

Following on from Steph and Holly's accounts of their first forays into bridge playing, I asked Cliff if he would write an account of how he started playing bridge, and here it is.

I started playing bridge pretty well exactly 60 years ago in the sixth form (as we used to call it in those days) of 'Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School for Boys' (a misnomer as it was solidly in Sidcup, a town no one would want to admit to living in, but 'Chislehurst' rather raised the tone. Although Sidcup may have earned some cachet from its numerous references in Harold Pinter's 'The Caretaker').

Four of us decided we wanted to play bridge in our lunch-hours but unfortunately there were no Hollies around then, we had to learn from books. Hence it was several months before we realised that the declarer was not the last player to make a bid. Our bible was 'Bridge is an Easy Game' by Iain Macleod (the same Iain Macleod who gave up professional bridge to become a famous Conservative politician, and very briefly Chancellor of the Exchequer in Heath's government of 1970).

A number of other of the more nerdy schoolboys became interested in our bridge and finally I (the shortest of my friends) was deputed to ask the headmaster (large and terrifying) if we could start a club at the school. He was a bit dubious, muttering that his parents used to describe cards as 'devil's pasteboards' but he eventually agreed and the club used to meet at a lunchtime each week. Shortly after four teachers challenged us to a match and hammered us. But a few months later we had a return match and the results were reversed. (The headmaster announced this latter result at the morning assembly, I thought with a certain amount of relish – he was not a head who was too popular with the teachers and the feelings seemed to be reciprocated - particularly to those more disreputable of his staff who wasted their time playing cards.)

Myself and one of my friends – David – felt we wanted to go further. Our school was built on a golf course and the club house had a sign 'Sidcup Bridge Club' just adjacent to our playing fields. So one day we went in and asked if we could play. They played pairs one evening a week occupying a very large area with a bar – always serving. We were welcomed with open arms - I suppose because of our youth and enthusiasm. Of course we were quite hopeless to start with, but the members were patient and helpful and at that age one improves rapidly, so after a few weeks we were holding our own. In those days you could hardly see from one end of the room to the other, every table was full of ashtrays (not that we ever smoked) and glasses of beer (for us the occasional shandy, not quite legal), and I can still remember the smell of delicious sausage rolls which they sold at the bar. I couldn't resist them and, no doubt, added some of their stickiness to the cards. It all seemed to our innocent selves wonderfully decadent. It was the highlight of my week (maybe apart from practical chemistry lessons which, before Health & Safety, could be relied upon to end in some dramatic disaster). I was quite disappointed in later life to find that most bridge clubs were comparatively dull.

The session director, ruling with unquestioned authority, was always the same old guy (or so he seemed to us, he was probably about 60) called Alf. Of course no computers or calculators. At the end many players were able score up the travellers, these were handed in to Alf who copied them all on to a large paper spreadsheet, added up rows and columns in his head with impressive speed, double checked everything and the results were always out by 10.45, when David and I had to leave the bridge post-mortems round the bar, picked up in the car of his marvellous mother to be sped back to our homes in rather more salubrious Orpington. (She must have done this every week for a year. I think I gave her a bottle of sherry for Christmas, at least I hope I did.)

After we left school, David and I each played a lot at, and for, our respective universities, but in the vacations met up to go back to the club where we were greeted as returning heroes. But after graduating I left home and gave up bridge for many years, although David became well known in the bridge world and I still see his columns quite often. So I never went back to Sidcup Bridge Club which I believe no longer exists. What a pity.

The story doesn't quite end there. A few years ago, Cliff and I had lunch with David Huggett and as well as the two of them spending a lot of time in the world of "and do you remember.....," he also regaled us with many entertaining tales of his bridge-teaching experiences. And as for Cliff, well after initial reluctance he, like me, is now enjoying online bridge but in these days of lockdown and social distancing, we occasionally turn to non-electronic solutions. Here are a couple of photos of James and Valerie's invention: a dummy holder, used when playing bridge outdoors at suitable distance on windy days!



