

Bridge spans generations

NEW DEAL: Bridge may have an image of being for competitive retirees, but that is all changing, as Catherine Scott discovers.

WHEN I first met my mother-in-law-to-be, one of the first things she asked was did I play Bridge? I was a 21-year-old student and although we played a lot of cards as children we didn't foray much beyond Rummy and Poker (for that you can blame my father).

Bridge to me was something that old people, mainly women, played fiercely and competitively in hushed rooms, with bags of frightening etiquette and a lot of tutting. Although my mother-in-law accepted my denial gracefully, I am sure I spotted a flicker of disappointment in her eyes that she hadn't found a fellow convert.

Over the years she has often suggested we take up the game, and although I have come to understand she plays social bridge rather than club bridge (I'll explain more later) I still always thought it was one of those pastimes which was the preserve of the retired.

And so you can imagine her delight when I confessed that I am now taking Bridge lessons.

It all came about as a bit of an accident. I blame the wine of course.

It was last Bonfire Night and a friend asked if a group of us fancied learning the game. All in our early or mid-40s it wasn't something many of us envisaged ourselves doing just yet. Another group of friends was already learning and had reported back that the bridge teacher, Jack, was about our age and it really was good fun. After a couple of glasses of wine it seemed like a good idea. I think I may have also agreed to join the WI that evening.

When I broke the news to my daughters they guffawed, saying: "but that's for old people."

And that is exactly the stereotype that Jack Stocken, owner and founder of Yorkshire Bridge is trying to dispel.

"Bridge has the image of being very competitive and full of people who never laugh, and shout at people if they get it wrong," explains Jack. "Of course there are Bridge clubs where this can be the case and

it is taken extremely seriously. But a tiny percentage of Bridge players play in clubs, most – an estimated two million of them – play at home with friends, socially and it is great fun."

Jack learnt to play at the family home between York and Doncaster, with his two brothers and sister, taught by their Bridge-playing parents who had met, of course, playing the game at university.

"My brother learnt to play when he was six, I was 10. We'd all four play together in the school holidays, but we were only allowed to play for an hour because after that there would be a fight," he recalls. "We even toured around the country as a family playing competitions."

They helped out at Doncaster Bridge Club and played Duplicate Bridge where all tables have the same cards.

"I played seriously on and off for five years. We were all away at school but would play in the holidays and I think



SHOW OF HANDS: Bridge is becoming a popular social activity, played in a spirit of fun rather than competition, which appeals to a younger generation. PICTURES: GARY LONGGOTTOM

that's how we got good."

But when he was about 18, Bridge took a bit of a back seat for Jack.

"I didn't go to university and at that time people playing Bridge seriously could be a bit strange and I didn't want to spend all my weekends in some dark, smoky basement playing with some strangers."

It was around this time that the now *Times* Bridge columnist Andrew Robson was opening his very successful club above a pub on the Fulham Road in London. He was trying to appeal to a different type of player, proudly proclaiming on its website to be the "friendliest Bridge club".

"I think he was trying to attract the



younger, affluent clientele. The 'yummy mummies' who had dropped the kids off at school and wanted something challenging but social to do, as well as the City boys who wanted to play in their lunchtime. It attracted all sorts," says Jack.

"He wanted to change the perception that nearly everyone has about Bridge."

Robson had heard about the Stockens and approached Jack's middle brother Simon to see if he was interested in helping him run the club, which soon got too big for the Fulham Road premises and moved opposite Parson's Green Tube Station where it now has around 3,000 members and is the biggest in Europe.

When Simon left, the eldest Stocken brother, Zebedee, managed the club for

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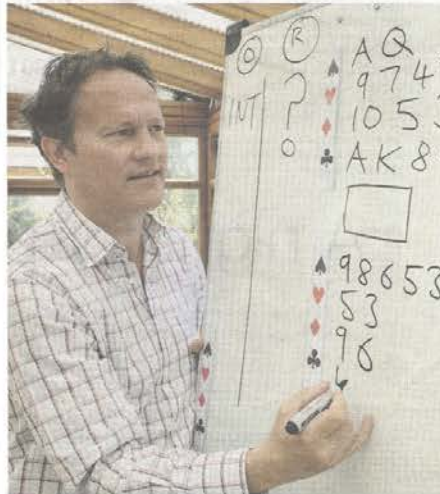
five years and afterwards it was Jack's turn to work under the tutorship of Robson. During his time as manager he also got to teach politicians and celebrities, including actress Susan Hampshire, who finds Bridge helps her dyslexia, the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow and his wife Sally, newsreader James Mates and American food guru Annabel Karmel. The Duke and Duchess of Gloucester also attended a week-long course.

Robson had also started to organise Bridge holidays, something Jack and his wife Annabel have continued in Yorkshire, including very popular winter holidays where skiing and Bridge lessons are combined, as well as summer trips to Malta and Lake Garda for intermediate and better players.

"Working for Andrew really gave me a thorough grounding in Bridge and made me realise that you could actually make money running a club like his. Andrew's style of teaching is very relaxed and friendly. He encourages people all the time, taking it one step at a time and that's the approach that I adopt now."



BEGINNERS' LUCK: Bridge tutor Jack Stocken, below, offers expert advice to Catherine Scott and fellow students of the game at their regular bridge group. Ideally players in a group should be of the same standard.



After seven years Jack decided he wanted to go it alone. By that time he'd met Annabel, a non-Bridge player who has since been taught to play by Robson rather, and they decided they wanted to move back to the county and try to establish Yorkshire Bridge. "I realised I wanted this to be our future," he says.

That was six years ago. The couple now have Sophie, five and recently-born Sebastian.

Yorkshire Bridge is proving to be a huge success.

He is quick to point out that he doesn't run a club.

"I am a Bridge school," he says. "I would quite like to open a club one day, it might happen in five or 10 years time."

Jack, with a little help from his mother, runs Bridge courses in Harrogate and Helmsley. There are eight eight-week courses for beginners (that's me) right through to advanced.

He also organises Bridge days and is willing to travel to people's homes if they can get a group together, like the group of eight I play with on my day off on Friday for two hours.

And Jack is right, it is fun. It also gets the brain matter working and while just when you think you've got the hang of it the rules change, there is something about it which just makes you want to play. Jack's love of the game is also infectious.

"I just love it," he says matter-of-factly.

"You never stop learning and the joy is that no two hands are ever the same. There will always be situations that you have never found yourself in before. There are so many different combinations of hands and you often have to pull on all your years of experience and knowledge, and that's what makes it such a great game."

Jack still plays competitively and to a high standard, recently winning the Yorkshire Masters Pair with his partner Phil Godfrey. He also often teams up with *Yorkshire Post* Bridge columnist Bill Townsend.

But is isn't just Jack and Yorkshire Bridge

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who are trying to dispel the fuddy duddy image of Bridge. The Bridge Association is starting to take Bridge into schools in a bid to encourage an entire new generation of players, playing something called mini Bridge which doesn't have the complicated bidding process.



ON THE CARDS: Bridge is a complex but rewarding game, which gets the brain working. Yorkshire Bridge aim to bring it to a wider and younger audience, running courses and holidays

Bridge which doesn't have the complicated bidding process.

Jack runs summer schools for children as young as nine often while their parents – usually their mothers – are having lessons in the other room.

"We threaten them that if they don't behave they will have to go and play with the adults," says Jack. "But they really do love it, although an hour is probably long enough for them, or else it starts out get out of hand."

Jack still plays with his family, although not too often as it can still end in a row.

However, not quite as serious a falling out as happened in Kansas City on September 29, 1929, when a Mrs Bennett shot her husband dead whilst playing with friends. The jury brought a verdict of accidental death and acquitted her.

"They were obviously Bridge players," says Jack, "since Mr Bennett's opening bid was bad and his play worse."

In our weekly lessons we're still getting to grips with the basics of bidding. We are all of a similar standard, which Jack says is important. At least that lets me off the hook for a little while longer with my mother-

in-law.

Jack admits that when he tells people what he does for a living they often raise an eyebrow.

"People do say 'what sort of a job is that?' but with the classes and holidays it is a year round job, which I love."

■ **Yorkshire Bridge's new season starts in Harrogate on October 1 and Helmsley on September 30. For more details on courses, private lessons and holidays visit <http://yorkshirebridge.com>**

