

Australians and Bridge

A Short History

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Introduction

This short history has two main objectives. The first is to give a long-term view of some of the issues relevant to the current debate on the future of bridge. This is a story of bridge as a product; how its market or markets evolved; what its competitors were; what social and economic factors influenced the market at different times; and how the product has evolved as the market has changed.

The second objective is to start a conversation about the recent history of bridge. For some of this period, we have quite good data on some things—but mostly we are going to have to rely on the impressions and memories of people who were part of scene. We are not, therefore, presenting a view of the recent past that we think is definitive. Rather the hope is that people will test it against their own experience and challenge where things do not seem to match or where important developments have not been given their due.

In the interests of readability, this is very much a short history. The aim has been to concentrate on the main trends and developments and to minimise detail. Details of sources have not been included. There is little here about leading players, competitions, organisational developments or different systems. For such a history of competitive bridge, and particularly contract, Cathy Chua's *History of Australian Bridge* is still the definitive source.

In researching this history, I have relied heavily on the extensive digitized newspaper collection of the National Library of Australia and, for more recent times, material in the archives of the Australian Bridge Federation. It should be stressed, however, that the views expressed here are the author's alone and have not been endorsed by any other body.

The story told here is organised around thirteen short chapters covering each decade from 1890 to 2019. At the beginning of each chapter, there is an illustrative trend line covering the decade. Particularly for the pre-1990 years, this is best thought of as an emoji. It is a rough impression of whether an imaginary person in charge of promoting bridge would be happier or more depressed as the decade progressed. It is not intended to represent any specific single measurement such as player numbers or press coverage.

The story begins in the 1890s, well before the emergence of contract bridge, because we cannot understand how the market for bridge has changed over the years without taking account of how bridge itself has changed. Throughout most of its history, with the significant exception of the recent past, multiple forms of bridge have co-existed, competing in different niches but often against each other, and were an important factor in the overall size and composition of the market for bridge.

The original end point was to be 2019 on the basis that it is way too early to make any judgment about the medium or longer-term impact of the COVID epidemic. However, the temptation has been hard to resist and there is a short post-script on the events of the last couple of years and some brief thoughts on current and future vulnerabilities and opportunities, that will hopefully help contribute to the discussions that we need to have about where bridge is heading.

1890-1899: A Very Different Game

1890

1893

1898

Original Bridge

The form of bridge that came to Australia in this decade had reached maturity in the clubs of the Ottoman Empire. It was called by several names, such as bridge whist, britch and Russian whist. For simplicity, it is referred to here as 'original bridge'. It had the exposed dummy, but there was no competition in bidding. Declarer simply picked the trump suit or passed the choice to partner. Scoring was along the lines of modern rubber bridge, with two games out of three making a rubber but the suits had different values and, unlike in the modern game, the penalties for undertricks varied according to the value of the suit. There was no limit on the amount of redoubling.

A Very Different Type of Game

Because original bridge is often described, somewhat misleadingly, as a development or descendant of whist, it is easy to forget just how different it was seen at the time.

For serious card players, the exposed dummy and the dealer or partner's choice of trumps, shifted the balance of skill in the game somewhat away from managing the unknown to making best use of the information available. It also created a greater distinction between declarer and defender play. Many whist players saw the additional information as taking away the skill in the game. In one sense, this was true as there were less unknowns, but the new game was more about strategic skills and positional thinking. Rules were still important but it opened up new horizons for flair and technique.

Bridge had other features that attracted people who had not previously been much involved in serious card play. Original bridge developed in a Mediterranean-Ottoman card playing milieu, that was typically far more lively than the relatively silent Anglo-Saxon competitive card-playing culture of the time. It had an intellectual appeal but also came with vocal chords attached. Bridge could be played with total and silent concentration or it could be combined with whatever level of social interaction suited the players involved. The flexibility of table culture would be a major factor in its growth and appeal.

Bridge had features that made it a very good game for gambling. It had a good balance between skill and chance that made it worthwhile for both skilled and less skilled players. Unskilful players were protected to some degree by the practice of scoring for holding honours (which as in America, had largely disappeared from whist in Australia). Unlimited doubling catered for the risk-takers but the varying penalty for under-tricks also effectively allowed players to 'fold' as in poker by bidding the lowest ranking suit. Under local rules, hands were indeed often not played out if a declarer bid spades, the lowest ranking suit of the time.

Beginnings

Bridge came to Europe, the UK and the US by various means, with Paris being a particularly important point of dissemination. It was played in some clubs from at least 1893, but it had a fairly low-key existence in the English-speaking world until around 1897. Although it had many sources of appeal, bridge did not have many of the features that a card game would need to have as much broad appeal as the simpler games, such as the different forms of rummy. It required a specific number of players, the

pace was relatively slow and the rules and conventions of play and scoring were relatively complex. However, there were a number of factors at work that led to it securing a very visible foothold towards the end of the decade among the upper classes, and particularly upper class women.

There were several dimensions to this. In part, it was part of a broader movement for change among educated and affluent women. It was a time of creation of many formal women's social and political organisations and clubs. Without mostly challenging the traditional role of women in the family, there were demands for greater independence, better education and suffrage; and a desire for more stimulating and intellectual ways of using leisure (of which they had a considerable amount, with the availability of servants and no workforce opportunities). Bridge ticked many boxes in its combination of sociability and intellectual challenge and day-time bridge clubs rapidly became important female spaces.

The second major factor was the contribution bridge could make to the large-scale home entertaining that was a central part of upper class life. The organisation of these events, which could involve a lot of people or last an entire weekend, was generally a female responsibility and there was a constant search for novelty and ways of breaking the tedium. While women did play whist, it was largely seen as a male game. Bridge by contrast had no such tradition and could be played without inflicting undue seriousness or silence on the gathering. It quickly became a feature of many upper class 'at homes' or country weekends.

Gambling was also a major driver for both men and women with means. In the English-speaking countries at least, the playing of games of chance in public was largely prohibited but whether a game was considered to be one of skill or chance largely depended on the social status of those who played it. Poker was largely banned but bridge, with its aristocratic patronage, was mostly given a free pass. Bridge in the late 1890s in the UK was associated with an explosion of gambling outside the home in many ways similar to the legalisation of poker machines in more recent times.

The so-called bridge craze at the end of the nineteenth century almost certainly involved an extremely small proportion of the population but the social status of those involved gave it high visibility. The link between bridge and the high social status and fashionable world would be an ongoing feature of bridge for much of its history—to the benefit of the game in some ways and not in others.

Australia and Bridge in the 1890s

The class of people who would take up bridge in Australia and their motives would largely follow the pattern of the UK—but slowly. There was no upper-class bridge craze in the late-1890s. So far, although there is evidence of occasional interest in the game, no contemporary reports have been found of actual play prior to the early 1900s. There are several possible reasons for this slow start.

The Information Problem

In the initial decade, the game got little or no support from newspapers. The first newspaper reporting of the game did not come until 1898. There was a little more in 1899 but this mainly consisted of rehashed, UK and US reports of the bridge craze and associated female gambling in these countries with no information on how to play it.

Before this time, the only people who would have seen printed information would have been upper class households or library members who had access to occasional articles on bridge in British journals. The first text books from the US and UK became available towards the end of the decade but would have reached

very few.

The Crowded Cards Market

Card playing was a very popular pastime among all classes in Australia, particularly among men. The serious card playing scene was also a market crowded with well-entrenched games. Whist was declining but still had a good core of committed players. Cribbage and euchre were particularly popular and solo whist was starting to make an impact. All were played in formal competitions and socially. Players who had developed high skill levels in an existing game had little to gain from switching to or encouraging bridge, particularly as it was often seen as likely to be a passing high-society fad or purely a gambling game.

The Tyranny of Distance (and Size)

Australian society and geography at the time also increased the time needed to reach a critical mass of players. Australia in 1901 had a population of around 3.8 million. Only a very small minority of this population went on to secondary education; and the educated middle and upper classes, who provided almost all bridge players overseas, were a much smaller proportion of the population than today. This small population was then fragmented by geography. Australia had a majority rural population spread over vast distances making it even harder to gather groups of enthusiasts.

No Such Thing as Bad Publicity?

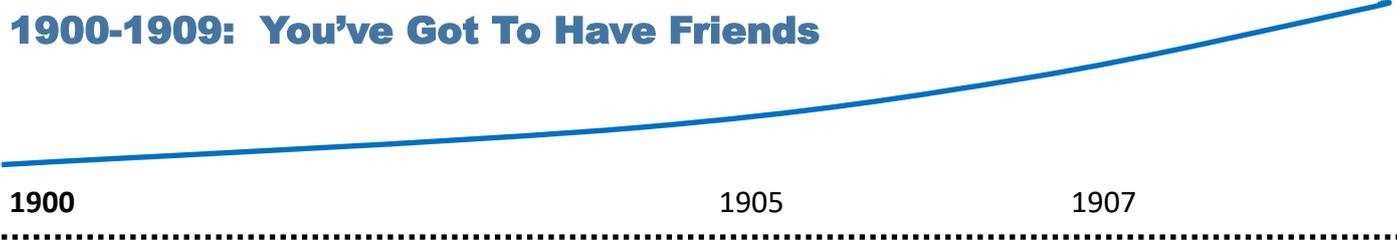
Most of the publicity bridge did get in the newspapers was fairly negative. The general news items about the bridge craze overseas were almost invariably of the shock-horror variety about women incurring impossible gambling debts and neglecting their families. Bridge was usually mentioned in the card columns in response to requests from readers for information rather than the columnist's initiative. Most columnists were whist enthusiasts and were rarely positive about the new game.

We will never know but there is a good case for thinking that negative publicity was probably not an important reason for the slow entry of bridge. Given the decline in whist, articles by whist columnists condemning bridge might well have been seen as a recommendation. Many people would have taken the stories of female ruin with a pinch of salt; and sometimes the stories would have conveyed messages to readers quite different from the negative tone on the surface.

Readers would have noted that this was a game in which women overseas were taking considerable interest; that they seemed to enjoy it; the gambling was an opportunity to take some manageable risks and make their own decisions with money; and that bridge clubs were creating more opportunities for women to meet others in their spare time. They would have also learned that it was extremely fashionable, which, for the very Anglophile, Australian elites was no small thing.

An enduring feature of bridge seems to be that, while people may hear of it through media, the actual spread and building commitment to play the game has largely depended on personal contact and the work of individuals. Like the association of bridge with high social status, this has been both a strength and a vulnerability. In any case, in the 1890s, individual enthusiasts were clearly at work under the radar as nothing else would explain the seemingly sudden emergence of the game in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

1900-1909: You've Got To Have Friends



1900

1905

1907

Visibility and Unexpected Champions

The beginning of the twentieth century provided the first visible evidence of where bridge was gaining a foothold. For the first time, we get a good look at both the different markets for bridge and also the people promoting bridge in different ways—the information spreaders, the image creators and the event organisers.

Struggle in the Card Clubs

Serious card players began to acquire knowledge of the game from the newspaper card columns that started to cover bridge in more detail in the early years of the decade. Particularly in the country areas, knowledge of the game was also spread by commercial travellers who used knowledge of card games and other city trends as a way of building local rapport and reputation.

By far the most important venues for competitive card play were located in the network of Mechanics' Institutes (also known as Schools of Arts). These were local bodies, with (despite the Mechanics title) mostly middle-class membership, funded by subscriptions, that provided members with a hall for various recreational and educational activities and a lending library. Most hosted card clubs that met once a week in the evening and hosted a variety of games.

Bridge established itself in the Institute card clubs relatively quickly in this decade without dominating. It seems to have hurt competitive whist, which was already in severe decline but other games such as euchre and cribbage remained more more popular. Some local clubs devoted only to bridge did appear early in the decade but seemed to struggle to survive for any length of time. A new game had to be considered superior in all respects to sweep others away and bridge was not that.

Bridge, although mostly a minority preference, could survive because this was not an 'all or nothing' environment. In most card evenings, there were different groups of players playing different games. Similarly, inter-club competition generally featured all games, with commonly just one or two pairs competing in bridge.

Beyond the Card Clubs

The main market for bridge at this stage, and for most if not all of its history, was not the card clubs but people who had hitherto been relatively little involved with the card-playing world, particularly outside the home. Most of the growth of bridge was due to interest from affluent women and most of it was played at home or in settings completely different from the traditional card playing venues.

The play at home took two main forms. By 1910, most of the wealthier suburbs in the major cities contained at least one daytime bridge club—small groups of women meeting regularly in each others' homes for bridge. This was a new social institution. It was part of general trend towards more stimulating use of leisure time and female mutual support and networking. Over time, hierarchy developed with high quality and serious players gravitating to each other.

Bridge and the Home Entertainment Sector

Probably the most significant factor helping raise the profile of bridge in this decade was the constant need for novel ways of entertaining guests during the often extravagant 'at homes' organised by the wealthier families during the winter 'season'. Some made bridge the sole focus of an evening but more commonly it was included as an optional choice among a range of more traditional entertainment offerings, such as music and dancing and billiards.

These events were frequently reported in the social pages of the newspapers. The inclusion of bridge by prominent and influential hosts greatly added to the social cachet and public awareness of bridge. It was the start of a long, sometimes helpful, sometimes not, association between bridge and high social status.

Bridge and the Hospitality Industry

During this decade, hospitality venues started to provide space for bridge clubs in the expectation of getting revenue from refreshments. While most club sessions were held in people's homes, some began to use cafes in the central business district for their meetings. The clubs were still strictly invitation-only and these places were quite different from the normal cafés of today. They often had space for a band and dancing and were fitted out for elegant dining. They would continue to be important venues, including for bridge associations, through to the 1950s.

The Fund-Raisers

Of all the promoters appearing at this time, the most important were charities and women's sporting clubs, whose prominence in organising bridge would last for more than sixty years. Charities were particularly important as government welfare was minimal and they, and female sporting clubs, such as croquet clubs, provided most of the few opportunities for women to exercise leadership.

Female-run charities were very quick to see the developing popularity of bridge among women and the scope to raise money by hosting events. They were significant in the history of bridge as they opened bridge events to all-comers (who could afford it) and into public spaces. By the middle of the decade, day-time tournaments for women and mixed evening events organised to raise funds for the sponsoring organisation became quite common. Most provided opportunities for gambling, which could be justified as being for a good cause.

High society social clubs

In most bridge histories, the role of elite men's clubs is writ large, despite it being at this stage primarily a female game. In Australia, at least, these clubs would, for good and bad, be important in subsequent decades because of the bridge columnists they provided and their role in bridge organisations. However, their contribution to playing numbers or quality bridge was small in this period and later. Much of the card playing in these places typically consisted of a few hands played along with some drinks after work. Bridge did become a feature in some clubs but tended not to be played for lengthy periods and simpler better-known games, such as solo, tended to be preferred.

The elite women's clubs were far more important as venues for bridge and early adoption of more sophisticated variants, such as auction and particularly contract. But during this decade most were in relatively early stages of establishment and also played quite a small role.

Changing the Game

This was not an era when bridge was played in a standard way. Each little club or group would have seen it as their sacred right to vary the text book rules when it suited them—and bridge had not long arrived before it began to split into different forms for different audiences. During this period, the more complex auction bridge, although still largely unknown in Australia, was being played occasionally in different forms by some serious players. More importantly at the time, the trend for fund-raising events and bridge parties increased the importance of another variant that went entirely in the other direction.

Dumbing Down—Progressive Bridge

Earlier in the UK and perhaps elsewhere it had been recognised that the standard form of bridge with its relatively complicated scoring and unpredictable length of rubbers was not very well suited for larger bridge parties or charity tournaments. There were not enough people with the necessary knowledge and enthusiasm and many people came primarily to socialise and circulate regularly and not necessarily have to think all that much. One could also not assume that even experienced players, who mostly learned from others, would follow the same rules of the game.

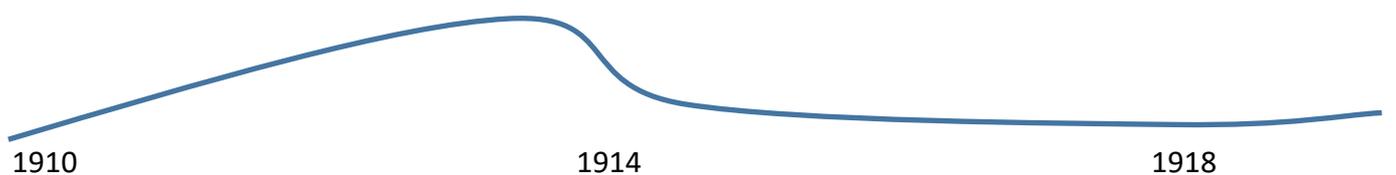
To deal with this problem a simplified version of the game, probably originating in the UK, called ‘progressive bridge’, was quickly and very widely taken up by Australian home entertainment and tournament organisers. Local rules varied considerably but in general, people would usually play four hands, with each taking turn to be dealer (often with a pre-determined trump suit), and then move to another table where they would change both opponents and partner. Scoring would be simple, sometimes just recording who had won the hand.

The impact of charities and high-society hostesses on bridge, promoting simple progressive bridge for events, was in many ways similar to the situation in the late twentieth century, when corporate entities took an interest in some sports and changed the rules to gain bigger audiences. The development of simple progressive bridge and World Series Cricket in the 1970s had a lot in common. Over the next thirty years, in different forms, this would be the dominant form of the game where a bridge event was organised at local level to cater for as many players as possible.

Still Small But Part of the Scene

Few contemporary observers in this period would still probably have been prepared to bet heavily that bridge would still be around at the end of the next decade. Bridge players were still an insignificant proportion of home card players (and would largely remain so). Five Hundred, recently arrived from America, and variants of rummy, were establishing themselves rapidly as the most popular card games. Poker continued to be popular although heavily suppressed in public spaces. Bridge had its base in a relatively small number of niches in the card clubs and the more affluent classes. Nevertheless, by 1910, if not widely played, it was widely-known about—and the range of forms and sponsors seemed to be a reasonably effective way of spreading its bets on survival.

1910-1919: A Tale of Two Halves



Before and After the War

Probably more than any other, this decade falls into two reasonably distinct parts—the pre-war period to 1914 and then the war and its aftermath including the influenza epidemic and an economy in trouble.

In the first half, bridge, in both the full and simple progressive forms, although still not widely played, continued to build its public profile, and grow gently but steadily in the various niches established in the previous decade. In the second, the war showed the power of external events to interrupt and influence almost any development.

Pre-war—Evening Bridge Clubs

Among evening club card players in the community centres bridge was still mainly just one game among many but during this decade there were sometimes enough players for the occasional stand-alone bridge tournaments. There was also a spurt in the number of small evening, sometimes male-only, bridge clubs. These were mostly affiliated to local Institutes or organised privately, usually taking turns to play in members' houses. In some regions, there were occasional contests between clubs from neighbouring towns. As before, these clubs were still fragile, prone to folding if a key organiser ceased to be available.

Pre-war—Daytime Bridge

As before, most of the growth of bridge, in numbers of players and in its public profile, occurred in women's spaces or events organised by women outside of the Institutes or evening bridge clubs. Regular daytime bridge sessions among groups of friends became well established and increasingly attracted the attention of commercial interests and newspapers. Fashion and social pages columnists tried to turn it into a highly stylized social ritual and there was prominent advertising for items purporting to be essential for such events.

Larger, mainly simple progressive, bridge events sponsored by charities and sporting organisations with strong female involvement, such as croquet, golf or bowling clubs also became more frequent. Charity events were always fund-raisers, but during this period sporting groups started to hold events as largely social occasions and a way of involving members' spouses in the club.

Pre-war—Bridge Parties and Women's Clubs

Bridge parties continued to be fashionable. As before, as with charity and other social events, where bridge was the main entertainment it was most often the simplified progressive form; and alternative activities were commonly offered, such as euchre or music, recitations or billiards. Where there were many options, bridge seems to have been seen as an option mainly for older participants—but the numbers who actually participated in bridge seemed to be growing.

The years before the War were also an important period for the growth of high-end women's clubs located in the central business districts. Previously established clubs, such as the Alexandra Club in

Melbourne, began to graduate into more spacious buildings that were well-suited for bridge parties. New clubs appeared, such as the network of Lyceum Clubs for women in the arts and professions and the Feminist Club in Sydney, whose members and facilities would be important in the development of bridge over the next two decades.

The Impact of War

War created a very different environment. Enlistments in the army affected the viability of men's evening bridge clubs. Small-scale bridge in the home seemed largely unaffected but continuing with large bridge parties or events, as with many other recreational activities, seemed wrong to many. Where they continued, they either had to keep a low profile or to be seen to be actively supporting the war effort.

Bridge did feature in many events and gatherings designed to raise funds for war-related causes, such as comforts for soldiers. However, as the aim had to be to get as many participants as possible, the bridge played was commonly progressive rather than standard bridge—and during this period, progressive bridge was further simplified and mixed with novelties.

War Bridge

The most popular variant was known as 'War Bridge', under which individuals—called 'scouts'- took it in turn to go to another table and be declarer. Rules probably varied locally but, under one set of published rules, the same trump suit was played at all tables and chosen by the organiser. Play on each hand only continued until declarer or opponents had seven tricks. The first to seven got a flag and those with the most flags won. People were encouraged to attend by advice that they did not need to know the rules of bridge to be able to participate.

Auction Bridge

Auction bridge, which introduced competitive bidding (but not the contract requirement that you had to bid to game to score it) had almost certainly been heard of since the first form appeared in 1902 but it had been slow to spread. The first reported auction game in Australia—a small tournament at the female Alexandra Club in Melbourne—was not until 1912. Apart from lack of information, a major problem was that the game, as played on the ground, was not remotely standardised. Depending on the preference of each group of players, it was played with different numbers of players, different bidding steps and rules and different scoring.

After 1914, auction seemed to spread rapidly and to largely supplant original bridge, at least among serious and regular players. This was not due directly to the war (although it did help spread the game among men of the officer class, stationed overseas who played it in the army). It was more a result of standardisation and an influx of information via text books and newspapers.

As would be the case with contract, the move to auction locally was mostly among women, who were the majority of serious players at the time and who had the time to learn the new game properly. Almost all public or semi-public auction events reported over the the decade had only female participation.

The Strange Death of Original Bridge

Once auction took hold among regular players during the War, its progress seems to have been rapid. Some people continued to play original bridge at home through the 1920s but they seem to have become a small and largely invisible minority by the time the war ended. The death now tends to be seen as

inevitable and auction bridge certainly had many aspects that added interest. At the time, the main reason given for its popularity was that it was seen as a giving opportunities to people who held bad cards. In original bridge, one just had to take one's punishment but the scope for choosing the suit, pre-empting and bluffing in auction gave a greater chance of being declarer or at least influencing the game. Nevertheless, this is unlikely to be a complete explanation for the near-disappearance of a game that a few years earlier seemed healthy and growing. In the next decade, contract would appear, which was in its turn, a game with more interest. But contract would take more than forty years to completely displace auction.

An important point, often overlooked, is that original bridge was not just facing competition from auction (seen as a better game for keen players) but also from progressive bridge and other games such as 500 or rummy that attracted the more casual players. In a way, original bridge was in a similar position to a political party caught in the centre, bleeding voters to those on its left and right.

The fact that auction appeared so quickly and was almost contemporaneous with original bridge was also a factor. Serious players would often have been aware of it in its various forms from early in their bridge career; and it became an option before they had too much invested in the original game. It is also important that bridge was often played largely because it was fashionable—and being fashionable meant keeping up with the latest trends.

Post-War

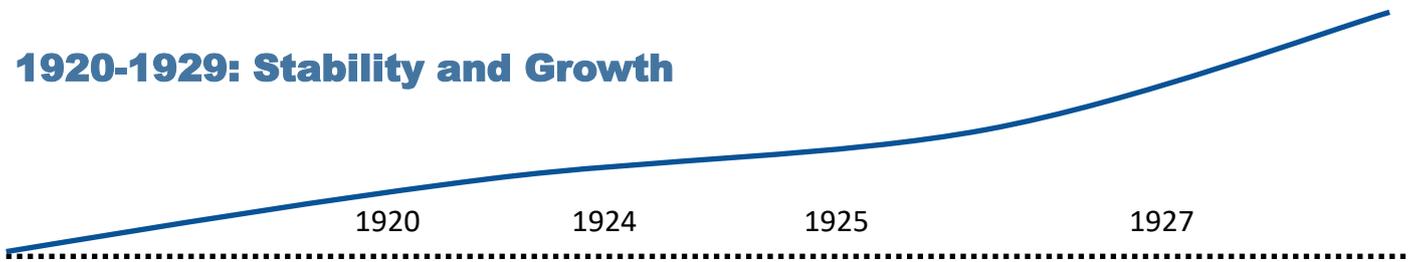
The end of the war did not immediately create a return to normal life. The final period of the war and immediate aftermath coincided with the arrival of the influenza epidemic. Bans on gatherings in public halls and spaces, combined with the large number of soldiers still overseas, meant that there is little evidence of evening bridge clubs at the end of the war. However, the epidemic had surprisingly little impact on bridge in homes, including large bridge parties reported in the social pages.

There were never any bans on gatherings in private houses and the flu was most deadly for younger adults, particularly younger males without access to good medical care, who were not a significant part of the bridge demographic. Large numbers of bridge parties in prominent private homes, therefore, continued to be held throughout the epidemic.

This provoked a certain amount of criticism and it would not be the last time that bridge would be associated with insensitive social displays in a time of general hardship. Most parties involved playing for stakes, often quite large, and they seemed to have become something of a symbol of the ongoing discrimination in gambling law and policing—where the avenues for working people were either closed or illegal but the rich could gamble with impunity.

The easing of the epidemic did not end difficult conditions in the country as a whole. The economy was in considerable trouble and there was a lot of social dislocation as large numbers of soldiers returned to civilian life. A few years would be needed before bridge would properly re-establish beyond the boundaries of high society and daytime home play.

1920-1929: Stability and Growth



Auction and Progressive Bridge

Compared with the previous decade, the 1920s were a time of relative stability in the type of bridge played, with just two forms being mainly played. Among regular players, auction was totally dominant and, at times, practically universal. Auction was almost always played with rubber scoring with only an occasional experiment with duplicate towards the end of the decade. The rules changed very little, with the only real division between players being between the great majority who played American ‘majority bidding’ (the system now used in contract where a higher number bid always beats a lower number bid of any suit) and the small minority who played the British system of ‘value bidding’ (where the higher number did not always win depending on the suit).

Although auction was more complicated than original bridge, it was a lot easier to find information on how to play it. Cheap editions of the rules were widely circulated, there was more information in the newspapers and magazines, and there were also (for a fee) plenty of teachers (probably in part a consequence of the slaughter of war, which left many educated women single and in need of employment). Although teachers had existed earlier, advertisements for began to appear regularly in the papers from 1921. At broad-based community fund-raising events, and some evening clubs, simple progressive bridge continued to be strongly preferred. Auction was hardly ever played in this way, being seen as requiring too much knowledge of bridge and the varying time taken for bidding made it difficult to synchronise large movements.

Contract achieved some popularity among some serious players in 1921-22 but this did not last—in part because of the lack of standardisation of bidding rules, scoring and systems. From around 1927 onwards contract began to get more publicity and, using the Vanderbilt scoring system, started to get a foothold among some serious players, particularly among women, but numbers would remain low until the early to mid-1930s.

An Upward Trend

Taking both forms of the game together, the visibility of bridge increased significantly in the 1920s, if judged by the level of coverage in newspapers. It is difficult to assess to what extent the significant increase in visibility was also reflected in the number of players. In metropolitan areas, particularly from the mid-1920s, bridge does seem to have gained ground in the most elite areas close to the city but was also starting to be picked up more in middle class suburbia. The relatively settled nature of the game was obviously helpful to growth but other factors were involved.

Overall, the middle to late years of the 1920s until the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 were relatively prosperous years for the middle class in the metropolitan areas (things were more difficult in the country). This relatively prosperity in its core market was generally beneficial for bridge, as was the end of the more puritanical atmosphere produced by war and social and economic crisis.

This period also a great increase in opportunities to play bridge outside the home, made possible by a

range of organisations and commercial interests, who saw bridge as a way of furthering their own interests. As before, the main promoters were charities, women's and other non-profit associations. The main difference between this and previous decades, was that charities moved from organising one-off events to creating clubs with regular (usually weekly) sessions. In the metropolitan areas, the so-called charity bridge clubs, which donated their membership fees and a proportion of gambling proceeds, were the major players in the bridge scene through to the 1940s.

The economic growth of the 1920s also saw accelerated development of the central business districts (CBDs) as daytime destinations for middle class women and commercial interests there were quick to use bridge to serve their own interests. The large Department stores saw it as a way of attracting and retaining customers. They formed clubs and employed bridge teachers. The high-end cafes, many of which were owned or managed by women, continued to host bridge club groups, but also saw the advantage of organising their own clubs on the premises.

Charities and women's associations still used cafes and private hotels but were increasingly acquiring more spacious premises in the CBD that could accommodate a weekly bridge club. Up-market private residential hotels also provided spaces as a source of extra income.

The 1920s also the rapid development of two new social organisations that would be major long-term providers of bridge venues. The Country Women's Association (CWA) was formed in this decade and, over the next forty years, had far more bridge clubs associated with it than any other organisation in Australia (certainly far more than the bridge associations that would be formed in the 1930s). Most held their sessions during the day but many, in part to raise funds, ran evening clubs for men and women.

For male bridge players, particularly those who had developed a taste for bridge during army service, the biggest godsend was the newly-formed Returned Soldiers League. Its network of clubs and Memorial Halls became major venues for bridge tournaments and weekly evening bridge—a partnership that has extended in many places until the present.

Private Enterprise

The 1920s saw the first known privately-owned bridge clubs—an indication of the growing market for bridge. The two most important were the the Melbourne Auction Bridge Club (founded in 1923) and Sydney Bridge Club (1928). Although catering to the more affluent, they were at least open to all men and women (a particularly important issue for Jewish players who were routinely barred from many elite social and sporting clubs) who could afford the membership fees and the stakes. They operated from their own premises during the day and evening, catered for both social and serious players, offered lessons, hired out rooms for private functions and other games, and also sold food and drink to add to profit.

Several other private clubs sprung up in the late 1920s in the major centres but could not match the longevity of the big two (the Melbourne club operated for seven years, Sydney (under private ownership) for almost seventy). Almost all other clubs came and went within a year or two. Revenues in smaller clubs came primarily from annual subscriptions and table fees. Players played rubber and either formed their own table or cut in with those already there. It generally proved too hard to get a sufficient and evenly-spaced flow of players. As members simply dropped in when they felt like it, filling tables or excessive waiting times were a common problem. Many private clubs created their own problems by promoting their supposed exclusivity as a major attraction.

The Sydney Bridge Club was an exception in part because it was founded by a consortium of experienced business people and a well-known top player. They understood management and were able and prepared to make the initial scale of investment needed in premises, staff, equipment and publicity, to generate the necessary ongoing revenue.

Bridge for the Sake of Competition

Bridge in clubs or at home was still overwhelmingly a game played for money. Bridge clubs routinely included maximum or required stakes in their information to members. This was partly to stop things getting out of hand but also to signal their position in the market. However, interest in bridge competitions was growing.

Bridge for the sake of competition was most common in both city or country Institutes (where gambling was often banned) and there were relatively frequent competitions between Institute-related clubs. From the mid-1920s onwards, we start to see contests between different women's clubs but also more evening teams-scoring contests.

Evening bridge was largely a male affair. An original attraction of bridge had been that it could be played in mixed company but social conditions and attitudes had meant that this promise had not been realised outside of casual home evening play. While most competitions were ad hoc one-off events, in Melbourne and Sydney there were occasional longer-running men's competitions and leagues. The results and progress of these competitions were often published in the major newspapers, being the first time that reports of bridge events appeared outside of the social pages. This was partly because the competitions, with their result lists and changing league positions were generally more newsworthy than ordinary relatively amorphous rubber sessions.

However, misogyny also played a role. The reality was that the game was really only taken seriously when played by high status males. General expert opinion was that the average standard of women's bridge at the time was markedly higher than men's with more of the latter tending to be far less regular or serious players. Nevertheless, women's bridge was routinely portrayed, implicitly or explicitly as, at best, an undemanding social skill, and commonly an exercise in frivolity, or an excuse to gossip. Women's supposed illogicality or lack of proportion in playing the game, particularly with husbands, was the frequent butt of jokes or cartoons.

In 1927, a league in Sydney gave itself the title of 'Sydney Auction Bridge Association'. This only ran for a little over two years and was, in fact, simply a league for teams from just five high-end, mostly entirely or mainly male-membership, social or sporting clubs (such as the Royal Yacht Club). The driving force seems to have come from the business-oriented Millions Club. There is no record of any attempts at expansion beyond this group or any felt need to do so. From today's standpoint, the Association title looks highly presumptuous—but this was a forerunner of how bridge politics and organisation would work over the next decade.

1930-1939: The Big Split and the Passing of the Boom

1930

1935

1939

A Time of Opposites

The 1930s was an era of contrasts for bridge. It was a time when most were playing the same form of the game as in the previous decade while at the same time the image of bridge was changing and the bridge world was becoming more divided. It saw the establishment of new institutions ostensibly to promote the game but which were essentially isolated from the aspirations and interest of most players. It saw an initial period of growth and high visibility followed, within a few years, by stagnation and decline.

The Dominant Forms—Auction and Progressive Bridge

During the 1930s, auction appears to have remained by far the most popular form of the game, particularly in social play and local competition. Most play, as before, is likely to have consisted of informal sessions between friends in the home—but by this time local organisers had also worked out different methods for playing auction bridge in a progressive movement and other competition formats. The decade saw a great blossoming of local evening auction competitions—both one-off and multi-week tournaments and local leagues—which were particularly important in giving men a chance to play competitively (although getting sufficient numbers was often a problem).

Stand-alone bridge clubs outside of the major metropolitan areas were still quite rare in this period and usually short-lived. Most commonly, the local leagues would contain teams from local institutions such as different churches, school parents associations, golf clubs, workplaces etc. Matches were played on a home and away basis using rubber scoring. The period also saw the development of local or regional knock-out pairs events, with initial heats played in people's homes. Some were on a very large scale. The Gippsland Auction Bridge Championships in 1937 was able to attract 300 players.

Auction generally did not have enough adherents to be suitable for purely social events or charity events wanting a wide attendance. Where bridge was played, it continued to be the progressive form played as simply as possible. On average, the Great Depression affected the middle and upper class bridge-playing public far less than ordinary workers. The greater demand for charity, in fact, increased the number of events to raise funds for different categories of the unemployed. There was a revival of the 'war bridge' that had been popular in the 1914-18 and was now re-named 'flag bridge'. As before, at such private and public events, other entertainments ranging from alternative games, such as euchre, cribbage or 500, to dancing and table tennis, were also commonly offered as an alternative to bridge.

Contract

For a minority wanting something more than auction, contract, with the Vanderbilt scoring system, had been spreading gradually since the late 1920s. As with auction, the early adopters of contract were disproportionately found among serious female players. The elite women's social, charitable and business clubs in the cities tended to be the first to host contract events in the early 1930s.

The equivalent men's clubs tended not to follow and contract also seems to have little presence in

ordinary middle class suburbs or the country areas. Throughout the decade, in terms of the total bridge playing population, contract had a relatively small base, consisting primarily of the more serious players who played in the inner affluent areas. Away from the concentration of players in the central elite suburbs, there were probably far more players who would have liked to play, but they were unable to take their colleagues with them. Contract at the time was not seen as a better game for the average player, particularly if played for money. It gave too much advantage to the expert, and took too much effort to learn. The problem was made worse in the early part of the decade by a bewildering range of conventions.

The Bridge Associations and their Goals

The 1930s were the time of formation of would-be governing bodies for the game, with State Bridge Associations formed in all States except Western Australia and a national body—the Australian Bridge Council (forerunner of the Australian Bridge Federation). They were largely modelled on the long-established organisations, such as for golf or croquet, that appealed to the same classes in society as bridge but, in reality, their goals and the situation they faced were very different.

The longer-established sporting organisations had come into being to help regulate and coordinate an already-established network of clubs, competitions, that generally agreed on the basic form of the game. In bridge, these conditions mostly did not exist. It was largely a game played in small home settings. Most importantly, the bridge associations were most interested in bringing change rather than coordinating what was already there.

While the associations in theory usually had the objective of promoting bridge in general and often mentioned auction, this was not the reality. In practice, their almost total focus was on promoting contract, which was a relatively small part of the player base, and almost never played in local competitions.

The second major objective was to create and maintain high-level competition. This involved annual national and state championships and lower-profile weekly events. The jewel in the crown was the annual interstate championship. Organisation and funding for this and selection of teams were major preoccupations of the associations.

As the 1930s progressed, in promoting contract competition, they also tend to proselytize for—and become associated with—one form of scoring—duplicate bridge. There had been only occasional trials of duplicate bridge from the late 1920s but it was enthusiastically promoted by the associations who saw it as a key to bridge being, and being seen as, a serious competitive activity in which skill would dominate.

The Bridge Associations and Reality

The bridge associations of the 1930s had two main achievements. The first was the establishment of national and state competitive frameworks, which have largely endured to the present day. The interstate events, in particular, did attract a lot of publicity and helped shift the image of bridge towards being a serious competitive activity. At the time, the events and the selection processes associated with them, involved only a very small group of players but they were to be an important contributor to the renewed interest in bridge in the late 1960s.

The second major achievement, in terms of their own objectives, was to get a lot of publicity for contract rather than auction, generally to a far greater degree than its level of popularity among bridge players

justified. The associations contained a number of people with journalism experience and skills; and they had extensive social and business contacts with newspaper owners and editors. As a result, bridge columns began to be almost totally dominated by contract—something that was occasionally a source of complaint from auction players. The 1930s were in fact the peak period for media coverage of contract. Apart from newspaper columns, there were regular radio programs and occasional broadcasts of play in specially-organised interstate events.

The Bridge Association Clubs

They were far less successful in building a thriving contract scene at local levels. As there were few or no existing contract clubs offering duplicate or wanting to be coordinated, the associations structured themselves as a club as well as a governing body, thereby setting the scene for major conflicts of interests from the 1970s onwards, when significant numbers of other clubs began to affiliate.*

There was an initial burst of enthusiasm for duplicate and association membership and there were well-attended pennant and other competitions in some places. But after the first few years of formation, membership seemed to stagnate and decline. Joining could be socially intimidating and duplicate, with some justification, developed a bad image for aggression, lack of friendliness and slow play. The contract of the time, even at top levels, was also often characterised by frequent psyching and gamesmanship and unethical behaviour.

Partly to counter the level of gamesmanship that was seen as detracting from duplicate as a test of skill, there was a push from segments of the association leadership to the other extreme, in the form of what were called ‘par’ competitions, with pre-dealt hands and results based on correct bidding as determined by the hand setters and not allowing anything other than totally standard interference—thus taking out a lot of the features that made the game interesting in the first place. Newspaper contract columns, with a few honourable exceptions, were frequently written in a way that reinforced the image that it was a game for joyless puzzle solvers.

By the end of the decade the associations were all effectively operating as small, socially elite, clubs. The bridge associations in the largest states did not operate their own premises but had a dedicated weekly session or sessions in the premises of a much larger private club. By the end of the decade, before the war, even the biggest associations seem to have had no more than 60 or 70 regularly active members each. It is very likely that, in any given week Australia-wide, less than 250 players were active in formal contract competitions.

Note *From this point the terms “bridge association clubs” or “association clubs” refer to the one club in each state or territory that was originally directly formed and managed by the state or territory bridge association—regardless of whether or not the association later divested itself of responsibility for the club. Other clubs that became affiliated with the associations are referred to as “affiliated clubs”.

The Private Sector

The 1930s had seen some growth in privately-operated clubs and teachers in the state capitals. There had been a major spurt in numbers during the Depression, when unemployed or bankrupted individuals turned to teaching for survival and other organisations, particularly drama and elocutions schools, diversified into bridge in an attempt to stay alive. Most did not last long but at the end of the 1930s, private bridge clubs were an important part of the bridge world.

Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane had clubs that were significantly bigger than the bridge associations clubs. In these cities, at various times, the associations held their sessions in them. These major private clubs also hosted and managed sessions for other clubs (usually women's daytime groups); and offered regular lessons. The selling point for these clubs seems to have been an emphasis on the promise of good standard bridge combined with congenial surroundings at a (for the middle class) modest cost. They relied heavily on sales of food and drink and supplemented their income by renting space to non-bridge groups and social functions. They seem to have gone to considerable lengths to avoid the bad behaviour and gamesmanship in bidding that was affecting the image of bridge generally.

There were also a number of other smaller bridge clubs mainly in affluent suburban areas. Some were more elaborate than others. Where associations did run pennant competitions, such as in Victoria, they hosted various matches. Some simply provided a weekly session. Others probably hosted poker and forms of illegal gambling.

Class, Gender and Image

It is not that surprising that the associations were not particularly successful in developing a more widespread contract scene. As discussed, it had not in reality been their main priority; they had no funds or resources other than what they put in themselves; and, unlike other sporting bodies, they were formed without a network of competition and clubs already in place.

One cannot question the enormous level of commitment and voluntary effort of the association office-bearers. Nevertheless, there were clearly some widely shared attitudes and values that would not have helped. The associations were a radical project run by quite conservative people. The association leaders were mostly highly successful in the professions or business; they belonged to the leading clubs; they or their wives featured in the social pages; they owned and frequently wore dinner and evening dress, including to bridge; and, for them, the bridge world was filled almost entirely with people like themselves.

Had the associations been contacted by any of the members of local church or school bridge clubs, Mechanics Institutes or Railway social clubs, which we know contained individuals interested in contract, one can be sure that they would have responded with absolute courtesy and helpfulness. But they lived in different worlds and there seems to have been no reaching out. The visits that were made to country areas to promote bridge that we know about were through contacts in their own social circle and confined people of that class.

Gender was also an issue. As had been the case with auction, women were disproportionately the early adopters of contract and the majority of contract players. They were also a substantial proportion, and often a majority, of the members of the evening association clubs. However, going out to play bridge in the evening, particularly for those with a non-bridge-playing husband, would have been highly problematic for many women at that time and most played during the day.

Despite this, there was only very isolated outreach to daytime clubs. For the most part, the bridge association officials do not seem to have been out and out misogynists, at least by 1930s standards, but in this regard they were not heroes either. The popular image of bridge over the previous thirty years

was that of a mainly female activity. As a female activity, it was rarely taken seriously and the butt of jokes and criticisms about frivolity. Part of the context of the drive to competition, the promotion of bridge as a serious sport, and the development of organisations with almost entirely male office-bearers, was to create an image of bridge as a game suitable for men. They did not want, and could not afford, to turn women away but they would not go too far out of their way to recruit them.

Decline

To some extent, the association problems reflected what seems to be a decline in interest in bridge generally from around 1935 onwards. Simple progressive bridge events held quite steady despite an increasing move to whist drives and competition for euchre—but the split between auction and contract, probably made it harder to organise events for serious players.

Bridge and bridge players were also starting to be the target of more negative commentary, related both to the nature of the game itself and the character of those who played it. The high-society image, which had given bridge glamour in the 1920s and early 1930s, was becoming counter-productive in a society still recovering from and remembering the depression.

The tone-deaf organisation of some high society charity bridge events during the Depression had added to ongoing public resentment about the social bias in gambling laws. The left-wing and union papers had never been fans of bridge but, by the end of the decade, satire and criticism was finding its way to the mainstream press. It could be presented as a pretentious joyless game played by Colonel Blimps.

By the end of the 1930s, bridge had added yet more features of the modern game, if in relatively limited scope. Contract was a part of the scene; there were regular local and duplicate competitions and interstate teams events; and formal governance structures had been established. These would pay off in the future but in the short-term bridge was not in a good position to face the situation created by the declaration of war in September 1939.

1940-1949: War and the first demographic cliff

1940

1945

The Second World War

From September 1939 to September 1945, Australia was at war. In several respects, the impact was similar to that of the first world war. As before, it led to an increase in public events involving bridge to raise funds for the war effort, particularly comforts and convalescent support for soldiers. As before, bridge was often one of a number of card games on offer but there were some differences.

While flag bridge was still played, this was now less common. The most usual form of operation was for people to organise their own tables for a session of rubber bridge, putting less onus on the organisers. Auction was the main game but most events also made room for contract players, who received separate prizes if justified by the number of contract tables. There was also a more democratic and less 'Lady Bountiful' feel about the events. Rather than being run by individual hostesses inviting a select group of friends with doubtful levels of profitability after expenses, they tended to be organised by more financially hard-nosed and slightly more representative organisations such as local Red Cross or Comforts Fund committees connected to a national structure.

As before also, war had relatively little impact on women's home-based bridge clubs, although they too became common donors to war-related causes. It was more difficult for men, who if, not enlisted, were often very conscious of not appearing to be enjoying life as normal while others fought. Some formed what were called Patriotic Bridge Clubs, where respectability was gained by regularly donating proceeds to various war-related causes. In general though, apart from the occasional Red Cross or Comforts Fund event, men's or mixed evening bridge, including the local church and other leagues, faded

Bridge Clubs and War

The average age and gender of bridge association members meant that they lost relatively few members to the armed forces but they suffered significantly because of their CBD locations, which were heavily affected by wartime restrictions. High-level competition, including the interstate championships, were suspended for the duration of war. Premises were requisitioned. Petrol rationing made travel difficult. Lighting restrictions and, in some places, the presence of large numbers of troops on R&R raised safety concerns at night, particularly for women. Starting as they were from quite a low base, associations tended to limp along through the war with just a few tables.

The major privately-owned clubs, which hosted the associations, also suffered badly. Rationing, combined with CBD location problems, and the decline of other social activities that created revenue, severely affected their businesses. The Brisbane Bridge Club closed in the first two years of war and Melbourne's Lythgo Bridge Centre closed just after war ended. The Sydney Bridge Club was the last major private club still standing at the end of the decade.

Post-War—the Bridge Associations

The bridge associations resumed interstate competition in 1946 and ran an Australia-wide Par contest but the competitive player base was a very small one. To boost attendance, most ran occasional beginners' lessons, organised auction events and started to cater for rubber as well as duplicate.

However, the social exclusiveness, lack of real outreach and recruitment after their initial formation meant that most of the bridge association clubs were facing a demographic cliff in the 1940s. Most members seem to have joined at around the same time in the thirties and had mostly not been young even then. Membership seems to have returned to around the immediate pre-war level and then stagnated or declined slightly. The Victorian Bridge Union, for example, had just 52 members in 1949.

This pattern of lumpy recruitment (where there is a major influx of new players), followed some years later by a demographic cliff, would be repeated a few decades later when the generation of younger players who joined en masse in the late 1960s and 1970s gradually aged together. The surges were certainly related to the specific circumstances of the period but it is possible other dynamics contribute to the demographic cliffs that have particularly affected seriously competitive bridge.

It may be part of a common social dynamic where established groups can become relatively closed circles without the members necessarily being aware of or intending to do this—but there may be factors specific to bridge. The game is often celebrated for the fact that age is no barrier to competitive success but in a competition-oriented environment it creates a world in which no-one inherits, unlike physical sports where there is constant need for renewal. As in the post-1970 period, numbers had been large enough for a reasonably robust competition and lack of urgent concern about the future but not large enough for leagues or other features that could have provided more incentive for newcomers.

The big achievement of the associations was to maintain in very difficult circumstances coherent national and state competitive frameworks for bridge and the practice of duplicate bridge. In the longer-term, these would become an important element in attracting a new generation to contract. In the next decade, though, the revival of bridge would happen mostly through other channels.

Post-War—Image and Visibility

As restrictions on newsprint eased, bridge also returned to the newspapers to a limited extent. The interstate championships usually attracted publicity in the state in which it was located, usually with photographs and profiles of some of the players but it never returned to the relative glory days of the 1930s. Getting access to newspapers had always been a major strength of the bridge associations but newspapers were getting more hard-nosed about what articles really reached the level of readership they wanted.

When articles on bridge, and contract in particular, appeared, they were not always positive. Occasional critical commentary on the snobbery of bridge resurfaced, as did complaints about the contrast between legal gambling at bridge and the prosecution of SP bookmakers favoured by the working class. Bridge was increasingly portrayed, not completely unfairly, as a game of the older generation.

In trying to create an image of contract as a serious competitive activity, the bridge associations had to some extent succeeded only too well. Contract had always faced the criticism of being too complex with too many conventions and the bad behaviour of many players was also well known. One 1949 major newspaper article described playing duplicate contract as “a miserable and nerve-wracking business.”

Post-War—Bridge in the Community

The state of bridge in the home and broader community is hard to ascertain with any certainty. After the end of the war, some of the local leagues and bridge events revived, showing that committed bridge players had not abandoned the game during the war. The charity bridge clubs mostly resumed but card playing as a fund-raiser did not recover to pre-war levels.

Partly offsetting the fall in fund-raising events, the challenges of the immediate post-war years had led to a great strengthening and new vitality in many women's organisations who continued to promote bridge as a community-building strategy. The Country Women's Association, in particular, began to reach its peak of membership and influence during this time.

No Longer Fashionable

Overall though, bridge seems to have been losing momentum. Despite still being the majority preference, nobody was promoting auction on any scale and new books and other fresh public information on the game had largely totally disappeared. Contract was gaining but rarely with enough players to populate a full session.

The need to cater for both games, while not an insuperable problem, was not helpful and there were plenty of alternatives. In addition to the ever-present euchre and 500, solo whist became extremely popular after the war. These games were significantly more popular than bridge in the fund-raising games nights of the time and even events advertised as "bridge evenings" would often cater for other card players.

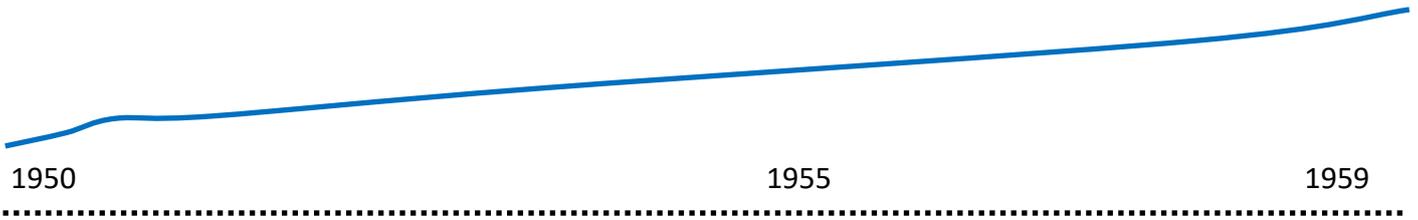
Social Change

One of the major changes to Australia in the post-war period was the surge of immigration from Europe, beyond the traditional recruiting ground of the United Kingdom. There had been a trickle of such immigration in the late 1930s, with the arrival of the first refugees from Nazism. Some of these had been or became top contract players and joined the associations. However, after the war, European immigration surged as governments sought to grow the population.

Several of the new source countries had much stronger traditions of contract than Australia and immigration would greatly grow the number of contract players in Australia—but this had relatively little impact in the short-term. This was partly due to settling in periods and conditions and settlement requirements but there was also some tension around the new arrivals and the perceived watering down of British identity.

Bridge associations on the whole were more welcoming than many other institutions, lack of good English was often not well received and there was a minority hostile undercurrent. The committee of at least one association debated an eventually-defeated motion to bar non-British citizens from representing the State (at a time when getting citizenship was quite a protracted affair). In the 1950s immigration would be a major driver of a contract revival but, for several reasons, the associations would be relatively uninvolved.

1950-1959: The Quiet Achiever Decade



Things Did Happen in the 1950s

The 1950s were a time of relative obscurity for bridge in Australia—no longer particularly fashionable and rarely mentioned in the major newspapers and magazines or radio or, after 1956, TV. However, just as media coverage in the 1930s overstated the popularity of the game, the silence of the 1950s was misleading in the other direction.

It would be wrong to see this as a period of general stagnation. It saw ongoing change in the balance of power between the different forms of the game. It was also a time in which saw the creation of a completely new sector in the Australian bridge scene, a general re-positioning of the image of bridge, and new institutions that are central to bridge today.

The Different Forms of Bridge

In the community generally, the main form of bridge played still seems to have been auction, but contract was becoming well-established. Contract teaching was becoming easier with relatively standardised systems and the introduction of the easier to understand point count in use today. The sessions run by various charities and women's organisations sometimes provided contract lessons and supervised play. Barriers to self-teaching were also reducing as well-written textbooks were becoming much widely available and more affordable.

Progressive flag bridge events continued to be held by local church and community organisations but this was largely on the way out. Part of the problem was the need to explain in publicity that it wasn't really like bridge—it was probably easier to just hold whist drives (which continued to be relatively popular), which were very similar and where everybody knew what they were getting.

Bridge in the Community

As with previous and subsequent decades, there is no real information on trends in women's at-home bridge clubs or informal bridge played at home, often between couples. The introduction of television, and its novelty, during the second half of the decade, may have reduced the amount of bridge played in evenings but there is no evidence about this. All that can be said with any certainty is that home bridge was very likely still a major part of the bridge scene and the standards would have varied enormously.

Where charities and women's organisations continued to sponsor bridge it was more for community-building. The charity bridge clubs started to disappear. For fund raising, as they became more centralised and professional, charities were finding far more effective ways of raising money than through bridge, such as raffles, jumbo sales, bingo, concerts and beauty contests.

The overwhelming majority of bridge played outside the home in this period, took place in day-time sessions run by women's organisations, such as the Country Women's Association, the Council of Jewish Women, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Catholic Daughters of Australia and the Red

Cross. In regional and suburban areas, some local evening competitions between local churches or other organisations were organised from time to time

Through the decade, the image problems from the thirties also started to fade. Charles Goren was helping to create a more down to earth and relaxed image. Cigars and suits were still there but it was a step down from the Culbertson era ambience. Learning bridge was still occasionally promoted as a way of entering more exalted social circles but the former claims of some bridge clubs to cater only for an exclusive clientele were no more; and its absence from the newspapers, where it had most often featured in the social pages, was probably a blessing. Bridge became less associated with the elite and more with the not-so-resented conventional members of the middle class.

Reporting on public clubs and events (outside of the bridge associations and immigrant communities) gives an impression of 'less is more'. Not so many people were playing, but those who did were playing more regularly; and more likely to be playing it for the sake of the game than for social display. In the wider community and the media, hostile comment about bridge players and the atmosphere of contract tournaments was mostly replaced by indifference. From the point of view of the future of bridge, this was a big improvement.

Immigration

During the 1950s large scale immigration from European countries with a much stronger contract tradition than Australia was a major source of growth in bridge, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne. The growing Jewish, Polish, Hungarian and Dutch communities were particularly prominent.

Some played in the association clubs. In places with a less established bridge establishment, such as Canberra, they were the main driving force behind the formation of such clubs. In the first instance, though, most probably played in social clubs associated with their ethnic or religious group. At the time, speaking of languages other than English was banned in some of the facilities used by other bridge clubs and often unwelcome elsewhere.

Some enterprising bridge teachers formed clubs, sometimes combined with cafes, particularly aimed at their compatriots or at immigrants more generally. Some organised city-wide leagues and inter-state events.

Bridge Associations

The other centres of duplicate contract bridge, the bridge association clubs, had been in a dire situation at the beginning of the decade, and generally faced ongoing low membership levels. They ran occasional lessons but, on the whole, were not particularly successful in attracting new members. Members from the 1930s still largely dominated administration and competition.

They also had few links with other clubs and bridge players outside of their immediate geographical area or social circle. To get participation in the mail-in 1951 Par contest, the method used was to send the information to local Mayors, asking them to pass it on to the leading bridge player in the area.

In this period, the associations were not benefitting much from the emerging multicultural Australia and some were struggling with it. There were particular tensions around anti-Semitism and selection processes in both NSW and Victoria. In Victoria, this led to a major split in 1955, which substantially weakened the Victorian Association for the next twenty years.

In the early to mid 1950s, to maintain public profile, some reverted to promoting large-scale (and very successful) auction competitions. The South Australian association, for example, organised a State Auction Championships in 1954 attracting 252 players (compared with just 18 teams of four in the State contract championship). One of the prizes was a set of free contract lessons.

There were some gains. British migrants were more likely to be involved with the associations and bridge would benefit from the arrival of a number of experienced British players from the 1950s onwards. Some made their mark by play but the most important contribution came from their experience of organising regional competition and dealing with a multiplicity of bridge clubs. Several would play a vital role in the spread of competition and clubs which would begin at the end of the 1950s.

The associations did manage to attract a handful of immigrant and Australian-born younger outstanding competitively-oriented players. Although few in number, they were very important to Australian bridge in creating its strongest-ever national team and in being the pioneers of a new group of bridge professionals and administrators.

The bridge associations in this period continued to play an important role in keeping state and national competitive frameworks alive, and ensuring that bridge got at least occasional coverage in newspapers. The older generation still in charge used its journalistic experience and managed the limited opportunities for publicity quite skilfully. In general, the publicity did not tell people much about bridge but it helped convey the image that it was a serious and competitive activity, which had its own stars. This would be a major factor in bringing in new players in the 1960s.

New Life in the Suburbs

A major problem in the 1950s for the associations and, therefore, the ability of people to play competitive contract, was their location in or near the central business districts. This had been an advantage in the 1930s but now the middle classes were increasingly moving farther out to new suburban developments. In an era of late finishes associated with manual scoring and often slow play, travel time could be a major disincentive to participation.

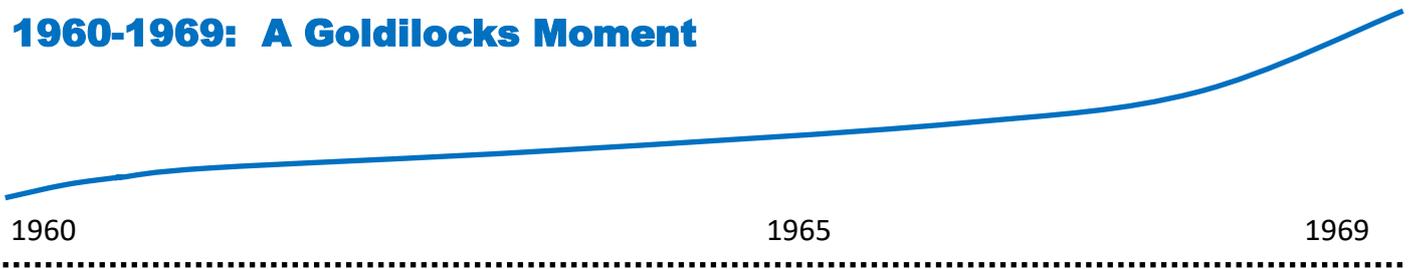
The disconnect between the location of the clubs and potential players began to be resolved from around 1958 with the creation of the first formally-organised suburban community-based clubs, such as the North Shore Bridge Club in Sydney or the Northern Suburbs Bridge Club in Brisbane. These were mostly organised by local residents. Some of the organisers were also members of the bridge associations looking seeing opportunities to expand the game. Some were bridge players or teachers from other organisations, such as the YWCA.

These were not the first suburban bridge clubs, but they were the first to have serious objectives and plans for both permanence and expansion. They also, initially at least, saw themselves as part of a wider bridge scene that included the bridge associations. Going beyond the traditional intra– and inter-club competitions, they had an interest in hosting larger events to bring together a wider circle of players. The late 1950s saw the first regional bridge congresses, which would be an important part of the appeal of bridge in subsequent decades.

The Quiet But Important Decade

In summary, bridge in the 1950s was a disappearing act in terms of public profile but this was not necessarily a bad thing as there was much about the image of bridge that could be usefully forgotten. And like all good disappearing acts, things were happening behind the scenes for an unexpected future.

1960-1969: A Goldilocks Moment



A Turning Point

The 1960s was a significant decade in many respects. It saw a major shift in the balance between different forms of the game; significant changes in bridge infrastructure and the amount of bridge played outside the home; a shift in the public image and the beginning of a one-off influx of players forming a generation that would eventually dominate competition for over forty years.

Auction and Contract

In the 1960s, auction is likely to have continued to have a presence in informal and home bridge; and was still played in some clubs. However, by this stage, contract does seem to have largely supplanted auction outside the home. It was getting easier to learn. Structured lessons were being offered more often—by individuals, bridge associations, women’s organisations and clubs themselves. Books were widely available and relatively affordable. Newspaper publicity was still quite rare but the *Australian Women’s Weekly* was at times an influential promoter of contract. In 1965 the magazine included a free lift-out 16 page pamphlet by Charles Goren.

Market Exit

The growth in the more complex form of the game was accompanied by the significant decline of the simplest form. Flag bridge events continued to be held in some localities but were becoming quite rare. For simple progressive card event formats, whist drives were probably more popular. They were much the same as flag bridge and had the advantage of not needing to explain that one did not need to know bridge in order to participate. The 1960s seems to be the decade in which public bridge largely left to others the “little prior knowledge needed” end of the market.

More Evening Bridge in Clubs

As before, the great majority of club bridge was almost certainly played during the day and organised by charities and women’s organisations. However, the process of creation of the new style of community-based bridge clubs for evening play in middle class suburban areas that had begun in the late 1950s started to accelerate. The trend also spread to some major rural towns.

The increase in the proportion of bridge played in clubs in this and subsequent decades seems to have been made possible by several aspects of the society at the time, other than a pure interest in bridge. It was helped by a societal culture of joining clubs of all kinds as a way of meeting people and establishing standing in the community (particularly important in new suburbs). Another factor was the general work-life balance that would enable people to confidently and comfortably schedule a block of several hours each week (something generally possible even for higher-level professionals at this time).

An economy in which large numbers of married women with high social status and good organising and networking skills (who did most of the leg work in forming clubs if not being formal office-bearers) was

also critical. Good contacts and ability to negotiate with local Councils and other organisations and sometimes State Governments could be crucial to getting premises, often at negligible cost.

Build It and They Will Come

Creating more evening clubs did seem to increase the number playing the game beyond the initial enthusiasts. Once established and known about it seems that they extended the potential market from people already keen on bridge to other people within reasonable commuting distances simply looking for something mildly-mentally stimulating to do in the evening at modest cost. Evening bridge in the 1960s and perhaps the next 15-20 years faced nothing like the competition it would face after that. TV was no longer a novelty and computing and gaming unknown.

The snob appeal of bridge had greatly declined—clubs no longer advertised themselves as being exclusive—but it still had some social cachet and was a game that in clubs was mostly played by people who could afford to dress well. Belonging to a bridge club not only gave you something to do but also signalled reasonable social status to others. While many potential members might not play regularly, awareness of bridge and knowledge of the rudiments was probably still very common among the middle-aged and older generation of the time. At the very least, there was widespread knowledge of 'feeder' games such as 500.

Bridge Gets A New Time Slot

The first weekend Congresses had been held at the end of the previous decade but the concept took off in a big way in the 1960s. These started with events organised by individual clubs but the associations, largely driven by arrivals from the UK with experience in Congress organisation, soon became heavily involved.

By the end of the decade in the major centres, attendances of several hundred were common requiring the use of hotels and other facilities with sufficient space to cope with the numbers. For keen bridge players, Congresses offered more competition and higher status from winning but they also helped create a higher profile for bridge as a competitive activity. The size of the events and the fact that they had enough committed players to give up weekend time generated useful publicity.

Most Congresses were in the major cities but the decade saw the first national-type events other than the interstate competitions, where many participants were expected to travel significant distances. The Gold Coast Congress was first held in 1962 and the Canberra Australia Day event of 1969 was a precursor of the annual Summer Festival.

A New Demographic

While bridge, as it always had been, was still mainly a preserve of the middle-aged and older, the last years of the decade saw the beginning of an unprecedented major influx of educated young people in their late teens and early twenties, mostly from the universities.

This youth movement was mostly a peer-driven phenomenon, with initially very little input or impact from bridge clubs or the bridge establishment. Enthusiasts taught their friends. Memoirs seem to suggest that many or most were not exposed to bridge through their parents. The keener players mostly joined clubs, often in small groups, after getting the fundamentals and some experience in informal settings. They were frequently not welcomed or made to feel at ease in the clubs, with dress standards

often a source of conflict but this was a generation that had enough social confidence or attitude to persevere anyway.

It is not obvious why this never-again-to-be repeated influx happened when it did but several factors probably played a part. Most importantly, the culture of card playing as a pastime among friends, particularly among males, was still strong. Widespread knowledge of 500 in particular eased the transition to bridge and increased interest in its possibilities.

The new young players were predominantly male and the proportion of baby-boomer young men interested in alternatives to physical sports may have been greater than previous generations; but the number of young women with an interest in competition was also significantly greater than any previous period. In this environment, the perception that bridge was a difficult and challenging game was more an attraction than a barrier.

The conditions of university study at that time also had a role in creating space for bridge. Bridge clubs, like other extra-curricular activities, were encouraged and subsidised and there were plenty of spaces for informal games at lunchtime. For many students, particularly the better-off, university results were not a major impact on future prospects. Most students spent all day on campus. Few had part-time jobs. The focus on end-of-year exams and minimal continuous assessment gave students flexibility in study.

Bridge Associations

During most of the 1960s, the primary focus of the associations continued to be on high-level competition, particularly the interstate and international competition, where Australia fielded its all-time strongest open team. They also continued to be the main providers of copy to the newspapers, which, while limited, probably helped in the effort to shift the image of bridge more towards being something that one played for competitive rather than social reasons. For the first time, also the associations began consciously to send out more democratic messages about bridge as being a game for all (often massively understating the reality of bridge's educated middle and upper class social base).

As before, much of the expansion of bridge was being driven without reference to the associations but they were becoming more involved, mainly as a result of individual initiatives by a new breed of administrators. Association activists helped new and existing clubs with lessons, advice and support to run duplicate movements, and, above all, support for the new world of weekend competition.

The membership of the bridge association clubs grew slowly at first but began to increase significantly in the second half of the decade. Improved relations with immigrant and other clubs brought more players into association competitions and, because of the inner-city location and their competitive focus, they benefitted perhaps more than most from the influx of younger players.

The 1960s

In popular myth, the 1960s were a time of protest and alternative lifestyles which, in reality, passed most people by. As far as bridge is concerned, it was a time of significant change—but it was change produced by a combination of factors. Subtle attitude changes among young people, 1950s club-joining culture, migration and assimilation, a protected economy, the role of women, and a relative lack of competition in the recreation market, all helped produce this Goldilocks moment. If nothing else, it started the creation of the generation that would dominate competitive bridge for the next 50 years.

1970-1979: Different Strokes for Different Folks

1970

1975

1979

Growing Duplicate

The 1970s saw a continuation of the growth in club duplicate bridge. There were more weekend congresses and more organised lessons. The major ethnic/religious-based bridge clubs in the cities continued to flourish and the number of suburban and regional community not-for-profit clubs also grew. Some became quite large and increasingly they began to affiliate with the bridge associations. There were more bridge columns in the newspapers and they helped foster growth by advertising events, lessons and the contact details of clubs. Another factor supporting growth was the increasing spread of the masterpoint system, developed in the 1960s, which gave status rewards to players competing more frequently and successfully.

There was a continued influx of younger players interested in competitive bridge. Partly because of this, the 1970s was a period of unparalleled growth for bridge association clubs, with at least two major centres quadrupling membership between the late 1960s and early 1980s but the influx of players in their twenties seems to have tapered off towards the end of the 1970s. Most of the members of the group that would dominate competition over the next decades seem to have been in place by the middle of the decade. However, beginners' lessons also brought in new players for less competitive evening sessions.

The new confidence, strength of membership, revenue from affiliations and masterpoints, and sense of purpose of the Associations enabled some to buy their own premises in this period. Importantly, it also enabled them increasingly to employ staff and bridge professionals to manage the administration and play and player recruitment.

A New Breed

This decade saw the emergence of the first of a new generation of younger bridge professionals, several of whom would be massively influential in the growth of Australian bridge over many years. As the 1970s progressed, the generation that started playing in the 1960s, became more prominent in national competition and, having established their playing credentials, some made the decision to make their living from bridge.

Depending on the individual, making a living from bridge at this time could involve a mix of professional partnering, gambling at rubber, directing or managing at bridge associations or other clubs, teaching, selling bridge books or equipment and perhaps a bit of a day job and other gambling or other activities that involved skill with calculating odds. Within this mixture, the managing, directing and teaching were the most important for bridge as a whole.

Both before and after this period, the role of the private sector in the bridge world and the relationship between amateur and professional was often problematic. At least one bridge association in the 1930s

initially sought to bar professionals from being office-bearers. At other times, the private sector could be crowded out or alternatively be resented as competition with the bridge associations or community-based clubs. However, this seemed to be one period where the relationship worked reasonably smoothly.

The ability to earn a living from teaching and directing was helped in part because at the time there were relatively few amateur volunteers with sufficient knowledge, time or skill who would price them out of the market. But the successful new teachers and administrators were entrepreneurial by nature and very good at what they did. They mostly had contracts that gave strong incentives to get a large attendance at lessons, introduce new members and increase table numbers.

One of the major barriers to the spread of contract had always been its relative complexity. The new teachers, helped by the standardisation of systems, addressed this problem by turning learning into an activity that was a reasonably interesting and enjoyable activity in its own right. They created their own teaching material and a hands-on participatory approach that was far apart from the relatively passive lectures on the rules or tactics that had often been the feature of previous outreach efforts. Most worked with a range of bridge venues and became quite well-known and helpful in building a sense of momentum in the bridge world.

The Wider World

During this period, contract seems to have almost totally replaced auction, which probably continued only in some home play. However, duplicate at this time was not displacing rubber bridge and bridge played in the newly formed bridge clubs was still only a part, and almost certainly a relatively small part of the bridge world.

This was in large part a gender and time-of-day issue. Affiliated club bridge at this time mainly consisted of evening sessions. Although times were changing, even in the 1970s and beyond, married women with school-age or older children, who were probably the great majority of regular bridge players, would find it harder to go out in the evening, leaving a husband at home, with or without children, than the reverse. The daytime market was still largely left to the women's, religious and community organisations, some of which were very active in promoting bridge sessions at this time and employed the new generation of bridge teachers to give lessons and provide other support.

It is not clear whether the associations or similar clubs could have competed more for the daytime market at this time, because of the community-building and social factors involved. However, in keeping with past history, very little effort was made. Most bridge in associations or similar clubs consisted of evening sessions. They had relatively little to do with daytime bridge. The typical association or larger club might have one 'ladies' afternoon session each week.

Duplicate and Rubber

Duplicate had little impact in this daytime the bridge world. Even where people understood the concept, the organisational requirements and scoring task in a pre-computer world just made it too hard. In clubs where people normally grouped themselves at tables with friends, frequent rotation had no appeal.

Part of the appeal of rubber to ordinary players was the aspect that made it unattractive for high-level competition. Luck of the cards could give players a chance against better players. Rubber was also

popular because many, possibly most, bridge players still liked to play bridge for money.

Most sessions were probably held in home but several clubs for high-stakes rubber play appeared in the major cities, usually in tandem with baccarat, and, less visibly, poker. Although relatively few players were involved, high stakes rubber would continue to be an important school and source of income for leading players and aspiring professionals.

The strength of rubber was demonstrated by the Sydney Morning Herald/Sun Herald knock-out rubber bridge competition, which began in 1971 with support from the NSW Bridge Association. This was an interesting and quite successful exercise in bringing together the worlds of competitive and social and home bridge. Top association players competed against people who had never seen the inside of a duplicate, or possibly any, bridge club. The main knockout rounds were played in people's homes, with results often influenced by the luck of the deal.

At its peak, the event attracted more than 2000 entrants. The success encouraged some charities to run their own at-home knockout competitions but such attempts were short-lived. The SMH competition was a once-a-year event, with good prizes and status for success, supported by major publicity outreach and bringing in large number of club players. Its success did not reflect much player interest in regular participation in smaller events.

The Changing (and Still Complicated) Image of Bridge

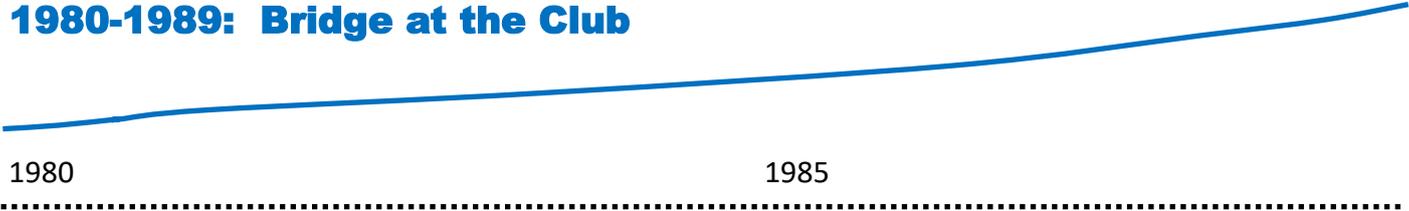
The 1970s can generally be seen as a good decade for the image of bridge. The serious competitive side was dominating whatever publicity the game was getting. Because of the time previously spent in the shadows, it was being seen as something new and something of a trend. The association with high society gambling well publicised through the James Bond novel, *Moonraker*, and the visit of the Omar Sharif bridge circus, added a touch of glamour.

On the other hand, reports by non-bridge columnists on championship events, pointed to an ongoing difficulty or lack of interest in explaining to a broader public in clear and simple terms what the game was about and what the attraction was. Most reports had the flavour of observing a harmless but mysterious cult. The level of smoking tended to get more publicity than the level of skill. Underlying most accounts was a sense of incongruity, perhaps absurdity, of so much silence and concentration for a game of cards.

Bridge was also presenting itself as a game for all classes, it was not possible to ignore reality of its middle class/professional market. Particularly among older players, playing in clubs was often not just about the game but a broader social and cultural experience, involving people with similar status, manners and dress.

This was a time when there was widespread concern among existing players and club management about the informal dress standards of younger players joining clubs. The image of bridge held by many bridge players was a bigger problem for bridge than any general public image. Unfortunately, it would not be the last time that new blood would be less than fully welcome.

1980-1989: Bridge at the Club



1980

1985

More Clubs

The most striking aspect of the 1980s was the growth in the number of bridge clubs affiliated with bridge associations, with 213 in 1989. There are no Australia-wide figures readily available on affiliation earlier than this but, from the fragmentary statistics we do have, the 1989 total seems likely to reflect a doubling or more over the decade.

There is not much evidence about club formation in this period, but it seems likely that most affiliated clubs had been in existence for ten years or less. More than 90 per cent were non-profit community-based clubs unconnected with any other organisation, brought into being by individual initiatives or existing groups of players moving to a more formal structure. NSW was the dominant state, accounting for half the affiliated clubs. Australia-wide, slightly more than half were located outside the major metropolitan areas, although this proportion varied greatly between states.

Much of the growth in club numbers was likely to be a result of the momentum started by the clubs established in the late 1960s and 1970s. Their example helped and encouraged others. As before, this was largely a 'bottom up' movement, often supported by associations but still largely relying on local initiative. Because of this, there was no consistent pattern to the expansion. However, there were some general conditions that helped underpin the growth of bridge institutions.

Professionals, Technology and the Private Sector

One of the reasons for this growth was that there were a lot more potential organisers around, many of whom had a strong financial incentive to encourage new clubs. The growth of clubs was greatly facilitated by the new cohort of young professionals. They were able to support newly-formed clubs through contracts to run sessions or, for larger clubs, take over day-to-day management.

In the 1980s several formed their own clubs, mainly in the inner ring affluent suburbs of the main cities. This first wave of private clubs tended to have their own dedicated premises. On the whole, they aimed at perceived gaps in the market variously catering for people who were attracted by expectation of a more intimate atmosphere, a connection with a leading player, a friendlier and more social atmosphere or a higher standard of amenity, including refreshments. They were probably more likely than other major metropolitan clubs to cater for the daytime bridge market. Most were standalone ventures, run and owned by a single professional (possibly with some investor backing) but this period also saw, in the Grand Slam bridge centres, the first chain and franchise bridge club model aiming at building a recognisable brand across different locations.

Most importantly, technology was starting to make it easier for professionals and others to manage clubs and sessions, including production of results. Relatively few homes had personal computers but the bridge world had a lot of early adopters; and scoring and other programs were widely used. By the 1980s there were also a number of local retailers specialising in the necessary bridge equipment, such as duplicate boards and scorers, that previously might have been expensive and difficult to obtain.

Venues

It was also relatively easy to find cheap, comfortable and consistently available venues. Social clubs with poker machine revenues were building more spacious premises with multiple-use spaces. Making these spaces available to bridge or other community groups for free enabled them to satisfy government requirements about community donations without incurring much actual expense. It also created some revenue if group members bought refreshments.

Explicit and implicit government subsidies were also important in making venues accessible. Organisers had the contacts and skills to gain access to unused or under-used local Council land or properties and space in government facilities, such as libraries. This was an era in which governments generally were not all that rigorous about cost-recovery or overall community cost-benefit and small bridge clubs sometimes benefitted from this.

The Attraction of Affiliation

It is likely that some of the increase in affiliated clubs came from those previously operating but not connected with the bridge associations. There was far greater awareness of the associations because of the newspaper columns but the two main factors are likely to have been the wish to be involved in the Congress circuit and the Masterpoint scheme.

The Masterpoint scheme had been in existence since the late 1960s but awareness and interest grew significantly in the 1980s as increases in the availability of points for local events and Congresses made it easier for players to advance through the lower ranks. Administrative changes in the late 1980s also reduced to some extent the processing burden on local clubs participating in the scheme.

The later 1980s were also probably the period in which growth really took off in the number of weekend Congresses held outside the major centres. City players in search of masterpoints were willing to travel. For local clubs, a Congress was an opportunity to raise funds, promote the town, and raise its own profile in the town. An important facilitating factor had been the rapid growth in construction of motels in the 1960s and 1970s. In non-tourist towns or off-season, these motels often had a lot of spare capacity on weekends, making accommodation readily available and affordable.

The bridge associations became financially stronger during this period thanks to levies on all members of affiliated clubs and the masterpoint scheme. As before, the major priority of the associations, and particularly the national association, was around organising high-level and supporting participation in international events, but they did become more active in supporting clubs and providing advice.

Social Change

Several broader social changes are also likely to have helped the formation of clubs. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that, while formal office-bearers were often still disproportionately male, most of the work in establishing clubs, fund-raising and day-to-day support was done by a generation of women with the necessary skills but mostly not in paid work who, in a different time, might have had other priorities.

The traditional women's organisations that had run bridge clubs, particularly in the country had mostly been in decline since the 1960s. This was partly due to lack of interest from younger women, the organisations' adherence to conservative social and religious values, and reduced need for their helping services because of the growth of government social services. By the 1980s, in many places, the bridge clubs they had run seemed to be a distant memory. The very limited evidence available suggests that in

both the country and city, such organisations, if they did anything, moved to occasional general card afternoons. The decline of the women's organisations was a problem in the short-term but it did create space for the creation of stand-alone bridge clubs. In larger rural centres, the task of finding the critical mass of middle class and professional residents needed for a bridge club was made easier by the trend for governments to concentrate previously scattered services in these places.

Bridge Associations and the Association Clubs

The only numbers available suggest that, despite the significant increase in clubs, between 1982 and 1989, the number of players in affiliated clubs is estimated to have increased by only about 15 per cent to just under 19,000. The 1982 figures may be overstated but it is likely that while the formation of bridge clubs likely attracted new members, it also created competition between clubs.

This was certainly a difficult decade for the central bridge association clubs. Most went backwards in this period. They were facing some very difficult immediate issues causing a lot of division and discontent among existing members. Smoking became a major issue in most association clubs, which resulted in some people leaving no matter how it was resolved. A major selling point of some new clubs was that they were non-smoking. The introduction of Forcing Pass and other highly artificial systems was also highly divisive; and much more prevalent in association clubs than others.

To compound their problems, a CBD location was no longer the advantage it once was. Most people attending lessons were in their thirties and older; more likely to live well outside the CBD, be busier with careers and so attracted to evening sessions at a club closer to home. People who did live near the CBD, thanks to the creation of new private and community clubs, were often spoilt for choice as to where to play.

Economics was another factor. As the associations tended to be paying mortgages on their premises and employed paid staff, they found it difficult to compete on price with clubs in free or subsidised premises and voluntary directors.

They were also affected by the general stagnation of attendance at high-level competition nights. This period did see the entry of some new players in their thirties, particularly women, who would become top-level players in the next decade but most new entrants were not attracted to this level of bridge. The core of competition nights continued to be the 1960s and 1970s players. The entry of new younger competitively-oriented players was reduced to a trickle.

A lot of reasons have been given for the failure of renewal of the 1960s and 1970s competitive generation. In part, the entry of so many young people was a historically unusual event related to conditions of the time such as university life, familiarity with cards, club-joining culture and absence of other options that would come later, such as computer gaming. People who started in their thirties and beyond generally had more commitments in their life and were less likely to have the time or motivation to succeed competitively and more likely to be looking for a more relaxed game.

The fact that in bridge, top players can maintain their position for a very long time is also probably a disincentive for new players. It is not clear whether devices used in other sports such as leagues or handicaps might have created more pathways and interest for those who might be attracted to competition. This is all speculation and the reality is that throughout most of its history only a very small proportion of bridge players had been interested in serious competition. The original 1960s and 1970s entrants remained committed and competition nights would remain relatively healthy until the aging

process began to impact.

Growth and Tension

The growth in affiliated clubs sharpened concern over real or perceived conflicts of interest between the role of associations as both governing bodies and participants. Associations faced accusations, in particular, of favouring their own club in the scheduling of events and Congresses, and of not being representative of the new wider bridge world. For their part, associations felt subject to unfair competition and free-riding by clubs who by offering lower-cost membership were reducing their ability to coordinate and support.

In the late 1980s, some associations started to explore constitutional change to separate the association function from club management. This could be complex, involving as it did both property and revenue ownership issues. Overall this was a period where there was much discussion of constitutional change but far less progress.

Such problems were probably inevitable as a system created in a different era faced a very different environment. In the 1980s, the bridge world was undergoing a process of coalescence, and like any such process, it would bring both benefits and tensions as new relationships had to be built and negotiated.

1990-1999: Bridge (mostly) in one system

1990

1995

Joining the Club

This period saw a further significant increase the number of affiliated clubs from 213 to 286. This was not even across the country. More than half the new clubs were located in NSW and almost half the remainder in Queensland. As before, the numbers of clubs bore some relationship to the population and level of decentralisation in each state, but with significant outliers pointing to other factors influencing the outcome, including the culture of the local bridge association.

Improvements in technology were an important factor in the increase in clubs running duplicate sessions and also added interest to post-mortems. The first Australian company specialising in technology supplies was created and most bridge booksellers diversified into this. Professionals often supplied both their directing services and the associated technology. This was the decade in which the use of software to replace manual scoring and results production became ubiquitous and the introduction of machine dealing and automatic production of hand records and Deep Finesse started.

The number of Congress events continue to grow — to over 400 in 1999. This was partly helped by changes to the masterpoint system that made it easier and more desirable to get gold points. But also reflected in part the age and affluence of the bridge-playing community, which freed them for weekend travel.

The growth of clubs was also associated with an increased proportion of bridge played as duplicate rather than rubber. The occasional club still offered rubber sessions but duplicate was far easier to organise for large groups and increasingly more popular. A sign of the times was the reducing interest in the annual Sydney rubber bridge competition and its eventual cessation.

Demographics

Unlike the previous decade, this increase was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of club players—from just under 19,000 to over 31,000. This was partly due to the new clubs and to widespread outreach activities and holding of beginners' lessons by existing clubs, combined with favourable demographics. A relatively affluent generation, born in the 1930s and 1940s, that had been familiar with card games in earlier life, sometimes including bridge, was retiring or nearing retirement and people were looking for new things to do and to enlarge their social contacts. The baby boomer generation was also reaching an age where responsibilities for children were making it easier to take up bridge.

Competing for the Daytime Market

There are a number of reasons for believing that the increase also reflected a move of bridge previously played at home into the clubs. In previous years, most affiliated by club bridge had been played in the evening but this decade seems to have seen a major increase in morning or afternoon sessions. Some clubs could be mainly centred on the needs of daytime or social players. A more congenial atmosphere in

a larger social group without the work involved in hosting bridge at home seems likely to have drawn in many previously non-club day-time players.

Women, the Workforce and Bridge

The growth of daytime bridge in affiliated clubs is also likely to have been helped by another economic/demographic shift, which was likely damaging for bridge as a whole, but may have given affiliated clubs an advantage in competing for the daytime market. By the 1990s, women with school-age children were re-entering the workforce in large numbers. This created challenges for a whole range of organisations that had previously relied on their participation or unpaid labour.

In the past, this group had been the main source of new recruits for daytime bridge sessions, both at home and organised by charities and women's groups. Without them, it is likely that average ages of players started to rise significantly and it became more difficult to maintain sessions. In some places, affiliated bridge clubs may have been the last place standing for those who still wanted a game.

A Rising Tide Lifts Most Boats

Most existing clubs did reasonably well during the 1990s. Around three out of four improved their membership to some extent during the decade. However, large increases in membership were concentrated in a relatively small proportion of clubs.

Clubs in coastal retirement destinations, particularly in Queensland, mostly experienced strong growth as the area's population grew. The new retiree arrivals, particularly from other States, tended to belong to the older affluent middle class that was the game's core demographic. In joining a bridge club, they often had the additional motivation of wanting to rebuild a social group in their new environment.

The larger clubs in the established outer middle-class suburbs of the major cities, established in the previous twenty years, also mostly got bigger. These clubs had the benefit of a large middle-class catchment with an older demographic, relatively little local competition and good facilities and parking. They had sufficient scale to hire professional staff; run regular lessons and multiple sessions; and manage behaviour at the table effectively.

The privately-owned clubs started in the 1980s also generally did well. In the 1990s, they were joined, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, by a second wave. Privately-owned clubs accounted for half of all the new clubs in Sydney and all of them in Melbourne. Their nature varied. Some were quite small with little room or intention to grow. Others became major players with a low-cost model that involved targeting affluent suburbs relatively un-serviced by other clubs and holding sessions at different locations using existing facilities, such as soldiers' clubs or other community facilities.

Bridge Associations

With one major exception, the 1990s were a period of consolidation and some growth for the bridge association clubs. The continued participation of those who joined in the late 1960s to early 1980s helped keep numbers stable for competition nights. Beginners' lessons and more daytime and less competitive evening sessions added to numbers.

The major challenges for the associations lay not in the administration of their own venue but in the increasingly conflicting demands created by the changing bridge world. In general, the period of growth in clubs had been characterised by reasonable amounts of goodwill and mutual support. As in the

1980s, there was continued debate about the potential conflict of interest inherent in the role of the associations as both market coordinators and participants. This decade saw the separation of club and representative functions in some States, but it remained a live issue in others. The increased in affiliated clubs and strengthened masterpoint system introduced at the end of the 1980s was popular and greatly improved the financial position of most associations but also created some new tensions.

The growth of daytime bridge and a major shift in the balance of players towards those playing as a leisure-time activity was also a source of pressure on existing arrangements. A primary role of the bridge associations since their foundation had been promoting and maintaining high-level competition. Almost all office bearers were current or former state or national representative players. As payments to associations by players, through their clubs, became more significant in the 1990s, so did pressure increase on associations to use the revenue to provide more support to clubs and social players.

The Private Sector

In this period, the Grand Slam franchise exited the masterpoint system, the first major club to do so. This was ostensibly a result of claims by the state bridge association, disputed by Grand Slam, that it was not complying with the requirement that a club enrol all members in the system. In the short-term, the dispute was made messier than need be by other factors, including the potential for conflict of interests on the part of the association which was both the regulator and owner of a competing club. Once could also make a case for there being legacy of hostility to professionals that had been a feature of the early associations. However, there were some structural underlying issues which would be ongoing.

The structure of the masterpoint scheme probably made it inevitable that there would be angst about the full enrolment rule somewhere at some point. Relatively few clubs were outside the system and as in most cases a majority of players would always prefer masterpoints. So it functioned much like a general levy and the all or nothing rule was very important for association viability and ability to promote and support bridge. The linking to desirable masterpoints made it quite popular and unresented by most. The downside was that others who were not interested (or those who had to charge them more or bear the cost) felt like they they had to pay for something from which they got little or no benefit. As more social players entered the club world, this latter group got larger.

A second factor was that the scheme was based on the notion that the basic entity of bridge was a club of the traditional type, where there was a marked division, in both costs and privileges, between members and visitors, with the latter being a small and closely monitored and restricted minority. Again, as bridge moved towards attracting the more casual part of the market, these distinctions were become less relevant. It was no coincidence that many of the private clubs were calling themselves bridge centres rather than clubs.

What Price Expansion?

Two main things were happening in the 1990s. Bridge in clubs was expanding, which was seen to be good, but in expanding, it was bringing different elements closer together. This in turn created tensions and some stress on prevailing governance institutions created in very different circumstances, which would take time to work through.

2000-2009: Plateau Time

2000

2005

The Club Scene

The number of clubs increased from 286 to 319. It seems quite likely that by this time, it is likely that most people played all their bridge in club settings and there were now few people playing bridge at home who did not also play in clubs.

As normal, the aggregate figures concealed a lot of variation and change. In the inner city and most affluent suburbs, privately run clubs tended to do well. The bigger clubs in the suburbs also did well. In the country, the sea change and retirement areas continued to be an important source of both new clubs and additional members. Some clubs in other major regional centres did well but the general pattern of these was stability with either small gains or losses.

On the negative side, community-based clubs in the inner city, including the bridge association clubs, mostly lost members. As previously, Sydney was the most volatile market in terms of shifts in members and club closures, which saw among other things the metamorphosis of the Lindfield Club, one of the oldest clubs and, for a long time, the biggest in the country, into the newly merged North Shore Bridge Club. Smaller clubs mostly just hung-on but in some smaller country towns, that were neither retirement destinations or important centres for services, there was a tendency for clubs to experience small but consistent decline to a point where viability would be an issue. Evening bridge continued to decline.

An interesting development was the growth, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, of highly restricted membership bridge clubs that were in many ways a return to the sort of clubs that had existed in the 1920s and 1930s. These clubs were in practice usually one or two sessions run by individual bridge professionals or a privately-owned bridge organisation within an existing sporting or social club, often a prestigious institutions where membership was tightly held. Access of non-members to the session or sessions of the bridge club could be very limited and possibly non-existent if not already a friend of a member.

While larger clubs were doing better the decade saw a continuation of the trend to a greater proportion of smaller clubs. By 2009, 40 per cent of clubs could run no more than ten tables if all members as measured by the masterpoint system were present. Nineteen per cent could run no more than five. This is likely to have been the result of several factors. In part, the new technology was making it easier to be viable with small numbers. It was also probably partly caused by professionals operating sessions at different venues, with each affiliated as a separate club.

A final factor may have been some disengagement from the masterpoint system. Clubs were required to enrol all members but not all clubs placed the same emphasis on formal enrolment of players, leaving things on a more casual basis unless a player specifically wanted masterpoints. This was most likely most common in private clubs but, during this period, may have become a factor in some of the smaller, more informally-organised clubs and those with high numbers of seasonal visitors.

Also noticeable at this time was the general downward trend in players in the masterpoint system linked to ethnic or religious community clubs that had been major drivers of the contract renewal in the 1950s

and 1970s. This was partly due to the aging of the original cohort and the geographical dispersion of the next generations. Where there was continuing immigration and a relatively high level of concentration of population in particular areas, such as in the Jewish community, bridge continued to be an important part of community club activities but seemingly with weaker ties to associations and the masterpoint structure.

Since the 1970s, bridge had continued to benefit to some extent from new arrivals, particularly from New Zealand, China and South Asia, but this was nothing like the scale of the boost it had received in the post-second world war period. This was partly because immigration policy targeted younger people, who as in Australia, were less likely to be involved in bridge, but other factors played a part. New migrants tended not to live in areas with the highest density of bridge clubs and occasional low levels of tolerance of poor English or speaking other languages in clubs and lack of outreach were other factors.

Player Numbers

For most of this decade, numbers held fairly steady. The decade ended with around 270 more players than at the start, having peaked at around 16000 in 2008. However, the bridge population was aging rapidly and this meant much higher rates of people leaving. In places that were not areas of population growth maintaining numbers required major recruitment effort.

Fortunately, there was no shortage of people highly motivated to put in the work needed. The private clubs had a personal financial incentive and there were other drivers in the community clubs. A significant proportion of community clubs now had their own premises on freehold or secure government leases and had become important social institutions within their region. The sense of permanence created by ownership of property, as well as the need to maintain and make good use of it, was an important incentive in promoting the club and getting new members. This decade, and most of the next, was also a peak period in terms of access to retired volunteers with a lot of club experience and time and inclination to do the necessary outreach and teaching.

Recruitment

By this time, while it might be possible in some areas to attract members from other clubs, most new recruits were unlikely to have played bridge for some time or ever, although they had probably played feeder games like 500. New members therefore meant outreach and beginners' lessons. A constant problem here though was there were consistently high wastage rates. If one in three who took lessons continued to play in the club, this would generally be regarded as a reasonable result.

The high wastage rate was not necessarily surprising. It would have been continued justification for the original critics of contract who said it was too complex for it to be as widely played as auction. For obvious reasons, there is no pre-vetting of people who take lessons to assess how likely it is that the game would suit them or whether they would enjoy duplicate sessions. To some extent also, the lessons, in the eyes of many participants, were simply part of the traditional evening class market, where one did short courses for something to do or to be exposed to for a while without any real intention of going on indefinitely.

Considerable efforts were made in this period to improve the quality of teaching, particularly as much was now being done by local volunteers rather than professionals. This period saw much more involvement from bridge associations in teaching advice and materials and the widespread adoption of

accreditation for teachers. There was also increased use of continued teaching in the form of supervised bridge sessions for those graduating from beginners' classes.

Club Culture

Unfortunately, not for the first time, some of the retention problem lay with existing members. At least one association during this period had to appeal to the members of its affiliated clubs to try to be more welcoming. Some of the insensitivity to newcomers could be unintended and the problem is likely in part to have reflected the fact that clubs with stable membership can become close-knit groups, which unintentionally become a barrier to new blood. Nevertheless, it was probably a reality that attracting new players was not as high a priority for some existing players as it was for management committees. Unfortunately, when people were nervous in new surroundings, it probably only took a few individuals to cause an entire club to be labelled as unfriendly.

Many volunteer-run clubs did manage this well but, in principle, it was probably easier for privately-owned clubs to address these issues. They had a strong personal stake in building numbers and private owners probably found it easier than more democratic organisations to exercise authority to set the tone and maintain it. They were often newer without deeply-rooted behaviour to manage. Where a more social and friendly atmosphere was an important element of their publicity and brand image, they tended to attract people who were less likely to be problems.

Wide Open Spaces

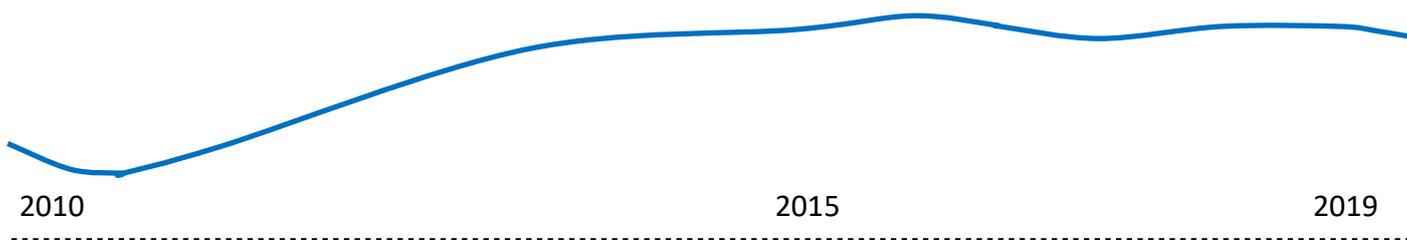
A far harder recruitment problem to address existed where there was no club within reasonable distance. As the growth in the number of clubs started to reach its peak, it increasingly became clear that, in the more populous metropolitan areas, the large increase in the number of clubs since the 1980s had been in the traditional long-established most affluent suburbs already reasonably well supplied with bridge clubs. The geographical area without good access was actually increasing.

In the major cities, most clubs, including the newly-created, were concentrated in the long-established affluent suburbs. There were great wide-open spaces in newer areas and previously working class suburbs with an increasing middle-class population, particularly the younger less well-established, who also tended to be time poor even without factoring in evening travel. A similar problem of lack of a place to play existed in many declining or smaller country towns.

Getting the critical mass needed, because of population size and geography, had been a problem for Australian bridge at each stage of development. There were almost certainly bridge players to be found or created in these areas but not necessarily in sufficient numbers or density that would make the club model (private or non-profit) easily workable.

The problem was even more acute for those who wished to play in the evenings. Bridge was increasingly becoming a daytime experience. During this decade, in line with much international experience, the failure to significantly renew the player base since the 1970s was starting to seriously impact on the viability of evening sessions, as that cohort aged. Many different factors, previously discussed, contributed to this situation. However, by 2010, geographical factors alone raised a real question as to what extent existing clubs could ever be a part of the solution to this acute and emerging problem.

2010-2019: Retiree and Online Worlds



A Golden Age?

The count of players in the masterpoint system peaked at over 36,000 at times between 2014 and 2016. It was undoubtedly, the highest number of players in formal bridge clubs in the history of the game in Australia; and possibly the highest ever number of Australians playing a reasonable standard of contract. The number of players had dropped a little by the end of the decade but was still at historically near-record levels.

The downside to this was that bridge had largely become a game for the retired, with the average age of players reaching 70 during the decade. There were several factors behind this aging. The influx of younger players in the late 1960s and 1970s had never been repeated and there was less interest in bridge in the working age population generally. High levels of workforce participation among women meant that the main source of new middle-aged day-time bridge players had dried up. On the other hand, this was the period which saw large scale retirement of a well-educated, reasonably cashed-up, middle class baby boomer generation, who, thanks largely to modern medicine, were staying alive and healthy long enough to play for a reasonable period after leaving work.

That these retirees took up bridge was not inevitable. The recruitment involved major effort from clubs in the form of beginners' lessons and further support to integrate new players; as well as a determined push from all levels to promote a friendlier image of club bridge. Associations generally provided more concrete support for both teaching and marketing. The increasing average age meant that the rate at which clubs lost players also increased, so just staying still involved a lot of effort, particularly with retention rates from lessons generally being no greater than a third of participants.

Bridge Outside the System

Compared with previous decades, there were relatively few dramatic ups and downs in membership of affiliated clubs. Some big clubs did get bigger and some had a poor decade. In Sydney and Melbourne there were significant falls and closures/mergers. Some more clubs in declining country towns closed. Overall though, most either increased a little or, if they went down, it was not by much.

The number of clubs increased relatively marginally. Most newcomers were small outer suburban clubs (sometimes run by the same professional operator), senior citizens' centres, developing retirement destinations or clubs formed among members of existing sporting or social clubs. The trend for bridge to become more local continued. There was a tendency for clubs to operate over several premises.

The decade also seems to have seen an increase in the number of bridge clubs and sessions not affiliated with the bridge associations or masterpoint system. The major drivers of unaffiliated bridge were golf clubs, which were facing their own challenges in keeping membership; and senior citizens' groups, where experienced volunteers promoted it as a weekly activity. Small groups in country towns

struggling with numbers were more likely to be affiliated but not be part of the masterpoint system. No exact figures are available but it is likely that about about one in five clubs or other institutions promoting bridge are not included in masterpoint totals.

Night and Day

In keeping with its demographic, bridge was increasingly becoming a game played mainly during the day. At the end of the decade, just under half of clubs were running an evening session, accounting probably for less than a quarter of total sessions in clubs, and an even smaller proportion of tables in play.

The higher-level competition evenings, largely dominated by those who had joined in the late 1960s to early 1980s were surviving but with reduced numbers as the cohort aged and online bridge had more impact. However, many clubs that were running evening sessions were struggling to get enough numbers for more social evening sessions in the face of declining interest from working-age people.

Congresses and special events had also been moving increasingly to daytime sessions only in the previous decade. Between 2000 and December 2009, the number increased by almost 60 per cent to 779, primarily because of an increase in events organised by national or state bodies. This figure dropped back slightly to 688 in 2019, mainly due to a reduction in state and national events. The number of local Congresses increased slightly to be about a third of the total but some country clubs were reporting declining attendance. This was possibly due to a combination of the aging of the playing population and less willingness to distance drive and a plateauing of masterpoint ambitions.

Online Bridge

It seems as if this was the decade in which online bridge became an important factor in Australian bridge, particularly among competition players. Online bridge had been around since the 1980s. For its first two decades, it was, for most players, probably more of a novelty add-on than anything else. The convenience of being able to pick up and play a few hands from home was counter-balanced by terrible behaviour and delusional self-ranking by players. For most, it was unlikely to have been seen as an alternative to club play.

This started to change in the new millennium, coinciding with the arrival of BBO, which helped establish its credibility as an appropriate medium for leading players. While it had virtually no effect on daytime bridge, by the time this decade began, it was likely having a still marginal, but noticeable effect, on numbers at sessions. It was not attracting people away from evening bridge altogether but was probably reducing the number of times some played each week.

By the middle of the decade, the impact of online bridge on evening competition seems to have deepened. There was probably something of a vicious circle here. Numbers would have dropped anyway because of aging. As numbers dropped and events became smaller and more “samey”, so did the attraction of online bridge increase. One could play with a favoured group, play high-level bridge during the day, and also link up with partners from interstate, often with a view to preparing for major competitions.

Bridge associations and clubs were generally in a difficult position in dealing with this disruption to the established club model of bridge. It was clear to all that online bridge could be an important part of the future of bridge. It potentially solved the problem of bridge players unable to get a game in areas without enough fellow-enthusiasts to make a club feasible. It freed bridge from the rigidity of the

standard duplicate movement, making it more accessible for the time poor. It created variety in new forms of practice and tournaments and the ability to watch leading players.

The problem though, as seen at the time, was that to support online bridge was to foster the competition that was already hurting the clubs, the support of which was the main *raison d'être* and source of revenue of the associations. To complicate matters further, there was no obvious way in which online bridge, no matter how popular it became, could support the organisation of bridge. The general approach, therefore, was to maintain a "toe in the water", with the occasional grant of masterpoints for online events and the use of BBO vugraphs for major events but avoidance of general commitment.

Bridge Professionals

During this decade it seems that there were a number of developments that helped established professionals stay in business, if not to get rich, while the scene for newer entrants wanting to build a career became more difficult.

On the plus side, the established professionals running clubs benefitted from the historically high playing population. The surge of interest in bridge cruises and holidays provide another supplement to income. Some had website income. On the other hand, opportunities for newcomers were probably becoming more limited. There was very little unclaimed territory. The improvements in technology and web services and the trend to smaller clubs all reduced the requirement for professional help. There were experiments with social media and innovative video but it is not clear whether these could be monetized sufficiently to create a living wage. In some ways, therefore, for younger players, life may have reverted to something like earlier days, when making a living involved both bridge and other activities involving similar (such as poker) or other skills.

Sponsorship

The aging and demographic uniformity of the bridge population seems to have led to an increase in sponsorship of the game. In the 20th century almost all sponsorship had consisted of either subsidised venues or ad hoc donations of prizes or supplies or buying of advertising. These ad hoc donations were almost entirely the result of personal contacts. Almost all were local businesses, although there was some sponsorship by major corporations such as Rothmans Tobacco (which placed free packets of cigarettes on tables at events) and Sitmar Cruises. Generally, there was relatively little commercial advantage in these arrangements, which were largely a result of goodwill and perhaps prestige among peers.

This sort of support continued into the post-2000 period but it was accompanied by a new wave of more professional marketing effort, advertising (including use of social media) and longer-term corporate partnerships, such as with the TBIB insurance brokerage. The critical point of these partnerships was that the driver here was not to use the image of bridge to enhance the brand. Rather it was to get access to the people who played it, who were an attractive market for the products they wanted to sell.

The Image of Bridge

It is hard to be definite about the image of bridge in this period. While it was probably still associated with being an intellectual activity, its image as a serious competitive sport was probably seriously faded in the general public mind. Lack of international success had made it less newsworthy. Nobody had yet

found a simple way of explaining the essence of the game in a way that resonated with people unfamiliar with, or uninterested in, the details (chess seems more successful here). This may become a much more pressing issue in the future. Most explanations of bridge one sees tend to, perhaps unconsciously, assume that one has some experience of trick-taking card games to build on and increasingly this will not be the case.

Some of the problem may be inherent in the nature of bridge. To appreciate the skill of leading players, one generally needed to be above-average competent oneself. Press reports in the 1960s and 1970s of congresses had tended to portray bridge players as being devoted to an activity which was something of a mystery to the rest of the world. In all probability this was probably still the case.

The most prevalent image of bridge was probably that, as in various previous eras, and equally correctly, it was regarded as a game mainly played by older people. In this regard, it could be promoted as a force for good. It gave people something to do, helped improve social life, kept the brain active, and with any luck, kept dementia at bay.

It was not the most exciting image, and not much help in attracting younger people, but things had been worse and the key point was that bridge was the great survivor. Most other card games, apart from poker, barely survived in memory or active play but bridge was a well-attended activity with well established governance and traditions and breaking through in the online world. Whether that would be enough for the future is the great unknown.

Postscript: COVID and Beyond 2019-22

The Impact of COVID

In terms of the impact on bridge, there have been two main phases of the COVID epidemic at the time of writing. In the first phase, many clubs in lockdown regions were forced to close for extended periods, while others were largely unaffected. In the second, current, phase, there are no mandated closures but all clubs now have to deal with the likelihood of infections and the impact of this on table numbers.

The overall impact of this on club bridge has unsurprisingly been negative. The number of affiliated players dropped by around 5% in each year of the pandemic. The decrease in membership was caused by both the dropping out of existing members (a combination of normal exits and the COVID situation) and the inability to run beginners' lessons to bring in new lessons. It is not yet clear whether people who have left or have been playing less at clubs and more at home or online will return to old patterns if and when the epidemic abates.

Despite the downward trend, clubs have mostly survived without catastrophic impacts, thanks in part to government support programs. In each of the epidemic years a minority of clubs still managed to increase membership. One of the most interesting things about the response to the pandemic was the progress made in bringing together the worlds of club and online bridge. The pandemic forced clubs into online bridge as the only option for keeping bridge alive; and this increased and new type of demand created space for emerging online bridge platform providers who tailored the product to combine the advantages of remote access with the atmosphere and ethics of club bridge.

While originally intended as a temporary measure only, the combination of online play with video interaction and normal club directing has been popular and it is almost certainly here to stay as part of the offering of many clubs. It is also likely that it will offer some clubs the opportunity to expand their membership. Some are already publicising their online events to people beyond their geographical area. It will give more people the opportunity of play in club conditions. It also has the potential to promote increased competition between clubs, which may be challenging for those that have relied on what is essentially a local monopoly position.

Future Challenges

Much will depend on the ongoing nature of the COVID epidemic and any other threats to health at indoor gathering. However, setting that aside, there seem to be three reasonably distinct challenges for the current model of bridge that has emerged from the conditions of the last fifty years. Keeping the game alive involves maintaining the current demographic of retired or nearly-retired players; attracting more players of workforce age; and attracting young people who may have the potential to compete at the highest level in the future.

The Existing Demographic

In the long-term, whether the retired continue to play bridge in current numbers will depend on a number of factors beyond the control of clubs. It will require, among other things, a continued ability of people to retire relatively early in good health with reasonable finances, and for retirees to be concentrated roughly in areas easily accessible to clubs. The response of coming generations with less or no knowledge of simpler card games is unknown. However, in the foreseeable future, the retired and

nearly-retired age group is likely to be the numerical mainstay of bridge.

The main immediate challenge for clubs here seems to be the continuing need for urgent and ongoing beginners' lessons and recruitment of new members. History suggests that if there too big a gap develops between the age of existing and potential members, recruitment can dry up. This is not just a problem of getting enough players. New members will also needed to replace in time aging administrative volunteers and teachers. As the club population ages, turnover in these roles is also likely to be much higher than at present.

People of Workforce Age and Young Players

Broadening the demographic—attracting younger working-age players—is likely to be substantially more difficult to solve within the existing club structure and existing social trends. Age difference with existing club members can be a demotivator. Only a minority of clubs run evening sessions and establishing or re-starting them without initial demand is a very difficult proposition. Setting aside the other options for entertainment and gaming that people have today, less predictable working hours, commuting distances, bridge club locations, and shared parental responsibilities, all make it difficult to commit to a regular large block of time for duplicate sessions.

Things can change very quickly but on current indications finding young players who could revive high-level competition and Australian international competitiveness in the future looks even more challenging for the existing model of bridge. In addition to the general barriers to participation by those of workforce age, the younger ages would face a much higher age difference; are much less likely to have any knowledge of feeder card games; more likely to have a more individualistic and flexible approach to leisure and more likely to be already involved in other forms of gaming.

With the exception of the 1960s and 1970s generation, bridge seems never to have attracted young people on any scale. Online bridge may be a game-changer but bridge may also be in the situation faced by some other rarely played sports when trying to be competitive at international levels. Rather than try to build up youth participation and hope something emerges, the tactic has often been to identify people with no experience but with the right potential and invest heavily in them.

This of course requires money; money requires sponsorship; sponsorship requires a brand or image with which sponsors want to identify. The issue for bridge is that developing such an image has been a problem that, for many reasons, has so far been difficult to resolve.

Online Bridge

Online bridge almost certainly will have some sort of role in any improved participation by people of working age, particularly where a need for time flexibility and issues around existing clubs are the major issues. Eventually online bridge might also be able to solve or ameliorate the problem of time and effort needed to learn the game. In recent years, a lot of lessons have become available online but much of the material is an adaptation of the in-person approach. They are often reminiscent of the first automobiles, which replaced the horse with an engine, but were still largely designed like coaches. It is hard to escape the feeling that we are at present only really beginning to scratch the surface of what the technology will be able to do.

However, online bridge is clearly not the whole answer and can add to problems. We should also not underestimate the damage that player behaviour on the major online bridge sites (where there are no

directors and people are not known to each other) is doing to the image of bridge and bridge players. The sites operate very similar to other social media in that there are some processes in place to identify problem content but which are largely ineffective in preventing partner abuse and commentary that would be unacceptable in any physical bridge club.

The behaviour is only experienced directly by those who already have some knowledge of bridge but the experience gets conveyed to a much wider audience. It is passed on through comments to non-bridge playing friends but also on general online discussion forums when anybody raises the question about what is bridge, is it worth taking up and where can you play in the evening.

The behaviour problem on unsupervised online bridge is a reminder that the issue about the future is not just about the survival of the game but what the bridge community looks like. Clubs and bridge associations have performed several important functions apart from promoting the game. As it is a game that gives scope and motivation for so much interpersonal interaction, clubs have been where rules of behaviour that make the game work are monitored but also largely internalised.

State and national associations and their associated competitions are another form of community structure that affect people's motivations and experience and the perceptions of bridge as a mind sport. Bridge may be able to continue without them but it will be a different game.

Bridge Past Present and Future

Bridge in Australia, and the world around it, has changed a lot over its history. The type of game played has become less diverse and has settled on its most complex but also most fascinating version—contract. It has gone from a game mainly played at home to one, other than online bridge, almost entirely played in clubs; from being a game played primarily for money to a game played for scores; from being time-flexible to one to which scheduled blocks of time have to be allocated.

Overall, this has been a successful model for the last fifty years. The depth of contract has kept the game alive while other card games have fallen away. The club structure has been a driver of permanence and growth and the structure of play and the governance institutions built on the clubs has enabled the game to be recognised as an important mind sport. However, all models come into being in part because of favourable social and other conditions. These rarely remain forever and generally models have to adapt as the world changes around them.

Current conditions do not appear favourable but the history does also give some sort of comfort. Peaks and troughs have been normal. There was no golden age with which the current system has to compare itself. Social and economic conditions are major drivers but the actions of individuals at local levels make a difference. There is a saying that "talent will out". Maintaining bridge through the next few years, assuming the continuation of current trends, will probably take a bit of effort and ingenuity but the game's innate qualities and survival to date probably make the case for avoiding too much pessimism.