



A Brief History

Our club was founded by a group of players who could regularly be found playing bridge while commuting to London on the train. Amongst these were JG 'Griff' Hartley (on the right in the picture) who was the first Chairman of the club as well as being the bridge correspondent for *The Times* and AJ 'Tony' Smith (on the left) who was the bridge correspondent for *The Telegraph*



The club's first regular home was the on the top of the Welwyn Stores (now John Lewis). The lower floor consisted of a lounge bar, kitchen, two snooker tables and two squash courts. The kitchen served excellent meals to welcome the commuters home before they went upstairs to the card room. This room had two skylights, but no windows, and could just about accommodate fourteen tables in two rows of seven. It was a tight squeeze, and Stan Harding remembers entering the room and not being able to see the far end of it for smoke.

Soon after this WGCBC joined with Harpenden Bridge Club to form the Hertfordshire Bridge Association (HBA) which was one of the first to be affiliated to the English Bridge Union (EBU). In those days, and for many years after, a new member had to be 'played in' by a committee member so that standards were maintained. Clearly, this was a forbidding ordeal and unsurprisingly, membership began to fall to a number well below one hundred. By the mid-1950s, although 'playing in' had been dropped, new members still had to be proposed and seconded by a member for committee acceptance. However, formal wear was expected at the club and even into the 1970s evening dress was expected at the annual Christmas Party.

In 1966, Welwyn Stores came under new ownership and WGC Bridge Club had to find a new home. The club moved to Gosling Sports Park at Stanborough in 1968 and under the chairmanships of Geoff Turnbull and George Westlake the club grew to welcome all standards of player. Under the subsequent leadership of Jack Wereik, begin to offer other social events, and the membership grew to 200. With his wife, Mary, the pair initiated a twinning with a French bridge club, and annual

exchanges took place, raising money through an annual quiz, which lived on for many years after, and when the visits to and from France stopped, the quiz continued to raise money for the Isabel Hospice.

The club enjoy continued success under Stan Harding's leadership from 1992, having moved from the huts at Gosling to the nicely appointed Collingwood Suite. However, it was felt that the club was rather at the mercy of the sports park's management, and so the hunt was started for new club premises that we could call our own in order to secure the future of the club and it is an avenue that we continue to consider. At the same time, a comprehensive teaching programme was introduced, recognising that we needed as a club, to continue to maintain and actually increase membership numbers, and to help our own members to develop their skills and knowledge. Classes were introduced by Derek Thornley, Barbara and Derrick Kime, Stan Harding and Peter Clark, and to this day, the club continues to run classes for beginners, intermediates and improvers and to hold workshops, post-mortem pairs, as well as up to 8 different sessions per week catering for all levels of player. The variety and quality of our weekly offer to members is a feature of the club of which we are most proud.



Computer scoring was started at the club in 1989 and a website developed in 1997. In that same year, our first dealing machine was purchased, allowing for pre-dealt (and multiple sets of) boards, each with its own printout of hands, which members could take away at the end of each session and conduct their own reviews of personal performance. In 2003. Scorebridge was adopted, and this was superseded in 2006 by the Bridgemate system which served the club well for the next twelve years. In 2018, Roy Button was instrumental in moving the club to the BriAn bridge system – wireless scoring for duplicate bridge using tablets (or our mobile phones) - a system we continue to use in 2025.

Bill Gordon became Chair on Stan's retirement in 2002 and under his, and Jeff Green's leadership, the club continued to flourish. The Constitution was changed which, amongst other improvements, allowed AGMs to take place via Zoom, instantly guaranteeing far greater attendance. Class numbers were high, and

membership numbers were well over 400. The club was (and continues to be) well-represented at county and national levels with our members regularly performing amongst the best.

Then, in 2020, the COVID pandemic hit the UK, and the country went into lockdown. The immediate impact on our club was devastating. Bridge clubs, along with many other activities were closed, nationwide. However, thanks to Srimath Agalawatte who introduced us to RealBridge, WGCBC was able to move online and its sessions could resume. It was a lifeline for many who found themselves housebound during that time, and long after the pandemic was over, we still hold several sessions on RealBridge to this day. It, or something like it, is definitely here to stay because the consequent impact of the pandemic has meant that for many, face to face bridge is no longer an attractive or even feasible option.

Sheila Gabriel took over as Chair in 2021 and in the following year, the club was keen to try to resume normal service and decided to look for new premises. A new base at Mill Green Golf Club was found. This wasn't entirely successful, and in 2023, the club moved to its new and current home at the King George Pavilion in Beehive Lane WGC.

As we look to the future, we keep our premises under review. For now, we are very happy in Beehive Lane. It is a very popular venue with our members and it is big enough to hold our largest weekly session. When we hold club events, or host luminaries like Andrew Robson, we look for other accommodation like local pubs or golf clubs where we can have 25 tables or more and make a day of it. In 2025, ninety years on, our membership numbers continue to rise and currently stand at 440, of which 120 are students, and it is through our students, that we are ensuring the future of our club. What the future holds for the game, whether online or face-to-face is not clear, but we are optimistic and confident that we have the resources to continue to provide a rich, varied and valuable experience for all our members.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those past and present who have made this club the success that it is. Here's to the next 90 years!

Helen Holehouse
WGCBC Chair

With thanks to: Stan Harding, Sally Bennett, Janet Wren and Jan Palmer Sayer