**Paper 3: Report of the County Chairs’ Meeting held on 23rd February 2022**

On February 23rd, Alan Mould attended the EBU County Chairs’ Meeting on behalf of Irene who felt being on holiday was an excuse for not attending the meeting.

The format was different from any previously in that the EBU, under the promptings of the Board member with responsibility for county liaison had arranged for three counties to set the agenda and give introductions to the agenda items, etc, rather than the EBU doing everything. This had the effect that it was a much more interactive meeting rather than the information dump from the EBU to counties that have previously characterised these meetings. At the end of the meeting there was call for counties to design the next meeting – I did not volunteer Manchester.

The main agenda items were

* Return to F2F bridge
* Green pointed county weekends
* Development of the game and finding new players
* Development of novice players
* EBU Strategy and County involvement

The first item took up the most time with all counties reporting a very slow return to F2F with numbers well below 50% of pre-pandemic levels. The message from most counties was the same – that the reluctance of the membership to return to F2F bridge was now not so much Covid, but that a good proportion of the membership, having been forced by necessity into online bridge, have discovered that they actually prefer it and are very happy continuing with it. This has hit the rural counties particularly hard. Norfolk reported that two of its clubs have closed and two more were merging; Cumbria and Devon that clubs were really struggling; etc. The more urban counties had a similar story. Merseyside and Cheshire reported that very few of its members have returned to F2F bridge, and there was a similar story from some of the Southern counties. It was interesting to note that no county reported they had been able to run a F2F league and most felt there would never be a return to any F2F league. Counties were finding it very hard to run F2F events and some have no intention of trying. Middlesex for example reported that its main congress will remain online forever – far less work, greater entries, and more profit being the reasons cited.

Given that picture, it is not surprising that the counties pointed their guns at the EBU for its position on online green pointed events. Following the AGM where the EBU announced the doubling of UMS for online GP events, this had been reduced to increasing by a half (I think). There was not much dissent to this, but the counties were furious that the EBU would only allow 1 online GP event a year. It seems, for example, that many counties run their main congress as essentially two GP events – pairs one day, teams the next – and so this dictate from the EBU means they cannot run such a Congress online. Given the difficulties above with getting people to F2F bridge, the counties were understandably not happy. Gordon Rainsford, representing the EBU, was completely unmoved by all of this, pointing out repeatedly that the calendar is too full, that county events compete with the EBU’s own events, that online events are not geo-restricted as F2F events are, and that he thought the EBU position totally reasonable.

The next two items rather merged into one. There was much discussion of the “Yorkshire model” of teaching beginners and related matters. It was interesting to note that all counties agreed that the main problem was finding teachers. It would appear than many counties have seen the same drop off of teachers during the pandemic that Manchester has.

No one had much to say concerning the EBU strategy and county involvement.

The minutes are not yet available on the EBU website.