

**STAFFS & SHROPS V OXFORDSHIRE**  
**12<sup>th</sup> November 2006 at Stafford Bridge Club**

The County continues to prosper! The results of this fixture included the A team's first defeat of the season, albeit by the narrow margin of 9 IMPs (8-12 VPs) but the B team won by 73 IMPs (19-1) and the C team by 91 IMPs (20-0). Amazingly, this leaves the leader board in the three divisions looking like this (matches played to date are shown in brackets):

A: 1<sup>st</sup> Oxfordshire (5) 78 VPs, 2<sup>nd</sup> Glos (6) 48, 3<sup>rd</sup> Leics (3) 47, 4<sup>th</sup> Lincs (4) 43, 5<sup>th</sup> Notts (4) 41, 6<sup>th</sup> Worcs (5) 40, 7<sup>th</sup> Derbys (4) 36, 8<sup>th</sup> Staffs (4) 35, 9<sup>th</sup> Warwick (3) 32  
 B: 1<sup>st</sup> Oxfordshire (5) 93 VPs, 2<sup>nd</sup> Leics (4) 58, 3<sup>rd</sup> Worcs (5) 47, 4<sup>th</sup> Warwick (3) 46, 5<sup>th</sup> Derbys (4) 42, 6<sup>th</sup> Glos (6) 32, 7<sup>th</sup> Lincs (5) 31, 8<sup>th</sup> Notts (4) 29, 9<sup>th</sup> Staffs (4) 22  
 C: 1<sup>st</sup> Oxfordshire (5) 63 VPs, 2<sup>nd</sup> Worcs (5) 58, 3<sup>rd</sup> Warwick (3) 55, 4<sup>th</sup> Leics (4) 44, 5<sup>th</sup> Staffs (4) 44, 6<sup>th</sup> Glos (6) 39, 7<sup>th</sup> Notts (4) 38, 8<sup>th</sup> Derbys (4) 37, 9<sup>th</sup> Lincs (5) 25  
 Our remaining 3 matches are v Lincs on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2006, v Leics on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2007 and v Warwickshire on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2007. Having moved hither and thither on date and venue, we are struggling a little currently to complete a 12-pair line-up v Lincs, though there is no problem in the quality of the pairs so far available.

Much good work remains to be done before we can harbour dreams of unprecedented glory, but the omens are good and our performances to date promise well. It's true that the A team didn't play as well against Staffs as on other occasions, though there were certainly less gifts on offer than in the B and C matches, as one would expect, and Staffs A declarers did extremely well on one or two hands, as will be seen. Nonetheless, we missed opportunities to turn a narrow loss into a modest win. Jeremy Bygott has prepared cross-IMP and Butler comparisons, as follows:

	<i>Cross-IMPs</i>	<i>Butler</i>
Krys Kazmierczak and Sandra Nicholson (EW C)	+61.33	+53
Tim Dickinson and Nick Smith (EW B)	+50.00	+43
Norman Gascoyne and Ron Quainton (NS C)	+47.00	+39
Marian Day and Nick Perceval-Price (NS B)	+42.33	+35
Andrew and Dinah Lintott (NS B)	+36.50	+29
David Flower and David Stead (NS C)	+23.83	+09
Cathy Rowland and Mary-Ann Sheehy (EW C)	+21.00	+04
John Williams and Chris Wilson (EW A)	+16.50	+01
John Slater and Nelson Stephens (EW A)	+13.67	-05
Chris Cooper and Nathan Piper (NS A)	+11.17	00
Robert Procter and Michael Robinson (NS A)	+03.17	-10
Denis and Kathy Talbot (EW B)	+01.50	-13

The scores are slightly distorted because Staffs were fined 2 X 3 IMPs for the boards Slater/Stephens couldn't play (3 and 4) when a Staffs pair arrived 30 minutes late (Jeremy has assigned notional scores in place of the awarded IMPs to complete the calculations).

I'm grateful to the usual culprits for comments on some of the hands where they shone or were extinguished.

**Board 1: dealer N, love all**

West ♠K2 ♥A54 ♦Q8652 ♣Q106 East ♠A4 ♥KQ876 ♦KJ3 ♣AJ3

Nick Smith is a little scathing towards those pairs who didn't find slam on these cards. He's arguing from a position of some strength, having reached 6NT by East.

However, the fact that no one in the A team match got to slam, only two pairs in the B match (Lintotts got a big bonus when their declarer went down in 6♥ - presumably by playing it from the short hand on a club lead through, courtesy of system?) and only two pairs (both from Staffs) in the C match, suggests it's no cake-walk. My auction, starting with me (East) was 1♥-2♦-2NT (15-19 bal) - 3♥ - 4♣ (cue) - 4♥ (end) was possibly typical. Both players were maybe tempted to have one more try, which would have been enough, but failed to appreciate how well all their cards were working. A 4-1 heart break would have scuppered 6♥ or 6NT, but both red suits broke 3-2 in practice.

**Board 3: dealer S. EW game**

North ♠1076 ♥AK43 ♦QJ75 ♣42 South ♠AK543 ♥QJ865 ♦None ♣AJ8

When the bidding starts 1♠ - 2♦ South should temper his enthusiasm a little, even after hearts are supported: the void in partner's first suit promises a lack of losers but doesn't help the winners tally. Partner now needs good cards in the black suits – or diamond tops - to make slam a reasonable proposition, and even 5♥ isn't bound to be safe. Two pairs were down in 6♥ (lucky for the Talbots, not so for the Lintotts) whilst Slater/Stephens got 5♥ one off. Flower/Stead were 2 down in 6♠ and Kaz/Nicholson took even 4♠ one off. The miracle score was 6♥ **made** by Gascoyne/Quainton (who only played at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour – thanks, by the way). I must find out who their witch-doctor is sometime.

**Board 4: dealer W, game all**

North ♠109742 ♥A97 ♦QJ63 ♣6 South ♠6 ♥KQJ103 ♦K98 ♣K842

Everybody outside Oxfordshire always seems to play Lucas 2-bids (weakish major-minor 2-suiters) and this was not the best example of the species. Against me, North opened 2♠, South bid 3♣ (pass or correct) and then passed 3♦, which I didn't mind as East, holding ♦A10754 and ♣AQJ7. OK, North chuntered at partner for never mentioning the tolerable heart suit, which she might have done I suppose, but Procter/Robinson, who found the reasonable 4♥ spot were rewarded with 2 down for minus 200, defeated unluckily by diamond ruffs. Typical of their day.

**Board 6: dealer E, EW game**

North ♠Q94 ♥A43 ♦AJ4 ♣AK43 South ♠A85 ♥K102 ♦987 ♣QJ86

Regardless of whether East opens a weak 2♥ (he holds QJ empty to 6 hearts and J to 4 spades, so it's not the normally recommended action, first in hand vulnerable) North-South will surely arrive in 3NT and who plays it seems to have been crucial. With North as declarer the 8 top tricks should become 9 immediately on any lead bar a club and even without help on the lead, declarer hasn't much to do to get home. I led a heart and declarer missed his first two chances, first by failing to put in ♥10 (why?) and then by running the low diamond switch to the 9 (ie losing to the 10). Knowing from the bidding that a diamond return was towards some sort of tenace, I went passive and switched back to hearts but it doesn't matter what card I return (except a

spade still gives the contract): declarer cashes all his winners, squeezing West to either bare ♠K or throw a diamond winner away, in which case he's thrown in with a diamond to lead away from ♠KX. Well played eventually! Of course, Chris could have dared to bare ♠K early but these things are never easy, particularly in tempo. (And declarer is then likely to have counted his hand down to too many winning diamonds in any case, thus needing the known singleton spade to be the King.) This was a disastrous board for the A team because both Oxon pairs (Cooper/Piper and Procter/Robinson) played 3NT from the South hand on a low diamond lead, and took reasonable but losing options to go down. Both Staffs pairs played it from North and made. The B team broke even with game in, game out, 50 in and 50 out. The C team were slightly plus with game, in, game out, 50 in and a mysterious 200 in when Flower/Stead didn't bother to bid, defending 2♥ undoubled. Instead. (We'll take it, boys!)

**Board 9: dealer N, EW game**

West ♠Q7 ♥Q743 ♦10863 ♣A85 East ♠K865 ♥AK1098 ♦A ♣Q97

It's a routine 4♥ and +620 for E/W when the hearts break 2-2 (and despite an unfavourable lie of the clubs). Two pairs didn't get to game, which was lucky for the Lintotts but not so for Slater/Stephens. I guess that after 1♥-2♥ the problem for East is that he doesn't know which black suit is the best to try for game in. To me that's just an argument for taking a pot at game yourself – at least you'll have given nothing away to the defence.

**Board 10: dealer E, game all**

North ♠KJ3 ♥AK653 ♦A102 ♣A9 South ♠82 ♥72 ♦973 ♣KQJ832

Seeing both hands it's easy to laugh at those who didn't reach 3NT but it's an awkward HAND for those who keep their 2-level responses well up to strength (which means most people these days). After 1♥-1NT North is tempted to check back on partner's heart holding but there's no completely satisfactory way of doing this (3♦ seems nearest and that might give South a problem with his three low doubletons. Again, if you haven't maybe lied a point and opened 2NT, the bash to 3NT over 1NT clearly works better than science. Four pairs were out of 3NT. Cooper/Piper ground to a halt in 4♣ and Flower/Stead again decided to defend opponents undoubled (but this time +100 proved scant reward). On the credit side, the Talbots took 300 from 4♥ and against Slater/Stephens a Staffs pair lost an axle and all their wheels when they arrived in 7♣.

**Board 13: dealer N, game all**

	♠9765	
	♥1097	
	♦52	
	♣Q842	
♠A4		♠Q83
♥A8542		♥J3
♦AQ104		♦K973
♣75		♣KJ96
	♠KJ102	
	♥KQ6	

♦J86  
♣A103

I didn't show all these four hands just to prove I really can type more than two, but to show how close is the borderline between triumph and disaster. Give West a couple of East's points and North-South will be in serious trouble after a weak NT opening (or even a 14-16). West can hardly be criticised for not doubling with his 14-count, however, so most pairs got out with nothing worse than 1 or 2 down (Chris and I were delighted to take 1♠ 2 down - getting to dummy with a diamond ruff to play a spade to the 10 doesn't actually gain declarer a trick). However, this was a big board for the county when two pairs brought in major scores: Tim and Nick found their way to 3NT (and made it!) with the East-West cards, but pride of place must go to Cathy and Mary-Ann who got the opponents into 2♣\* for a delicious 1100.

### Board 15: dealer S, NS game

	♠2	
	♥AJ84	
	♦974	
	♣QJ763	
♠A874		♠Q9653
♥93		♥KQ65
♦Q1065		♦8
♣985		♣K104
	♠KJ10	
	♥1072	
	♦AKJ32	
	♣A2	

Against me, South opened 1♣ (strong) and after a negative 1♦ from North I couldn't resist the temptation (always stronger against strong club somehow) to back in with 1♠. South rebid 1NT, Chris pushed the boat out with 3♠ and North trusted partner when he raised him to 3NT. Chris led a spade, declarer won and after cashing Ace of diamonds, played Ace and another club. Of course I won and played a second spade, giving declarer 9 tricks when the clubs came home. I would have thought that going after diamonds offered better chances of success than would clubs. No doubt all those who went down in 3NT would agree. However, it was my overcall that really lost us the board because without a spade lead, declarer can't hope for 2 spade tricks. Tim and Nick lost the same 600, no doubt by similar means, but Marion and Nick P-P squared the board for them. In the C team two of our pairs showed how to take the money when Quanton/Gascoyne got 300 from 3♠\* and Flower/Stead 500 from one level higher.

### Board 16: dealer W, EW game

North ♠986 ♥KQJ732 ♦KJ97 ♣None South ♠A32 ♥A10 ♦Q10 ♣AJ10765  
Looks simple to reach 4♥, doesn't it? However, West has an opening strong NT (or 1 of a black suit) in first position and this complicates the auction slightly. Chris Cooper tells a tale of woe when he opted for science, as South, after (1NT)-2♥. He pictured partner having to ruff losing diamonds with top trumps and losing control thereafter, so took the safe line of passing the South hand, knowing that if he was

wrong, the loss would be small-ish, non-v. In fairness, he also knew that partner had a 2♦ overcall available to show a single-suited hand with a 6-card major. Unfortunately, another Oxon pair took the same pessimistic view, whereas Staffs were out of game only once (Cathy and Mary-Ann were the recipients).

**Board 17: dealer N, love all**

North ♠842 ♥A1043 ♦102 ♣A1065 South ♠AQ10965 ♥J ♦AQ7 ♣Q87

Well b\*\*\*\*\* me, here we are again on the very next board, with a non-vul game we'd all want to be in, hampered only by an opening 1 NT (or equivalent) from East! On this occasion no less than 7 pairs failed to bid game. The good news was it didn't include Cooper/Piper this time. Also, the only losers from Oxon were Gascoyne/Quinton, who played 2♠+3 and the Talbots, who lost 300 in 2♥\* (though this could be argued to be an advance sacrifice, and they couldn't do anything about it anyway). The problem, obviously, is that if you double 1NT with the South hand and West runs to 2♥, doubled by North, you're afraid that removing to 2♠ shows either that you have a very strong hand or that you just made the wrong bid on the previous round. On the other hand, if you simply overcall 2♠, you might play there. Difficult. However, personally, I think doubling and then removing describes the hand fairly well. After all, you could have removed to 3♠ with extra values, couldn't you?

**Board 18: dealer E, NS game**

	♠10983	
	♥QJ7	
	♦KQ64	
	♣A4	
♠Q5		♠AKJ6
♥95		♥A10632
♦1098753		♦AJ2
♣1082		♣3
	♠742	
	♥K84	
	♦None	
	♣KQJ9765	

I don't quite remember our auction on this hand, though clearly I must have done something totally brilliant because after a lot of bidding Chris was able to play in 4♦ as West eventually, for + 130. That's the trouble with brilliancies: when you produce them at one every 7.5 minutes it's difficult afterwards to remember one from another. (Mind you, the same goes for idiocies.) Plus scores were pretty evenly divided between NS and EW here, the only disaster being when a Staffs pair got 3NT through against the Talbots. It looks silly, but unscrambling your top tricks, after an initial heart lead, is no easy matter when a heart's led straight back...

**Board 19: dealer S, EW game**

West ♠Q ♥AQ4 ♦A1054 ♣K7643 East ♠KJ ♥1086 ♦KQJ72 ♣AQ8

You'd want to be in 6♦, wouldn't you, if someone said the heart finesse was right? I for one thought long and hard about bidding it after North had shown a weak 2 in spades, but settled in 5♦, as did most of the field. The only exceptions (apart from

those in 3NT) were when Slater/Stephens took 500 from 4♠\* and Flower/Stead managed to get out for only –300 in the same contract. All of which proves that bidding 6♦ is worth only +800 anyway, assuming N/S take the save. I forgot to mention a well done to Rowland/Sheehy as the only pair to bid the slam, followed by commiserations for going down: difficult to see how this happened, but bridge is never bereft of surprises. And I've not been strictly honest: Day/P-P were very unfortunate when their oppo got to an inferior 6NT: this made thanks to the heart finesse and 3-2 club break, to complete a sorry tale for Oxon on the board.

### **Board 20: dealer W, game all**

West ♠Q872 ♥KQ5 ♦None ♣AQ9842 East ♠54 ♥98762 ♦AKQ632 ♣None  
Chris still hasn't quite forgiven me for this one. (Although he's said nothing, I know from the anonymous letters I've been getting.) After his 1♣ opening I couldn't bring myself to bid hearts ahead of diamonds and when he rebid 2♣ I hadn't the strength for a game-forcing 2♥, of course, so rebid 2♦ and played there for +130. I've replied to the anonymous letters, pointing out that 4♥ is beaten trivially on three rounds of spades, because South then comes in with ♥A to lead a fourth round and promote North's ♥J, but only a stony silence has ensued, meaning yet another self-justifying argument I've failed to win. And the proof of the pudding is that 4♥ was bid three times and made twice – both by Oxon declarers (Talbots and Dickinson/Smith – Cathy and Mary-Anne went down, perhaps by the means described above). And yes, it's daft to risking losing a suit of AKQXXX but no less daft to risk losing XXXXX opposite KQX in a major.

### **Board 21: dealer N, NS game**

North ♠Q105 ♥K108 ♦2 ♣QJ8763 South ♠K843 ♥AQ4 ♦AKQ4 ♣A9  
This looks like the world's most normal 3NT contract but not everyone saw it that way. Against me, Hyett/Cornelius proved that an earlier eccentricity (7♣) was not a once-in-a-lifetime experience when they bid smoothly to 4♥ via 5-card Stayman. Though Chris and I each thought the other had nothing in trumps, this drifted 1 off for +100. Two pairs, Procter/Robinson and Gascoyne/Quinton, thought the hand resembled a 6♣ contract. Amazingly, the latter pair made it for +1370. The same witch-doctor was on call, presumably.

### **Board 22: dealer E, EW game.**

West ♠A10654 ♥10854 ♦106 ♣K9 East ♠Q2 ♥A ♦AKJ984 ♣A1032  
Chris and I played 3NT by West – a bit nerve-racking on a heart opening lead, but the ♦Q falling singleton saw the clouds clear away very quickly. As always, the odd pair saw the hand differently. Chris Cooper encountered a strong 1♣ opening by East and overcalled 1NT (minors) at green on ♠K7 ♥J92 ♦7532 ♣Q874. (See what I mean about being over-anxious to crowd the bidding against strong club?) E/W were equal to that one and took 1400 from 2♣\*. Cathy and Mary-Ann got into 5♠ with the East-West cards, which proved too much when trumps were 4-2. The other exception was when a Staffs EW pair decided to stand 2♥ re-doubled against Procter/Robinson. I was told at the scoring-up that our rather breathless heroes could have taken 1600 on the board, rather than the 400 they emerged with. Selfishly, I was happy to write down +14 IMPs rather than hear about the +19 which might have been...

**Board 23: dealer S**

West ♠A3 ♥KQ1097 ♦Q104 ♣A92 East ♠K1072 ♥4 ♦J963 ♣7543

This doesn't look like much of a hand, does it? Most E/W pairs played 1♥ and though many went down, England's finest (Gary Hyett) pursued an abstract defensive line against Chris, allowing him to make 8 tricks. This was a great board for the county when added to the above, Flower/Stead as N/S took 300 from 3♥ undoubled, the Lintotts as North-South defended 2♣\* and took 500 and finally, Dickinson/Smith as EW got to defend 2♥\* by **South** and took another 500. Who needs fancy dealing programmes when players can invent exciting disasters, all on their own?

**Board 26: dealer E, game all**

West ♠AK103 ♥A1042 ♦Q10 ♣Q104 East ♠Q652 ♥KQ5 ♦KJ ♣K952

Everyone played 4♠. I got two rounds of diamonds and played a trump, seeing the Jack fall from South. I abandoned trumps for the moment, crossed to ♥K and played a club to the 10 and Ace. I could now win any return, draw trumps (which were indeed 4-1) and claim. Did I do anything notably right or wrong? Dunno. On the line I took I could have gone down if North held JX of clubs. Only one pair went down in 4♠ and that was Flower/Stead's oppo. Declarer won the trump lead and drew them all in 4 rounds. He then played a diamond, ducked by North. Now, when North won ♣A he had 4 diamonds to cash for 2 down!

**Board 27: dealer S, love all**

	♠A965	
	♥QJ97	
	♦QJ96	
	♣8	
♠J		♠Q732
♥AK10854		♥6
♦K102		♦8754
♣AJ10		♣6432
	♠K1084	
	♥32	
	♦A3	
	♣KQ975	

This was surely the best hand of the day. What happened at my table was that South for Staffs opened 1♣, Chris overcalled 1♥, North doubled to show spades and South rebid 1♠. Chris persisted with 2♥, North raised to 4♠ and Chris led ♥K, asking for a count signal. I played my 6 in tempo but sadly the 3 was out so either South or me had a singleton. After thought, Chris switched to ♠J (as most defenders did, I believe). Declarer won in dummy, ran ♠9 successfully and then played a club to the King and Ace. He won the club return, ruffed a club and drew trumps with the aid of a further finesse. The last two clubs squeezed Chris into baring either ♥A or ♦K – a reminder of board 6, though this time there was no guess involved as the bidding and play marked him with both these cards. Chris chose to bare ♥A and was thrown in with it to lead away from ♦K. There are times when all you can do is congratulate the oppo through gritted teeth. Of course, we can all see the one sure way to beat 4♠ - play ♥10 at trick 2 as a McKenny for diamonds: partner ruffs and returns one, and hey

presto! Trouble is, this defence is totally committal and could produce a well-cooked face omelette. In the car going home we tried to construct other defences (eg cash two top hearts and lead a third for me to ruff, then in with ♣A to lead a fourth, etc. We haven't yet found a way of defeating the contract. Not everyone played 4♠ but the only pairs to beat it were Slater/Stephens and Procter/Robinson's oppo. Cooper/Piper bid and made 3NT, which was a pretty cute effort, and Flower/Stead got 300 from 3♥\*, so it wasn't all bad news.

**Board 28: dealer W, NS game**

West ♠AK9 ♥Q98 ♦A2 ♣KJ862 East ♠1043 ♥KJ1052 ♦1093 ♣Q3

I was in 4♥ from the East seat, North having shown spades and diamonds in the bidding. South led a diamond and my first priority was to set up a diamond ruff, so I played Ace and another. North switched to ♠Q so the next priority was to set up a discard for the losing spade and I accordingly played a low club. North won and played another to my Queen. The discard could wait now so I ruffed a diamond and played ♥Q, getting a shock when North showed out. South ducked both this and ♥9, knowing that if I had to come to hand with a ruff I'd lose trump control. But I could just cash the other two black-suit winners, throwing my losing spade, and claim when they stood up. All I had left was ♥KJ10 and South was welcome to his one trump winner. I don't think I did anything good – just timed it OK, but only two other pairs got home in 4♥ (Dickinson/Smith and Kaz/Nicholson for Oxon) and the only bad news was when the Lintotts went for 500 as N/S in 3♦\*.

**Board 29: dealer N, game all**

North ♠Q108543 ♥AK109 ♦5 ♣94 South ♠J9 ♥7532 ♦KQ ♣AK1062

Our opponents were in 4♥ and after I led a diamond to his Ace, Chris lost no time in switching to his King-doubleton spade, so that was the first 4 tricks to the defence. Nobody made 4♥ in fact, but two Staffs pairs did very well to bid and make 4♠, the unlucky Oxon pairs being Dickinson/Smith and Slater/Stephens.

No doubt I've missed many of the pearls fished from the deep by those who've written in but, as ever, I've run out of time.

**JOHN WILLIAMS**

24/11/06

