

Summertown Bulletin No. 19 – written by Steph Bliss

Dear All,

I hope you are keeping well and able to venture out a little more. We actually managed to get away for a short break in Somerset last week. We were meant to be at Glyndebourne, and our dog was booked into kennels. We therefore decided to keep the dog's booking and go to a hotel we particularly like near Yeovil. We felt perfectly safe and enjoyed superb food and wine. We came back refreshed, ready for another month or so in and around Woodstock.

I have decided to tell you about my early life learning bridge at the London head office of the British Steel Corporation (BSC) back in the 1970s. Please do not read on unless you are prepared to be a little shocked! I'm afraid working life was a little more free and easy then than today.

BSC had a fair number of after work activities, all subsidised by the company; a small but thriving bridge club being one of them. I heard that they were running lessons, and decided that I would give it a try. I was slightly influenced by the fact that I thought the chairman of the bridge club was rather pleasant, and I did think it might be a way of getting to know him a little better!

The lessons were excellent and well-attended, given by an experienced teacher. Back then it was basic Acol, so although it was still a difficult game, there were no fancy conventions that most of us play today. We were only taught Stayman and basic Blackwood. No Jacoby, transfers, Michaels, Landy etc to learn – what joy!

I was PA to the Managing Director, Technical, who had a technical assistant called Andy Morris, an excellent bridge player (current grade NGS AC). We organised complicated trade missions for our boss, so he would be away for a couple of weeks at a time trying to drum up business overseas. I'm afraid during his absence and in working hours Andy would come round with his pack of cards, so I had plenty of free practice during the working day. I became competent in all responses to a 1NT opener and beyond! I therefore was lucky enough to have expert tuition and a good grounding in the basic elements of this marvellous game.

Well, lessons complete, the students were all invited with a mentor to try out the bridge club. I am sure we can all remember how terrifying our first venture to a "real" table was. However, the good thing about BSC in those heady days was that they had an after work bar open in the evenings from 5.30 to 7.30 pm, so an alcoholic drink or two was needed to calm the nerves. Andy took me down for my first evening, and by 10.00 pm I was a little more relaxed. I found out that the norm for the bridge club members was to rush out at about 7.20 pm as the bar was due to close in order to line up enough drinks to last for the rest of the evening! Of course, in those days most bridge players smoked, so I think most of us ended up playing in a semi-alcoholic, smoky fog. Did it help my bridge? I'm probably not the right person to answer that!

As we all know, bridge is an excellent way to develop friendships, and I quickly established partnerships with two fellow beginners, so we all struggled on together. Unfortunately, the club chairman had a regular partner, so failed to ask me for a game! The club, like Summertown, was very friendly with a huge variety in ability, ranging from someone who had trialled for England ladies to novices like me. We had many 'characters' in the club. I will mention just two I remember.: The Chairman's PA, Renee Darling, in the days before bridge boxes, could utter 2H, for example, in such a variety of ways, it would be clear to her partner

whether it was a 'good' or 'bad' 2H bid. Then there was a great Welsh chap called David Pugh (affectionately known as "old red, white, and blue eyes"). He and his partner were excellent card players but had no idea of bidding. Their bidding usually consisted of getting to a 3NT contract by the quickest route possible. He would invariably make the contract, leaving time to pick up his next pint! The main purpose of the club was that we were all encouraged and made to feel welcome.

The *piece de resistance*, however, was the BSC bridge club Christmas party. I think we did play some bridge, it's difficult to remember! The main focus was eating food purchased from Harrods, plus drinking the excellent selection of wines (including good quality beaujolais and riojas – most people had a bottle each!). Fortunately, we all used public transport to get home, so there was no drink driving. There were a number of participants who failed to make it into work the next day until near lunch-time. I hasten to add I was not amongst this motley crew, although I admit to feeling a little fragile!

You may think that the bridge club chairman has much to answer for, and I agree. I wonder whatever became of him? Well "reader, I married him"!

Regards

Steph