

1) How did you start playing bridge?

Until I was 5 my 3 siblings (all much older than me) and I were all brought up in a caravan on a caravan park. My father worked nights and so slept all the day, so my mother had the job of keeping 4 children quiet all day, every day. Her solution was to play games with us - all the time. I am told I could play knock out whist at 2 and whist at 4. I was taught bridge, as were all the family, by my two brothers (10 and 12 years older than me), who learnt it at school. The school was King Edward VI Grammar School, Stratford on Avon, whose most famous alumnus was a certain W. Shakespeare, followed closely by a certain Max Bavin.

(Journalist note: Max Bavin is the former chief TD of the EBU, his role is now taken by Gordon Rainsford. Max sadly died in 2019)

I continued playing until they left for University and then again when I passed the 11+ to go to the Grammar School. I continued playing at school and also at the local club in Stratford-on-Avon. The last bus left long before the club finished, but very fortunately a local businessman lived in the same village as me and always kindly gave me a lift home. I didn't know what he did until one night on the way back he said to me "Guess what I have in the boot of the car?" Having no idea what to say I said I couldn't.

"Oh", he replied, "It is the new Sea Cat ground to air guided missile"..... It turned out he worked for a Dutch firm who made them and he had been at the Farnborough air show on the stand and simply put it in his boot after the show. What different times we lived in...

When I got to University I discovered that everything I knew about the game was completely wrong! I thus had to start essentially from scratch. Fortunately there were a huge number of good players around at that time who were a few years older than me, and I was able to fall in with them and be taught by them. John Holland, Gary Hyett, Michelle Brunner, to name the obvious ones, but also my friend David Whyte and the sadly departed Rabbit. (who, when they played together appeared on the line up slip of the Gold Cup final as "White Rabbit") amongst countless others. The rest followed...

2) As secretary of MCBA what would you say is the best and worst part?

The two best parts are (a) working with Irene who I think is a superb chair with great abilities and (b) giving something, albeit a little, back to the game which has been such a dominant part of my life. If that sounds po faced and trite, sorry, but there it is.

The worst part is having to see some of the sad feuds that occur between players or player and club and sometimes having to be involved in trying to sort them out. They are almost always about nothing very much but get blown up enormously.

3) Who would your perfect game of bridge be with?

The perfect rubber game (provided we were not playing for any stake at all) would be with Garozzo and Meckwell. Reasons obvious I would have thought.

This is your second stint as an officer of MCBA, you were involved in the 1980s. What are the main changes between now and then? Which do you enjoy more?

The main changes are obviously technology. Even in the 1980s, email was non-existent, all scoring was by hand, etc etc. The first time around I was tournament secretary and we had a small tournament committee to run the events and adjudicate on issues (yes there were plenty). I was also involved in the league committee. It was run at that time by Alan Jones, but we had a committee to sort out problems (and yes there were issues sometimes). All the meetings had to be F2F and all arranged by telephone. All the leaflets had to be printed and distributed (no website or internet to advertise on, no email lists...), etc etc.

4) What is your most interesting hand?

There are a few hands I want to forget, so I will give you one (as far as I can remember it) from at least 20 years ago. It was the England trials. I was playing with Gary Hyett, and in the other room was Geoffrey Wolfarth and Mr. Grumpy (This is a nickname of bridge professional Brian Senior. The nickname is not ironic)

We played a match just before dinner which we scored as +2 to us (10-10 draw) and went to dinner. We came back to discover we had ACTUALLY won 16-4 I think it was. It was all down to this hand:

EW Game, Dealer West

	Kxx	
	Axx	
	xx	
	J9xxx	
-		Q10xx
QJxxx		10xx
KQxxx		AJxxx
A10x		x
	AJ9xxx	
	Kx	
	x	
	KQxx	

Geoff and Mr Grumpy bid uncontested to 4H on the sequence

1H 1S
2D 3H
4H Pass

Grumpy managed the play to only loses the AK of Hs and so scored 650

In our room the sequence was:

1H Pass 2H 2S
3D 3H 4D 4S
5D Pass Pass 5S
Pass Pass Dble All Pass

I got the HQ lead and showing a rare moment of competence managed to remember to win it in hand. A S to the K revealed the break so I could pick up the spades and knock out the C ace for 11 tricks and 650. (The defence needed to lead ace and another club to beat it, unlikely, or the KD lead overtaken and a club switch, quite possible)

So when teammates said +650 I just said flat... instead of 15imps in!

Teammates have always rightly said that scoring is the strongest part of my game.

5) Do any of your family play bridge?

As above, my two brothers did play and they taught my parents. My eldest brother is the only one left alive and he said the last time he played was when I went to see him in 1978 (he lives in Canada)

6) Where have you been around the world, have you played bridge there? What was the best place you visited?

I have travelled a lot with bridge, more as an official than a player. Maastricht, Tenerife, Warsaw, Montreal, Istanbul, Opatija, Budapest, Wuhan to name a few. However, you never get to see any of these places. All you see is the inside of a hotel room and a convention centre. You could be

anywhere in the world. Travelling and playing or officiating bridge is nowhere near as glamorous as people think.

(Journalists Note: This is not true. Being a bridge international is glamorous, exciting and luxurious and you get to see wonderful sites and have great experiences, though apparently not if you go with Alan).

I don't travel much abroad apart from bridge, mainly because of Monica's health. (Monica is Alan's wife whom he met at University)

We did however have a great holiday in Croatia before the European Championships in Opatija and a great holiday in Budapest after the Europeans there. As you know, we both like narrowboats and if we ever come out of lockdown we shall be back on them again.

7) What was your most memorable league match? Why?

I suppose the most memorable one was a recent one where the opposition were just snakebitten - whatever they did it was the wrong thing to do - and we ended up winning by something like 108-6. Never won a league match by 100 before. the match was played in an excellent spirit.

8) I believe your wife doesn't play bridge - how does she cope with you leaving all the time?

With great joy I expect! (Journalist's note, Alan has made a good pun here. Joy is the name of his stepdaughter)

We both accept that each of us has interests the other cannot understand or share. For me it is bridge, for her music. She sings in choirs, plays piano, cello and accordion, etc and I cannot hold a tune if you stapled it to my chest.

Last Autumn I was offered the chance to play on the World Championship team for England Seniors. I was prepared not to go because it clashed with a very large holiday we had booked and paid the deposit for. Monica said I would regret it forever if I didn't go so we cancelled the holiday, I went, and.... the result was a Silver Medal. Also a global pandemic - the event was held in Wuhan.

9) And finally I believe you once played against someone famous?...

I don't need to make up an outrageous story as I have played against Omar Sharif! When the Stratford Congress started (now long gone) the name was such a draw that the special guest the first year was Omar Sharif. So I played against him and was also introduced to him in the bar afterwards. He looked like a man who had been introduced to 2000 people that evening and just wanted to be anywhere else, but of course could not say that. If I had been older and wiser I would have invited him to the Dirty Duck (the local name for the Black Swan, the pub opposite the RSC) for a drink. But I was 18 and gauche - what did I know.

10) And what is the first thing you will do once life returns to normal?

Will it ever return to "normal"? I hope not, because the planet will then die. Merry Christmas!

11) Any other famous stories you wish to share with us?

One time at work (Alan was a Maths lecturer for many years) I made reference to my wife and received a strange look from a colleague.

"But I thought....that is to say" he began..."well if you have a wife, who is this Gary person that you describe as your partner and are always going away with at weekends?"

It turns out that several of my colleagues assumed Gary Hyett and I were a couple and "partner" meant life partner not bridge partner. Bridge terminology can be very misleading. In fairness I wasn't too insulted as none of them had actually met Gary.

(Journalist's note - You could do a lot worse Alan)