night I was confronted with bidding boxes, stop cards, alert cards and names such as Benji, Jacoby and Michaels; I met Roman Key Card and weak twos; and the majority of players had been to classes run by Winnie and Esme and Peggy and they were all good players. I had cut my teeth in Bridge on Acol and sometimes Culbertson so it was all strange to me. In my first three sessions I held the record for the number of director visits to one table. I recall with great fondness the kindness of Krishan Jalie and John Simpson as I struggled to adjust to the changes. Even now, 20 years on and before lockdown, I still spray alert cards like confetti. Online I still can't remember what I should alert or is it announce but my inadequate typing speed and slow reaction time saves me from further embarrassment.

This is my second bulletin and perhaps the last in the series. SBC is following the Fawly Towers principle of “leave them wanting more”. In my first attempt I wrote of my lack of preparedness for lockdown. I confessed that I was slow to get on supermarket lists, a Skype sceptic, a FaceTime phobic and I thought that Zoom was a song by the Fat Larry Band in 1982. Now my problem is the opposite: I am unprepared for re-entering the social world. I now have rule neurosis and information conflict. As I was with alerts and announcing, I have only a sketchy notion of what the Covid rules are. Does anyone know? There is no Krishan to put me right.

I think there are many similarities between Covid and Bridge. Take systems for example (what system do you play?). How many times do we find that the system does not fit the hand we have been dealt? How many of our defences to NT contracts are automatic – leads from fourth highest. How often do mantras infiltrate our thinking (on finesses with eight cards ever, with nine cards never, bid to the fit, rule of 20). We ask what a bid means only to find that the respondent doesn't remember or they guess (usually wrongly) or there is no partnership agreement. We have to make the best we can of the information we receive.

This is true of Covid too. We are faced with lots of information to process: R levels, false positives, false negatives, asymptomatic testees, PCTs, whether children are or are not carriers and CIF (I made that one up). The government claims to be following THE science as if there is, or has ever been, ONE scientific explanation for anything. As in Bridge, lots of messages are carried by one statement; take the multi 2 diamond as an example which carries about 4 messages in one bid. In Covid, what does tested positive really mean?

What about risk? “I would have bid game in teams, partner,” I say lamely as the rest of the E/W marks up 420 or 450 and we score 170; or “I only had five points and we were vulnerable so I passed”, as another red score appears. My sacrifice success ratio is woeful. In all of this, there is partner to consider. Their attitude to risk and ability to adapt to my behaviour is another element in the mix.

So, I guess we all will look at the information we are getting and then make a decision just like we do in Bridge. How much do I miss going to the cinema, real ale from a pump, the smell of the sea, shouting at the ref at the Kassam, browsing in a bookshop, and face to face Bridge? Will I, like Steven, find solace in Pat Metheny, Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett? What sort of risks will I take over the winter months? With my track record, will there be more greens than reds on my home results page if or when I decide to go into the parallel universe I used to inhabit?

*Trevor Dawn
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