

Beginnings

This is a collection of sometimes vague and possibly inaccurate reminiscences of my fifteen or so years playing bridge at Southern Highlands Bridge club. My SHBC story is built around a great many wonderful people.

In the beginning, way back in 2007, there was Marina, without which the story would not have started. She taught Kate to play and showed her the game could be both challenging and more importantly, fun.

Each week Kate would bring home her notes and show them to me. I would avidly scan them. Having played bridge most of my life I was very interested to see what she was learning.

Thank you Marina for launching us into a wonderful seventeen year adventure.

Supervised Bridge

Once the lessons had finished, Kate and I joined in a couple of social sessions with Marina and some of her students. I had to unlearn ACOL and adapt to Standard. I am sure all of our bidding was awful and the play even worse but we enjoyed ourselves.

The next step came when Marina suggested that the keener players might like to have a go at supervised bridge. So, off we went to the Community Centre. Alison was in charge in those days, ably assisted by June Gardner-Brown and Ina Smith. We learned quite a lot but once again, the emphasis was on having fun.

Our First Session at the Club

The next step was the daunting prospect of playing in a regular club session. We weren't too sure about this and we prevaricated for a long time. Encouraged by Alison, we finally decided to give it a go. At that time, Reg Gilbert was president and he made us very welcome. "Sit at our table. We will look after you." In fact, everyone, without exception was very welcoming.

The one big advantage we had was that we didn't know who were the really tough opponents. From our point of view, all were equally tough. Still, we settled down and just did the best we could.

This was before the age of electronic scoring so we were the using travellers. As we made our way up the window side of the room, I saw we were not doing too badly. Most of our results seemed to be above average.

With no electronic scoring, final results were not immediately available. They were posted to the web after a few days. Impatiently, I checked the web time and again. Finally, they appeared. I looked up the list, starting from the bottom. Finally, at the top of the list, I found Craig Bayliss and Kate Chown. Well, the name may be wrong but indubitably, we had won. After this, enthusiasm knew no bounds.

Characters of the Club

Now we started playing on a regular basis. Alas, our beginners luck did not last. However we worked on our game with many of the club's strong players. The help was always given in a friendly and tactful manner. I remember Margaret Browne saying to Kate " you could have made that contract on the last hand. Would you like me to show you how?" That is the way help to beginners should be offered!

Talking of Margaret Browne, she and Jacqui Pascoe were a really scary combination for us. They played multi-twos! Unheard of at the club. I remember one hand where each side got confused about which suit the other side had. I don't remember who ended up playing the contract but the result was a disaster. We had lots of laughs about that one.



Here they are sitting north-south and up against Margaret Hutchison (back to the window) and Moira Weate.

Jacqui and Margaret had their favourite table on the window side of the room. At the next table, it was always Alison and Judy Blunck. Alison was (and still is) a terrific player with as exceptional memory for the cards. Judy was the quiet achiever. When you arrived at the table, you always thought that Alison would be the tougher opponent but often, it would be Judy who would do you down in her quiet, unassuming way.

I seem to remember the club was blessed with many players who were great characters as well as being more than decent bridge players.

Two of the top players and regular trophy winners were Anna and John Zaranski. It seemed they lived for their bridge. They could be a little bit boisterous at times but they always gave you tough, competitive bridge. When you arrived at their table, you knew you would be in for a battle. Regardless of the outcome, at the end of the round, there would always be lots of smiles.

My enduring memory of John was his arrival at the start of a session. He would stride into the room with a big, beaming smile on his face. He would kiss all the girls and shake hands with all the guys. Suddenly, the world was a better place for everyone.

Here are Anna and John sitting North-South with Frank Gray (back to cupboard) and Margaret West.



I well remember the day when John and Anna invited us to join them in the club's Teams Championship. We were relative newcomers so it was a great honour. Of course, we were terrified we would let them down. But we just about held up our end and were proud to get our names on a trophy for the first time.

Two other players who dominated in those days were Joanna Widawska and Barrie Iredale. Barrie is a founder member of the club and was for many years, chief director. Joanna's flair combined with Barrie's rock solid bidding and play made them a formidable combination. I will never forget Joanna's stare when she thought she had you boxed into a corner. I must say though, that although they tried very hard to win, they were always graceful in defeat.

Sheila Butler and Betty Collier were the quiet achievers who wrapped up two pairs championships. It always seemed to us they were under-bidders. But hey! Just look at the results!

Here they are playing against Helen van Dugteren and Pam King. Sheila has her back to the window.



Marcia Jackson and Stan Brown were another pair that balanced flair and sound judgement to good effect. If we left their table with average scores, we thought we had done well.

In a similar vein were Margaret Hutchison and Moira Weate. I seem to remember that when we joined the club, Margaret was the club's highest ranked player, being a silver life master. That made our paltry collection of masterpoints look pathetic. Both are still going strong and I had the great privilege of partnering Margaret in the recent Country Teams regional final.

Who else? Well there was Alan Orr. You could always expect a fair old battle at his table. Not a round went by without a doubled or a re-doubled contract. Whether the double worked or not, Alan seemed unconcerned. Alan was another one who was full of praise for opponent's good play.

Tony Tuft was chief director. He had a most amiable personality. Usually, things went to plan but when they didn't, he was quite unflustered. It always seemed to work out in the end. Tony was another one who you underestimated his card play at your peril.

George Connor is easy to remember. He was a big man who had a very loud, penetrating voice. We all forgave the noise because he was such a nice and generous person. He also played pretty good bridge and was an inaugural winner of our Teams trophy.

I could go on and on. We can't all be stars but there were many, many people with whom we had loads of fun and developed firm friendships.

Behind the Scenes

Not long after we started playing, Reg Gilbert stood down from the president's role and Alison took over. Apart from a couple of short breaks when Margaret Hore and Margaret West took the reins, this was to last many years. I do not remember the committee members but the club seemed to run very smoothly.

Tony Tuft was chief director and the directing team included Alison, Joanna Widawska, Alan Orr and Frank Gray. We scored on travellers and Tony and Joanna were the two people mainly responsible for getting the scores into the ASE program. Then, the results were uploaded onto the internet and filed in the famous black book..

Tony was also masterpoint secretary and each month, manually and laboriously produced the masterpoint forms needed by the ABF.

With our computer backgrounds, it was inevitable that we would get involved in a lot of this. The first step down the slippery slope was when we took over the dealing, previously done by Reg. Soon after, I got involved with masterpointing and scoring.

Competitive Bridge

For me, one of the attractions of the club was the wide range of championship and other competitions. Not only that, the club held qualifying sessions for many state and national events.

When we first joined the club, most people were reluctant to play in regional qualifying events, especially if they involved travel. I remember an early trip to Figtree with Margaret Hibbert and Kate Kerr. We were the only SHBC team and played the number one seeds in the first match. They were so bemused by our primitive systems, they contrived to lose. After that, our luck ran out.

Our favourite event was the Grand National Pairs (GNP). Initially, Kate was uneasy about this, thinking she was not good enough. In the regional final, we finished third. Kate was pleased at that outcome since only two qualified for the Canberra final. But, that evening the director called us to say there was a scoring error and we were actually second. Did we want to go to Canberra? YES!!!

Technology

When we first started playing at SHBC, all scoring was made on travelling scoresheets. The scorer would enter the scores into the ASE computer program some days after the session. The scores would then be uploaded to our web site, kindly set up by Ron Butler of the Bowral Bridge Club. During Alison's tenure as president, all this was to change. While Alison was not technologically inclined, she was very supportive of new ideas.

In 2009, we switched to a new web site host. With this, it became possible to upload results directly from the scoring program. Now, results were generally available on the same day that we played the session. Furthermore, features that we take for granted now such as hand records, personal scoresheets and travellers became available. A great step forward.

One year later we took an even bigger step with the introduction of Bridgemates. Travellers were dispensed with and scores were entered directly into the Bridgemate. We had worried that many people might find it difficult to adjust but this proved not to be the case. Results were now available a minute or two after the completion of the last board and there was much less work for the scorer. A win for everyone.

A few years later, we switched to a superior web site and scoring program. Later on, we added Pianola to our on-line facilities. Otherwise, not a lot more has changed.

And so Bridge Life Went On

Our bridge life continued serenely on for many years. I started directing and Kate and I went away to many country congresses, state and national events. We loved it. We played regularly with Joan Shanahan and Marina in the Southern Highlands congress. We had mixed success and a lot of fun.



Here are Joan and Marina (back to window) playing against Anne Crisp ("Anne with an 'E'") and Marika Holmik. Marika was the club's treasurer for many years and we can just see her legendary basket. Marika was also famous for the frequency and success of her 3NT contracts.

After many years, Alison stepped down from the presidency but under the guidance of Craig Curry, the club continued to thrive.

Hiatus

The trouble was that bridge was depriving us of many other interests: bush walking, cycling and skiing. We finally decided to take a year away from bridge and in 2019 had an outdoorsy year doing things we liked to do while we still had some physical fitness to do them. We got our walks in just in time as the end of that year brought savage bushfires to many of the places we had visited.

And then came COVID. For most of 2020 and 2021, nearly all of our club bridge was on-line via BBO. I remember Craig editing a series of newsletters called "The Advancer" and many interesting articles from our members to help us stay in touch.

Then in October, 2021, restrictions started to ease, We were allowed to gather in groups of eight and we instituted the Transitional Teams completion where we hosted matches in members homes. It proved a great success and congratulations to the eventual winners, The Bowral Brutes, in the guise of David, Craig, Steve and Tony.

Resumption of Regular Bridge

Finally, at the end of the COVID peak late in 2022, we were allowed to resume regular face-to-face bridge. Unfortunately, we had lost quite a few members in the interim. Some moved away, some, sadly passed away and some simply lost interest. Disappointingly for me, my partner was amongst the latter.

It was Marina to the rescue again. She persuaded me to return to bridge and I have had a very happy couple of years mainly partnering her, Lynleigh and my friend from long ago, Chris Lelliott.

Regrowth of the Club

It was now a question of regrowing the club. By now, Steve Brabyn was president and we started attracting new members via an extensive teaching program. At the forefront of this were Judith Capps, Kirsten Hartley and Simon Elderfield. Latterly, Lynleigh Evans and I also got involved. Many other members helped out. The club now has more members now than pre-COVID.

It is a joy to me when I wander in on a Monday morning. I see big smiles on everyone's face. I hear lot's of laughter. Our members are obviously enjoying their bridge, enjoying the challenges and having lots of fun.

That is exactly as it should be.

Chris