

Hello folks

In 2002, Andy Ward's book, "Bridge's Strangest Hands" was published. Some of you will remember Andy, who played at Summertown with various partners between about 1990 and 2005. The book was one of a series published by Robson Books which included "Cricket's Strangest Matches" (also written by Andy) and "Horse-racing's Strangest Races". So, in the eyes of the good people at Robson, if not the International Olympic Committee, bridge counted as a sport. Maybe we will have time to get it accepted into the Tokyo Olympics of 2021/2/3. At least it could be carried out without any physical contact, and the crowds would be manageable, as not many people would want to watch..... or would they?

I did once in the far distant past travel to London to watch a Camrose trophy match. It was interesting to see how the players were completely shielded from each other by screens and to watch the smallish crowd gasp as different contracts were reached in the closed and open rooms.* I can't, however, say it had the emotional pull of a titanic tennis match, or the glorious variety and ebb and flow of an Ashes test or the muddy fury of a 6 nations encounter on a rainy day, or the fervent joy at the Hong Kong 7s when an underdog takes down one of the big boys.

I wonder how long it will be before I travel again to Trent Bridge or Wimbledon or the Tate or the Hepworth Gallery or Wormsley or the Playhouse to be part of a crowd watching an event? (it's not just sport, you see!).

My hopes lie with County Cricket. There was a time when the 2nd day of a four-day match between Surrey and Somerset at the Oval would attract dozens of fans. Sweeping the terraces with your binoculars might reveal several fellow spectators munching sandwiches or snoozing under newspapers or listening to the commentary on a more interesting event on the radio. There would be space for hundreds more without any chance of contact. Oh, I'd give a lot right now to watch a boring County Cricket game live. I'd give more to sit by the Windrush outside the Swan at Swinbrook watching the village take on Westcott. Or Wolvercote playing Garsington and Cowley at Cutteslowe Park.

But that's for another day.....and things are opening up, and more is becoming feasible. The square in Cutteslowe Park is being watered. The National Trust and the RSPB are slowly increasing access. I recommend Rousham House, near Bicester (private, not NT) which has a gem of a garden, with a good deal of space. It is not on the bucket list of well-known places (well it wasn't until now) but it is very fine, all the more so because there is no café or gift shop. The owners do, however, welcome you and your own picnic to their gorgeous gardens. It re-opened a couple of weeks ago. You pay £8 cash at an unmanned machine, just one button to push, so gloves only for that.

Cricket, gardens, opera, theatre, exhibitions.....what dreams! To share the joy with others, to be part of a group responding together to skill and luck, artifice and artistry! But, I suppose, we must be grateful that we can enjoy some of these things, diluted, in isolation. At least we have technology. Thank goodness for streaming. Thank goodness, too, for online bridge.

So, back to Andy's book which includes stories about hands, or rather bidding, which provoked murder or the sudden onset of illness; and hands played in extreme conditions, such as PoW camps. Apparently, early in the war, it was difficult to play bridge in the camps: cards had to be improvised, and prisoners had to learn the basics. By 1943, the Red Cross

was delivering cards and bridge books, and special rooms were set aside for bridge. An article in *Contract Bridge Journal* of September 1947 explained how bridge had helped PoWs retain mental balance during their captivity “No other game could have assisted us so well”. It would be exceedingly disrespectful to liken what we are going through now to the experiences of those PoWs, but nonetheless, being able to play bridge online with friends and in competition, has kept many people feeling connected and mentally stimulated.

I put it to Andy recently that, 18 years on, there is plenty of material for a new edition of his book, given the foibles of online bridge. I have experience of Bridge Base Online, having helped a lot of students from my classes at “the other” club, and friends, get acquainted with it from the early days.

I told Andy how, if you are a birdwatcher you might be confused to come across a bittern, a tawny owl and a gypaetus (scientific name for a lammergeier) all at the same table. How the silence is quite eerie at first, although the sound effects, before you learn how to turn them off, provide the noise of cards riffing to indicate a new deal, and a very strange “thump” when it is your turn to bid or play. You learn that you can type in the chat bar to talk to the others at the table, but the speed needed leads to many typos.

Most people decide to play on one device while joining a 4-way audio or video call on a separate device. This means they can see and speak to each other while playing. There have been some lovely comments as players get used to how BBO works. The software does many things for you such as rearranging your cards with trumps on the left immediately the contract has been decided: “Hey, I’ve got a different hand”. It prevents you from revoking: “I can’t play a card...oh yes, wrong suit”. It also keeps a running total of tricks won by each side and shows the contract while you play. We are going to find it strange when these things aren’t done for us in real life games. You can also use the History button to review any hand, and look at how other pairs have bid and played it. This is useful with students, as we can replay the hand trick by trick, focusing on declarer play, or defence as required. Of course, it can be useful for post-mortems whoever you are. When you play more seriously, you have to learn to “self alert”stay alert and self alert.

Some people find that their connection to BBO can be dodgy at times, although there are precautions which should be taken by the person setting up the table to prevent disasters. I received some amusing text messages early on such as “M has dropped off”. With no context, this worried me for a little while: from what had M dropped off, and was she hurt? Was she due to deliver some shopping? Had she fallen asleep? Then the penny dropped: M had lost her connection and left the table. I could respond and explain how to get back to the game.

For the moment, I’m glad to be able to play bridge online with friends and students (often the same thing). I also enjoy the very well organized OBC tournaments, currently on Tuesday evenings and Friday mornings, and the teams matches. But, just as I long for live cricket, live opera, open galleries and open bird reserves, I do hope to be able to play again in person.

See you soon, Ann xx

*And of course, you can now watch the Camrose and other big competitions on BBO